

The Painter's Butterfly



Rebecca Weber

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by
Rebecca Weber

Illustrated by
Sarah Ann Doughty



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9 Mockingbird Hill Rd

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info@kinkajoupress.com

www.kinkajoupress.com

Content Notice:

This story includes scenes that involve foster care, children running away, adults yelling at children, and of being trapped in a burning building that may be traumatic for some readers. The story also includes thunderstorms, dogs, cats, and one mischievous leprechaun.

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“I feel that there is nothing more truly artistic
than to love people.”

~Vincent Van Gogh~



Chapter One

Moonlight

*O*n any other night, the glowing sheen of ivory moonlight against shiny hardwood floors would have been a pretty sight to behold. But as Nova crouched close to the ground and carefully maneuvered her bedroom door shut, blood pounded in her ears at the stark vulnerability of this eerie light. The group home sat stock still, as if waiting for her to make a mistake and alert the caretakers to her escape plan. She held her breath and listened beyond the ruckus of her heart. The entire facility hung suspended in a far-off dreamland. Not even the flutter of moth wings pattered against the nearby windowpane. Maybe she'd be able to pull this off after all.

Shouldering her backpack and steeling her resolve, she lowered her belly to the floor and crept down the corridor, inching like a sneaky caterpillar to the back stairs... the ones that lead to the kitchen. The front foyer would be a stupid move, with the manager's office ablaze in light, even at this hour. Nova could picture the manager tilted back in her wooden rocking chair, facing the office entrance should any of the foster kids wake from a nightmare and need a cool glass of water. Even in sleep, the woman was diligent. So, Nova would have to exit through the backyard. A cold sweat dripped down the curve of her neck as she scuffled toward the shadowy staircase, fingertips scratching against the fibrous wood floor. Freedom rang in her ears like a beautiful ballad. "Nova," it sang. "Go home." But home had never been anything more than a gamble, a game she always lost. She was ready to play her only hand.

Gently, she tackled the staircase, one creaky step after another. She tiptoed along the edges of the boards, shifting her weight to keep the house's groans minimal. Nova had thrown her hair into a ponytail to keep it out of her face, but the hairdo pulled at the corners of her forehead, and she grimaced, wishing desperately to free her locks. Soon.

At the bottom of the stairs, Nova peeked around the corner to investigate the empty kitchen. The normal bustle of children and staff had vanished, like someone had taken an eraser to the scene and scrubbed out the people. She allowed herself a small intake of air as she ogled the back door. Nova knew the manager liked to make hourly rounds to check on

the children. A clock above the stove ticked to urge her on. Tensing her shoulders, she sprang into action.

Hopping expertly to the back door, Nova unlatched the chain and twisted the deadlock with a feverish click, squeezing her hands against the doorknob to gather the last of her nerves. Softly, she coaxed the door open, praying under her breath this decision was the right one.

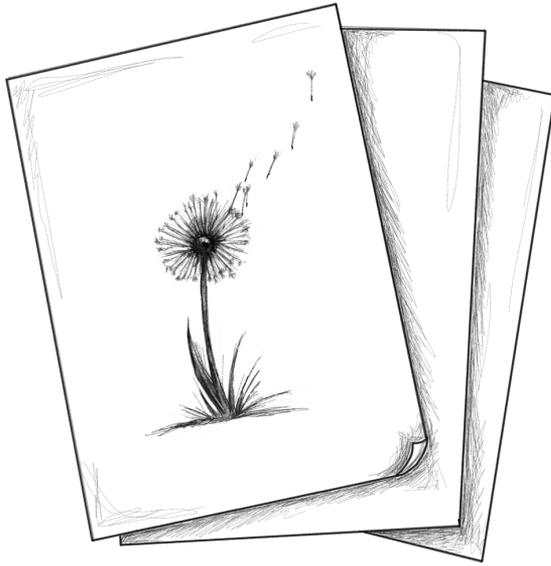
A small cough echoed behind her, and she froze. Twisting her head to the side, Nova spotted a tiny silhouette lurking in the opposite door frame: one of the youngest foster boys in red fire truck pajamas, thumb stuffed in his mouth and unruly black hair contorted into weird shapes. Nova raised a trembling finger to her lips and made eye contact with the boy. "Please," she begged him telepathically. "Don't tell." He didn't move. She took her brief chance, slinking out the door and into the darkness beyond.

