

  WONDERINGS  



I wondered if I had made the worst mistake of my life.

I lifted the skirts of my navy dress above my ankles to avoid stepping on it as I climbed the stairs to reach what felt like the end of my life. I noticed through my dread it would be a beautiful end, as the overwhelmingly large, white house – whose stairs I was climbing – was cast in the warm, fading light of the day. A soft pallet of colors was created, matching the light shining out the windows around the silhouettes of many figures.

I didn't like big parties, they always made me feel *more* than lonely. Simply being lonely is a result of being alone. Being overlooked in a crowd is something beyond loneliness because it's no longer just being alone, it's being unwanted. Yet, there I was at the top of the staircase in front of the dark wooden doors, taking a breath before I entered. I barely cracked the door open when music mixed with the sound of voices striving to be heard over one another overwhelmed my ears. I was afraid I would stand out for being as underdressed as I was; however, I soon realized no one noticed me at all. I wandered around the house, avoiding the few people I knew. They always tried to make conversation about my life, their attempts to be caring being harmful.

I didn't like talking about my mother and how much I missed her, being told, "If only you had gotten to know your father, he was a wonderful man," or discussing how I was *still* unmarried. I was only nineteen after all. Talking about my life was as difficult as living through it because I had to talk with a smile; find a bright side so others could

walk away without feeling the burden of my situation. A difficult task, as the only bright side to my life I didn't even possess: hope for my future.

I wandered the house, admiring the different colors of the walls and vibrations of each room, catching snippets of unintentionally ridiculous conversations that forced me to enter a battle with laughter. I came across a mirror and stopped to take in my long brown hair, freckled skin, and deep green eyes. I decided, before I quickly moved on from the mirror to avoid appearing vain, I looked exactly like my mother did in my memories. I did wear her old dress to the party after all.

The last room I entered was the only empty room I had come across; the room I didn't know would change my life forever. The ceilings were high – painted navy blue with gold stars – over the walls made entirely of shelves, filled ceiling to floor with books. The hues of the covers were dark and muted, yet still beautiful. They looked like the last light of a sunset.

The smell overwhelmed me in the way I imagined a warm hug from a friend would. Hints of comforting must and paper filled my nose as I walked around the room, sliding books that caught my attention off the shelves to examine them. Each one I carefully put back, not wishing to cause more disturbance than scattering a bit of dust. The next book I pulled off the shelf was different – I could feel in my core it was special. It had a thin, dark green cotton cover lacking a title. The only detail was on the spine: a golden rectangle with a row of small stars above and below it. The book had the lovely scent only age can bring to paper, a peculiar hint of smoke, and another scent I could not place at the time.

I took the book to a velvet armchair and, forgetting I was at a party, sat sideways with my feet up in the chair and my knees bent. I opened the book to the first page but it was blank. I flipped to the next page, then the next, and the next, until eventually I ran my thumb along the edge to flip through all the pages searching for words. There were none anywhere in the book, so I flipped back to the first page and stared at the cream-colored paper.

*"I wonder why this book doesn't have any words,"* I thought to myself. I almost dropped the book when the handwritten words appeared on the page:

*"Because you had not wondered anything yet."*



I should have listened to my conscience when it told me not to steal. Yet, I treasured the book more than anything I owned. I could have thought 'I wonder' before everything I said so it could hear my thoughts, but not everything I had to say was a question. So, instead I wrote on the page. I wish the ink didn't fade after a minute. I wish I could remember every piece of knowledge it shared, every conversation and joke.

I learned that the book was not just a book, it had a person trapped inside it. I should never have wondered what his name was, because the moment I read the word 'Reu', it never left my mind. Despite only reading his words, he was a warm ray of sunlight in my life. He made me smile, laugh, feel *wanted*. We wrote every night after I finished my daily work as a seamstress. As the weeks passed our friendship developed and I found myself welcoming thoughts of him until they filled my mind. I ached for him to be out of the book.

Reu told me the book didn't always contain a person, it was once pure magic. He discovered the book when he was an apprentice to a sorcerer named Grindorve. Reu, much to his regret, became so obsessed with the book and the knowledge it contained that he abandoned his work to ask the book questions. After many of Reu's shortcomings, Grindorve punished him by trapping him inside the book.

*"Someone stole the book shortly after,"* Reu told me one night. *"Grindorve would not have intended to leave me in here for 53 years years, just a day or two to teach me a lesson."* He explained that within the book, he lived in a giant library. He had a blank book of his

own where people's questions appeared and he wrote the answer, which he found in the library's books. Time was warped, so the wonderer waited only a second for a response. Reu also said he never felt hungry, thirsty, or tired.

I asked Reu if there was a way to get him out of the book because Grindorve, we concluded, had long since died. He was, after all, very elderly 53 years ago.

*"There is, but I do not want to ask it of you. It would require a long journey, you would have to leave your work for a while."*

*"I would do anything to get you out,"* I wrote.

*"I don't think you mean that, Annaleigh."*

He was right as always, but I didn't listen.

He eventually gave in to my persistence and told me Grindorve, on one of his many travels, experimented with making a pond look like the sky. The result was a breathtaking body of water filled to the brim with magic that had the power to release him from the book. I began the journey to the pond two days later, desperate to free him.

