

PASSAGES™

MANUSCRIPT

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ANNISON'S RISK



PAUL MCCUSKER
FROM ADVENTURES IN ODYSSEY®



TYNDALE

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ANNISON'S RISK

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PROLOGUE



“It looks like we’ve reached a dead end,” Jack Allen said to his friend John Avery Whittaker, or Whit, as he was better known. The two men were having lunch at Hal’s Diner after spending the entire morning searching through archives at Odyssey City Hall and the Odyssey Public Library. They had been trying to solve a mystery

Whit chomped on a French fry, then thoughtfully brushed the side of his finger along his bushy, white mustache. His eyes scanned the papers, photocopies, and notes on the red Formica table in front of him. Around the diner, cups rattled, cutlery chinked, and people chatted. Cold sunlight, reflecting off the snow outside, poured in through the large, plate-glass windows. Whit sighed and said, “Maybe we missed something. Let’s go over it again.”

Jack nodded. He knew they would probably have to go over the “clues” repeatedly.

The mystery began when Jack discovered a school notebook in the bottom of a trunk that had belonged to an elderly schoolteacher named Maude McCutcheon. Maude had recently died, and her children had sold many of her belongings to Jack because he owned an antique shop. The notebook was

the old-fashioned kind: black with a white subject box on the front, and black adhesive tape down the binding. Every page was filled with handwriting that told a story about a brother and sister named Kyle and Anna who visited their grandparents in the summer of 1958.

Being in a small town made the children bored and restless. So, on the advice of an uncle, they took a walk through some woods to a mysterious old house. Strange things began to happen while they searched the house, and suddenly they found they were no longer in Odyssey. They had traveled to a country called Marus—in another world—where they seemed to have remarkable powers because of a being called the *Unseen One*.

Jack had been so intrigued by the story that he had shown it to Whit. Whit had thought it fascinating and sensed immediately that there was more to it than just a class assignment or fanciful imagination. They had then searched through the notebook to see if they could learn who wrote the tale. Apart from the story itself, there were no clues.

Whit and Jack had wondered if Maude McCutcheon had any other stories like it. So the next day—yesterday, in fact—they had gone to the schoolteacher's house. Her son, who had never seen the notebook before and didn't recognize the handwriting, had invited them to have a look around. They had found a second notebook on a shelf in Maude McCutcheon's study. Shoved inside were newspaper clippings from August 1945 about the

United States dropping atomic bombs on Japan. The story inside was written in the same handwriting as the first. This one, though, told the story of a boy named Wade Mullens who, while waiting for his father to come home from World War II, slipped into Marus and accidentally brought a holocaust with him.

Whit and Jack had been even more intrigued after reading the second manuscript. It seemed to weave real-life events from *Odyssey* into the fantasy world of Marus. Who had written these stories, and why? The two men wanted to know.

And so Whit and Jack had spent the morning looking through archives at City Hall and newspapers at the library, trying to learn about Kyle and Anna and Wade Mullens. Now, in Hal's Diner, they sorted through the notebooks and papers and pages of scribble pads for clues—just like a couple of old panhandlers sifting for gold.

"Let's start with what we know," Whit said. "The first notebook told the story of Kyle and Anna and how they helped Darien become king of Marus. But the story didn't tell us their last names, only that they were visiting their grandparents in the summer of 1958."

"That's right," Jack agreed. "The adventure happened that summer, but the notebook was written on October 3, 1958."

Whit pushed some papers aside and glanced at the notes he'd written. "In the second manuscript, we read the story of Wade Mullens. Wade's mother was Carol, and his father was Ronald."

Jack looked at his own notes. "We know that Ronald had been hurt and trapped on an island in the South Pacific when the war ended, but he was found and brought back to Odyssey. Then ..." Jack held up a yellow newspaper clipping "... in the article reporting Ronald's return, Wade said he was thankful to the 'Unseen One' for bringing his father back. Wade said the Unseen One was God."

"Funny that he'd mention it. The Unseen One must've seemed very real to him." Whit gazed out the window, squinting against the bright sunlight. Cars drove past, sending up plumes of melting snow from the road.

