



The Puddle Dimension

A SHORT STORY BY
KAY L MOODY

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Chapter 1

Kate locked her silver Kia Rio and eyed a homemade sign which read General Store. She slipped the keys into her pocket as she walked up the steps and pushed open the wooden door. A bell on the door rang as she stepped inside. She scanned the tiny aisles filled with quaint shelves. Marshmallows. She was looking for marshmallows. That was part of the plan. She needed to look like a normal customer. Huntsville got a lot of campers and marshmallows seemed like the most common item a camper would want.

Kate walked under a green sign with white faded letters. Someone had carefully painted the words “Baking, Breakfast, Water” on it. What would have been three aisles in a normal store was smooshed into one in this tiny general store. Kate absently pointed her finger as she scanned the aisle. When she found the marshmallows, she nodded with pursed lips. Being sneaky meant it was hard to do even the simplest of tasks without feeling like a weirdo.

Kate ambled down the aisle and up to the counter. Not a single person was in sight except the checker. His bright orange hair was just as wild as the geometric covered t-shirt he wore. Red squares, yellow circles, and lime green lines covered the orange t-shirt. Sure, it was wild on its own, but it clashed spectacularly with his bright orange hair. Kate glanced to the side as she put the marshmallows on the conveyor belt. What

could ever possess someone to buy a crazy t-shirt like that? Luckily, most of it was hidden by a green apron. The nametag on the apron said, “Trevor.”

“Camping, huh?” Trevor said as he took the marshmallows from the conveyor belt.

Kate blinked in shock while a flurry traveled through her veins. She expected a high pitched, whiny sort of voice with that bright orange hair. One befitting a pimpled teenage boy whose voice was barely beginning to change. But this voice was husky and dark. Cheerful, but mature. She hadn’t noticed before, but this was a man. Well, not a boy at least. Close to her age, but that was neither here nor there. She had a mission and no man with wild orange hair and a loud t-shirt would distract her.

She cleared her throat and said the words just as she rehearsed. “I’ll be here the whole weekend with some friends. We’re staying at the Oakshore Camp.”

Trevor scanned the marshmallows. “Oakshore’s nice, but ask any local and he’ll tell you to try Battlecreek. You get trees and birds and mountains at Oakshore, but at Battlecreek...” He did a lopsided grin as he placed the marshmallows into a translucent green bag. He tapped some buttons on his screen. “At Battlecreek the trees provide, the birds harmonize, and the mountains live.”

“Isn’t Battlecreek the camp where people have gone missing?”

The grin on Trevor's face disappeared as he took her credit card and slid it through the machine. "Those are nothing but rumors. The entrance to Battlecreek is not ten steps from this store. If the rumors were true, I'd be the first to go missing and I'm still here, aren't I?"

Kate pursed her lips. She could tell Trevor wasn't about to volunteer the information she wanted. But she thirsted for knowledge. Ever since she could remember, she just had to know things. She had to understand, no matter what the cost. That was why she took apart her easy bake oven as a kid. Maybe she broke it, but she could rest at night because she understood how it worked. And that was why she was here and wouldn't leave until she had some answers.

Kate first heard about the disappearances three weeks ago. Ever since then she couldn't sleep at night. Not because she was afraid, but because she had to know. She needed the mystery solved. Kate took the translucent green bag with her marshmallows. She eyed Trevor, calculating her question. She had to phrase it in such a way that he would want to answer.

She turned her head toward the back of the store. Just behind the back wall of the store sat the Battlecreek campground. She bit her lip to look vulnerable. "I don't believe in the mystical or the supernatural, but how else do you explain the flashes of light? The electromagnetic pulses? The disappearances?"

Trevor shook his head, but she knew he was looking at her. Not just looking at her like a customer either. Her lip biting trick had worked. Just like she noticed he was a man, he now noticed she was a woman. “Come on, I’ll show you,” he said.

Trevor stepped out from behind the counter and slipped the apron off his head.

“Um,” Kate said. She stepped back and watched Trevor march to the front of the store. “Don’t you have to—” Kate glanced back at the aisles. No one else was there, but still. “You know, work here? Don’t you have to work?”

