



WING *harven*

NAOMI SHIBLES

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that feels both timeless and new.”**

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WING HAVEN

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FOR
Rowan, Willow, and Averly
Treasure trusted friends.

WING *haven*

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CHAPTER I



*T*hat bug could drain half my blood in a blink. The thought made Almond shudder. She eyed the mosquito's winding sucker as it circled over a spot of marsh and bit back a scream. *If it doesn't kill me, it would give me swamp sickness, for sure*, she thought.

Ducking behind a crimson toadstool, she settled among the mushroom's white spots so that her gossamer shift camouflaged her. Trying to make herself smaller, she pulled her long, slender limbs against her body, but pressed too close, squishing her sling of fruit. A cloudberry quivering with juice spurted into her face. Blinded by the juice, she swiped at her golden eyes and floated out of the toadstool's shadow, not realizing she was exposed. For a moment, both Almond and the mosquito froze in the air.

She held her breath, gaze locked on the giant vampire bug. It drifted in her direction. Almond backed against the toadstool and the ruptured berry slipped from her sling. She watched in horror as it tumbled to the ground and winced when its thin juice splattered across a clump of clover. Almond's heart thudded in her throat. The mosquito didn't move.

Careful not to draw attention to herself, she shifted her gaze to check if the beast detected the sugary elixir spilled across the clover. It floated in the breeze, drawing closer, then wheeled around and zipped into the wet dawn. Almond squinted after it. Was it really gone? Once she was sure, she sagged against the toadstool. *One little mistake around here, and I'm just another notch on the Tree of Sorrow*, she thought. She bent her head to acknowledge the dead fairies tallied in the tree's hard bark. Almond flitted between the holly leaves, their sharp points scratching against her periwinkle arms, leaving sapphire trails. Morning dew slimed her wings and made them heavy. The sling of berries across her shoulders didn't help. Flexing her wings, she angled her body toward the Fairy Nook, but the delicate appendages strained to keep her in the air.

She hated foraging duty. The forest at night was always cold, the darkness full of terrifying monsters like raccoons and owls.

All around her, tree trunks soared from the loamy forest floor. They towered skyward—higher than fairy wings could go—before crashing together at the last moment into a photoprotective canopy. Despite offering cover, the trunks marked canyons of dangerous open forest. After several seasons of foraging duty, Almond held deep convictions about which trees were and weren't fairy-friendly. She knew that the bark of the redwoods was scored with crevices—natural hiding places for a fairy being stalked by a spotted cat. Try to blend in amongst fig leaves, however, and risk a full-body rash from the milky sap. She shuddered and rubbed her upper arms, remembering the burning sensation.

For obvious reasons, she steered clear of monkey-no-climb trees. If the jagged thorns marching up the tree trunk didn't pierce a wing, their bizarre exploding seedpods could pulverize a fairy. They were without question the most murderous trees in Rosepurse Wood.

Almond landed just over the jutting oak root that hemmed in the Fairy Nook and padded toward the hawthorn nicknamed the Teacup Tree. In its hollow sat a chipped, china teacup that some weary human placed there long ago. Her gaze swept the great furrows of ancient tree bark that soared to the leaves covering the sky. They formed walls around the Nook on three sides, while Rosepurse Stream tinkled and splashed over smooth stones, protecting the fourth. On the other

side of the hawthorn, the wizened oak leaned its thick hide, forming a defensive wall. The carcasses of old pinecones stood like haunted sentinels in the early morning mist, making Almond jumpy.

Together, they created a natural fortress that had kept the Nook hidden for millennia. There were five adult humans in the world who could still see fairies, and none of them lived near Rosepurse Wood. Most children had the ability, but it had been five hundred and eighty-eight moons since the last one had ventured deep enough into the forest to stumble upon the Nook.