She hurried around the side of the group home, gripping her backpack to keep her hands from shaking. Was she really going to do this? Nova had a hunch where she belonged, but the journey would not be easy. And even when she arrived, she'd have to fight for her place. But maybe that's the point of a bet. If you win, the prize is worth it. And what did she have to lose?

But Nova didn't even make it to the driveway. Fate doesn't always cooperate. A strong hand caught her by the arm and a familiar voice whispered in her ear. "It's always the quiet ones." The manager waggled a disapproving finger close to her nose and clung to Nova's shoulders, guiding her dutifully back into the

group home. The pale moon cried above them, tears of shimmering moondrops speckled along the pavement, a reflection of Nova's resounding disappointment. She pondered struggling for a moment, pushing the woman to the side and bolting down the driveway, to the street. Deep in her heart, Nova knew she wouldn't get far. Ripping her hair tie from her head, she shook out her tresses and released the tension in her muscles.

Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but soon. Home is where the heart is, and Nova's heart knew one reality: nomad.



Chapter Two

A Long Road

*H*er new transfer began well before dawn, so early the birds were still dozing in their nests, and the stars twinkled lightly in the sky. Nova blinked, groggy, when they shook her awake. She untangled herself from the mussed covers. Then, robotically ran a comb through her shoulder-length brown hair. She rubbed the sleep from her leaf green eyes and grabbed her few belongings with practiced hands, draping her favorite sweatshirt over her shoulder. Chilly morning air blasted her face when she exited the group home. Nova shrugged on her sweatshirt and zipped it up all the way to her chin. The manager and caretakers each took turns giving

her a hug, but she knew it was more a formality than anything.

Once she'd said her paltry goodbyes, Mr. Briar, her hefty companion in the gray suit jacket, made a show of opening the trunk of his car as if Nova actually had anything to stow in the back. She shook her head at him, casting her eyes toward the ground and clutching her denim backpack more tightly. Mr. Briar shut the trunk with a quick snap. He straightened his faded tie and ushered Nova into the car, muttering about beating the traffic and sticking to the schedule. The coolness of the leather seats seeped through her jeans, adding to the jarring morning chill. Glancing at the reflection of the group home in the rearview mirror, numbness vibrated through her entire being. Goodbyes are meaningless when you have nothing to miss. Nova fastened her seatbelt decidedly as the car shuddered to life and resigned herself to the dim view outside the front windshield, her fate in Mr. Briar's clumsy hands.

Nova was used to being uncomfortable. So many days and nights spent in temporary places left her feeling akin to a dandelion seed caught up by the wind. It drifted from forest to mountain to field, settling only for a moment, before the breeze carried it onward and away. This life of constant motion was exhausting and relentless. But the routine was good for one thing—never having to look back.

How would it feel to put down roots: to attend school, do household chores, and make lifelong friends? To stride through the door at the end of a rough day into a warm, authentic hug? The visage of

a beloved young girl with blonde tresses appeared in her mind's eye. Nova shoved the memory away as tears sprung to the corners of her vision.

The thoughts bled into one another as the scenery changed. Blacktop transformed to gravel, and the new road lent a rugged bumpiness to the journey. Fields stretched as far as the eye could see: rows and rows of seedling corn stalks and leafy beans. Nova leaned her forehead against the cold glass of the window, reflections of the rural landscape swimming in her eyes. The hours and miles flew by.

