

"Brimming with surprises and grand adventure. Brave, smart and full of heart, Madeline and Ruby are a breath of fresh air." —Rebecca Stead, Newbery Medal-winning author of *When You Reach Me*

HELEN PHILLIPS



HERE *Where*
the **SUNBEAMS**
are **GREEN**

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the SUNBEAMS
are GREEN



DELACORTE PRESS

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v3.1

*For my sister, Alice,
brava and bold*

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CHAPTER 1



So here we are in this shaky little airplane high above the jungle, which is kind of (very) scary. On our first flight Roo got the window seat the whole five hours, so she insisted that I get it for the second flight, which is pretty thoughtful for someone who's only nine-almost-ten. But I really should've let her have the window seat this time too. Even though I'm three years older than my sister, she's the brave one who loves flying and other dangerous things. Plus I've been a bit more freaked out in general lately, ever since The Weirdness began. The amazing view is basically wasted on me—the only way I can get through the wobbly ride is by pressing my forehead hard against the window, trying to pretend the jungle below is a huge green trampoline and even if we fell out of the sky we'd be totally fine.

And then—right as I'm telling myself, *Listen, Madeline Flynn Wade, you need to calm down and get a grip*—I see it.

"There it is," I murmur.

"What? What!" Roo yelps. "Where's what?"

"There's the Lava Bird Volcano." I lean back in my seat so she can peek out the window. Dad taught us that not all volcanoes have the classic volcano shape, but this one sure does. It's big and blue and very, very perfect.

"Volcán Pájaro de Lava," Ken/Neth corrects me from across the aisle, where he's sitting next to Mom.

"Volcán Pájaro de Lava," Roo echoes with a perfect little accent, and I'm going, *How come she has that super-great accent when I've been studying Spanish for three years and she's only been studying it for one?*

Just as we pass the volcano, two rainbows jump up out of the jungle and crisscross each other. They truly crisscross each other! Roo unbuckles her seat belt so she can squeeze closer to me and see the rainbows better, and we go "Ooo, rainbows!" and start to feel really, really excited about what we're going to do this afternoon. Well, actually, Roo's been really, really excited all along. She always is. I'm the one who gets nervous about things.

Anyway, Roo and I are gasping and squealing and feeling hopeful until we look across the aisle to make sure Mom is watching the rainbows and instead see Ken/Neth whispering into her ear. It gives me an automatic stomachache. Dad never would have become friends with Ken/Neth if he'd known *this* was going to happen someday. Ken/Neth on an airplane with *Dad's* family, whispering things into *Dad's wife's* ear!

But I liked Ken/Neth too. Back in December when Dad brought him home

for dinner and introduced him as Kenneth Candy (seriously, his last name is Candy), a longtime ecological developer and a newtime friend.

“Newtime?” Roo said, giggling, as Mom sighed and added another place mat to the table. “Is that really a word?”

“Ken’s involved in that fascinating development in Central America,” Dad explained to Mom, pinching her waist in the way that makes her smile. “The one I’ve told you about, remember, that opened a couple years ago? It’s won the World’s Greenest Spa award for two years running. They’re doing revolutionary work in the field of environmental development. It’s the way of the future, Via. And the location is unbelievable—virtually untouched jungle on the flanks of a volcano. An ornithologist’s dream!” Dad paused, and all the enthusiasm drained out of his voice. “Of course, it would’ve been more of an ornithologist’s dream a few years back, before the Lava-Throated Volcano trogon was confirmed extinct.”

Dad *hates* extinction. And he *loves* Central American birds.

“The most elusive bird in the world,” Dad said dreamily as we sat down to eat, “long before it went extinct. Spectacular plumage but so shy—hardly ever let anyone get a good look at it. The females were especially reclusive. Even if you managed to spot a male, he’d never give you a hint about the location of his mate or their nest. They were monogamous, mated for life.”

“*Elusive, reclusive, elusive, reclusive,*” Roo rhymed merrily under her breath, twirling spaghetti on her fork.

Mom looked at Dad, shaking her head. “I still can’t believe they’d build a spa right in the habitat of a rare trogon like that.”

“*Former* habitat,” Ken Candy corrected her, chomping down on a big mouthful of spinach salad. “Extinct”—chew—“is”—chew—“extinct,” he said sadly (or at least as sadly as you can while chewing), almost as if someone from his own family had died. But really it was more like someone from Dad’s family had died, because Dad’s the one who’s the world-class ornithologist, otherwise known as the Bird Guy.

“What’s that place called again?” Mom asked. “The Magma?”

“La Lava,” Ken Candy said with a spinach-toothed grin. “La Lava Resort and Spa.”

“I love lava,” Roo said. “It’s like the planet’s own hot caramel sauce.”

“So,” Mom said to Ken Candy, “what exactly do you do for La Lava?”