Other fairies returning from foraging duty peppered the ground surrounding the tree. Almond was on the cloudberry squad this moon—a mostly futile assignment so early in the season. Others gathered raw pollen and honey, sunflower seeds, blueberries, sweet peas, mock strawberries, and cowslip bells brimming with fresh dew water.

Lacy ferns sprang like ruffled collars from the bases of the tree trunks and hung overhead. Almond stepped into their deep corridors of shadow. A line of fairies carrying slings of seeds marched past her toward the hawthorn. Several of them looked at her askance as she plucked a pair of lady slipper blossoms and slid them over her feet. *Go ahead and get your feet muddy*, she thought as she slogged past them in her slippers.

Readjusting her sling, she merged into the crowds of exhausted fairies flowing toward the Teacup Tree to deposit their haul from the night forage. She glanced at the two cloudberry she carried—half the minimum that she was required to contribute to the Nook. It wasn't her fault that a mosquito almost quenched its thirst with her blood. She scowled as a ray of sunlight touched her face. *They're lucky to get two berries after what I've been through*, she thought, emerging into the heart of the Fairy Nook.

The old hawthorn stood low in the middle, casting its shadow and keeping the soil damp. Its twisted branches were bare from the white blossoms with their sprays of claret stamen that now littered the ground. Bright baby leaves sprouted in their place.

As she edged nearer, Almond stepped around the petals that curled brown at the edges from rot. Watching the other fairies stomp squarely

into the decay, her stomach turned as the brown flecks splashed against their ankles.

The Nook teemed with fairies floating through the mist—returning from night duty or waking for the day shift; showering in the fallen stone waterfall; collecting rations in the new dining hall fashioned of pebbles; stringing fresh forget-me-not blossoms across the Nook’s tiny plazas to form sky-blue streamers. Still, with all its busyness, loneliness managed to drape itself across Almond’s life like a dead leaf. She was isolated in her revulsion at anything slimy, muddy, sticky—anything to do with the forest. Loving the forest was part of being a fairy. So, what kind of fairy was she?

She dumped her meager offering into the teacup and blew out a sigh, relieved that her night foraging duty was completed for a moon. Rolling her shoulders, she geared up for the short flight home to her length of ivy. She’d have the morning to sleep before her next day shift.

“Let me go!”

The voice sounded familiar. Noting the panicked tone, Almond paused in the air and scanned the clearing for its source. In the shade of a broken twig, one of the young Fairy King’s guards held someone by his wings. A chill rolled up Almond’s spine as she recognized the detained fairy—it was Sage Thornsmith, one of her squadmates from cloudberry duty. She had just seen him at the bend where Rosepurse Stream curved deeper into the forest. They had discussed venturing across the stream to check for honeysuckle blossoms but decided that it was too early in the season to take such a big risk.

“The queen says you didn’t bring back enough cloudberry,” said the guard. He struggled to keep a grip on Sage, whose biceps bulged as he wrenched at the guard’s arm. With a scowl and a firmer grip, the guard pushed Sage forward, hissing, “Off to the pebble pit with you!”

The pebble pit? thought Almond. Why would Sage be sent to the gash in the ground full of pea pebbles that ran along Rosepurse Stream? Freezing groundwater filled the spaces between the pebbles and rose nearly to its brim. Many fairies had lost all feeling in their fingers while pulling the pebbles out for royal building projects. Only fairies who offended the royal legacy ended up on that duty.

Almond’s lavender curls tightened at the base of her neck as her

heart rate accelerated. Sage was a hard worker—much more so than she was, she admitted to herself with an inner eye roll. Why was he being detained? Watching the burly fairy struggle with the guard, she pulled her wings flush across her back, aphidbumps erupting across her arms. Sage, likely as exhausted from foraging as she was, sagged in the guard's grip when his feet lost purchase in the damp clover. She hugged herself as the guard hauled him into the gloom by his wings.

I can't stand by and watch this, she thought. Aiming her head, she zoomed after them. "Wait, please!"