Jack continued reading from his notes. "Wade went to the usual schools here in Odyssey Maude McCutcheon was his English teacher in eighth grade."

"So that's our first real connection." Whit drew a line connecting Wade's name with Maude McCutcheon's on his notepad.

"Later, Wade followed in his father's footsteps and joined the military. He became a pilot for the Air Force in 1956." Jack picked up another article that had a black-and-white picture of Wade as a decorated officer. "In 1965, it was reported that Wade had been killed in Vietnam."

Whit stroked his chin. He'd lost a son in Vietnam, too, and could imagine how Ronald and Carol Mullens felt. "If the old phone directories are anything to go by, the Mullens family

lived in Odyssey at least until 1966. City Hall records show that they sold their house in February of that year. We don't know where they moved to."

Jack leaned back in his chair and folded his hands across his chest. He felt he had nearly gone cross-eyed searching through databases and the Internet to find where the Mullenses might be now. Nothing matched up. "So we've reached a dead end," he said.

Whit shook his head. "There must be some other angle, another avenue, we can consider."

"Like what?"

"We could talk to their old neighbors. Somebody's bound to know where they went."

"And how will we explain our questions to the neighbors?"

"What do you mean?"

Jack pretended to be standing in front of one of the neighbors' doors. "Hello there, we're trying to track down the Mullens family because their son Wade was in a story about traveling to another world."

Whit laughed at the thought.

"They'll think we're crazy" Jack smiled. "We *are* crazy. Imagine spending all this time trying to find the author of a couple of kids' stories."

"Do you really think they're only kids' stories?"

Whit's question was so earnest that Jack paused to think

about it for a moment. *Something* about the stories made them both wonder if maybe, just *maybe*, the stories really happened. It was crazy, sure. But *what if?*

Maggie, their waitress, approached with a coffeepot and held it up with a smile.

"Yes, please," Jack said. She poured the steaming drink into his mug.

"Whit?"

Whit nudged his mug in her direction. "Thank you, Maggie."

After Maggie poured his coffee, she gestured to the papers and asked, "Aren't you two a little old to be doing homework?"

"Old?" Jack asked innocently and looked to Whit. "What's she talking about? Who's old?"

"We're playing detectives," Whit said.

"Oh, really?"

Whit eyed her as if he suddenly realized something.

"Maggie, you grew up here in Odyssey, didn't you?"

"Born in Connellsville, raised in Odyssey," she replied.

"How old are you?"

"That's none of your business."

"I mean, when did you go to school? The late forties? Early fifties?"

"Yes to both decades. I graduated from high school in 1953."

“Did you know Wade Mullens?”

Maggie looked surprised and set the coffeepot down on the table. “Wade? Yeah, I knew Wade. We had some classes together. I even had a crush on him once. Why do you ask?”

Whit and Jack exchanged hopeful glances.

“Do you have any idea what became of his parents after Wade died in Vietnam?” Whit asked.

“They moved away.”

“Do you know where?”

“They moved to Virginia. Wade’s father got a job there. They wanted to get out of Odyssey because it reminded them so much of Wade.”

“You say that as if you know firsthand,” Jack observed.

“Were you friends with the Mullenses?”

“Mrs. Mullens and I became friends because of Wade.”

Whit shifted in his seat excitedly. “Have you kept in touch? Do you know where they are now?”

“Well, Mr. Mullens died nearly 10 years ago, and Mrs. Mullens remarried. Her name is Walston now.”

“Where’s she living?” Jack asked.

Maggie suddenly frowned. “What’s this all about? Why are you so interested in finding her?”

“We want to ask her a couple of questions about these notebooks,” Whit said, waving a hand over them.

“What about them?”

"They have stories in them. One is about Wade."

Maggie was puzzled. "A story about Wade? What kind of story?"

"A story about a place called Marus," Jack said.

Maggie's features froze in place, as if she had been stunned.

Whit pressed on. "Did you ever hear Wade talk about a place called Marus?"