It took all of my savings to buy a train ticket from Manchester to Glasgow. The travel was long and I was often hungry, thirsty, and hot, as the summer heat was intensified within the train car. I never questioned though if it was worth it. The people around me must have thought I was crazy doing nothing but writing on the first page of a book all day; however, despite the discomforts of travel, I was the happiest I had been in years. Our conversations were easy, we never ran out of things to talk about, and I often had to fight laughter at our jokes, hiding my smiles by resting my chin in my hand.

Despite my better judgment, I allowed myself to daydream about what Reu might look and be like in person; all I knew was that he was twenty when he was trapped and hadn't aged, but nothing else about his physical appearance. I wondered to myself when the book was closed how my life would change once he was released from the book. The hope and excitement kept me up at night.

The pond was closer than I expected to the train station in Glasgow, but it still took a day and a half to walk to. I had to stop many times for Reu to direct me, using the sun as my compass and increasingly peculiar trees as landmarks. Most of the journey was through the forest and the closer I got to the pond the stranger the foliage became. The trees seemed to wear clothes of moss and vines, crowns of abnormally large leaves, and shoes of peculiar bright red and yellow mushrooms. The air was still, comfortingly warm, and the sunlight seemed to mist rather than shine through the trees, dazzling as individual flecks of gold.

When I finally reached the pond it took my breath away. It was about ten yards in diameter and looked like a hole in the ground into another dimension. I cautiously drew closer, looking down into the sky. I could not see any water, only an identical picture of what I saw when I looked up. I felt as though jumping into the pond would be like jumping straight up with no gravity. I walked a full circle around the pond, admiring the beautiful pink and orange clouds set against the soft blue sky. Coming back to my senses, I wrote in the Book of Wonder, as I had named it:

*"I'm here, it's incredible! Do I just throw the book in?"* I asked Reu.

*"I think so, there is nothing in the library about this, but that sounds right. Wait until it's dark though, the stars enhance the magic,"* he wrote.

I laid in the grass, watching the sunset through the small clearing in the trees the pond provided. There was a gentle breeze, rustling the vines on the trees and providing relief from the heat. As beautiful as the scene was, every minute of waiting for dark was agony. I wanted to be next to Reu, not the book. I hoped that tomorrow we could watch the sunset again here. I bought enough food to last a while longer, and I thought Reu would probably know what plants were safe to eat in this forest.

Finally, the stars made all the full glory of their light known to the earth.

*"Reu, it's dark now, I'm going to throw the book in,"* I wrote. I was scared. If it didn't work and I threw the book into a pond, now a bottomless hole of stars, I would never get to write to him again. Talking to him in a book was better than not talking to him at all.

*"This will work Annaleigh, I promise,"* he wrote. He knew my fears well, I had told them to him before. I couldn't bring myself to selfishly keep him trapped in the book to avoid the risk. But still, it took all my trust in him to throw the book into the pond.

I never got to see if it made a splash, because as soon as it touched the invisible surface of the water, the once navy blue sky exploded into blinding yellow light, sending a powerful gust of wind with it. I covered my eyes with my hands to avoid being blinded but was still almost deafened by the roaring of thousands of tree leaves and branches shaking in the wind. Despite all of this, I couldn't help but notice the wind smelled of old paper, smoke, and that unidentifiable smell.

The wind died down and the light faded, so I opened my eyes. There, wading out of the pond, was Reu. He looked almost exactly as I had imagined, except he was *real*. I smiled and ran towards him, taking in his brown hair, tall figure, and

strangely reluctant smile before I hugged him. I didn't notice how wet his clothes made me, or how the other smell of the book was him, or good his arms felt around me. All I knew was the sudden pain in my back where his hands were. I tried to step back but he held me too tightly.

"Reu, you're hurting me!" I said. I began to see the light shining from his hands out of the corners of my eyes.

"I'm sorry Annaleigh," hearing his actual voice made me catch my breath. I didn't want to do this to you, but I had to get out."

"What do you mean?" I asked him, growing panicked.

"Grindorve never intended to set me free. He cursed me to be trapped forever in the book unless I found someone to trade places with me."

My body grew tingly then numb, and I felt lighter with every passing moment.

"No," I said softly, then repeated the word over and over with every ounce of strength I had. I pushed my hands against his chest to try to move him away from me, but I had already faded away too much.

"But seeing you now, switching places is a worse punishment than staying in the book," he said desperately. "I'm sorry, I was so consumed with getting free!" I could see the pain in his eyes.

"Then switch back," I said, my faded voice cracking.

"I wish I could but I can't, a person can't be in the book more than once."

I think he kissed me, a moment I had been dreaming of for months, but I wasn't sure because, at that moment, everything went black.



I woke up in a beautiful but flooding library. The book, having sunk into the pond, was absorbing more and more of the magical pond water and the library mirrored the paper's condition. I hoped the magic water would send me back out of the book but it didn't. No one else was willing to make the sacrifice of switching for me.

The ceilings were tall, arched, and cream colored. The dark wooden shelves created a maze through the building, which took full minutes to walk across as I had to wade through the rising water. After searching in vain for an exit or window, I climbed up as high as I could on one of the shelves. I shoved some books off into the water to make room for myself to lay and let my tears join the flood.

I wondered if I had made the worst mistake of my life.