

THUNDER
CLOUD
SUMMER

Mike Hvidsten

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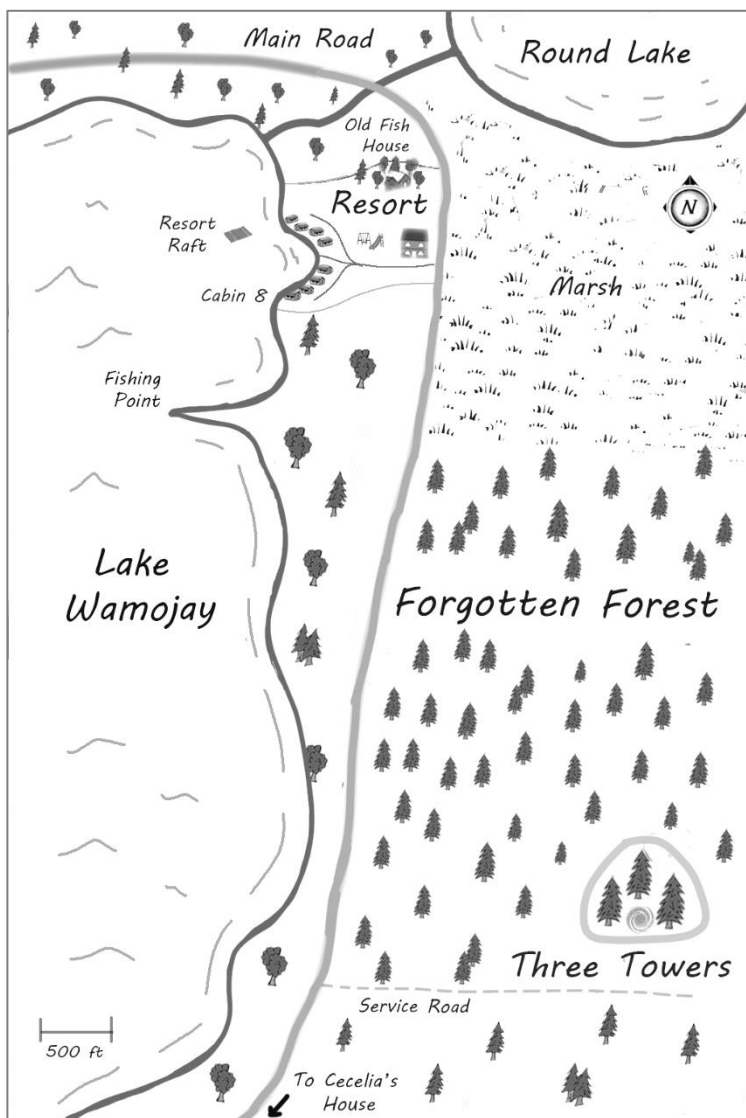
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1

Cloud

Ben gripped the edges of the resort's raft, his knuckles white. Overhead, the green and blue ribbons of the Northern Lights splintered into jagged spikes of purple and orange. Red lightning stabbed down into the Forgotten Forest, leaving a crimson haze floating above the treetops.

A flash brighter than the moon exploded across the sky. He closed his eyes tight, but the light burned through. The raft rocked beneath him, the rough

planks digging into his palms. When he dared to look again, a new star blazed in the night sky, vivid orange and purple streaks of light circling around it.

“Ben! Get inside!” His mom’s voice sliced through the chaos. “It’s not safe out there!”

He scrambled into the canoe, nearly tipping it as waves slapped the sides. Paddling past the resort’s old metal slide, his thin arms fought hard against the choppy water of Lake Wamoja. Finally, the canoe scraped the sandy shore. He bolted up the beach and into the house.

For the next hour, while his parents checked the news channels, he sat glued to the kitchen window. The sky churned with color, painting the walls in ghostly light.

Down the hill, the fireworks threw eerie shadows over the old wooden cabins of the resort. Was it only a few hours ago that he was down there helping his mother?

He had spent that afternoon doing the job he hated most – cleaning cabins. Sand everywhere, dirty dishes in the sink, a box of dead leeches in the fridge. While kids from school were having grand adventures at summer camp, he was scrubbing

toilets and changing sheets. It was another reminder of how much their lives had changed.

He knew his parents needed help – the resort was barely staying afloat, and every guest mattered. But that didn't make the work any less miserable, or stop him from wishing they'd never left their farm in the first place. Sometimes he lay awake at night wondering if his parents regretted the move as much as he did, or if they were just better at hiding it.