“Oh, mainly just some consultation about ecological development and that sorta thing.” Ken Candy was smiling very brightly at Mom. “I’m based here in Denver but I travel there a few times a year.”

“We need more people like you doing the kind of work you’re doing,” Dad said.

“Well. Who knows. But I sure do love what I do,” Ken Candy said, pretending he wasn’t proud of himself. “And not to talk business at the dinner table,” he continued, “but ... La Lava is seeking an expert ornithologist to help us track and catalog the native bird species, both for the benefit of our more curious guests and to further our green mission. What happened to the Lava-

Throat should never happen again.”

Ken Candy looked at Dad. Dad looked at Mom. Mom looked at Ken Candy.

“Interesting,” Mom said. “Very interesting.”

“It’s quite a dazzling array of avian life out there, lemme tell ya,” Ken Candy added.

“I’m sure it is,” she said.

After dinner Ken Candy pulled some candy from his pockets and offered it to me and Roo. He just so happened to have a mini Snickers (my favorite) and a mini Butterfinger (Roo’s favorite). “Since Candy is my last name,” he explained with a wink. He was nice and also cute, even with spinach in his teeth, and I felt shy. Now I just wish Dad had never met him.

Because look where we are today, Ken/Neth pointing out the airplane window at the rainbows and leaning in too close to Mom to whisper, “Well, that’s an omen if I’ve ever seen one, right, Sylvia?”

“Uh-huh,” Mom says absentmindedly, because she’s thinking about Dad. I can tell.

When Ken/Neth came over to our house back in February, after Mom called him to complain because Dad’s trip had just gotten extended for the first time, he asked us to call him Ken rather than Mr. Candy.

“Like Ken and Barbie?” Roo said, staring down at him between the banisters of our wooden staircase. I was standing behind her, staring down at him too.

“Can I call you Neth instead?” I said. I knew I was being mean, but I was mad and sad about Dad, and he seemed like the best person to blame.

But instead of being offended, Ken/Neth was charmed. He thought I was being friendly.

“That would be great,” he said, looking up at me and Roo. “That would be totally great if you called me Neth. No one’s ever done that before.” It made him feel special, like I was giving him a nickname. So I never call him Neth. Or Ken. Or anything. Except in my head, where he’s Ken/Neth.

Roo can’t sit still in her airplane seat. She reaches over across the little aisle and starts poking at Mom’s arm, asking in a voice that’s way too loud: “What’s an omen? Hey, what’s an omen?”

“*iSeñorita! iSeñorita!*” a woman’s voice crackles over the loudspeaker and says a bunch of words in Spanish. Then, again, “*iSeñorita!*”

“Hey, Roo-by, they’re talking to you!” Ken/Neth says, pulling himself away from Mom’s ear.

The third time Ken/Neth came over was back in March, when Dad had extended his trip for the second time. That day he called my sister Roo, and I had to teach him that only three people are allowed to call Ruby that—I nicknamed Roo when she was three and I was six, so I get to decide these kinds of things. Ever since then he’s been careful. Every time he calls her Ruby I feel proud of myself. I like how he begins “Roo—” and then squirmingly adds the “by.” I also make sure he never calls me Mad, because I only let people call me Mad once I’ve given them permission.

“Huh?” Roo says.

“They’re talking to you, *señorita*,” Ken/Neth tells her. He’s the only one of us who really speaks any Spanish, and it was already bugging me in the airport hearing Mom going, Oh, Ken, what did he say? Oh, Ken, can you translate the menu for us?

The voice on the loudspeaker sounds more and more annoyed, and at the front of the short aisle the flight attendant is glaring at Roo. “They’re telling you to buckle up!” Ken/Neth translates.

“Oh good lord, Roo, you’re not buckled?” Mom shrieks. “Buckle up! Buckle up! Buckle up! Mad, help her! Quick, quick! Hurry!”

Mom’s way more scared of small planes than I am. But Roo’s not scared at all. Roo isn’t scared of anything. She’s not even scared of The Very Strange and Incredibly Creepy Letter, which she’s pulling out of her little backpack now that I got her buckled. It’s the last thing in the world I want to see because it’s the thing I’m most scared of, the thing I’ve been most scared of ever since we got it in April. The Very Strange and Incredibly Creepy Letter is what I call the last letter Dad sent from La Lava before he stopped contacting us at all. That’s when The Weirdness began. After that we didn’t get any more letters or phone calls or emails from him. For a while Mom kept sending emails, kept leaving voice mails at La Lava Resort and Spa. For a while I kept writing letters. Roo, of course, never stopped sending coded notes to Dad. But all we got in return were phone calls from some official person at La Lava, informing us that Dad was deep in the jungle and out of contact, and that he was doing very important work about which he felt very passionate, and that he sent us all the love in his heart and would be in touch soon, and was very sorry to keep extending his trip this way.