Maggie's face changed, as if she wanted to appear cool and relaxed, but she still replied quickly and nervously. "Marus? Why should I? Look, I have to take care of these other tables." She grabbed the coffeepot and hurried away.

"But Maggie," Whit called out after her, "where is Mrs. Mullens?"

Maggie said over her shoulder, "Mrs. *Walston* lives in Connellsville. On Meadowbrook Lane."



Carol Walston lived in a small, gray, boxlike house with shutters on the windows and a white picket fence. A man who turned out to be George Walston, Carol's husband, was scraping the last of the snow off his driveway when Whit and Jack drove up. He stopped shoveling long enough to rub his red-checked coat sleeve across his sweaty forehead. The movement knocked his wool cap slightly askew. A tuft of white hair poked out. "What can I do for you gents?" he asked.

“We’re looking for Carol Walston,” Whit answered.

“Are you salesmen?” he asked, hooking a thumb at the briefcase Whit carried at his side.

“Not at all,” Jack replied. “We’re from Odyssey. We want to talk to her about her son.”

“Oh.” George Walston turned away as if mentioning Carol’s son was a cue not to get involved. “She’s inside. Just knock hard on the front door.”

“Thank you,” Whit said. But George was already pushing the snow shovel across the driveway again.

Carol Walston was a surprisingly tall, slender woman with a round, friendly face. It was hard to guess her age since her face seemed almost wrinkle-free and her hair was dyed a flaming red. She wiped her hands on her apron and invited Whit and Jack inside.

“So what’s this all about?” she asked after she’d taken their coats and got them seated comfortably in the living room.

Whit explained about finding the two manuscripts and the trail that had led them to her. He also pulled out of his briefcase the two school notebooks and the articles that had been tucked inside. Whit thought he saw something in her eyes—a glint of great interest in the notebooks—but she seemed to restrain herself and laughed instead.

“Wade would laugh, too,” she said. “He would. To think of two grown men making such a fuss about his little story.”

"You remember it?" Jack asked.

"Of course I do," Mrs. Walston said. "He came out of that fever—the flu was going around then—and told me all about the dream he'd had."

"Is this Wade's handwriting?" Whit asked, holding out one of the notebooks.

"No," she replied without looking at the book. "But Wade was a very imaginative boy. Very intelligent. He must've told his story to some of his friends, and I can only guess that one of them wrote it down for a school assignment." Her gaze drifted to a black-and-white photo sitting in a gold frame on the end table. A young man posed proudly in a military uniform.

Whit asked, "Did he ever talk to you about Marus after that?"

"He mentioned it occasionally. But only the way a child mentions a game he once loved to play I didn't pay much attention."

"So he didn't tell any more stories—or write any down anywhere?"

Mrs. Walston shook her head. "Not that I know of."

Jack held up the other notebook. "Then how did this *other* story, written 12 years later, come about?"

Mrs. Walston shrugged. "I couldn't tell you."

Whit and Jack looked at each other sadly.

Mrs. Walston smiled at them. "I'm sorry for you both, but you really shouldn't take children's stories so seriously." She

stood up and began to smooth her apron. "If you two will excuse me, I really have to get back to my baking. My great-nephews birthday is next Saturday, and I promised to bake him a Texas sheet cake."

With nothing else to say, Whit and Jack put on their coats and made their way to the front door. A door slammed in another part of the house, and Mr. Walston appeared at the kitchen doorway. His cap was off now, his thin, white hair matted to his head.

"Did you wipe your feet?" Mrs. Walston asked him.

"Sure did," Mr. Walston answered and held up a boot to prove it. "Are you leaving so soon?" he asked Jack and Whit.

"Yes. It was nice to meet you," Jack said.

Just as he and Whit were about to step out into the cold day, Whit turned back to Mrs. Walston. To Jack's surprise, he asked, "Do you believe Marus really exists?"

Mrs. Walston laughed sharply "No," she replied. "Why would I? Wade had a vivid imagination, he was feverish, and we were both worried about his father's safe return from the South Pacific."

"I see."