Finally, after supper that evening, freedom! He had dragged one of the resort's canoes from the grass near the sagging dock, tossed in his fishing rod and cup of worms, and paddled out into the still water.

The sky had darkened to a deep blue, but even before the crazy light show had started, something felt off. No frogs croaking in the reeds, no loons calling across the water. Fishing had been terrible – not even a nibble from the sunfish and they were always biting. It was as if the world was holding its breath.

And then the sky exploded!

That was strange enough, but even stranger was the new star, brighter than any other star in the night sky. A supernova! That's what they called it on the news. But, how could a star just explode?

"It still looks awful, especially over the forest." Ben's dad turned from the kitchen window and checked his phone, his forehead creased with worry. "But no police or fire alerts."

Ben's mom sat down heavily at the kitchen table, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear—a nervous habit she'd had for as long as Ben could remember. Ben yawned and scratched his eyes. It was after midnight and the adrenaline of what had happened was wearing off.

"James, do you think we're safe here?"

"I don't know, but you two should get some sleep. I'll keep watch. Hopefully, it'll settle down."

It took a long time for Ben to relax enough to feel drowsy. And when sleep finally came, it was in restless fragments. Nightmares of trees bursting into flames chased him through the dark hours until dawn filtered through his curtains. He blinked awake, his t-shirt damp with sweat. The Forgotten Forest beckoned through his window.

It was his favorite place since moving to the woods of northern Minnesota from the flat prairies of North Dakota. A place where he could escape the anxiety of being the new kid in sixth grade, a place to be alone with his thoughts, a private refuge that was more like home than the run-down resort his family now called their own.

Last night the forest had looked like it was on fire! This morning, he'd jolted awake with one burning thought: he needed to see if his sanctuary was okay.

The screen door squeaked as he slipped out into the morning chill. Dew soaked through his sneakers as he jogged toward the forest, the gravel road crunching beneath each step. Ben wiped sleep from his eyes and pushed his unruly brown hair back from his face.

The familiar scent of pine grew stronger as he neared the preserve. He veered onto a hidden trail and wiggled through a gap under the preserve's boundary fence.

Ben breathed in the rich smell of damp earth and decaying leaves as he made his way east. He scanned the trees for any sign of fire, but everything looked untouched.

A quick glance up confirmed the new star was still there, as bright as the moon. It hung quietly among the morning clouds, strangely peaceful after last night's angry light show.

He finally reached his special spot: a small clearing surrounded by three towering white pines arranged in a perfect triangle. He had named it the "Three Towers" when he first discovered it. He climbed the nearest tree, its rough bark cool against his palms. From his perch, he could see the forest stretching endlessly in every direction. Everything looked normal.

Then he felt it. A prickling at the back of his neck, like a hundred tiny needles. The hair on his arms stood on end. His tongue went dry as cotton.

Something was watching him.

The woods had gone unnervingly silent. No rustling leaves, no chirping birds— just a heavy stillness that pressed in from all sides.

CRACK!

The sharp sound echoed through the forest. Ben's grip on the tree tightened as he scanned the clearing below. A shadow darted between the trees near the creek, too fast to track.

Every horror movie he had ever watched flashed through his mind. How many times had he shouted at the TV, "You idiots! Don't go there!"

But something pulled him forward. It was like an invisible rope tugging him toward the creek. Slowly, he climbed down the tree, bark crumbling beneath his fingers. The damp carpet of pine needles squelched under his sneakers as he edged toward the water. To his left, he noticed something weird - the air rippling near a thicket of ferns. Swallowing hard, he crept closer.

"Hello?"

Only the faint hiss of wind answered.

A warm breath grazed his neck.

He jerked back. Stumbled. His heel caught on a jagged stone and he fell to his knees. The seconds crawled by.

And then—out of thin air—it appeared.

It was no bigger than a fawn, its fur a dazzling white that glowed in the shadows. Tall, pointed ears twitched at every sound. A tufted tail curled under its body. But the eyes—deep, dark pools—held him transfixed. They flickered with the same fear and curiosity flooding his own chest.

“What... what are you?!” The words escaped in a whisper.

Slowly, ever so carefully, he extended his trembling hand. The creature tracked every tiny shift of his fingers. As he reached closer, warmth radiated from its body and something else - a presence, a consciousness - brushed against his mind.



The creature took a shaky step forward. Ben held his breath as its cold, damp nose brushed against his palm.

The world beyond their small clearing ceased to exist - nothing left but this impossible moment, this impossible creature. He fought the overwhelming urge to blink, terrified that it would vanish.