The guard's fairy sight glowed red in the dawnlight. "This doesn't concern you, Almond Nettlesworth," he growled. He grunted as he wrestled Sage—still struggling—into a headlock.

"Let him go," Almond cried, hovering just out of reach. "I was on the same foraging squad and can vouch for him. The season is too early for cloudberry. We gathered all we could."

Sage nodded, despite the guard's forearm across his neck. "Listen to her, please!"

"Not according to the queen," said the guard. "The squad failed to perform their duty and there are consequences."

Almond blinked. *We don't have a queen yet. Do we?* As far as she knew, King Cornsilk had yet to choose a mate. She wished he would hurry in making his selection. Ever since he replaced his father as the Fairy King, the Nook had been a beehive droning with speculation and gossip.

"I was the one who lost part of the haul," she said to the guard. "There was a mosquito..." She twisted her hands together as she watched him force Sage to his knees.

Gripping his prisoner by the elbows behind his back, the guard yanked Sage to his feet, turning his back on Almond. "Like I said, this doesn't concern you."

She landed, helpless, as her squadmate lost whatever small amount of freedom he'd had. Bitterness spread in her mouth, and she spit out the thin strip of bark that she had stuffed inside her cheek without thinking—masticating like an egg-bearing fairy building her nest. Still gagging, she ran a hand down her face, ignoring the oily sensation in the pit of her stomach after the encounter with the guard.

Vibrating her wings, she rose from the ground as thick mist made the tiny glen cozy and spooky at the same time. Glimpses of other fairies starting their day peeked through the fog—a confusing contrast to what she’d just witnessed.

Why didn’t the guard take me, too? she thought.

Even though she hated night foraging, Almond was usually happiest—if you could call it that—at this time of the morning. The crisp air invigorated her, and the dawn that trickled through the tree-tops was a velvety robe that she slipped on to hide in the shadows. This was the time when she could watch her community without fear of being noticed.

Because scrutiny in the Nook meant one of three things: you were being evaluated for joining—being forced to nest with a mate, which Almond intended to avoid—you were in big trouble with the royal legacy, or you were about to get extra work. She considered herself to be a clever fairy, and clever fairies kept their heads down in the Nook.

The mist dissolved into droplets of dew, slicking the leaves and rocks. Almond wrinkled her nose. The spell of daybreak was broken, and she was back in the ‘puddle,’ as she secretly thought of the Nook. It was full of mud and slime—her two least favorite things—with steps of rotten mushrooms clotting the tree trunks. Earthworms occasionally reared their harmless but disgusting heads out of the soil to her dismay. Still, she lingered.

In the heart of the Nook, toadstools lined pathways that led to various plazas. Each plaza catered to fairies in different phases of life. All of Almond’s old school friends were in the nesting plaza now, bark chewing and sitting on eggs. She shuddered at the thought of such tedium. Fairy School was its own plaza, where young fairies were sent to live and learn about their place in the Nook.

Almond hadn’t graduated from the fledgling plaza—mostly consisting of a sturdy vine of ivy whose curves and sheets of leaves served as barracks for the newly adult fairies who were assigned the most dangerous duties. She had hoped when she moved to the ivy after school that it would be one giant celebration, but the wingbreaking work that they performed left them exhausted and listless. Almond’s friends had moved to the nesting plaza at the first opportunity. But as much as

Almond hated living in the ivy, she couldn't stomach the thought of joining. She'd rather be alone with her thoughts, free to imagine an ordered forest and a Nook free of grime.

Her wingtips vibrated, alerting her to a nuisance. She closed her eyes and cracked her neck. Without looking around, she asked: "Why are you awake this early, Pepper?"

"Two berries? That's seriously all you got?" asked her younger sister from behind her.

Almond didn't need to look over her shoulder—Pepper's drawling voice betrayed her perpetual sneer. Tall and lean, Almond towered over Pepper, but her petite sister's ferocious personality made her seem as overwhelming as a screaming cicada swarm.