"Thank you for coming by, though," she said as they stepped onto the front stoop. "It was a sweet reminder of my son."

"Marus?" Mr. Walston said from the kitchen. "Did you say Marus?"

Annoyed, Mrs. Walston snapped, "Mind your own business, George."

He ignored her and moved into the hallway from the kitchen. "I remember reading that story. The one by Wade, right?"

Mr. Walston shrugged. "Didn't he?"

"You're confused, George," Mrs. Walston said.

Whit and Jack glanced at each other.

"You read Wade's story? When he went to Marus?" Jack asked.

"Must've been a long time ago," Mrs. Walston said quickly.

Mr. Walston now looked puzzled. "When *Wade* went to Marus? No. I read a story he wrote about a girl named—oh, I don't remember—anyway, some other kid went to Marus."

"Kyle and Anna?" Whit persisted.

"Not two kids. Just one."

Then there's another notebook, Whit and Jack seemed to say to each other in their expressions. The color left Mrs. Walston's cheeks.

Whit opened his briefcase, grabbed the notebooks, and asked, "Was it written in a notebook? Like these?"

Mr. Walston smiled. "Yep. Just the same." Then he looked perplexed. "You have two of them already I didn't know there was more than the one."

Mrs. Walston looked as if she wanted to throttle her husband. "Drop it, George," she said in a threatening tone. She

tried to move Whit and Jack toward the door. “Thanks again for coming—”

“Mrs. Walston, if you have another notebook, we’d be grateful to see it,” Whit said.

She stammered for a moment, then said, “I don’t have it. My husband is old and easily confused. If there’s a notebook, it’ll be in the attic with my son’s schoolbooks.”

Mr. Walston grunted and replied, “That’s ridiculous, Carol! It’s in the TV room. I saw it there just the other day.” He suddenly disappeared from view. His footsteps thudded down another hallway. In the meantime, Mrs. Walston regained the color in her cheeks. They now went a bright red as Mr. Walston returned with an old-fashioned school notebook in his hand.

“See?” he said proudly. “It’s right here.”

“So it is,” Mrs. Walston said softly.

“May we see it?” Jack asked. Mr. Walston handed the notebook over to him. At a glance, it was obvious to both Jack and Whit that the handwriting was the same as in the other two. But the story was different.

“Mrs. Walston, it would mean a lot to us if we could borrow this to read,” said Whit.

“It’s a keepsake,” she replied in a sharp tone. “I’d rather not let it go.”

“Then please come with us while we make copies of it.”

"No," she insisted. "It's my son's story, and I don't want it out in public."

Whit smiled and said gently, "But it can't be your son's story. You already told us it wasn't his handwriting."

Mr. Walston looked befuddled. "What's the matter with you, Carol?" he asked. "If they want to read the story, let them."

It was clear that Mrs. Walston had run out of sensible reasons to keep Whit and Jack from having the notebook. A slight groan escaped from her before she said, "All right, I'll trust you with it. But only for the night. And *no copies*."

"If you insist," Whit said.

They took the notebook, thanked her, and walked out.

The door slammed behind them, and they heard Mrs. Walston shout unhappily, "George!"

This was followed by Mr. Walston complaining, "What? What did I do wrong?"

During the ride back to Odyssey, Whit said to Jack, "I thought something odd was going on."

"You did? Why?"

"When I took the notebooks out of my briefcase, I thought I saw something in her eyes. As if she already knew what they were. But more than that, it struck me as odd that she didn't ask to read the stories. She didn't even look at them."

"So?"

“If someone brought a story to you about your dead son, wouldn’t you want to read it?”

“Well ... I suppose I would,” Jack said. The whole experience was bizarre, he thought. “So what do you think she’s hiding? Why didn’t she want us to see this manuscript?”

Whit gazed down at the notebook in his lap. “I have no idea. Maybe we’ll understand more after we read it.”

“You’d better start now if we hope to finish it tonight.”

Whit opened the cover, his eye drawn to the familiar handwriting.

It was dated September 18, 1927.

“The Chronicles of Intercession,” it said.

And then the story began.