Trevor laughed. “Not from a small town, huh?” he asked. Kate prided herself on knowing about the world. His offhand remark stung more than she cared to admit. She lifted her chin in the air and flipped the translucent green bag over her shoulder.

“I just didn’t want you to get in trouble.”

Trevor snickered as he locked up the store. Then he led her around back. Of all the things, he wore cowboy boots on his feet. Not only did he have the wildest t-shirt ever created, but he paired it with cowboy boots! She was ready to write him off as a crackpot when she noticed the logo on his jeans.

Modpair. The same as hers. And the favorite of anyone who took the time to really understand what jeans were supposed be. Kate chewed on the inside of her lip. If he was smart enough to know the best jeans, it didn’t prove much. But at least he had some kind of sense.

Kate pulled the cell phone from her back pocket and started to record a video as they neared the forest.

Trevor glanced back at her phone and his eyes narrowed into tiny slits. “Are you a reporter?” he asked. And then his lip curled up into his nose. His words were thick with disgust. “Or one of those paranormal bloggers?”

Kate shook her head, but kept her eyes on the recording on her phone as she stepped closer to the forest.

Trevor planted his feet and crossed his arms in front of his chest. “I ain’t showing you anything if you’re a blogger. We’re sick of you terrorizing our town and interviewing the families of victims. Your blog can get haunted by never ending error 404 pages for all I care.”

“I promise I’m not a blogger,” Kate said. She lifted her eyes to meet his. “I just want to understand what’s happening.” Kate lowered her eyes to the ground. Suddenly, she felt as sheepish as a child explaining a broken vase. “I like mysteries,” she said.

To her surprise, Trevor’s face softened. His eyes scanned her blonde curls, then he turned back to the trees and beckoned her with his hand. “All right,” he said. “But promise you won’t interview anyone.”

Kate nodded. She stepped onto the trail with her eyes glued to the recording on her phone. Unfortunately, a large root on the path caught her attention far too late, and her toe stuck on it just as she tried to take another step forward. Kate

tripped immediately and her phone flew out of her hands as she tried to brace herself. Her palms slapped the dirt path while her knees smarted with a thud. A hot blush filled her cheeks when Trevor rushed to her side and helped her up.

“Hey, nice jeans,” he said. “I love Modpair.”

Her arm was hot where he had grabbed her and for a moment, she got lost in the sea of his churning blue eyes. “I dropped my phone,” she said when she stared too long. She lowered her eyes to the ground to search before she could see his reaction. The bag of marshmallows was also gone into the forest somewhere, but Kate figured she should find her phone first.

Kate and Trevor both tromped away from the path, searching for the stray phone.

“Over here,” Trevor said, pointing. “Right next to that puddle.”

Kate jogged toward him. Her eyes scanned the ground when his voice changed. Still husky. Still mature. But full of wonder. “Whoa,” he said.

Kate plucked her phone from a tuft of wildflowers, but she almost dropped it again when she saw the puddle. A tiny gasp escaped her mouth as she leaned closer. Kate slid the phone into her back pocket, too distracted now to take video.

It looked like a puddle, and yet... different. The clouds mirrored the clouds above, but they were whiter. The trees in the reflection of the puddle were tall and green with rustling

leaves, just like the trees around them. But the ones in the puddle were special. The leaves seemed to rustle with the energy of electricity. Everything in the puddle seemed to shimmer.

It looked magical.

Kate tore her eyes away with a frown. But that was silly. She was here to solve a mystery, not create some fantasy. Only facts were welcome here. Kate looked back at the puddle with critical eyes. What made the puddle shimmer? Maybe oil or glitter even? There had to be something.

As Kate considered the possibilities, Trevor bent down to touch the puddle. In an instant, the serenity of the trees and clouds shattered. A flash of white light shot into the sky. Trevor's finger, then hand, then arm disappeared into the puddle. His body continued to fall inside with no regard for the impossibility of the action. The puddle was tiny. Not big enough for a person. But Trevor continued to fall, no matter how his hands flailed.

Soon, his head disappeared into the puddle and Kate's heart raced with panic. "TREVOR!" she screamed. Without a thought, she grabbed his waist to pull him out, but then she too was pulled in deep. A flash of white light obscured her vision and she was falling, falling, falling.