“All the love in his heart?” Mom repeated suspiciously.

“Indeed,” said the extremely calm and beautiful voice on the other end of the line, which I know because Roo and I snuck upstairs to listen in from the phone in Mom and Dad’s bedroom. We were dying to figure out more about The Weirdness. Roo said I had to start thinking like a detective. I said what about her, didn’t she have to start thinking like a detective too? And Roo said she already did, obvi.

The voice on the phone was a woman’s voice, and it had some kind of slight accent but I couldn’t tell what kind. Actually, even though it was a calm and beautiful voice, it was also kind of a chilly voice. And what the voice from La Lava said *was* suspicious, because Dad would never say something like “All the love in my heart.” He’d say, “I love you with all the bananas in my brain” or “I love you like a chair loves a table.” But he would *never* say “All the love in my heart.”

“I’m paraphrasing, of course,” the voice said in its flat, elegant way, and then added, “Dr. Wade sends his regrets that his greetings to you can’t be more personal.”

We were used to it, sort of, because sometimes Dad went to look for rare birds out in The Middle of Nowhere so he could track them and count them

and study their behavior and stuff. Then we'd have to wait a little while for him to get somewhere where he could call or email or even just mail letters. We missed him but it was okay because, as Mom always said, Being the Bird Guy is Part of What We Love Him For, Right, Girls?

But. It had never been like this before. It had never been seven months away from home and three months without contact. It had never been The Weirdness. It had always been a month at most. A month was no problem. A month we could do. When Dad headed off to La Lava and said it would just be a month, we didn't think it was such a big deal.

I feel stupid now, that we just said goodbye and let him go and didn't even worry.

And as Roo smooths out The Very Strange and Incredibly Creepy Letter on the folding airplane tray table, I refuse to look at it. I don't want to see the way Dad decorated the page with badly drawn flowers and vines as though he's a little girl (Roo and I can both draw way better than that). I don't want to read the bizarro poem that makes absolutely no sense. I don't want to think about it at all, so that's what I'm doing. Not thinking about it.

Roo strokes the letter and bites her tongue in the corner of her mouth that way she does, then opens up her code notebook and writes a few things down. She's been trying to break the code ever since we got the letter.

The code, I've sometimes wanted to scream at her, is that there *is* no code! The code is that Dad has gone completely, 110 percent, totally, absolutely, *thoroughly* (Dad's word) CRAZY. Okay?

I used to be a tiny bit jealous of Roo and Dad's code thing. Pretty much as soon as she could read, Roo started to make codes. Dad got her the *Super Little Giant Book of Secret Codes*, and *Codes, Ciphers, and Secret Writing*, and the *Top-Secret Handbook of Codes*. I'm not really into that kind of thing. I'd rather just read, you know, books with stories. Like the ones Mom always brings home from her job at the library. But Dad and Roo had their code thing, just the way they had their bird-tracking thing, and whenever Dad was out of town he'd send us coded letters for Roo to crack. First it would be not too hard, like flipping the alphabet, so that you'd write Z when you meant A, and Y when you meant B, but then it got more and more complicated and I lost track of it, and I had a small feeling of, Hey, what about me?

Back in January, when Dad first went to La Lava, before The Weirdness, Roo didn't have too much trouble breaking Dad's codes. Those first few letters were exciting. He wrote that he was going to bring us lots of presents from the rain forest—rare extrasweet nuts and raw chocolate bars and pretty little animals carved from jungle wood. He wrote: *Madpie & KangaRoo & Mama Bear, I have some REALLY GOOD NEWS! But it's a big secret, so BE PATIENT!* Madpie—sort of like the bird—and KangaRoo. That's what Dad liked to call us. Another good thing to not think about. Anyway, nowadays I'm not at all jealous of Roo. I'm just glad I'm not the one who's obsessed with the freaky letter from Dad.

I pull out my poetry notebook, which I've been using a ton ever since I

made the New Year's resolution to write a poem a day, but quickly I realize there's no hope of me writing a poem while I'm sitting this close to The Very Strange and Incredibly Creepy Letter. It's too much of a distraction in the corner of my eye. I put my notebook away and shut my eyes for a few minutes.

"Hey, Roo," Ken/Neth says from across the aisle. I open my eyes to glare at him. "—by. It's time to put your tray up. We're about to land! Hey, girls, listen to the flight attendant's announcements and see if you can hear any words you know from Spanish class. *Gracias*, you know that one, right?"

It bugs me a lot that anyone who overheard this would probably think Ken/Neth is our dad. Also, is there a single person in America who doesn't know the word *gracias*?

But Roo doesn't seem annoyed. She just carefully refolds The Very Strange and Incredibly Creepy Letter, slides it back into its envelope, kisses the flap, slips it into her backpack, and locks her tray.