CHAPTER ONE



“Ready or not, here I come!” a child’s voice called out from somewhere behind the shed.

Madina Nicholaivitch giggled and scrambled to find a hiding place. She’d already hidden once behind the well and once in the garage, and now she had to think of somewhere little Johnny Ziegler wouldn’t think to find her.

Johnny shouted, excitement in his voice, “I’m coming, Maddy!”

Everyone called her Maddy now except her grandparents, who still spoke in Russian and called her Dreamy Madina in that tongue. It didn’t matter to them that they’d been living in America, this town of Odyssey, for 10 years now. “We will not forsake our traditions, no matter where we live,” Grandma had said.

On the other hand, Maddy’s father, Boris, now refused to speak any Russian. He said he was protesting the Russian Revolution of 1917 that drove them, persecuted and destitute, from their home in St. Petersburg. “We’re in America now,” he stated again and again in his clipped English. “We must speak as Americans.”

“The revolution will not last,” Maddy’s Grandpa proclaimed several times a year, especially in October, on the anniversary of the revolution.

“It is now 1927, is it not?” Maddy’s father argued. “They have killed the czar, they have destroyed everything we once held dear, and they are closing our churches. I turn my back on Russia as Russia turned its back on us. We are Americans now.”

So Madina became Maddy and spoke American because she was only two when they came to America. She never really learned Russian anyway, except for odd phrases from her grandparents. Refugees that they were, they'd started off in New York and drifted west to Chicago as opportunities from various friends and relatives presented themselves. Boris had been an accomplished tailor back in St. Petersburg, so his skill was in demand wherever they went. Then they'd heard from a cousin who owned a tailor shop in the small town of Odyssey and wanted Boris to join him in the business. They called the firm Nichols Tailor & Clothes, Nichols being the English corruption of their original Russian name, and made clothes for nearly everyone, including the mayor of Odyssey.

Maddy was unaffected by all the changes and upheaval in their lives. She seemed contented and happy regardless of where they were. The world could have been falling apart around her and she would have carried on in her pleasant, dreamlike way, lost in fantasies like *Alice in Wonderland*, *Peter Pan*, and the many other stories she read at the local library.

She often pretended to be a girl with magical powers in a fairy-tale world. Or she played out a dream she'd been having night after night for the past two weeks. In the dream, she was a lady-in-waiting to a princess with raven black hair and the most beautiful face Maddy had ever seen.

"You must come and help me," the princess said to her every night in the dream.

"I will," Maddy replied. And then she would wake up.

She had told her mother about the dream. But her mother smiled indulgently and dismissed it as she had most of Maddy's fanciful ideas.

Apart from pretending to be in fairy tales, Maddy enjoyed playing games like hide-and-seek with the smaller neighbor-

hood children. Her mother often said that she would be a teacher when she grew up because she loved books and children so much.

Maddy circled their old farm-style house that had been built with several other similar houses on the edge of town. It had gray shingles, off-white shutters, and a long porch along the front. She ducked under the clothesline that stretched from the porch post to a nearby pole. The shirts and underclothes brushed comfortingly against her face, warmed by the sun. She then spied a small break in the trelliswork that encased the underside of the porch. That would be her hiding place, she decided—under the porch.

She pressed a hand down on her thick, curly, brown hair to keep it from getting caught on any of the trellis splinters and went only as far under as she dared, to the edge of the shadows. The dirt under her hands and bare legs was cold. She tried not to get any of it on her dark blue peasant dress, which her father had made especially for her. She could smell the damp earth and old wood from the porch. In another part of the garden, she heard her little brother squeal with delight as their mother played with him in the late-summer warmth.

“I’m going to find you,” little Johnny, the boy from next door, called out.

Maddy held her breath as she saw his legs appear through the diamond shapes of the trellis. He hesitated, but the position of his feet told her that he had his back to the porch. Maybe he wouldn’t see the gap she’d crawled through. He moved farther along, getting closer to the gap, so she moved farther back into the shadows and darkness. The hair on her neck bristled. She’d always worried that a wild animal might have gone under the porch to live, just as their dog Babushka had when she’d given birth to seven puppies last year. But

Maddy's desire to keep Johnny from finding her was greater than her fear, so she went farther back and farther in.