Chapter 2

The moment ended faster than it began. Kate was on the ground next to the puddle and not a fiber of her clothing was wet. She sat up slowly, brushing over every inch of her body to note whether or not it was normal. Trevor seemed to have a different approach.

He jumped to his feet and patted his chest and legs and side with vigorous inspection. His breaths shallow as he forced his fingers through his hair, determined that not even a hair on his head was lost.

Kate got to her feet and pulled her cell phone from her pocket. It was dry and had service just like normal. Every rational cell in her brain screamed that something was wrong, but when she sought it out, nothing revealed itself. Kate brought her arms tight over her stomach until she could wrap her hands over her elbows. She chewed on her lip, trying to bite out the perplexed feeling in her mind.

Trevor rubbed his temple and stared at the puddle. He gulped and said, "Did we just fall through that puddle?"

Kate dug her teeth deeper into her lip. "Yes?" she said, though she hated the uncertainty in her voice. She needed answers and she needed them fast. She couldn't let a mystery like this go unsolved.

Trevor opened his mouth, but seemed to think better of it. He scanned the trees behind him and finally said, "I need to get back to work. Can't leave the store unattended for too long."

Kate nodded and backed away from the puddle without hesitation. She followed Trevor even though he didn't seem to appreciate it. "What do you think happened?" Kate asked.

Trevor shrugged, but increased his speed as he walked to the general store. "I'm sure it was nothing. Probably just a figment of our imaginations."

"Imagination?" Kate asked. "Do you even know how imagination works? People don't randomly hallucinate the same thing at the same time. Something happened. I think we're inside the puddle. Don't you think the air looks shimmery like the puddle did?"

"Sure," Trevor said, though his tone was full of jest. "And I also think magical elves are going to start doing my work for me while I sleep. Or maybe that's only if I make shoes."

"I'm serious," Kate said. But at that moment, they rounded the corner of the general store and Kate clamped her mouth shut. A tall man with wispy, gray hair shut his car door. He glanced up at the two of them with a friendly smile. "Morning, Trevor. Morning, Kate."

A nervous grin appeared on Trevor's face. "Morning, Ned." Trevor glanced at Kate and said in a whisper, "Do you know him?"

Kate shook her head, even more perplexed than before.

Ned pushed his keys into his pants pocket and his eyes fell straight to Kate's stomach. That was enough to make her squirm, but when more words left his mouth, she nearly fainted. Ned said, "You two ready for your little one? Only a few weeks left, isn't it?"

Kate clutched her stomach, which was most certainly not filled with a "little one." It was filled with her lunch, which threatened now to make an appearance. Trevor wrapped his arm around Kate's shoulder and gripped her tight. She excused the sudden touch because it was so comforting at this new perplexing mystery. Trevor said, "Actually, it's not a good time, Ned. I came to put up the Closed sign."

Ned waved a hand and nodded while he retrieved his keys from his pocket. "No trouble at all, Trevor. I understand. I'll come back later. Good luck, Kate. Ida picked up some eucalyptus salts for your feet. She'll bring them by your house tonight. Hopefully it won't be long now."

As Ned got back into his car, Trevor led Kate back to the side of the store. He released her as soon as they were hidden from view. He pushed his body up against the side of the store and rubbed circles into his temples. His face was paper white and he looked as likely to lose his lunch as Kate felt.

"How did Ned know your name? I didn't even know your name. Unless. Is Kate your name?"

"It is," Kate said. "And how did Ida know I like to soak my feet in eucalyptus salts? And who is Ida anyway?"

“It’s Ned’s wife.” Trevor stopped rubbing his temples just long enough to steal a glance at Kate’s stomach.

“I’m not pregnant,” she said before he could ask.

“Well, you don’t look it, but you never know.”

“Something happened,” Kate said. “When we fell through the puddle. But I’m sure there’s a logical explanation. I read some very compelling research on time travel the other day and it mentioned...” Kate trailed off as she noticed even the grass beneath her feet was shimmering.

“Do you think that’s what this is?” Trevor asked. “The future?”

His eyes held a hope that caused another flurry through Kate’s veins. She *did* want to have a baby someday. And she loved the idea of living in a small town. A future like this was everything she ever wished for. At this point all she was looking for was the right man to share it with.