"I wanted to see for myself if the rumors are true," said Pepper, closing the gap between them. She swept her silky cerulean hair back and locked gazes with her older sister.

"Rumors?" Almond tensed. She had been ready to curl into her nest, but thoughts of rest scattered with the morning mist. Facing Pepper, she plastered on a smile. "Tell me all about it over here, out of the way." She wrapped her fingers around Pepper's lime green wrist and float-walked to a massive, deserted pinecone.

"Everyone's talking about how you haven't been gathering as many berries as the other squads," said Pepper. "And it looks like they're right." She cut her eyes at the teacup in the tree holding her sister's two berries. "I'm tired of hearing everyone's complaints about how you think you're too good for the Nook."

"Everyone?" Almond's brow drew down in a vee, a dry cough escaping before her throat constricted. "Other fairies are gossiping about me? Why?" She leaned back on her shoulder but bounced away when a cold patch of mildew smeared down her arm from a jutting pinecone scale. "Ugh! I hate how dirty everything always is." She swiped at her grimy arm and scowled at the ground, embarrassed.

Pepper shook her head as if Almond had laid an egg during the Resting Moon. "It's not dirty. The forest is a place of coexisting. It's an enchanted sway of the wing."

Almond gaped at her and then turned away. "I'm going to my nest." She dragged her wings through the air and bumbled away from

her sister. *Pepper seems way too into Nook life as she enters her pixie moon*, she thought.

“If you think the Nook is so dirty, why don’t you find somewhere else to live?” Pepper’s sharp words carried over the remaining ground fog and rang in her ears.

Almond squeezed her fists and clamped her lips together, but her retort burst undaunted into the morning, startling other fairies returning with full slings of acorn caps for the teacup. She rounded on her sister. “Maybe I will! Maybe I’ll go someplace clean and tidy, where I can have my own things the way I like them, and I won’t have to get chased by squirrels on a nocturnal suicide mission to gather cloudberry once a moon! Maybe...” Almond paused and looked Pepper up and down in an unspoken insult. “I’ll go someplace where I don’t have to listen to entitled nits like you!”

Pepper narrowed her gaze, unflinching. “Then go. You’re embarrassing.” The words dripped from her everlasting pout.

Almond took a breath to fling more careless barbs at Pepper but stopped at the disapproving stares of fairies who had paused to watch the argument. Two pips looked away from her, uneasy, as they fluttered wildly to haul half a walnut shell full of honey toward the Teacup Tree. A fairy matron swept the ground around the hawthorn with a stout dandelion, her lips pursed and wings rigid with reproach.

A fairy around Almond’s age picked apart thin strips of bark as she sat cross-legged on a daisy’s yellow pouf of florets. She cut her eyes at Almond while stuffing the bark strips into her cheek. Brown saliva dripped from the corner of her mouth as she softened them with her sharp teeth, preparing to build a nest for her imminent egg. Almond looked away, the recent memory of her own bark chewing souring her stomach.

“Well?” asked Pepper.

Almond clenched her jaw to keep silent as she examined her little sister, this time with interest. Pepper was no longer the pip Almond pictured in her mind’s eye. This was not the little gnat who used to follow her around Fairy School, trying to join her group of friends despite how they treated her. Before her stood a poised fairy, self-possessed and full of conviction. Her lime skin glistened, mature and

ripe, and shiny tresses cascaded down her erect posture.

When did she become stunning? Almond wondered.

A ray of light filtered through the overhead ferns and glinted on something iridescent at Pepper's throat. Almond stiffened. *It can't be*, she thought. Understanding broke through her cluttered mind. She pointed to the tiny emerald and cobalt featherlettes wrapped around Pepper's neck. "Is that from a peacock feather?"

She watched the smug child still inside her sister struggling to break free from the constraints of maturity—clearly gleeful.

There was only one peacock in all of Rosepurse Wood, and he shed just one long tail feather from his magical fan per year. Featherlettes from this one feather were the most coveted treasure in the forest, only to be worn by the Nook's royal legacy.