The porch, like a large mouth, seemed to swallow her in darkness. The trelliswork, the sunlight, and even Johnny's legs, now moving to and fro along the porch, faded away as if she'd slowly closed her eyes. But she knew she hadn't. She held her hand up in front of her face and wiggled her fingers. She could see still them.

Then, from somewhere behind her, a light grew, like the rising of a sun. But it wasn't yellow like dawn sunlight; it was white and bright, like the sun at noon. She turned to see, wondering where the light had come from. She knew well that there couldn't be a light farther under the porch, that she would soon reach a dead end at the cement wall of the basement.

As she looked at the light, she began to hear noises as well. At first they were indistinct, but then she recognized them as the sounds of people talking and moving. Maddy wondered if friends from town had come to visit. But the voices were too numerous for a small group of friends. This sounded more like a big crowd. And mixed with the voices were the distinct sounds of horses whinnying and the clip-clop of their hooves and the grating of wagon wheels on a stony street.

Crawling crablike and being careful not to bump her head on the underside of the porch, Maddy moved in the direction of the light and sounds. The noises grew louder, and, once she squinted a little, she could see human and horse legs moving back and forth, plus the distinct outline of wagon wheels.

It's a busy street, she thought, but then she reminded herself, *There's no busy street near our house*. The sight inflamed her imagination, and she ventured still closer and closer to the scene. *It's like crawling out of a small cave*, she thought. Then her mind raced to the many stories she'd read about children

who had stepped through a hole or mirror or doorway and wound up in a magical land. Her heart beat excitedly as she thought—*hoped*—that maybe it was about to happen to her. Perhaps she would get to see something wondrous; perhaps she was going to enter a fairy tale.

At the edge of the darkness, she glanced up and realized she was no longer under the porch. The coarse planks of plywood and the two wheels directly in front of her and two wheels directly behind her made her think she must be under a wagon. More startling was that the porch, the trellis, Johnny, and even her house had disappeared.

A man shouted, “Yah!” and snapped leather reins, and the wagon moved away from her. She stayed still, afraid she might get caught under the wheels, but they didn’t touch her. In a moment she was crouched in an open space, sunlight pouring down onto her. People were crowded around, and she stood up with embarrassment on her face, certain they were wondering who she was and where she’d come from.

A man grabbed her arm and pulled her quickly into the crowd. “You’d better get out of the road, little lady,” he warned. “Do you want to get run over by the procession?”

Besides that, no one seemed to notice her. But she noticed them. Her eyes were dazzled by the bright colors of the hundreds—maybe even thousands—of people lined up on both sides of the avenue. Trees sprung out from among them like green fountains. Tall buildings stood behind them with enormous columns and grand archways. Maddy blinked again. The colors seemed too bright somehow, much richer than the colors she was used to seeing. Then she smiled to herself: They looked just like the colors in so many of the illustrated stories she’d read.

She noticed that some of the people clutched flags and

banners, while others held odd-looking, rectangular-shaped hats to their chests, and a few carried children up on their shoulders. What struck Maddy most were the peculiar garments everyone wore. The women were in long, frilly dresses, not unlike Maddy's own peasant dress but far more intricate in their design, billowing out at the waist like tents. The men had on long coats and trousers that only went to just below their knees. The rest of their legs were covered with white stockings. On their feet they wore leather shoes with large, square buckles. The men had ponytails, she noticed, and hats that came to three-pointed corners.

The scene reminded her of the last Fourth of July, when she had stood along Main Street with the rest of Odyssey for the big parade, followed by fireworks and picnic food in the park. Some of the people in that parade had dressed the same as the people she saw now. It was the style of clothes worn when America won its independence.

Unlike the parade in Odyssey, however, this parade didn't seem very happy. Most of the people stood with stern expressions on their faces. A few looked grieved. Several women wiped tears from their eyes. Maddy suspected she had formed the wrong impression of what she was seeing. Maybe it wasn't a parade; maybe it was a funeral procession.