And Trevor seemed sweet. She felt she could understand him somehow. Except for his crazy t-shirt and cowboy boots, but what did those matter anyway? He seemed like a good man. She felt ridiculous for wishing that maybe this was the future, but she could tell Trevor was wishing it too.

Kate pulled her phone from her back pocket to keep herself from spiraling too far down that fantasy. The date shined bright the same as it was when she first arrived in Huntsville. If they had traveled through time, the satellites that set the time on her phone hadn’t noticed.

“Still 2:30, huh?” Trevor said when he saw her screen. “And Ned said ‘morning.’”

Kate shoved the phone back in her pocket and grabbed Trevor’s wrist. “Come on,” she said. “We need to figure out what’s going on. Call your boss and tell him you’re taking the day off.”

Trevor retrieved his phone from his pocket just as they rounded the corner back in front of the store. Kate pulled out her keys and pointed to her silver Kia Rio. Trevor grabbed the passenger door handle, but then started talking through his phone. He leaned against the passenger door, deep in conversation. Kate fiddled with her keys while she watched Trevor talk.

She had no idea where she would go once they got in the car. All she knew was shimmer floated through the air in every direction and it wasn’t natural. Even Ned looked shimmery and the grass. And the cars. If this was the future, there was still something different about it. Kate decided she’d drive to the city limits and see if the shimmer continued past the border. After that, she’d find something else to test.

Kate whipped out her phone again and glanced at Trevor. She did intend to solve this mystery alone, but she was glad Trevor was here. His presence felt natural. Familiar. Which didn’t make any sense, but that’s how it felt. He was talking to his boss now and she tuned out his words in a way she could only do with the people she knew well.

Kate glared at her phone, which still told her nothing, just as Trevor tapped the end button on his phone. She stole a tiny glance at him and looked back at her phone. But as soon as her eyes pulled away from him, she brought them right back to him again. He was worried and she could tell. Since she was the only person there, she figured she should be there for him.

“What did he say?” Kate asked. “Does he need you to go back to the store?”

Trevor shook the bright orange hair out of his eyes. He picked at the shoulder of his crazy t-shirt and frowned. “No, he said I own the store. He said I must be losing sleep over worrying about the baby and the stress made me forget. Apparently you and I are married and we’re having a son and I bought the store a year ago. He asked about your feet.”

Trevor frowned at the notion and that made Kate’s heart ache. But why should she care? They didn’t know this was the future. Not for sure. The first time she laid eyes on Trevor was 24 minutes ago. The sensible part of her brain forced herself to ignore the disappointment. She tucked her phone into her back pocket and unlocked the car.

Trevor opened the passenger door, but didn’t get in. “Where are we going?” he asked.

Kate twisted the keys around her key ring with an increasing speed. “I’m going to drive until I can’t see the shimmer in the air. The city limit is only a few minutes away, right?”

Trevor nodded, but avoided her eye. He kept glancing at Kate, then looking away as fast as he could. “Do you think it could be the future?” he asked. “I am planning to buy the store. I’ve been saving money for years and the owner and I have an agreement about it. And you are really...”

The silence hung as heavy as an elephant on top of a baboon. Kate gripped her keys and bit into her lip until hurt. She couldn’t finish his sentence. 24 minutes. She saw him for the first time 24 minutes ago. Surely, she didn’t know what he was trying to say. But the silence lingered and finally she said, “Pretty?”

Trevor averted his eyes with a long exhale. “Well, I was going to say gorgeous, but yes. How did you know what I was going to say?”

Kate shrugged, but the thread of connection between them thickened to the size of a rope. “If that shimmer isn’t in the air past the city limit that will tell us something. There has to be something in the shimmer. Hallucinogen maybe. Or maybe it’s a hologram. Normally I’d say that kind of technology is only theoretical, but we’re here and something is definitely going on.”

Trevor nodded and finally got inside the car. Kate wasn’t usually clumsy, but this was the biggest mystery she’d ever encountered and it got to her. Her hands jittered with anxiety as she reached for the door handle. With a great shake, her car keys slipped from her fingers and fell to the ground. In a huff,

she bent down to pick them up. While her eyes were on the ground, a loud crackling sound filled the air.

