

## **Chapter 1**

### **In Green Bridge Park**

Once upon a time, in a quite and peaceful land, on the banks of a beautiful river, lived a people who had come from far away to start their lives over in a new and foreign place. The land was big and full of mystery, but they were able to ignore what they couldn't explain. They were mostly happy. And in one of the towns they built on the river, the town of Plainview, lived a little girl named Susan.

Susan was much like any other girl or boy in her town. She was pretty, but not too pretty. She was smart, but not too smart. She liked school, but she would rather bring home books from the school library and read them by herself, swinging on the front porch. She loved to spend hours reading about amazing creatures, like dragons and sea-monsters, and far-away lands of fairies and elves. But her favorite pastime, the thing she liked more than reading books or dreaming about strange places, was to wander down to the Green Bridge Park, where she would stare dreamily for hours at the Blue River that ran through the park and through the middle of her town.

She would sit on the grass down by the river, and make up stories about the plants and animals that surrounded her in the park. She would tell herself tales about the singing family of cattails near the bridge, and how the mother and father would keep time for the little ones by swaying to and fro in the wind. She would tell herself tales about the muskrats that lived under the cattail family, and how the muskrat mother would try not to get grumpy when the muskrat father was late in getting home from his mud-digging work across the river.

And she had come to believe that it was the river itself that told her these tales, as she sat by its side. Because it was only when she sat still for a very long time, quietly gazing at the river, that the stories would begin. And then it was as if she could just sit back and listen as the river whispered them in her ear.

Susan's parents loved her, she knew that, but most of the time they were too busy to sit down and listen to the stories she wanted to tell them. Her brother Tom and her sister Veronica, who were both younger than her by a few years, weren't that interested in her stories either. They would listen for awhile, but when she would get to the complicated parts, where she had to lay out the reasons why everybody had to do what they had to do, in order to make all the pieces of the story fit together, they would quickly grow restless, and would end up squabbling with each other long before she finished. So instead she had to content herself with spending time alone in the park, listening to the stories of the river.

One sunny day, when she had no school, and she had been out of school long enough for it to be out of her mind, Susan sat down by the river for an extra long time. She had no thoughts of moving on. She didn't want to return to the chatty world of the town streets where everyone tried to talk at the same time, without

really listening to each other, not even really listening to themselves.

The grass was green, as it usually was, and the row of maple trees planted along the banks of the river made for a dappled pattern of shade, where Susan could pick just the right mix of sun and shade to keep herself comfortable. The river was flowing by fast, swelled by recent storms, carrying lots of leaves and twigs inside itself. Its surface was rippled by a steady soft breeze.

As she sat, Susan told herself a tale about the big elm tree in the center of the park lawn, and the nest of woodpeckers in its tall branches, and how the father had to go to work every morning to build new homes, and how the mother had to be concerned about everything going on about her tree, watching out for squirrels that might want to store acorns in her house.

Then an urge to sing came over Susan. She sang in church all the time, but she had never sang in the park. She didn't know what to sing, so she just started to "loo-loo" a melody that seemed to spring from her tongue. Even though it was a lovely tune, she didn't ask herself if it was lovely, because she was enjoying herself. She wasn't thinking about what others would think. She went on clearly and cleanly, and wove a beautiful tune that started to satisfy unknown longings in her heart, longings for beauty and happiness that she never knew she had.

After awhile, as her heart grew more full, she turned to sing to the flowers that grew at the river's edge, daisies clustered in the small rushes of cattails near the muskrats home. She started to put nonsense words to the song, words that somehow conveyed her thanks for the flowers and the sun and the day.

She could never recall after that day whether it was the shuffle of heavy footsteps she first heard, or the muffled voice of someone who hadn't talked in a long while. But all of a sudden she became aware of that just maybe she wasn't the only one in the Green Bridge Park down by the Blue River.

She thought the sound, if she really had heard something, must have come from somewhere near the bridge. She wondered if there was anything under the bridge. She felt she had to go over and look. She thought she should be scared. But she couldn't feel all that scared. Maybe it was the nice sunny day. Maybe it was how happy she felt after singing her song. But she couldn't feel very nervous as she started over to the bridge. That is, until she started to imagine just exactly what curious thing might be under there.

This thought caused her to slow down, as she pondered what could fit under that big stone bridge that spanned the river. As she got closer she could see its fittings of steel and wood, and how they gave it the sturdiness and the strength to bear on its back all the traffic that came to town.

She came to the path that led first to the water's edge, then under the the bridge.

She had never taken this path. Under the bridge was a dark place, never in the sun, and there was a pile of rocks that tumbled from the foot of the bridge down to the water's edge. A lot of things no one had seen in a long time could live under the bridge, she thought. She wondered most of all if it could be a troll. For the moment, she really believed it could be a troll. But she knew that no one else believed they existed anymore, if they ever existed at all. No one else that is, except maybe her grandfather.

She thought her grandfather might believe in them, because he had told her tales of when he was a young boy, how trolls had come to live under the newly constructed bridges in each newly settled town. In those days, he would say, there were many trolls about, up and down the river. The people knew all about them, and when the townfolk went down to the park in the cool summer evenings to dance and play music, they mingled with the trolls who were dancing and playing their own trollish music. Their music was similar to what the townfolk played, but there was something special about it too, that made people who never usually wanted to dance get up and jump around.

Over time, the town had grown big, he would tell her, and the business of the townfolk had grown very serious and efficient. The town had prospered, and the townfolk had grown wealthy. They built grand theaters, to which famous actors and musicians came to put on operas and symphonies and plays. No longer did the townfolk go to the park in the evenings to sign and dance. Instead they went to these big and cool auditoriums, where they would see the most wondrous of shows, and marvel at ever craftier presentations of song and story. They stopped coming to the park, and stopped making their own music, content to let others do it for them. And they stopped mingling with the trolls.

Still the trolls were not completely forgotten. For a while there were those individuals who still went down to the park to seek them, and with good luck would make the acquaintance of a traveling troll taking up temporary residence under the bridge. And this is the part of her grandfather's story she liked the best, when he described these solitary trolls, how they were wandering troubadours that sang and told stories about many wondrous things, tales of simple beauty and drama.

They would weave their performance out of whatever occurred to them as they went along. They had no interest in ever repeating themselves, because there were so many other beautiful and dramatic songs to be sung and tales to be told. They claimed no ownership for any song or story, always saying they heard most of it from someone else, but they could never quite remember just whom. Some of their songs would end up the central theme of a grand symphony played by the town orchestra, and some of their tales would be reworked into the fancy plays put on in theaters. But the trolls knew very little what became of their music and words, and weren't that concerned, because they saw themselves as temporary caretakers of any tale they touched, and were very glad to see others take them new places.

And then her grandfather would always say, with a wink at Susan, that you can always tell the tales that have been touched by a troll. Because, he said, no one but a troll would ever think of them. And she loved him more than anything, and that is exactly how she felt, though she had no idea what "more than anything" meant, when he'd swear that it was all true, and wink again.

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