What was one doing around her little sister's neck?

Pepper touched the drape of silky, jewel-toned featherlettes that signified her membership in the royal fairies club. "Cornsilk joined me to his legacy last night. Which means—"

"Which means, you can tell me what to do," said Almond, interrupting.

"Correct. I am your new queen. But I won't make you kneel—this time." Pepper whipped a fresh sling from the hawthorn tree and tossed it to Almond, who caught it on reflex. "Don't come back until that sling is full of cloudberryes."

Almond stared at the sling in her hand, and then at her little sister, who had morphed into her queen with dizzying swiftness. Her tired mind struggled to make sense of what was happening. "Right now? But, it's daylight, and—"

"Were you about to say you're tired?" asked Pepper. "Well, I'm tired of you lallygagging about in an untidy vine nest, soiling our legacy's reputation. You could have ruined my joining, you know. You're lucky I don't have you locked up with the rest of your worthless squad. I'm giving you a second chance to please me, big sister. Now, get back to work."

"You had the squad arrested?" Almond gaped like a trout. "Pepper! You know it's early in the season—there aren't many berries yet. We did our best."

Pepper smirked. "Maybe you belong in the pebble pit, after all."

Almond noted the gathered fairies nodding approval at Pepper's assessment of her. She had forgotten they had an audience. *Every fairy in the Nook hates me*, she thought miserably.

Raking the crowd for a sympathetic glance, her gaze stopped level with a hard line of topaz thigh. Perverse curiosity dragged her vision upward over a heaving chest as broad as an acorn. Her breath hitched as she stared into the deep clover eyes of Beechnut, the Knight of the Nook.

His chiseled face was stony, but his irises held her with their kaleidoscope of green hues—almost as if there were emotions warring beneath his stoic visage. But she knew that couldn't be true. The Knight of the Nook was incapable of feeling anything but the desire to protect and serve the royal legacy. Songs were written about his bravery—she knew one by heart. He was born into his position, sequestered from his family as a pip and trained to become the ultimate soldier. There was no time for family or friendship in the Knight's life—only the possibility of danger.

Rattled by his fame, Almond stood mute before the handsome fairy, unable to tear her gaze from his jawline; his stern, straight nose; the hollow under his neck where his collarbones met. Somehow, her lungs had filled with air that she whispered out through full, pursed lips.

There was one emotion that his shifting eyes settled on—disgust. His gaze raked the congealed filth coating her arm. She ran her palms down her shift, sticky with smeared pollen, and her cheeks flamed. Pulling her long, lavender curls in front of her shoulders, she tried to cover herself with her curtain of hair. She could feel his thoughts dripping over her head and down her spine—she was just another sloppy, lazy fairy. Pepper was right.

Pepper!

Almond's wings drooped toward the bracken at her feet and a thought pitted her stomach. *Beechnut is here as Pepper's escort*. The Knight of the Nook only accompanied royals. Pepper's newfound power was a reality—and it was going to be bad for everyone.

Still gazing into Beechnut's cold eyes, she knew that being Pepper's sister did not mean a thing to him. He glared down at her, taller than

any fairy she'd seen. This was the closest she had ever been to him, and she flushed deep indigo as berry juice seeped from her shift and trickled down her leg.

His lip curled.

Fire leapt from the tips of her ears when Almond registered that he'd noticed the rivulet drip to her ankle. She swiped it from her calf with the bridge of her other foot, dragging her toes in the dirt. "It's just berry juice," she said.

He flicked his gaze to Pepper, awaiting orders.

The image of the guard hauling Sage to the pebble pit flashed in her mind. She'd been powerless to save him, and there was nothing she could do for herself now. Pepper was queen and she commanded the Knight of the Nook. Almond had to obey.