A crow's harsh caw shattered the stillness. The creature flinched, ready to bolt.

"It's okay. I won't hurt you."

It hesitated, as if weighing his words. The sight of it, lost and confused, stirred something deep inside him. He recognized that bewildered fear, that ache of being somewhere strange and unknown, with no idea how you got there or what might happen next.

It was exactly how he'd felt that first day at his new school—the suffocating silence when he walked into the sixth-grade classroom, the way the other kids watched him, full of questions and judgment.

At least he'd had his parents, a roof over his head, a safe place to retreat when it all became too much. The creature had none of that.

"I can't leave you here."

Carefully, he reached down and scooped the creature into his arms. It trembled at first, but as he held it close, its shivering began to subside. It nestled against his chest, its fragile warmth spreading through his damp t-shirt.

The dense forest closed around them as he turned back the way he'd come, the path winding between towering trees and tangled roots. His

thoughts spiraled with questions. What was this creature? Where did it come from? He glanced at the faint shimmer outlining its form. Could it be connected to the lights in the sky last night?

The musty scent of pine gave way to the sharper smell of lake water as he reached the forest's edge. The bright morning light beyond the trees revealed the world he'd have to step back into - a world where invisible creatures didn't exist.

How was he going to explain this to his parents? It was crazy! As the creature snuggled closer, he knew he had to protect it.

The weight of the animal was starting to wear on him, his shoulders aching. He needed somewhere safe to put it down. Somewhere out of sight. But where could he hide it at the resort? It had to be somewhere no one would look. After a moment's thought he knew the perfect place.

Keeping to the shadows, he slipped through the back of the resort, careful to avoid the lit windows of the main building. About a hundred yards into the woods, a small wooden structure came into view, its flat metal roof rusting in patches. The resort's old fish house. Dragged back here when they built the new one.

The smell hit him as soon as he opened the door—old fish guts and mildew.

Carefully, Ben laid the creature down on a pile of faded, dusty life jackets. It stirred slightly, then settled. Its dark eyes locked onto his, and it made a soft trilling sound, nudging his hand with its nose. He smiled and petted the animal's fluffy white fur.

"You're like a cloud," he said softly. "That's what I'll call you. Cloud."

Cloud blinked slowly, as if acknowledging the name. Ben glanced at his watch and winced. His mom was going to kill him.

"I'll be back. I promise."

He quickly shut the fish house door and sprinted out of the woods. As he rounded the corner of his house, he nearly crashed into his mother.

"Benjamin Eliot, where on earth have you been?" Her face was lined with worry. "I've been calling you for an hour!"

Ben patted his pockets, realizing he'd left his phone in his room. "Sorry, Mom. I was, um, exploring."

"You didn't go into the forest, did you?"

Her eyes bored into him.

"I wanted to make sure the trees and animals were okay."

His mother's expression softened. She reached out to brush leaves from his hair.

"I know you care about the forest, and that's great. I do too. But you need to let us know where you are, especially after last night."

"I'm not a little kid. You don't need to worry about me."

She smiled. "But that's my job. To take care of you, to make sure you're safe."

He immediately thought of Cloud. His new friend was all alone and needed help. Part of him knew he should tell his parents—that's what a little kid would do. But he wasn't a child anymore. Cloud was his responsibility, his secret. There was just one problem - how could he sneak off and take care of Cloud without raising suspicion?

After a moment's thought, he said "What if I clean up around the old fish house? No complaining, I swear."

His mom raised an eyebrow. "You're volunteering to clean? You must be feeling really guilty!"

Ben gave a sheepish smile. "I want to help."

His mother studied him for a long moment before sighing. “Alright, that mess has bothered me since we got here. But I expect a thorough job, young man.”

As they walked along, she put her arm around his shoulders.

“You know, you’re still my little boy.”

“I’m twelve years old. Almost a teenager!”

“Yeah, that’s what I’m worried about! I just need you to be careful, okay?”

There was a strong aroma of blueberry pancakes as they walked into the house. His stomach growled in response, but his hunger couldn't distract him from the tingling in his palm where Cloud's nose had touched it.

Ben glanced at the clock as he sat down at the table. It was still early in the morning and hours stretched ahead until day’s end—hours to figure out how to sneak food to Cloud, to ensure it was safe, and to start unraveling all the incredible events that had unfolded. For the first time since moving to this old resort, he felt a sense of purpose, as though he was exactly where he was meant to be.

