



THE LIFFTERS

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CHAPTER ONE

Gran did not want to move to Carousel.



CHAPTER TWO

But his parents had little choice.

His father, a mechanic, had not had steady work in many years, for reasons unknown to Gran.

His mother had had an accident when Gran was young, and was now in a wheelchair. His parents never explained quite what happened, and Gran didn't feel right asking. After a while, when people asked Gran about his mother's condition, he just said, "She was born that way." It was the easiest way out of the conversation.

But he remembered when she walked. He remembered that she had once worked as an artist in muse-

ums, making the animals in dioramas look realistic. He had a foggy memory of standing, as a toddler, in an African savannah with her as she touched up the whiskers of a cheetah. That was before the wheelchair.

Then Gran's sister Maisie was born, and his mother hadn't returned to work. Gran's father had built a studio for her, enclosing their deck and filling it with easels and paint and worktables, everything the right height. But Gran couldn't remember her ever using it.

"My art is them now," Gran heard her say to his father one day. At the time, Gran didn't know what that meant.

Something of her talents had rubbed off on Gran. When he was four, his mother began giving him a certain kind of clay, available in hundreds of colors, that hardened when baked in the oven. With this clay, and with his mother's gentle guidance, he formed penguins and dolphins and narwhals—sea creatures who shared the Atlantic with him.

There was a distinct satisfaction in taking a block of blue clay and warming it, rolling it into a ball, then pinching it here to make a fin, squeezing there to make a tail—and suddenly, from a blue

ball there was something like a whale. Gran made animals from clay when he was happy, when he was sad, and especially when his parents fought. He was never sure what would happen when his parents argued, how loud it would get or how long it would go on, but he always knew that in twenty minutes, as their voices faded from his mind, he could make a ball of colored clay look like an orca, a manatee, a hammerhead shark.

As he worked, Maisie usually watched.

“Doesn’t look like anything,” she would say as he first rolled the clay.

He would pinch and pull, and she would say, “Looks like a snake. Snakes are boring.”

Then he would twist and poke, and something different, and specific, would emerge, and always Maisie acted like it was a miracle.

“How’d you do that?” she would ask, her voice awed. Gran liked nothing better in the world than to hear his sister’s voice awed.

It gave him immeasurable strength for reasons he could not know.



CHAPTER THREE

But over the years, money had grown tighter, and there was nothing left over for clay.

Now work had been offered to Gran’s father in Carousel, a town where Gran’s great-great-grandparents had once lived.

“Much less expensive there,” Gran’s father had said.

“Less stressful. Less traffic,” Gran’s mother had said.

“What about the ocean?” Maisie had said. She was five years old now, and had been amassing a tremendous sand dollar collection.

“There’s no ocean there,” Gran’s mother had said to Maisie and Gran. “But there are hills, and a river winds through the town, and there are trees, and raccoons, and foxes, and more deer than you’ve ever seen or could count.”



CHAPTER FOUR

So one day Gran, his parents, and his sister Maisie left their coastal Atlantic town to drive to Carousel, a hilly hamlet a thousand miles from any sea.

On moving day, Gran’s parents did what they did for any long drive: they woke Gran and Maisie up in the middle of the night, carried them to the car, buckled them in, stuffed pillows under the seat belts, and covered them with blankets.

“I am a burrito!” Maisie said.

“You are not a burrito,” her father said. “Go back to sleep.”

When Gran and Maisie next woke up, they were

at a gas station. “Halfway there,” their mother said. It was warm in the car, so they fell asleep again. The next time they woke, they were parked in front of a narrow two-story house located midway up a slope crowded with other wooden homes.

“This is Carousel,” their mother said.

“This is our new house,” their father said. “Not that it’s new. My great-grandfather built it.”

“When?” Gran asked.

His father opened the car’s passenger side door and sat, putting on his boots. (He liked to drive bare-foot.) He paused for a long moment, his right boot in his left hand. “Shoot. Now I can’t remember. I know it’s on a plaque inside. Or used to be. I want to say it was 1924. Or 1942. I’m almost sure it was an even number.”

“Why’s the house crooked?” Maisie said.

“Maisie, shush,” her mother said.

They got out of the car and stood for a moment on the sidewalk, which zigzagged up and down the hill, in front of the other homes that dotted the street. Gran agreed with Maisie: the house looked crooked. The first floor seemed to be leaning to the right, and the second floor leaned to the left, and all of it seemed to

be leaning ever so slightly downhill. But Gran knew saying any of this might hurt his father’s feelings, so he stayed quiet.

Gran’s father was standing with his hands on his hips, his head tilted and eyes squinting at the house, as if trying to figure it out.

“Something’s off,” his father said.

“It’s fine, Ben,” his mother said. “It’s just fine.”