Too exhausted to fly, she dropped the sling over her head and trudged back into the thick forest, only using her wings once she got to the oak root wall. She glanced over her shoulder at the damp corner under the ferns teeming with morning fairies. Sprays of dew from their wings cast strange little arcs of color where sunlight collided with her home.

It almost looks pretty, she thought.

Over the root wall, she dropped to the ground and bounced along springy moss, unsure of where to forage at this time in the morning. Her thoughts were fragments like shattered ice that could not make sense of her new situation. All she knew was that she deeply regretted snubbing Pepper at school with her friends, but she regretted even more that she'd failed to keep an eye on her in recent years. She'd been a rotten excuse for a big sister.

Those friends were all feathering nests now or fulfilling important duties to the Nook. Only Almond had floundered when she moved to the ivy vine with the other fledglings. Pepper never even made it to the vine before becoming joined. *She only just finished school.* Almond's thoughts spun painfully.

She toed the thick, dry moss under her feet. Making herself still, she opened her thoughts to the forest, probing for danger. Activating her fairy sight, her golden eyes glowed white and she peered into the gloom, searching for camouflaged creatures. The air buzzed with

emerging insects and the sodium whine of plant life, smelling verdant and steady. But only soil, wood, stone, and lichen surrounded her.

Satisfied that she was safe for the moment, she wrinkled her nose and slid between the soft moss, curling into a long overdue nap. As she drifted to sleep, she didn't care that moss flakes stuck in her curls or that Pepper plotted to make her life worse than it already was. She would rest, gather what she could before the sun blazed at the top of the sky, and return to the Nook triumphant.

CHAPTER 2



Someone grabbed Almond's wrists and ankles. Her stomach lurched and she thrashed out of her dreams, but it was only her limbs twined in the moss while she slept. She tore herself free, alone in the dim light while the tangle closed in on her, a crashing wave aimed at drowning her. *Why am I moving?* She scrabbled for the opening she had made to crawl in and the dry tendrils bit into her willowy fingers.

Almond strained to wiggle farther out, squeezing her wings close to her body and twisting her shoulders. She peered through the opening. Above her, spindly umber sticks stuck straight up, seemingly reaching to the clouds above. That didn't make sense, so she flipped onto her stomach. Moss grabbed at her like a malevolent weed. She swept her gaze around. Underneath her froth of vegetation were fathoms of clear air.

Looking up again, she realized the spindly sticks were the legs of a chickadee, and the cloud they touched was the bird's snowy under-feathers. Almond gulped and struggled in a frenzy to loosen

herself from the clump of peat that was bound for cradling chickadee eggs.

I'm too high up. I'm too far from the Nook to find my way home. Sweat running wildly from her temples, her thoughts pounded at the inside of her skull as if they too were trying to escape through her pores.

She folded her wings against her back, careful to keep them tight as she pulled herself farther out of the moss. It crumbled under her hands. She swung her legs around to dangle over the edge of the clump, steadying herself. The bird soared higher than fairy wings were meant to go—or so Almond had always been told. But she couldn't let herself be carried off and lost forever. The only option was to leap into the sky and pray that her wings didn't tear.

If I can free fall long enough, it'll be safe to open my wings closer to the ground, she thought. But there was no way to know for sure. What if the velocity of her fall ripped them right out of their sockets? What if she crashed into a star? They were invisible during the day. Even in the sky, the world was full of danger.

Seated on the moss clump, Almond let the rhythm of the chickadee's flapping soothe her frayed nerves. The fastest way to get herself killed was by panicking. Her gaze swept the horizon. *I never realized how big Rosepurse Wood is,* she thought. She marveled at the view. Usually so overwhelming, the forest floor far below looked fairy-sized. *There's so much more out here than the Fairy Nook. Are there other fairy nooks? Are any of them clean?*

With each flap of the bird's wings, Almond's thoughts crystallized and burst forth, urging her to flow into the quest for her place in the forest. It hid teeming worlds in its vast carpet of benign green—some microscopic, but all mighty with the force of life. *Maybe I can find another nook where the fairies aren't so judgmental,* she thought. Her hand wound around the chickadee's leg, and she leaned her head against it, daydreaming of adventure.

