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# Synthetic Summer

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## Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1** Late Bell for Summer
- **Chapter 2** Blueprints in Chalk
- **Chapter 3** The Back Fence Pact
- **Chapter 4** Salvage and Scavengers
- **Chapter 5** The Quiet Tank
- **Chapter 6** Microhabitat, Macro Stakes
- **Chapter 7** First Pulse of Life
- **Chapter 8** Ping from the Perimeter
- **Chapter 9** Neighbors with Questions
- **Chapter 10** Endangered, Not Helpless
- **Chapter 11** Hairline Cracks
- **Chapter 12** A Corporate Smile
- **Chapter 13** Forest Under the Deck
- **Chapter 14** Fine Print and Finer Lies
- **Chapter 15** A New Recruit
- **Chapter 16** Night Shift
- **Chapter 17** The Clip That Spread
- **Chapter 18** Compliance at the Gate
- **Chapter 19** Heat Dome
- **Chapter 20** Fault Lines
- **Chapter 21** Extraction Versus Exodus
- **Chapter 22** House Meeting
- **Chapter 23** Makeshift Sanctuary
- **Chapter 24** The Hearing
- **Chapter 25** After the Rain

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## Introduction

This is a story about a summer that refuses to behave. It arrives humid and restless in a cul-de-sac lined with receding lawns and security signs, where sprinklers still arc at odd hours because that's what they've always done. Inside garages, boxes of projects lean against family histories; on the sidewalks, the future scuffs its shoes and waits to be noticed. Our protagonists are teenagers with pocketed bravado and tender loyalties, living in a near-future that looks suspiciously like tomorrow morning. They want what most young people want: to make something that matters before someone tells them they can't.

The something they choose is both simple and audacious: a living refuge, crafted in a backyard, for creatures whose names appear in headlines only as warnings. They are not saints or savants. They are friends who borrow, repurpose, argue, and laugh their way through a problem bigger than any of them. Their summer job becomes a vow, and their hideout becomes a habitat—an act of care under the wide, watchful sky. In their hands, conservation is not an abstract policy but a daily practice of noticing: the way water cools the air, the hush that falls when a rare animal settles, the chime of a text that might change everything.

Of course, the world is listening. A lens blinks from across the fence. A drone lingers. A neighbor's curiosity sharpens into complaint. A company with a green logo and a tidy mission statement makes contact, all generosity and non-disclosure. The backyard shrinks as attention swells, and each new day forces the friends to decide who they are when they are seen—what they owe to the creatures they protect, to the laws they bend, and to one another. They learn that protection is a promise with a cost, and that cost compounds in public.

Beneath the pressure there is warmth: the ordinary grace of shared sandwiches on a splintered deck, the embarrassing sweetness of first crushes, the awkwardness of asking for help and the shock of receiving it. The book lingers on the texture of making and mending—on duct-taped dreams and hand-me-down know-how—because the work of care is work, and it is communal. The ecosystem they build is not just moss and water and wing, but also trust, apology, and stubborn hope. When the system falters, they learn to listen harder. When it thrives, they learn to share credit and keep secrets in the same breath.

This is a novel about conservation as a feeling that grows larger than rules, and about rules that exist for reasons that are harder to ignore the longer you sit with them. It asks what it means to rescue something without owning it, to use the tools of a world you don't fully endorse, to tell the truth when the truth might invite harm. It invites

readers to root for ingenuity while staying alert to its shadows, to admire a fix while asking whom it leaves out, to honor the lives at stake on both sides of a fence.

The drama unfolds in the gap between intention and impact. Surveillance becomes both threat and mirror; corporate interest reveals the blurred line between partnership and predation; community proves to be a verb, not a noun. As summer stretches and the stakes rise, the friends discover that doing the right thing is exhilarating—and complicated. Their triumphs are small and luminous; their mistakes, human and consequential. They will be brave, but not always correct. They will be loyal, but not always kind. They will be changed.

Synthetic Summer is a love letter to the stubborn, necessary impulse to care for a world that is fraying. It is also a caution: that the quickest path is not always the wisest, and that the most intimate revolutions begin at the kitchen table, on the porch steps, under the hum of a streetlight. If you have ever looked at a patch of scrub behind a fence and felt it tug at you—if you have wondered what could live there, if only given a chance—this book is for you. The story begins at the back door, with a handful of friends and a key that sticks, and it opens onto a thicket of choices that no one can make alone.

## CHAPTER ONE: Late Bell for Summer

The final bell rang with a hollow echo that seemed to stretch the hallway into a tunnel of lockers and half-finished doodles. Maya shoved her notebook into her bag, the pages rattling against the metal spine of her water bottle. She glanced at the clock on the wall—three forty-seven—and felt the familiar tug of relief mixed with a restless itch that had been building all week. Summer was supposed to start tomorrow, but today felt like a stretched rubber band ready to snap.

Jaden leaned against the row of lockers, his skateboard tucked under one arm, and watched the stream of students pour out like ants disturbed from their hill. He caught Maya's eye and gave a half-grin, the kind that said we're both thinking the same thing without needing to say it. "You still up for the thing after school?" he asked, voice low enough that the bustle swallowed it.

Maya nodded, her mind already flickering to the sketch she'd tucked into the back of her science textbook—a rough diagram of a pond surrounded by native plants, a tiny waterfall cascading over stacked stones, and a few obscure labels she'd copied from a field guide she'd borrowed from the library. It wasn't a formal plan yet, just a feeling that something could be built if they dared to try.