A force hit her body and the crackling sound got louder. Now she could feel it in her very mind. Each of her muscles tensed as the force gripped her. Her body shook as all happiness seemed to drain from her mind. Every hope, every dream, every wish sucked away.

KayL Moody

Chapter 3

Kate fell to the ground in a heap. An icy cold washed over her clammy skin. The curls around her face hung limp. She felt empty and drained, but not sad necessarily. Rather, she felt the absence of every wishful or positive thought that had once graced her mind. After a moment, the aching lessened and the positive thoughts slowly crept back.

Before she could look up from the ground, she became aware of Trevor screaming her name through the car door. She glanced toward him. Trevor had jumped over to her seat and tried to open the driver side door, but she sat in the way. Without thinking, Kate dropped her body closer to the ground so he could open the door over her. As her blonde curls splayed out over the asphalt, she scolded herself for having such a terrible idea. But it was too late now.

When the car door opened, Trevor grabbed her hand and pulled her inside. In a hushed voice he said, "Shut the door before..."

Suddenly, Kate realized he was looking at something. And suddenly she realized that something must have been what took her hopes and dreams away. She reached for the inside door handle. At the same time, she looked up at the thing Trevor watched with such frightened eyes.

Before her stood an alien with thick, yellow skin. His hungry black eyes stared right past Kate. His butterscotch hair looked more like fur and covered most of his face. But strangest of all was how human he looked. Kate always imagined aliens to be gray and scaly or have extra eyes or something. This alien looked so similar to humans, she almost didn't know if she could call him an alien.

At least not without the thing in his hand. But sitting menacingly in one hand was a silver piece of technology which had to come from another world. She wanted to call it a gun. Two prongs came straight out with a blue light glowing between them. The alien's hand gripped a silver triangle which was attached to the two prongs. Curious symbols were etched into the triangle and they certainly weren't any language from earth.

Whatever the thing was, the alien pointed it straight at Trevor. Kate grabbed the car door from the inside and pulled it toward her. Before it could shut, the alien slipped his fingers around the outside edge of the door then yanked it open.

The silver gun slipped past Kate's nose just as a scream erupted from her throat. Kate reached up to snatch the gun, but a strong, yellow hand pushed her hands down and nearly broke her fingers.

Kate held her breath as she struggled to release her hands.

Out of nowhere, a loud clang interrupted the fear. The yellow alien slumped to the ground with his eyes closed. Kate's

head jerked up. A squat woman with plump cheeks stood just behind the alien. Her soft brown hair was tied up in a bun. The horn rimmed glasses on her nose looked like they came straight from a one room schoolhouse.

“Mrs. Peck?” Trevor’s voice held just as much confusion as his face.

“You got here at the worst possible time, Trevor. We’re just about to escape. Follow me.”

Trevor nodded and immediately got out of the car. Kate glanced from Trevor to Mrs. Peck then back again. Just because Trevor trusted this woman implicitly didn’t mean she was going to. Mrs. Peck looked out of place in this shimmery world, but Kate couldn’t quite figure out why.

“We’re just through the door of the store. And hurry!” Mrs. Peck said.

Kate jumped over the alien and slammed her car door shut. As she stepped toward the general store, the yellow alien stirred and soon he was on his feet. He raised his gun just as Mrs. Peck pulled Kate through the door. “Get inside, quickly,” Mrs. Peck said.

When Kate stepped over the threshold, Mrs. Peck grabbed a sheet of plywood and covered the glass in the door frame. Kate stared at the plywood with an empty expression. Trevor put his arm around her shoulders. “Are you okay?”

“She’ll be fine,” Mrs. Peck said.

“What was that thing?” Trevor asked.

“Since when do you have a girlfriend?” Mrs. Peck asked, ignoring his question. “And she’s not from Huntsville? How did I not hear about this?” Mrs. Peck shook her head. “How long have I been missing?”

Before Trevor could answer, Kate pointed to Mrs. Peck’s arm. “You don’t shimmer.”

A man emerged from behind the checkout stand. “That’s because we’re real,” he said. “And when *did* you get a girlfriend?” he asked Trevor.

“She’s not my girlfriend. She was just a customer at the store. Can someone please answer my question? What was that gun thing and what is this place?” Trevor frowned and his voice tremorred over the last few words. Once again, Mrs. Peck ignored him, but this time she handed him the shovel she was holding.