The bird twitched, tried to shake her off, and when that failed, pecked her hair.

Almond slapped her hands on the crown of her head. "Sorry!" She craned her neck, meeting the bird's black eye, annoyance reflecting back at her. Just one more creature who found her irritating. She was

already too far from home to daydream, anyway. If she didn't jump now, she could end up on the other side of the forest, away from everything she knew. The thought surprised her by sending a thrill up her spine.

"Farewell, then," she said to the chickadee, who ignored her. Before she had time to think about what she was doing, she slipped from the wad of moss, instinctively angling her body—wings tucked tight—so that her face aimed for the ground. Her fear blew away with the air rushing along her torso. The festival of greens, browns, and grays blazed toward her, and she grinned, exhilarated. Nothing this exciting had ever happened to her. She floated like a pip just learning to flutter. Twisting and coasting along the air currents, she drank in the expanse of timberland and strange piles of stones beyond.

She loved to swim in Rosepurse Stream and feel the cool water lick against her periwinkle skin, caressing her as she floated and dove. This felt even better. The air whispered against her—almost tickling her—while it carried her toward the treetops. Reaching the crowns of the tallest trees, she hesitated to use her pinions. Was she still too high? Would they hold?

Taking a deep breath, she unfurled her opalescent wings and flipped them perpendicular, slowing her descent. She was jerked up when they caught the air and then released to float like a silken seed-pod. *I can't believe I just did that*, she thought. Panting, she scanned the forest as quickly as she could before sinking below the tree line, searching for something familiar that would lead her home.

She didn't recognize anything. Puffs of spring leaves foamed as far as she could see in every direction—everything looked the same. Panic bubbled in her stomach. Which way should she go? Her wings trembled and she dipped lower in the air.

And then there, to the left, she spotted the stream that wound through Rosepurse Wood.

The Fairy Nook crouched near Rosepurse Stream. She had just been there last night—with Sage. But there was no time to worry about him. Almond blew out the breath she'd been holding. *All I have to do is follow the stream and, one way or another, I'll find my way home.* It was a long way off, though, with vast meadows between her and

the water. She drifted down to perch on a high branch and considered her options.

As she leaned against a crumbly fork in the branch, she entered one of those rare and wonderful states when she was exactly comfortable. Every part of her body felt easy and good, with no annoying kinks or awkward angles. She closed her eyes and turned her face to the sun.

“What are you doing? Are you crazy?”

Almond peeked from behind her curtain of curls at a very rattled adolescent chipmunk twisting her paws together next to her. “What?” she asked.

“You can’t sleep out here like this,” said the chipmunk, squeaking. She trembled from her long lashes to her stubby tail. “This territory belongs to Boscoe. It’s not safe.”

“I wasn’t sleeping, I was just perfectly comfortable.” Almond adjusted her back against the branch, trying to regain the blissful moment. No matter how she positioned herself, it was gone, elusive as morning mist burning off a stream. She gave up and scowled at the chipmunk. “It’s been quite a day.”

“Please come inside if you want to see the end of it,” said the chipmunk, who threw furtive glances around her, clasping Almond’s thin wrist and tugging her to her feet.

Despite its fuzziness, the animal’s paw was surprisingly bony. Almond allowed herself to be hurried into a hole in the tree, the chipmunk pushing her from behind with squeaks of effort.

“Stop pushing. And I’m not that heavy, so you don’t have to huff and puff like that,” Almond whispered vehemently. She stumbled through the opening and stood in a tidy room with a respectably sized pile of nuts in the corner. The floor was swept clean, and a crusty brown leaf served as a meager doormat. Smooth twigs bound with strips of young tree bark formed a sturdy-looking chair. Its back sat flush against the far wall, near the nuts. In another corner, more leaves—these fresh and green—were piled into a passable nest. The room was otherwise bare. There were no special objects displayed. No drawings hung on the walls.