A barren field sparked wayward memories of broken promises. A massive tractor ripped open the nearby field with its powerful rototillers, and Nova winced as the sharp blades of loss pivoted simultaneously in her gut. Faint images of all the times people had abandoned her broke her mind's surface and bogged down her spirit. It was the happy places Nova refused to revisit in her recollections. She hid the lost contentment away in the furthest part of her subconscious. Sometimes, she would dream of the good homes and the people who had burned a hole in her heart, especially the blonde girl she locked up tight. She had learned the hard way in her twelve years of life that nothing could last forever.

Some seeds never get the chance to grow. Inevitably, no matter the previous destination, she always ended up back in this car. The exterior of the vehicle was black, full of dings and dents much like her mood. The mirror up front hung at a lopsided angle, studying her like it was trying to read her thoughts. She frowned in its direction and was met with two

brown, unsympathetic eyes staring back.

"Nearly there," Mr. Briar mumbled. "According to the directions, anyway." He gazed offhandedly at a paper copy of the route marked with scribbles, arrows, and the like. Evidence of how the datedness of the car was a direct connection to its owner. Nova crossed her arms and harrumphed. He had tried unsuccessfully to enter the address into his ancient phone before they started their trip. The paper copy was his back-up plan.

The air conditioning in the car had given out long ago, and the lack thereof transformed the space into a makeshift sauna, morning chill long banished by afternoon sun. Nova yanked off her sweatshirt and balled it up in a lame attempt to combat the heat. Sweat brimmed on Mr. Briar's forehead and dripped onto the collar of his worn suit coat. Yet he refused to remove the jacket. Nova had to give him credit at least for that. He was professional to a tee.

Nova was bored enough to flip through the magazine Mr. Briar had tossed to the back seat for her. It was full of fashion tips, quizzes to find out if he really does like you, and inane advice columns. None of the readers had ever written in to ask: "How do I find a place to belong?" Useless trash. She judged the length of the trip by the number of times Mr. Briar fiddled with his tie, a habit repeated every ten minutes. Nova lost count somewhere near thirty.

That's when the good ol' clunker read Mr. Briar the riot act. The dashboard lit up with an angry gas symbol. They had to go left to refill. She practically jumped with joy when they came to the fork in the

road, her muscles aching in anticipation of exiting the car. The buildings looked very out of place amidst the endless crops. A small gas station and restaurant sat tucked back from the gravel.

“May as well get something to eat while we’re at it,” Mr. Briar suggested to Nova. She shrugged non-committal, rolled up the window, and unfastened her seatbelt. She stretched her sore muscles and hurried to escape the stifling confines of the car.

Nova shielded her eyes from the afternoon sun. She had visited many places in her short life, but never anywhere quite as rural as this hodunk country pitstop. The scene looked as if it had been frozen in time for the last fifty years. The old gas station had two pumps out front and a sky blue awning covering the door. Metallic letters dangling across the top read “Fuel and Co.,” except the C was so crooked it suspiciously resembled a wayward horseshoe. She restrained herself from reaching out to pretend to straighten it.

As Nova swung herself around toward the restaurant next door, a sudden, intense hunger plowed through her, and her stomach grumbled noisily. She could have drooled at the delicious smell of cinnamon and hot maple syrup lingering in her nostrils. While the gas station looked like it had been neglected for decades, the restaurant was a different story. Though small, the entire building was immaculately maintained. Nova studied the brown brick exterior, eyeing the light pink shutters, pretty flower boxes, and hand-painted sign above the door that read “Ellie’s Place” in script. Nova approached a window

box and stroked a silky flower petal between her thumb and forefinger. A small chalkboard balanced outside described the specials of the day. Chicken noodle soup, Reuben sandwich, homemade apple pie... the thought of fresh food made Nova salivate and her stomach rumble yet again.

"I'll grab us a seat," she shot back at Mr. Briar as she rushed to the door. He had put on his glasses and was trying to decipher the faded lettering on the gas pump. He waved her onward without turning.