The plane starts to descend, leaving my stomach behind with each jolt.

"Woo-hoo!" Roo goes every time the plane jerks downward.

Even though Mom has to grab Ken/Neth's arm (ugh) because she's so terrified, the little plane lands without anyone dying.

"Hey," Roo whispers to me as the plane brakes, her breath smelling like orange Tic Tacs, "do you think Dad is coming up with something special for when he sees us?"

Suddenly there's a huge hard lump in my throat. I can hardly wait to see him. I can't believe it's been seven whole months.

"Something special?" I say. "What kind of thing?"

"Well"—Roo pauses, thinking—"like, a song he made up just for us. Or a cake with our names on it."

Sometimes I feel so much older than Roo.

"I have no idea," I snap at her. "He's probably doing actual *work* right now."

I don't want Roo to know that my heart's swelling with excitement. It scares me to be this excited about seeing Dad. It makes me feel superstitious, like things might go extra wrong the more excited I am. I know if Dad were here, he'd tell me to take a deep breath. Slow and steady wins the race, Madpie. Slow and steady.

But slow and steady is really hard to do, because we're finally here, we're finally going to find out what's up with Dad. Roo and I have been begging Mom to take us to Dad in the jungle since March.

"I don't care if he's in the middle of the middle of the middle of the jungle!" Roo said back then, digging her fork into her mashed potatoes but not eating any. "I don't even care if he's in the middle of the middle of the middle of the *volcano*. I. Just. Want. To. See. Dad."

"I can't pull you out of school right now," Mom informed her. "You're learning about the solar system."

"Solar system schmolar system," Roo said.

“It’s a work trip,” Mom said quietly. “It’s not like Dad’s on vacation. He’s very busy. He wouldn’t be able to hang out with you. Besides, it’s dangerous for kids.”

I looked across the table at Roo to see if she realized that Mom wanted to visit Dad just as much as we did. But she was too young to notice.

“*What’s* dangerous for kids?” Roo demanded.

“Roo,” Mom said, looking suddenly exhausted, “please.”

A few times, when Roo was out of earshot or over at a friend’s house, Mom said to me, “Mad, what do you think? You think we should go and ...?” She always trailed off, not quite wanting to say *figure out what the heck is going on with Dad*.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I told her, and once we even sat down and got online to look for plane tickets, but right then Ken/Neth called to ask if he could drop by with some *ratatouille* he’d just made. He’d accidentally doubled the recipe.

Things kept on happening. The lady with the beautiful voice would call again from La Lava to assure Mom that Dad was doing groundbreaking work in the inner jungle and his one regret was that he couldn’t be in touch with us personally, but he knew we—more than any other people in the entire world—understood how much this work meant to him. Mom would hang up and say, “We’ve been overreacting, girls. Everything is fine.”

Or Ken/Neth would stop by with a chocolate cake and three tickets for Cirque du Soleil. “It’s the least we can do,” he said, “given all that Dr. Wade is doing for us. You’re very generous, ladies, to lend us your dad and”—with a wink at Mom—“husband for all this time.” I don’t know why I didn’t say, *Hello*, we didn’t lend him to you; it’s not like we had any choice, and besides, we had no idea it would take “all this time.”

And then there was the night Mom opened the monthly bank statement and gave this enormous gasp, and I was like, “What’s *wrong*?” After not being able to talk for a few seconds she said, “Well, Mad, La Lava is being exceedingly generous, that’s all.”

So weeks went by, and then months, and we never bought plane tickets. When Roo bugged her about it, Mom would say that as far as she knew, Dad might come home tomorrow, and business trips get extended all the time, and we just had to be patient and calm, and this is Part of What We Love Him For, Right, Girls?, and it really didn’t make sense for us to leave school and for her to take time off from the library right in the middle of the semester, and Dad would be furious if we did.

It wasn’t till May that Mom decided we really did have to go to the jungle. Ken/Neth had gotten in the habit of coming for dinner once a week or so, which was pretty much starting to get on my nerves. So he was there at the dinner table when Mom announced that the time had come—she was going to book the plane tickets.

But Ken/Neth insisted that she let *him* book the tickets.

“Are you sure?” she said, though I could tell it would be a relief for her if he’d take care of it. “I don’t want to burden you.”

“Sylvia,” he said in that really sincere way of his, “it’s not a burden, it’s an honor.”

I noticed Mom slightly rolling her eyes, but Ken/Neth didn’t see.

“Not only that,” he continued, “but it just so happens that today my contacts at La Lava informed me that they wish to invite you ladies to the Gold Circle Investors’ Gala in early July.”

“The what?” Mom said.

“It’s La Lava’s huge annual celebration for all of their investors, where they honor the ‘Geniuses’ who have contributed to the success of the organization in the past year. It’s basically the party to end all parties. I know you girls will get a kick out of it.”

