



Ages 8–12

Katie and Ana are the kind of friends who share everything with each other—friendship bracelets, hidden messages, and ice-skating escapades. But some things you can't share, even with your best friend, and lately, Katie and Ana have been keeping secrets from each other.

Katie has always known she was adopted, but recently she's been wondering about her birth parents and her birthplace. She worries that saying this out loud—even to her best friend—could mess up the perfect family she has now.

Ana's family has been falling apart ever since her dad left, and it's up to her to hold it together. But Ana fears no matter how hard she tries, her family may never be whole again.

At a time when they need each other the most, the links between the girls are beginning to break. Before they lose each other, they must work through the tangles of secrets to the shining truth underneath: friendship, just like family, is worth fighting for.

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Paper Chains



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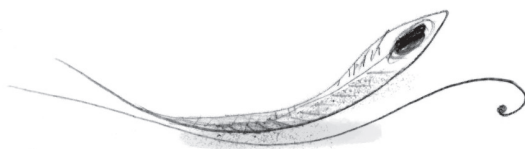
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First Edition

for my family





Chapter 1

EVERY STORY HAS a beginning.

That's what Katie's teacher kept saying all week, and even though Katie had just been set free for five days of Thanksgiving break, those words echoed through her ears. They taunted her as she made her way across the playground and down the sidewalk; they haunted her as she listened to the buzz of voices around her.

Of course, her teacher hadn't been trying to freak anybody out. She'd been talking about pilgrims and the Wampanoag and Plymouth, Massachusetts, where they'd be going on a field trip in the spring. "History!" Ms. Decker had said. "You have to know your history. Every story has a beginning, and you can't move forward in the right direction unless you know where you've been."

Farther down the crumbly brick sidewalk, Katie spotted a hockey jacket that had to belong to her best friend, Ana. And in that very instant, Ana turned and spotted Katie too. It had been like that for them since the first day they'd met—saying things and doing things at just the same time, even though they were so different.

"Hey," said Ana, pulling her hair into a lumpy, loopy black ponytail. Katie touched the fancy braid her mom had fixed for her that morning, still so tight it pulled at her skin.

"Sorry I didn't wait," Ana said. "Mikey just took off." Ana's little brother waited for them at the end of the block, studying something in his red-mittened hands.

"I don't think we can come over today," Ana said, lowering her voice. "But watch for my signal over the break. Maybe even tonight, once it's dark. I'm feeling like we

might need some adventure this Thanksgiving!” Ana wiggled her eyebrows and smiled her up-to-something smile. Then she hurried down the sidewalk to catch up to Mikey before he crossed the street alone.

Katie blew on her fingers to warm them up. Was she ready for an Ana-size adventure?

It had been four months since Katie and her parents had moved to Boston. The summer had been blisteringly hot and achingly lonely, but fall had been much better. As soon as school had started and Ana had noticed there was another fifth-grade girl in the neighborhood, she’d made an announcement.

“You and me, Goldilocks,” she’d said, nodding at Katie’s long, honey-colored hair. “We’re best friends now.”

Normal kids couldn’t announce friendships and hand out nicknames, just like that, but Ana was definitely not normal.

In a good way.

Mostly.

Katie and Ana lived just one street apart, and those streets curved so that their backyards faced the same small pond. At Katie’s house, Ana had quickly gone from ringing the doorbell and waiting like regular visitors to

knocking-then-walking to coming right through the kitchen door.

“It just makes more sense,” she’d told Katie. “That way I can grab a snack on my way to find you, and I’ll still get there faster.”

“I guess you’re more like Goldilocks now,” Katie had teased her.

But Ana had disagreed. “Goldilocks was an intruder,” she’d explained. “I’m like family.”

Katie loved that Ana felt so comfortable at her house, but she didn’t agree about the “like family” part. Family was a quilt—safe and familiar, patched together maybe, and sometimes wrapped a little too tight. Ana was more like a superhero cape, always off on adventures, flapping whichever way the wind blew.