"Did someone die?" Maddy asked the man who'd pulled her from the street.

He gazed at her thoughtfully and replied, "Our nation, little lady Our nation."

A regiment of soldiers now marched down the avenue. The men were dressed in the same outfits as those in the crowd, but all were a solid blue color, and they had helmets on their heads and spears or swords in their hands. They broke their ranks and spread out to the edge of the crowd.

“The king is coming, and we want you to be excited about it,” one of them said gruffly.

“He’s not *our* king!” someone shouted from the thick of the crowd.

The soldier held up his sword menacingly. “You can be excited or arrested,” he threatened. “The choice is yours.”

The soldiers moved off to stir up other parts of the crowd. Across the avenue, a fight broke out, and Maddy watched in horror as three soldiers began to beat and kick a man they’d knocked down. They dragged him away while the rest of the soldiers stood with their swords and spears at the ready.

What kind of parade is this, she wondered, where the people are forced to enjoy it or be beaten? As if to answer her question, Maddy remembered the stories her father told of the Russian revolutionaries who demanded that people parade and salute even when they didn’t want to.

Halfhearted cheers worked their way through the crowd as a parade of horses approached and passed, soldiers sitting erect on their backs, swords held high in a formal salute. Then a large band of musicians with woodwinds and brass instruments came by, playing a lively song of celebration. Next came several black, open-topped carriages, each with people dressed in colorful outfits of gold and silver that twinkled in the sunlight. The men wore white shirts with lacy collars. The women wore hats with brightly colored feathers sticking out of the backs. They waved and smiled at the crowd.

Maddy noticed one man in particular who seemed almost as unhappy as some of the people in the crowd. He had a pock-marked face, unfriendly eyes, a narrow nose, and thinning, wiry hair. Unlike the rest of the parade, he didn’t wear a colorful jacket but one of solid black—as if he, too, were mourning something. Occasionally he lifted his hand in a wave, but

Maddy was struck by the look of boredom on his face. It seemed to require considerable effort for him to be pleasant to the crowd.

At the end of this particular procession came the largest carriage of all. Gold on the outside, its seats were made of a plush, red material. A man sat alone on the rear seat—propped up somehow to raise him higher than he normally would have been—and waved happily at the crowds. He was a pleasant-looking, middle-aged man with ruddy cheeks, big eyes, and wild, curly hair.

“I was wondering if he’d wear that stupid wig,” someone muttered nearby.

“It’s no worse than that coat,” someone else commented.

The man’s coat displayed the colors of the rainbow and had large buttons on the front. Maddy smiled. It made him look a little like a clown.

“I can’t bear it,” a woman cried as large tears streamed down her face. Even with the tears, she waved a small flag back and forth.

“What’s wrong?” Maddy asked the woman. “Why are you crying?”

The woman dabbed at her face with a handkerchief. “Because it’s the end of us all,” she replied with a sniffle.

“Aye,” an elderly man behind her agreed. “When the barbarians parade down the streets of Sarum, it’s the end of Marus.”

Suddenly a group of soldiers who had been following the golden carriage with muskets slung over their shoulders spread out to the crowds, thrusting flags and banners into their hands. “Take these and follow us to the palace,” they commanded.

“Only after I’ve had my brain replaced with a beetroot,” the elderly man said defiantly.

A soldier hit him in the stomach with the butt of his musket. The man doubled over in pain. "You'll follow no matter what kind of brain you have!" the soldier growled.

"Leave us alone!" a woman shouted. "Why don't you go back to Palatia where you belong?"

"And deprive our king of his spoils?" another soldier called back. "That wouldn't do."

The man who'd been hit recovered his breath, grumbled something Maddy didn't understand, then stepped out onto the avenue to follow the soldiers. Maddy was swept along with him and the rest of the crowd around her. Before she knew it, the man's flag—a small, rectangular cloth of red with a single star in the middle—was in her hand. He smiled at her. "You'll enjoy waving it more than I will," he suggested with a pained expression on his face. Eventually, she lost him in the crowd.