“Oh!” Roo yelped with glittering eyes. “I love parties! When’s July?”

“Roo,” Mom said severely. “You know when July is.”

“May, June, July,” Roo recited. “Wait, that’s not soon!”

“The time will fly,” Ken/Neth said with a grin. “It’s just a little over a month.”

“July is good,” Mom said. “We can all finish out the school year. And James very well may be back before then anyway.”

“Maybe so,” Ken/Neth agreed. “Maybe so.”

And from then on it was all: Ken booked the tickets, Ken says we should head down the Sunday before the gala, Ken is going to notify La Lava that we’re coming, Ken said we should be sure to bring some special dresses for the party, Ken this, Ken that.

And every day Mom’s been telling us, “Look, girls, we’ll see Dad soon and everything will be normal.”

But I know the truth. The truth is that Mom is mad, and hurt, and confused, and lonely. She thought I’d left the kitchen when she said to Aunt Sarah, “When I married James I never thought I’d be a single mother. And look at me now. Months now my kids haven’t had a dad.”

“Okay, okay, okay,” Roo is saying as the plane glides to a stop on the runway. She shrugs and kicks gently at the seats in front of us, still offended that I snapped at her about Dad. “Jeez, I was just wondering if Dad’s as excited to see us as we are to see him.”

And the truth is: I’ve been wondering the exact same thing.

CHAPTER 2



The airport is by far the tiniest I've ever seen. We just walk right off the plane onto the ground—we don't go through one of those detachable hallway thingies. The second I step out onto the little staircase, I get slammed by hot, heavy air. I look over at Roo and see that her face is already shimmering with moisture.

"Man," Roo says, "what is *up* with this air?"

"Welcome to humidity, Roo," Mom says with a giddy laugh. Happy that we survived the tiny-plane ride. Happy that she's about to see Dad.

I feel like the air here is green. I mean, it's not *actually* green, but it has this thick, green smell as though the jungle leaves are breathing it out. Which I guess *is* what's happening, though it's been a while since Dad reminded me exactly how photosynthesis works.

We wait as the flight attendant and copilot pile everyone's luggage next to the plane, and before they're even finished Ken/Neth picks up his suitcase, and Mom's, and then grabs the roly suitcase Roo and I are sharing.

"That's not necessary, Ken," Mom says. "Let us carry something."

But he just gives her his goofiest grin and starts walking toward the airport building, which looks sort of like a one-room schoolhouse. That's when I realize that, except for the runway and the building and the small parking lot, everything is jungle. All along the edges it's jungle, jungle, jungle, and there's a great noise rising from the jungle, or bunches of noises that add up to one.

"Hey," Roo says, "*what* is that growling sound?"

I'm impressed she can pick one sound out of everything.

"Howler monkeys." Ken/Neth grins. "Loud little buggers, aren't they?"

"Wow! Wow! Wow!" Roo says with each step. "I didn't know this is what it'd be like."

I definitely have to agree with her there. I didn't realize it would feel like we were on a different planet.

Ken/Neth moves quickly (his long legs are *so* long), and we rush to keep up. Inside the airport, a man dressed in white pajamas is holding a sign that says:

SEÑORA SYLVIA WADE

SEÑORITAS MADELINE Y RUBY WADE

"That's us!" Roo whispers loudly. "Fancy-pantsy!"

I'm waiting for Mom to mention the fact that she kept her maiden name, so she's actually Ms. Flynn, not Mrs. Wade, but she doesn't say anything. I look over at Ken/Neth to see if he'll say something, since he's sort of in charge, but

he doesn't seem to notice—he's busy greeting the man in pajamas by holding up two fingers in a peace sign.

The man smiles quickly in our general direction without actually looking at us. He doesn't say a word as he leads us outside and loads our luggage into a van that's pure white, aside from a pair of elegant gray *Ls* on the side. He opens the side door and Roo clambers eagerly into the van, followed by me and then Mom. It has a sky-blue interior and is deeply air-conditioned.

"This," Roo announces, "is the most beautiful van in the entire universe."

Ken/Neth sits in front with the driver and they talk very softly, in English or Spanish—I can't even tell from the way backseat where Roo insisted we sit. Roo is in one of her wiggly moods. She grabs my hand and squeezes it, then drops it so she can put her nose up against the window to look out, then grabs it to squeeze it again as the van heads down a long, badly paved road lined with walls of jungle.

The cold air is giving me a headache, so I press the button to roll down my window and stick my head out into the humidity. I decide right then that I like humidity. It smells like flowers growing.

Roo is babbling to Mom, asking about how many different kinds of monkeys we're going to see, when I realize why this road is so bumpy—thick jungle vines sneak up between cracks in the asphalt, breaking the road apart. I get this creepy vision of the jungle as a gigantic monster with millions of octopus arms.