Mrs. Peck glanced over her shoulder and readjusted the glasses on her nose. “You have to hit the alien right on the ear. That’s the only way to subdue him. And it only knocks him out for a couple seconds at the most. It depends on how hard you hit. We’re all going to take turns knocking him out while we try to escape back through the puddle.”

“So this place is real, but the shimmery people aren’t? Is the puddle a gateway or something?” Kate asked.

The man gathered four people from one of the store aisles. Two of them held shovels. The man said, “The alien has a portal generator that can connect dimensions. He calls this

place a wish dimension. It's a place where all of your wildest dreams come true."

Trevor ran a hand over his forehead. He said under his breath, "We thought it was the future."

Mrs. Peck said, "Oh trust me, we all wish it was. But the more we believe in the things here, the more powerful it makes him. The gun he has, steals your wishes. We don't understand the technology exactly, but basically the gun can extract the wish energy from your brain. The more times you get shot, the more your brain gets damaged. Which is why we need to get out of here and fast."

Trevor eyed the door suspiciously. "Why doesn't the alien just come in here and shoot us? And don't tell me it's because he missed door opening day at alien school."

The man grabbed a shovel from a pile on the ground. He handed it to Trevor and said, "He can't get past wood for some reason. Good thing the door frame of this old store is still made of wood. We use the plywood to keep us extra safe."

Kate looked at the other four people standing just in front of the aisle. Two of them stared off with vacant expressions and had a strange tilt to their heads. Mrs. Peck said the gun caused brain damage. But the only way they could know that was if they had seen it happen before. A woman who wore a vacant expression started brushing her purple sweater with a strange intensity. Kate forced herself to look away when the man handed her a shovel.

Mrs. Peck told the others to line up behind the door, and then she pulled Kate and Trevor to the end of the line. “You two will go through the portal last because you’ve been here the shortest. Five hits with the gun makes you go brain dead and the rest of us have been hit at least four times. Now Alice and Brian can’t use the shovels so they’ll need escorts the whole time. Jack and Portia, you two will watch over Alice and Brian. Hank and I will take turns with Trevor and his girlfriend with knocking out the alien with our shovels.” Mrs. Peck turned to Trevor, “It’ll be easy. Just stand behind him and smack him in the ear when he starts to stir.”

“Her name is Kate,” Trevor mumbled.

“On three,” the man, who was apparently named Hank, said.

Mrs. Peck nodded and grabbed the door handle. When the man said three, she shoved the door open. The yellow alien stood just outside the door with an angry expression. Mrs. Peck smacked him across the ear with her shovel.

A teenager with knobby elbows guided the woman who had been brushing her arm. It took awhile to convince the purple sweated woman to walk through the door. By the time they finally passed through the threshold, the alien was stirring. Mrs. Peck patted the woman’s shoulder and didn’t notice the alien. Kate lifted her own shovel to knock out the alien in Mrs. Peck’s distraction.

Just before Kate's shovel made contact, a crackling sounded and Kate was hit with another sucking blast from the wish gun. She managed to hit the alien before she gasped and fell to her knees.

Trevor grabbed her by the hand and said, "Come on, we'll stand behind him so he can't shoot you again."

The alien stirred only a second later since Kate had only barely hit him with her shovel. Before he even lifted his head, Trevor smacked him hard across the ear.

A young man with a vacant expression was led down the store steps by a young woman. Again, the alien stirred. He got to his knees before Kate even noticed he was moving. The whole thing sounded so easy when they were talking about it inside, but actually doing it was much harder. It was surprisingly easy to get distracted by shimmery world around them. And the alien would sometimes be down for several seconds and sometimes he'd only be down for one. Mrs. Peck and Hank took turns hitting the alien, but sometimes he got up sooner than they expected.

Even with the difficulty, they made it around the general store without anyone getting shot. The alien had managed to take several steps some of the time he was awake, but he was laying unconscious back at the trailhead now.

When they were only a few feet from the puddle, the alien appeared and his black eyes locked onto Mrs. Peck. Kate knew

Mrs. Peck couldn't afford another shot from the gun. But Kate was too far to simply jump in front of her.