The chipmunk tumbled in after her, making *chip chip* sounds and knocking Almond further into the room. She slumped against the

wall, gathering herself. Looking around again, something felt off.

The chipmunk crouched at the opening, apparently scanning the skies for Boscoe—whoever that was. Her rust-colored fur was grubby and matted, with a set of black stripes running down her back parallel with a white set. Almond examined her from across the room. Her stripes were the only things giving her structure. Her tail trembled as she ducked under the opening.

“What are you looking at?” Almond asked the nervous creature.

The chipmunk peeked over the sill of the opening. “Oh, nothing... just a cloud. I thought it might be Boscoe.”

Almond approached the opening and peeked out. A lonely wisp of a cloud hung listlessly in the bluebell sky. She glanced down at the chipmunk sitting on the floor and slid down next to her.

“Who is Boscoe?”

The chipmunk shuddered. “A truly horrible bluebird who terrorizes this grove.”

Almond thought for a moment. “But bluebirds don’t eat chipmunks.” She didn’t mention that they were known to snack on fairies. Shivering, she examined the room. It occurred to her what seemed off. “What are you even doing up here? Chipmunks don’t live in trees.”

“Boscoe kidnapped me when I was a pup and flew me far from my family.” The chipmunk scrubbed her face with her fawn paws. “He stopped to rest on the same branch where you were enjoying comfort, and I scurried into this nest. Boscoe was too fat to squeeze through the opening, but he kept watch every day so that I couldn’t escape.”

“How long have you been up here?”

“An entire season,” the chipmunk wailed, throwing her ample fluff into Almond’s arms.

Almond patted her head. “But whose nest is this?”

“I don’t know. No one ever came back, so I live off of their nuts and rainwater.” She sniffled against the fairy’s tiny shoulder, making it damp.

Almond’s heart ached for the chipmunk, but her new friend was also quite heavy, so she eased the furry head from her shoulder and stared into her cocoa eyes. “You’re not alone anymore. We’ll get out of here together.”

“Easy for you to say,” said the chipmunk. “You have wings and can hide easily. Every time I try to run down the tree, Boscoe swoops and chases me back here.” She looked around her little prison. “I’m so sick of eating nuts.”

“Look...what’s your name?”

“Nutsie.”

Almond nodded. “I feel like every chipmunk I meet is called Nutsie.”

“It’s a classic.”

“My name is Almond Nettlesworth. Look, Nutsie, I have to get back to the Fairy Nook, and I’m not leaving you behind. You’ve already lost a season in a place you don’t want to be. Let’s get you home.”

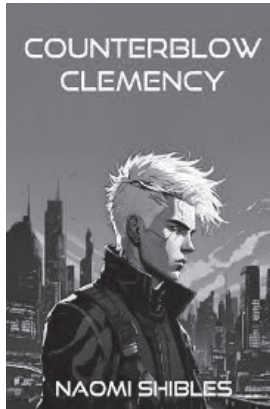
Nutsie shook her head, and her whiskers drooped. “I don’t know where my home is.”

“You still have to leave here and live your life. Let’s have breakfast and then begin our escape.” Almond crossed the room and grabbed a nut from the bottom of the pile, quickly realizing her mistake.

“Nooooo!” Nutsie shouted as an avalanche of nuts tumbled toward the fairy.

The deluge rolled over Almond, sweeping her toward the opening. Nutsie’s eyes were round with shock as the riptide knocked her off of her paws. Together, they tumbled out of the hole onto the branch as a seemingly endless surge of nuts followed, falling from the tree and peppering the ground far below.

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Naomi Shibles grew up in the U.S. Virgin Islands. She is the author of the critically acclaimed science fiction caper, **COUNTERBLOW CLEMENCY**. She treasures time with her son, and traveling with a good book.

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