"Mad," Mom is saying, "Mad, the driver wants you to roll up your window, please."

I look up and see that the driver is staring at me in the rearview mirror.

"Okay," I say, embarrassed. I press the button. "Sorry."

But I don't like having glass between me and the outside, even though I'm already scared of the jungle. I stay quiet for the rest of the ride and let Roo shout the questions up to Ken/Neth.

"Hey, are those *pineapples* in the middle of those plants?"

"Yep, that's a pineapple plantation," Ken/Neth replies, grinning, as usual.

"I thought pineapples grew on trees!"

"Well, those are pineapples, Roo-by."

"Man, doesn't it look like Dr. Seuss invented that plant?"

And on and on. I tune it out, stare at the jungle. After half an hour or so, we turn onto a different road. Now we can see the silhouette of the volcano, as blue and perfect as before.

"Gettin' close," Ken/Neth announces.

The volcano seems bigger and bigger as we approach it on the very straight road. I close my eyes for a few seconds and then open them again, close, open, close, open, and I can create the illusion that the volcano is actually pushing its way out of the earth, growing with each passing second. Sometimes it's kind of fun to freak yourself out.

Then we turn right and suddenly we're too close to the volcano to really see it. Now we just have to imagine it. Which somehow feels even freakier, as

though there's a monster standing right behind you.

"And here we are," Ken/Neth proclaims as the driver steers into a parking lot. "Welcome, ladies, to the Selva Lodge."

"The Selva Lodge?" I say, confused. No one ever mentioned a Selva Lodge. "I thought we were staying at La Lava." With our *actual* dad, I stop myself from adding.

"Oh shoot," Ken/Neth says apologetically. "I thought you knew. Kids can't stay at La Lava, so you'll be staying here. They have a pool!"

What? We seriously aren't staying with Dad? I turn to Mom, waiting for her to correct Ken/Neth, but she just shrugs at me.

"I'm sorry, honey," she says. "I thought I mentioned to you that kids aren't allowed to stay at La Lava."

First of all, Mom most definitely did not ever mention that to me, because I obviously would have remembered an annoying fact like that, and second of all, I hate places that don't allow kids. What's their problem?

Roo looks at me and I look at her. We're together in our rage, and that feels good.

"La Lava is *such a jerk!*" Roo says. "Why don't they want us?"

"Girls!" Mom says sharply. "Be grateful for where you are. The Selva Lodge is lovely too."

"Sure," Roo mutters, "whatever. But Dad isn't here."

"Ruby," Mom says in that threatening way of hers, and Roo has to shut her mouth.

From the van I can see that the pink 1950s-style sign for the Selva Lodge is missing some letters so it reads SELV L DGE, which is just real nice.

Then I hop out and get a better look at the Selva Lodge, which is pretty much like any old American motel except for all the weird animal sounds coming from the jungle.

Ken/Neth has already made it across the gravel parking lot. He opens the gate and I hurry over to follow him and Mom and Roo into a concrete courtyard. A few kids are splashing around in a pool, and the hotel forms a square around it, with three rows of orange numbered doors plus a little souvenir shop and café area on the fourth side. The café just has a half wall enclosing it, so the dining area is basically open to the jungle. I have to admit, it looks like a nice place to eat, sitting right there looking out at the layers of green.

"Ooo, pretty!" Roo says, and at first I think she means the big barrels of flowers placed throughout the courtyard, which are overflowing with red and orange and purple blossoms. But then I notice that she's pointing at the little neon-green lizards painted on the orange doors. So I guess it's not *quite* like any ugly old motel. But still.

Ken/Neth is yanking some papers out of his computer bag and flipping through them and making exasperated sounds. He's very talented at looking totally discombobulated (one of Dad's favorite words).

"Aha!" he says after a moment, holding up a piece of paper. "Here we are.

Mad and Roo are in room number four, and Sylvia's in number five, and I'm in number eight. I'll just run and get us checked in."

"You're staying here, Ken?" Mom says, surprised. "You don't need to do that. You should stay at La Lava."

"Hey," Ken/Neth says, grinning, "anywhere that doesn't want kids doesn't want me!"

I can't help smiling—which bugs me, but hey, he's got a point there. I look over at Roo to exchange a giggle, but she's staring at the pool.

"Very cute," Mom says, "but I really don't want to inconvenience you. You should stay wherever you usually stay when you come here for work."

"My most important work is to keep you ladies company. The best job ever! La Lava wants you to have an excellent time while you're here, so I should be as close as possible."

"As you like," Mom says, gently shrugging. "Where's the front desk, then?"

"Pool, pool, pool?" Roo says hungrily.

As Mom and Ken/Neth go to check in and Roo runs over to dip her toe in the pool, I stroll toward room number four—and suddenly realize that the little neon-green lizards aren't painted onto the orange doors. They're actual, honest-to-goodness, living, breathing neon-green lizards that scatter as I approach. I'm pretty proud of myself for not screaming.