While the alien raised his gun, Kate shouted out the happiest, cheesiest, most wishful thought she could think of. "I can't wait to see my children's faces when they open their presents on Christmas morning!" As soon as she spoke the words, a warmth spread through her body as her belief in the wish took hold.

As she hoped, the alien immediately turned toward her with eyes even hungrier than she remembered. The teenager with knobby elbows and the woman with the purple sweater disappeared through the puddle in a flash of white light.

"When I'm a dad, I'm going to make my kids pancakes every Saturday morning!" Trevor shouted.

The alien turned toward Trevor now. He took several steps toward Trevor and raised his gun. After those few steps, the alien was close enough for Kate to reach. She smacked him in the ear before he could shoot.

The young man with a vacant expression and his young woman escort disappeared through the puddle with another flash of light. Trevor rushed with Kate toward the puddle while Hank, then Mrs. Peck disappeared through it.

The puddle sat less than a foot away. All they had to do was touch it and they'd be free. Kate pointed her toe, ready to dip it into the puddle. Just before she could reach it, a crackling sound filled the air.

Chapter 4

Panic set in and Kate side stepped to avoid the blast. She didn't realize the gun was actually pointed toward Trevor and when she stepped to the side, she inadvertently stepped straight in its range. Once again, every happy and bright thought sucked away from her brain. Trevor lifted Kate off the ground and carried her a few feet before plopping down behind a wooden trail sign in the forest. He pulled the sign backward so it tilted back over their heads and bodies.

Trevor brushed the hair away from Kate's face. A crease formed between his eyebrows while he stared at her with a frown. He rubbed his temple and said, "Here's what we're going to do. I'll distract the alien with future wishes like you did before. Then, you're going to go through the puddle. Once I have his attention, I'll smack him and get through the puddle."

Kate immediately protested. "But what if he shoots you with the gun?"

"You've been shot three times and I haven't been shot at all. I'll distract him, maybe get shot a couple times in the process, but once I get close enough, I'll smack him with the shovel and go through the puddle."

"But what if he shoots you more than four times before you can smack him?"

“He won’t. And even if he does, that’s my choice to make. You’ve already been shot three times. There’s only two of us left here. One of us has to smack him and I’ve been shot less than you so I have to be the one to do it. Maybe I’ll get stuck here, but that’s my choice.”

Kate tried to protest. Her heart beat wildly as she sat and tried to think of even one reason not to let Trevor sacrifice himself. One reason other than her. *What about me?* That’s what she wanted to say, but how could she? Why?

“There’s no use arguing with me,” Trevor said. “We know the only reason for any connection between us is because of the wish thing. Not because it’s the future or because we’re soul mates or anything that’s remotely real. I wish I could promise we’ll both get out of here safely, but I can’t. All I can do is make sure you don’t get shot again. Now let’s go before this alien thinks of some strategy to use against us.”

Trevor gripped his shovel tight in his fist and pushed the wooden sign away from them. Kate jumped to her feet. As soon as she turned, she saw the alien in front of them. She raised her shovel and Trevor immediately yelled, “Don’t worry about that, just run!”

Trevor smacked the alien hard against the ear. Trevor nodded toward Kate and said, “I’m right behind you.”

Kate pumped her arms as she ran. She heard Trevor’s hard panting right behind her. She glanced back over her shoulder and saw the alien stir. Trevor waved her forward and ran back

toward the alien and knocked him out before he could get up again.

Kate got to the puddle and stuck her toes right at the edge, waiting for Trevor. He was only a few feet away when he said, “Don’t wait for me, go NOW!”

Kate hesitated, but the urgency in his voice sent that familiar flurry through her veins. Oh, what did it matter that they only just met? She *wanted* to trust him and so she would. Kate pointed her toe and dipped it into the puddle. In a flash of white light, she landed just beside the puddle in a normal, non-shimmery world.

“Where’s Trevor?” Mrs. Peck asked.

Kate got to her feet and glared at the puddle. “He was right behind me. He’ll be here any second.”

Kate bit her lip as she waited. She glanced up and noticed Hank and the young woman hammering scrap 2x4s into a square on the underside of a scrap sheet of wood. Kate tapped her toe and looked back at the puddle. Four whole seconds had gone by and there was still no sign of Trevor.