Now the wind nudged Katie along as she hurried up the path to her brand-new, hundred-year-old house. White siding, black shutters, and a bright red door, all perfectly symmetrical. It was nothing like her Salt Lake house with its big backyard and gray stone that matched the mountains. Her Boston house couldn’t match the mountains because there were no mountains here, and Katie missed them more than she ever would have guessed. How were

you supposed to know which way was east without mountains, unless the sun was rising? People here acted like the Charles River or Boston Harbor should be a clue, but how was that supposed to work when you couldn't always see them?

Katie reached for the knob, but before her fingers touched the cold metal, the door swung open. Suddenly, the world was warm and smelled like gingerbread as Katie's mom folded her into her arms.

"My girl!" she said. "Home with me for five whole days. That's what I'm thankful for."

Katie and her mom walked to the kitchen, where a thick square of gingerbread and a tall glass of milk already waited on the counter. Katie's mom tucked a short, kitten-gray curl behind her ear and perched her reading glasses on the end of her nose.

"Eat up; then you can tell me about your day while I finish these pie crusts. And you'd better start from the beginning."

There it was again.

Every story has a beginning.

In spite of the warmth of the well-worn kitchen, Katie shivered. Her story had a beginning too, of course. The

trouble was that nobody knew what it was. Or nobody on this side of the ocean, anyway. Katie's story only seemed to stretch back as far as one closeup picture of her two-year-old self, looking sad and lonely in an orphanage. Or maybe it only stretched back to her very first, fuzzy memory: cold air on a hot day, blowing like magic from two gray rectangles inside a shiny silver car.

According to Katie's parents, this had happened when she was three years old. They said she'd been so mesmerized by the air conditioner the first time she'd felt it—letting the air flow between her fingers, puff into her mouth, whisper in her ears—that they'd sat with her in the driveway for almost an hour that day.

The day they'd brought her home.

"Okay, forget the beginning," said her mom, smiling. "Just tell me something!"

So Katie told her mom about the other parts of her day. It was easy to talk about *now* and *today* and even *tomorrow*. Ms. Decker's *history* was the hard part. When she'd talked about beginnings, Katie had wanted to raise her hand and ask, "What if you don't know the beginning?" Not that Katie wanted to tell the whole class about her adoption. She definitely, definitely didn't. She hadn't even told Ana.

Katie and her parents talked about the adoption once in a while, but it always gave Katie a twisty sort of pinch inside, and she suspected her parents felt the same way. Katie never brought it up herself. She could never find the right words.

I wonder what it's like in Russia sounded too much like *I wish I were there instead.*

Do you think my birth mother has blond hair? sounded like *I'd rather be like her than like you.*

And tell me about my birth parents sounded like *tell me about my real parents.*

But she didn't mean that at all, and nobody knew anything about her birth parents anyway. Katie only had one lonely photo from her life before; it stared back at her from a small frame in the living room. Some days it didn't even feel like a picture of her. And other days, it felt like the *only* true picture of her. Katie didn't tell her parents about those days.

Katie's mom pinched the edges of a piecrust into perfectly even pleats. "When you're finished with your snack, do you think you could find the turkey platter and the cornucopia centerpiece for me? There should be a Thanksgiving box in the attic somewhere."

“Okay.” Katie eyed the piecrusts. Piecrusts meant pie filling, and those were the bowls she liked to scrape clean. “Can I help with anything else?”

Katie’s mom frowned at an imperfect piecrust pinch. “No, I think I’d better handle this. You took your medication today, didn’t you?”

In the seven years since her surgery, Katie had never missed a day of medication. She tried to keep the exasperation out of her voice as she answered.

“Yes, Mom. I took my medication today.”

“That’s good.” Her mom whirled the finished piecrust away and slid the next one toward her. “Up to the attic, please.”

When Katie had climbed the two sets of narrow, creaky stairs and tugged the cord of the dangling bulb, she stopped to catch her breath and survey the attic. The first time she’d seen it, the space had felt almost spooky, with nothing but dark, angled corners and dusty floorboards. But now it was too packed to be scary, full of towers of boxes with labels like *Leftover Doodads* and ??? written by her dad in fat black Sharpie.