Roo and I are already pulling on our Speedos in our room (there's a bunk bed—weird for a hotel, but still cool, I guess) when Mom bursts through the door, half yelling "*Surprise!*" and holding up a pair of brand-new two-piece bathing suits—red polka dots for Roo and green stripes for me. She herself is wearing a maroon bikini I've never seen before. Actually, I've never seen Mom in *any* kind of bikini. She's always worn a navy-blue one-piece swimsuit. And she's always said that women who wear bikinis are silly, because bikinis fall off so easily that they're useless for swimming, and no daughter of hers was going to wear such absurd swimwear. When I remind her of all that, she just says, "Oh, lighten up, Mad! We need to have some fun finally. This is an exciting day." Meanwhile Roo's already pulled her Speedo off and is tugging her bathing suit bottom on and wagging her red-polka-dotted bum. I leave the new green-striped two-piece on the concrete floor beside our bunk bed and stay in my good old gray Speedo.

Before Mom and Roo and I are even settled into our lawn chairs at the pool, Ken/Neth brings Mom a pink drink with a pink umbrella in it. She looks like a lady on a postcard, lying there beside the pool at the Selva Lodge with her pretty drink and big sunglasses and straw hat (even though the lawn chair is sagging and some of the plastic strands have snapped).

"Isn't this great, Sylvia!" Ken/Neth says in his peppy way. "You look so happy. Relaxed. Madame Librarian, away from all those dang books. You've sure earned this."

I can agree with Ken/Neth on that one at least. Ever since The Weirdness began, Mom's lips have had this squeezed look to them, and right now they

don't. Actually, it's a pretty big relief to look at Mom and not see squeezed lips.

Next Ken/Neth quizzes me and Roo about whether or not we know what *selva* means.

"It means *jungle*, Ken," Roo says as though she's never been so bored in her entire life.

"Well," Ken/Neth says cheerily, pretending Roo wasn't just rude to him, "I guess I'll head over to La Lava now!"

"Where's *Dad*?" Roo says, her tone still rude.

"Oh, you'll be seeing him very, very, very soon," Ken/Neth promises. Then adds, "*Adiós, amigos*. Or should I say *amigas*."

Ken/Neth heads out of the pool area toward the parking lot, so at last it's just me and Mom and Roo. My Three Girls, as Dad called us. And boy, does it ever feel great being with my sister and my mom and no Ken/Neth, the three of us just lying here on lawn chairs relaxing in the sun, but then of course Roo jumps up and cannonballs into the pool. I don't feel like getting in. It's a hot, hot day and the pool water just feels warm and soggy. Mom reaches over to hold my hand. She smells like coconuts. It's comforting to feel her strong, familiar hand. Her palm is a bit wet with sweat, but so what. It's nice to know that Mom's hand is still Mom's hand, even after The Weirdness and everything. I'm glad we're at the Selva Lodge, where I don't have to worry about anyone I know seeing me hold my mom's hand even though I'm almost thirteen. Soon, though, Mom falls asleep and her hand slips limply out of mine, which makes me feel kind of lonely.

Roo's in the shallow end of the pool, playing some sort of underwater headstand game with these kids who don't speak English. Or Spanish. Or any language I know of. I can't tell where they're from. Mom smiled at the other parents in greeting, but we haven't heard anyone speaking English since we got to the Selva Lodge.

"Don't you wish this was our own private pool?" I said to Roo earlier.

"Kind of," Roo said, but I could tell she didn't. She likes other people. Wherever she goes, Roo always has oodles of friends. Sometimes I've been jealous of her, but mostly I just admire her for being that way.

"Rooooo!" I howl loud enough that she can hear me underwater. "Come here!" Because she loves me, she clambers up out of the pool. As she pitter-patters over to me, I tell her, "You're getting sunburned!" Which is not exactly true. She does look a tiny bit pink, but mainly I just want her to play with me and not with Random Kid #7.

"Okay," I order, holding up a towel. "Dry yourself off. Then I'll put some sunblock on your back."

"Mom put tons of stuff on me already," Roo protests, but at the same time she obediently turns her back to me.

It makes me feel right at home, to be hanging out with Roo and taking care of her. It's my favorite activity, being Roo's sister.

"Uh-oh," I say as I squirt the last globs of coconut sunblock into my hand.

“It’s all gone.”

I knew all along that we were almost out of sunblock, and knew that this would mean we’d have to go to the souvenir shop to buy more, and knew that going to the souvenir shop with Roo would be fun.