Hank hammered in another nail. But before Kate could wonder where he got the nails, a flash of white light shot through the tunnel while a hand appeared through it. Next, came a head of bright orange hair.

“Finally,” Kate breathed.

But then his head disappeared back into the puddle. Kate immediately grabbed Trevor's hand and yanked him toward her. "Help!" she said desperately.

Mrs. Peck grabbed Trevor's arm and finally the bright orange hair reappeared. Kate took a step back and tugged harder. Trevor's face appeared with the worse grimace she had ever seen. Desperation took over.

"We need more help," she said to Hank. Soon Hank and the young woman grabbed onto Trevor. Even with the four of them, it took more effort than Kate imagined possible.

But finally, Trevor's shoulders appeared through the puddle. Trevor grimaced again. He said, "This alien has super strength or something. I think he's going to break my—" He flinched and Kate pulled him toward her as she took another step back. Now his stomach was through.

With each tug, Trevor got an inch closer.

At last, Trevor's entire body came through the puddle just before he toppled over onto Kate. They fell onto the dirt and brush of the forest floor. Kate immediately wrapped her arms around him as a sigh of relief escaped her.

Trevor grinned and jumped to his feet. He wiped his hands on his jeans and held a hand out to Kate to help her up even though she was almost up as it was. He squeezed her forearm when Kate saw Hank and the young woman cover the puddle with the sheet of wood and 2x4s. They stuck the square of

2x4s directly over the puddle, but around the outside so none of the wood would touch it.

Hank stomped his foot over the wooden sheet to make sure it stayed securely in place. “That should keep the alien from getting into our dimension.”

The teenager appeared from around a tree with a small pot of paint and a paintbrush. “So, are we just painting ‘Danger’ on the wood, or what?”

Kate turned her eyebrows down with a question in them. Hank said, “We want to make sure nobody moves the wood and goes into the puddle dimension.”

Trevor snorted. “Well then don’t write ‘Danger.’” He gave Kate a sideways glance. “*Some* people love mysteries and that will only make them curious.”

Kate tried to glare, but it immediately turned into a chuckle. “He’s right. I bet if you make it look like garbage nobody will come near it.”

Trevor nodded. “Yeah, just write ‘G E’ like it’s the beginning of General Store. Then someone will think it’s part of a sign that got thrown out.”

The teenager nodded and started painting.

Mrs. Peck glanced at Trevor’s hand. It was only then that Kate even noticed he was still holding onto her arm. Mrs. Peck squished her mouth up. “You sure this isn’t your girlfriend? You two do seem...” she glanced away for a moment then said, “In sync.”

Trevor dropped his hand with a frown. "It's just because of the wish place. We were married there and she was pregnant and I guess we wish for the same kind of future, but that doesn't mean anything."

Mrs. Peck shrugged. "Actually, it might."

Kate raised her eyebrows and tilted her head toward Mrs. Peck.

Mrs. Peck shrugged again. "From what we've seen, all the wishes there were very realistic. The only way you'd be married in the wish dimension is if you're compatible in real life. And I mean a higher than average compatibility." A twinkle glimmered in her eye. "I just thought you should know."

Mrs. Peck turned to walk away and the others followed after her.

Kate looked back at the wood sitting over the puddle. She bit her lip and said, "Why did the alien do it? Does he think humans are inferior and doesn't care that he damages our brains? Or does he think we're not inferior, but also not care?"

Trevor raised one eyebrow and crossed his arms. "Oh, no you don't. We aren't going back in there to find out. You wanted to know why people were going missing and you found out."

Kate chewed on her lip and stared harder.

Trevor shook his head. "We barely got out of there alive. There's no way we're going back."

Kate squeezed her teeth even tighter over her lips. Finally she let out a disappointed sigh. “You’re right. I found out what I wanted to know.”

Trevor cocked up one eyebrow. “This is going to be a thing with you, isn’t it?”

Kate opened her mouth to say something but then shut it again. It didn’t matter. Even out of the wish dimension, the familiarity was still there and she had a feeling Trevor knew what she was thinking. Kate let her mouth turn up to a half smile.

Trevor looked back at her with a grin.

Maybe they hadn’t seen the future together, but whatever happened, the future looked bright.

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