Worried that she might get in trouble, Maddy held the flag up and swung it as she walked. It didn't occur to her that she had no idea where she was or if she could find her way back to her porch. If this was a dream she was having or, better still, a magical place she'd found like Alice in Wonderland, she was curious to see what would happen next. "Dreamy Madina" was like that. But she wasn't too pleased about the nasty soldiers or the unhappiness of the people.

Maddy followed the crowd up the avenue until it joined yet another broad street. They seemed to walk for miles. Because she was surrounded on all sides by the crowd, she couldn't see much of the city. Only occasionally did a large building poke skyward beyond someone's head or shoulder. She wished she could stop to look longer at the great pillars and round towers or to read the names on the statues of men in brave and noble postures. Otherwise, she caught only glimpses of shops and homes made of brick and stone.

Just as Maddys legs started to ache from the long walk, the crowd slowed to a halt. Then, after a moment, it slowly moved forward again, now through a large gate made of wrought iron and gold posts. She found herself in a parklike area with level grounds and manicured grass. A single driveway curved around in a half-moon shape and stopped at the double front doors of a palace. At least Maddy assumed it was a palace, for she'd never seen such a majestic building in her life.

The front door stood at the center of two wings, made of yellow stone, that spread out to the left and the right. There were three stories, each with rows of tall windows that reflected the day like jewels. Maddy's eye was drawn to a gold rotunda over the center section, where the front doors were. On top of the rotunda was a statue of something that looked to her like an angel.

The crowd was instructed by the soldiers to sit down on the grass. The man in the golden carriage stood up to address the throng. His voice was deep and booming but still hard to hear since he was some distance away.

"I, King Willem, declare a national holiday for my subjects, the people of Marus," he declared.

"We're not your subjects!" a man shouted from somewhere deep in the crowd. Soldiers instantly moved in to find the culprit.

The king ignored him. "Let this be a time of celebration!" he continued. "A time of feasts and banquets unlike anything seen in your lifetime!"

"As if I ever expected to see a *Palatian* king on the throne in my lifetime," an old man with a craggy face growled softly off to Maddy's right.

"Let the musicians make music, let sweet drinks flow, and let the food fill our bellies!" the king called out. "From this day

forward, Palatia *and* Marus are intertwined, united by fate and by victory.”

“It’s *our* fate thanks to *his* victory,” the same man muttered sarcastically.

The king continued, “And now I beseech every man, woman, and child to join me in celebrating my marriage to one of your own, the pure and gracious Annison!”

With this, a woman stepped out through one of the palace’s front doors. Maddy gasped. The woman had raven black hair and a slender face, with a smile that seemed to light up everything around her. It was the most beautiful face Maddy had ever seen.

“It’s the princess from my dream,” she said out loud to a woman next to her.

The woman grunted and turned away.

Maddy craned her neck to see better. Annison wore a beautiful, red-velvet dress that highlighted the redness of her lips and the blush of her cheeks. She looked shy and slightly embarrassed to be standing in front of so many people. Lifting her hand, she gave an awkward wave.

Though it was a slight gesture, the crowd came alive now, with all the people leaping to their feet to cheer her. They cheered in a way they hadn’t cheered for the king at any point in his procession—wildly and exuberantly. He didn’t seem to mind, though. He stretched out his hand to her, his face filled with pride.

“I can’t believe she’s marrying him,” a woman nearby sneered in the midst of the shouts and cheers. “She’s a Marutian. She should be ashamed.”

“She’s an orphan girl,” another woman said with a shrug. “Who knows what her lineage is? For all we know, she’s a Palatian herself.”

"She may be our only hope," an old man observed thoughtfully. The two women looked at him uncomfortably and shut up.

Maddy didn't understand what any of it meant. All she knew was that the princess of her dream was real in this strange world, and now she'd lost sight of her because of the crowd.

"You must come and help me," the princess had said in the dream.

And Maddy had promised she would. With that thought in mind, she pressed herself forward through the crowd. She was determined to get to the front door of the palace—and Annison.