So we prance across the courtyard, but as it turns out the Selva Shop is weird and not that nice. For one thing, there’s no one in it. No customers, no employees. It’s hot and dim. The floor is concrete, and there are lots of metal shelves with hardly anything on them. There’s one shelf holding a single hot-pink shirt, XXL, with neon-green lettering, *Fui al Volcán Pájaro de Lava*, and on the back, *¿Y tú?*

“Found it! Found it!” Roo says from across the shop, waving in the air our exact favorite kind of sunblock. We always want to smell like coconuts. It seems like a miracle that they have it here. “How much is it?”

“How would *I* know?” I say, before realizing she’s talking to someone else.

I squint into the dimness behind the counter, and can just make out a figure as it stands up.

It’s a guy. A teenager. Suddenly I wish I were wearing my new two-piece and not this old bathing suit, and then I feel embarrassed for having that thought. Anyway, I pull the ugly hot-pink T-shirt down from the shelf and stroll to the counter with it.

“Excuse me, but what does *fui* mean?” I say. (I know what *Volcán Pájaro de Lava* means, obviously, and I can figure out that *¿Y tú?* means “And you?” So I guess I *have* learned a thing or two in Spanish class.)

The teenager shrugs and I discover that (a) he doesn’t speak English and (b) his eyes are golden. I’m not kidding. Seriously. Golden.

Roo waves the sunscreen in front of him. She really can be kind of obnoxious sometimes.

“*Ho-la*,” she says. “*¿Cuánto?*”

He shrugs and says, “*¿Cuarto?*”

“*Cuarto?* What’s that? Does that mean ‘four’?” I blabber. This guy makes me nervous.

“It means ‘room’. He wants the room number so he can charge it,” Roo informs me. “*Cuatro* is ‘four’.”

How does she *know* all that?

“*¿Cuarto?*” the guy repeats.

Roo holds up four fingers. “*Cuarto cuatro*,” she rhymes with a grin.

He nods and marks something in a yellow lined notebook and then stares over our heads into space with his golden eyes.

So. I guess that’s it.

“Um, *adiós?*” I try.

“*Hasta luego*,” Roo yells before running back out into the courtyard.

“*Hasta luego?*”

I rush to catch up with her. “Where’d you get that?”

“Don’t know,” Roo says.

“What does it mean?”

“See ya later, alligator.” She starts skipping. She skips all the way to the pool and then, without stopping, skips right into the water, the coconut sunblock still in her hand.

I’m about to follow Roo when I’m grabbed up in a hug from behind. For a weird half second I think it’s the guy from the Selva Shop—until I notice the freckly arms of my mother.

“Where *were* you guys?” Mom whispers into my ear, her voice almost hysterical. “I woke up and you were gone! I’ve been looking for you. You can’t just run off like that. It’s *dangerous* here!”

“Dangerous?” I say, looking around the courtyard, its barrels full of flowers. “What’s so dangerous here?”

“Oh, you know, the regular,” Mom says, laughing with relief, but I can tell she’s still upset. She leads me toward the pool. “Poisonous snakes, rabid monkeys, hungry jaguars.” She sounds half teasing and half serious.

“JAGUARS? For real?” Roo yelps from the pool.

Ever since The Weirdness, Mom’s been a little weird too. Or I guess *paranoid* is the word. At least, that’s the word I heard her use with Aunt Sarah over the phone. “Sometimes I even wonder if the phone is being tapped,” Mom had whispered. “But I know I’m just paranoid. I miss James is all.” Mom was the one who first started to notice strange sounds and movements around our house in Denver, back in March or so. Roo and I heard her complaining to Aunt Sarah about those too, and after that, we started to notice the strange sounds and movements. We called them The Creepies. Like, sometimes when you walked into a room it felt as though there had just been a shadowy face at the window. And yeah, was there maybe a soft clicking sound in the background when you put your ear up to the phone? Roo got excited about that, because all of her detective books have tapped phones in them. But me? I just got nervous. And paranoid. And extra lonely for Dad. Like Mom—who, ever since The Weirdness, sometimes grabs me and Roo up in a hug and squeezes way too hard.

“We were in the *Selva Shop*, Mom,” I tell her. “Buying sunblock. Because we ran out, and you always say it’s *dangerous* not to wear sunblock.” I think this might be the sarcastic way teenagers supposedly talk to their parents. I immediately feel bad about talking to Mom that way.

“Okay, okay, you’re right,” Mom says, pulling me over toward our lawn chairs and smiling at me. “According to moms, everything is dangerous.”

It’s then that I notice an odd thing happening: Roo is clambering up out of the pool, and a short woman wearing a black dress and—get this!—a black lace veil is standing there with a towel in her wide-open arms. A creepy feeling flashes through me. I don’t mean to be rude, but if someone told me to shut my eyes and picture a witch ...

Roo runs straight into the witch’s arms and squirms happily around inside them as the woman dries her off.

Oh great. So now Roo trusts witches too, the same way she trusts every single person she’s ever met. I look to Mom for the Bad Girl frown she gives