The attic was the reason their house stayed clean and presentable on the first two floors. If anything didn’t have

a perfect place or fit just so, it went upstairs. There were times when Katie felt more at home in the dim, drafty hodgepodge of the attic than anywhere else. Some of her summer projects were up here too—the suitcase she'd turned into a dollhouse, the chess set she'd made from a sanded-down tabletop and her mom's box of old knobs and buttons. Even the vintage typewriter she'd fixed up with her dad.

Katie wandered through the narrow, jumbled aisles between the boxes, searching for the word "Thanksgiving." But the creak of the floorboards and the taste of the air made the attic feel so old and so full of possibility that it gave Katie another idea too.

Every story has a beginning. Maybe somewhere in these boxes she could find out about hers.

Through the thick glass of the attic window, Katie saw snowflakes drifting down, soft white against the feather gray of the clouds. Snowflakes were nothing like the bel-
low of thunder or the urgent speed of rain. They didn't beg to be noticed, and as she watched each snowflake's small journey, guided by gravity and tiny breaths of wind, Katie felt like she was being told a secret.

Finally, she thought. It had been North-Pole cold all

November, but it hadn't snowed even once. Katie's dad had promised her the snow was coming soon, though—and plenty of it. It was hard to believe the season could change so completely—from miserable cold to magical *winter*—with something so small.

Katie let her gaze drift with the flakes until it fell upon an old box just under the window. The cardboard was soft and sagging, and the stripe of yellowing tape across the top looked like it had been sealing the box shut for years. Somehow that made Katie want to open it even more.

The box wasn't wide enough for the Thanksgiving platter or tall enough for the centerpiece, and it had no fat black Sharpie label at all. But it called to Katie just the same. She ripped back the tape and flipped the flaps open, telling herself not to be disappointed if it only held old vinyl records or scratchy sweaters.

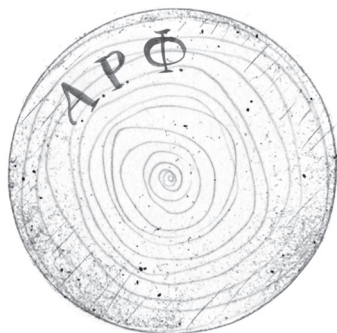
Instead, the box was filled with things so beautiful and unexpected, they took Katie's breath away.

A pocket watch with delicate designs surrounding a bird, graceful but fierce.

A pair of carved candlesticks made of honey-colored wood.

A nutcracker, solid and strong in his soldier's uniform.

A smooth figurine painted like a round peasant woman that cracked in half to reveal another smaller figurine, and another, and another, and another, until finally Katie uncovered the smallest one, barely bigger than the tip of her pinkie. Nesting dolls, she thought they were called. Each one had the same curvy letters painted on the bottom—like initials, but in another language.



The things in the box weren't unusual—Katie had a watch sitting in her nightstand, and there were nutcrackers and candlesticks that they'd unpack from other attic boxes before the leftover turkey was all eaten.

But everything in this box seemed to be from another place and time, both familiar and unfamiliar all at once. They stirred a memory in her even fuzzier and farther away than the cool air in the silver car.

Katie picked up the things, one by one, and gathered

them in her lap, wondering who had made them, and how. Could she learn to carve like this if she practiced? To paint so perfectly? She fit the nesting dolls back together, each inside the one just bigger. *Inside her mother*, Katie thought. *They all fit right inside their mother. The way I fit inside my mother once.*

As she examined the remarkable pieces, Katie couldn't imagine they belonged to her parents. But the attic had been empty when they'd moved in.

So if they didn't belong to her parents, whose were they? Only one other person lived here. One other person with pieces of a past life that were still a mystery.

A knot in Katie's chest began to ease, and the drafts creeping in the cracks around the attic windows seemed to draw all the almost-magic to her. Then Katie knew the answer, and the falling snow seemed to whisper that she was right.

They're mine.