Across the hall, Priya was arguing with Mr. Hale about the due date for her ecology project, her hands waving as she tried to convince him that a late submission would be justified if she could present data from a real-world observation. Mr. Hale, a man whose tie was always slightly askew, sighed and relented, granting her an extra day. Priya's eyes lit up, and she glanced over at Maya and Jaden, catching the unspoken signal.

The three of them fell into step as they pushed through the double doors and out onto the sun-baked pavement. The school's parking lot was a sea of cars idling, parents waiting, and a few seniors revving engines in a half-hearted attempt to look cool. A breeze carried the scent of freshly cut grass from the adjacent field, mingling with the distant tang of gasoline from a nearby gas station.

They crossed the street and cut through the alley behind the old corner store, where the paint on the brick walls was peeling in lazy curls. The alley smelled of damp cardboard and forgotten takeout containers, a reminder that even in this tidy suburb, neglect lingered in the cracks. Jaden kicked a loose stone, watching it skitter away, and muttered, "This place feels like it's waiting for something."

Maya laughed, a short sound that surprised even her. "Maybe it's waiting for us to

stop waiting.” She glanced at the fence that marked the edge of Mr. Calloway’s property—a tall, weathered wood barrier that had seen better days, its planks grayed by sun and rain. Beyond it lay a stretch of backyard that, from the street, looked like any other: a patchy lawn, a plastic swing set, and a garden hose coiled like a sleepy snake.

Priya slowed, her gaze fixed on the fence. “You ever notice how the ivy grows thicker on the south side?” she asked, pointing to a tendril that clung stubbornly to the wood, its leaves a deep, glossy green. “It’s like the plant knows where the sun hits hardest.”

Jaden shrugged. “Plants don’t know anything. They just grow.” Yet his tone lacked conviction; there was a flicker of curiosity in his eyes that matched Maya’s own.

They reached the fence and paused, listening to the muffled hum of the neighborhood—lawnmowers in the distance, a child’s laughter, the occasional bark of a dog. Maya pulled out her phone and checked a notification: a news alert about a recent decline in the local population of the spotted salamander, a species once common in the nearby wetlands but now rarely seen because of habitat fragmentation and runoff.

“Did you see that?” she said, showing the screen to her friends. The article was brief, but the accompanying photo—a small, dark amphibian with bright yellow spots—caught Priya’s breath.

“Those things used to be everywhere when I was little,” Priya murmured, remembering family trips to the creek behind her grandmother’s house. “Now you hardly ever hear about them.”

Jaden frowned. “If they’re disappearing, maybe we could... I don’t know, make a place for them? A little sanctuary?” His voice trailed off, uncertain whether the idea was bold or naive.

Maya felt a spark ignite. “We could try. Not a big thing, just enough to see if we can keep a few alive. Something... low-key.” She glanced at the fence again, imagining what lay beyond: a hidden corner where the grass grew taller, where a few stray weeds hinted at moisture, where perhaps a puddle formed after rain.

Priya nodded slowly. “My ecology project could be the cover. I could say I’m studying microhabitats in urban settings. If we build something small, we could monitor it without drawing too much attention.”

Jaden looked between them, his skateboard scraping the concrete as he shifted his weight. “Okay. But we need stuff—liners, rocks, maybe a pump. And we have to keep it quiet. No one’s gonna let a bunch of kids dig up a backyard without questions.”

Maya smiled, the kind of smile that felt both excited and a little reckless. “We’ll figure it out. Summer’s just starting. We’ve got time.”

They lingered a moment longer, the late afternoon sun casting long shadows that made the fence look like a sentinel guarding a secret. The bell of the school had long faded, replaced by the rhythmic chirping of cicadas in the trees. Somewhere down the street, a car horn blared, and a neighbor shouted a greeting to someone across the road.

With the plan forming like a half-remembered dream, the three friends turned and headed back toward their respective homes, each step carrying the weight of possibility. Maya’s thoughts drifted to the sketch in her textbook, now feeling less like a doodle and more like a blueprint waiting to be fleshed out. Priya replayed the salamander’s image, wondering if she could ever see one in the flesh again. Jaden imagined the sound of water trickling over stone, a soundtrack to a summer that might just become something more than idle days and video games.

When Maya reached her house, she dropped her bag by the door and kicked off her sneakers. The kitchen was quiet; her mother was at work, and her younger brother was engrossed in a cartoon on the living room TV. She slipped into her room, closed the door, and pulled out the sketchbook. The pencil felt heavy in her hand as she added a few more notes—depth of the pond, types of native grasses, a spot for a small rock pile that could serve as a basking area.

She didn’t notice the time until the house phone rang, startling her. It was her father, calling from the office to check in. After a brief exchange about dinner and reminding her to finish her chores, he hung up, leaving Maya alone with the hum of the refrigerator and the faint buzz of the fluorescent light.

She stared at the sketch for a while longer, then closed the book and leaned back against her chair. The idea of building a refuge for creatures most people overlooked felt simultaneously absurd and profoundly right. She could already picture the first splash of water, the way the light would catch on the surface, the quiet that would settle over the space when the world outside seemed too loud.

A soft knock at her bedroom door announced Priya’s arrival, her backpack slung over one shoulder and a determined expression on her face. “Ready to start gathering supplies?” she asked, already pulling out a list she’d scribbled on a napkin: pond liner, submersible pump, aquatic plants, gravel, and a few odds and ends she thought they could scavenge.

Maya grinned, feeling the late-bell excitement settle into a steady pulse. “Let’s make this summer count.”

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