

## EPILOGUE



I found school nearly unbearable that morning. The magic had done amazing work. There was no mention of rituals or kidnapping or police. No events had taken the place of the real ones, but for everyone but me, the lapse was unnoticed. You never remember you haven't remembered something. Jason walked by me without a glance; everything was just as it had always been before.

Restless and pacing on the playground, I had left my book bag in the classroom. There was no novel capable of keeping my attention today. There was no escape. Often, as I circled the back fence of the playground, I found myself flexing my fist, realizing that never again would I be able to fly. Most important, I had lost my friends.

Coming into class a few minutes early, I had found Mr. Hunt cleaning out his desk into a cardboard box.

"Stuart," he greeted me.

I had been surprised to see him there at all. Somehow, I'd thought that he would be gone, and that his promise of seeing me again sometime would be fulfilled in a vastly more distant future. I'd had a surge of hope, that was quickly replaced when I saw what he was doing.

The room was dim, the blinds drawn. It was morning and the sun was slipping through the slots. In the shafts of light, there was dust dancing. I blinked. "Mr. Hunt," she said. It was so natural to use his last name only, just *Hunt*, and an effort to remember the distance now between us. "What's going on?"

He stopped and regarded me seriously. When he spoke, he was grave and tired. "The board is cutting back. It's time for me to move on."

I stared. "You can't!" I said vehemently. "You – you're my favorite teacher. You can't go."

He smiled sadly. "Thank you. That's nice to hear. It'll make this a bit easier." He came closer and leaned on a desk beside me. "Maggie," he said. "When I said it was time to move on, I meant it. I don't mind leaving the job, or the city."

The city, I thought. Not just leaving the school. Going away. *What about the promise*, I wanted to shout. I would be completely alone if he went.

He was still talking. "I've been here a long time, in Metro. I'd like to get out east for a while, maybe do some traveling." He stopped again, and put one of his big, stained hands on my shoulder, not the one that still throbbed and ached with its hardening scar. "Don't get the idea I want to go. I'm just putting a good face on it. You'll know the difference. I can't think of anything worse than having to leave Westbrook. This has been a special year. I can't remember when I had a group of kids I liked more."

I felt like I was going to cry. *Be strong, idiot*, I told myself. Like he taught you to be. It can't be this bad forever.

He lifted his hand away, giving my good shoulder a pat as he did. Was it memory or only chance that he touched only the whole one and avoided the injured?

“Aren’t you even staying for this class?” I cried out to his back as he returned to the desk.

“Until the end of the week. Then Mr. Sterling will take half of you and Mrs. Donaldson the rest. There’s a part-timer coming in by the end of the month. It’ll be split grades from now on, but I expect you can cope with just about anything.”

More double talk, or just a teacher egging on a student? I smiled weakly, realizing it had to be the latter. I couldn’t stop the feeling of desertion.

Then, he picked up his briefcase, paused, and fixed me firmly with his cool, clear gaze. “I’m sure our paths will cross again, Maggie May,” he said. Then the class arrived, and I went to my seat, feeling a little less hopeless for the first time since the magic left, just a little.