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The Girl Who Drew the Future

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Table of Contents

- **Introduction**
- **Chapter 1:** Sketches in Charcoal and Sunlight
- **Chapter 2:** The Lost Dog and the Maple Tree
- **Chapter 3:** Grandma's Stories
- **Chapter 4:** Hints of Tomorrow
- **Chapter 5:** Storm Over Willow Street
- **Chapter 6:** Shadows in the Margins
- **Chapter 7:** Secrets Unveiled
- **Chapter 8:** The Warning
- **Chapter 9:** Whispers at the Café
- **Chapter 10:** The Art of Staying Silent
- **Chapter 11:** News Travels Fast
- **Chapter 12:** Sides Are Drawn
- **Chapter 13:** Fractures and Fault Lines
- **Chapter 14:** An Unwelcome Visitor
- **Chapter 15:** A Dangerous Offer
- **Chapter 16:** Midnight Drawings
- **Chapter 17:** Blame and Belief
- **Chapter 18:** Uncovering the Past
- **Chapter 19:** The Family Secret
- **Chapter 20:** Visions of Calamity
- **Chapter 21:** Countdown
- **Chapter 22:** A Line in Time
- **Chapter 23:** Crossing the Threshold
- **Chapter 24:** The Art of Change
- **Chapter 25:** Drawing a New Future

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Introduction

Ren Carter never thought her life would be extraordinary. She grew up tucked into the comforting folds of Willow Glen, a sleepy town where everyone's business was common knowledge and the boundaries of possibility felt as narrow as the winding streets. Willow Glen thrived on its quirky traditions and an unspoken agreement to value art, kindness, and the occasional oddball personality—qualities Ren embraced even as she sometimes felt like she was peering into the world from outside its fogged-up windows. Art had always been her chosen language: she sketched her friends, the ever-changing symphony of the town square, and her own tangled emotions, hoping that with each line she might better understand both herself and the world.

Ren's sanctuary was the attic studio in her grandmother's old Victorian house: a room filled with the ghosts of paintings, pulpy drafts of mystery novels, and the rich scent of turpentine and tea. Her grandmother, once a bestselling author of whodunits, saw Ren's artistic spark early and gently nudged her to believe in her talent. But believing in herself became harder as she struggled with rejections from the city's prestigious art schools. Each letter that arrived in a thin, impersonal envelope stung with the suggestion that her art was not enough, that maybe she herself was not enough.

Still, art was in Ren's bones and memory—her earliest comfort, her truest compass. The town might have been small, but its textures were endless to her sharpened pencil: the shade beneath the willow trees by the river, the worn steps in front of the bakery, the defiant burst of color in her friend Jamie's mural. Drawing was how she processed loss and longing, laughter and love, especially with her parents gone and only her grandmother left to fill the spaces between words.

Willow Glen's rhythms offered a kind of safety, but they also tightened like a loop, making Ren restless with questions she didn't know how to voice. Who do you become when you think you've failed at what you love? How do you make peace with the parts of yourself that can't quite fit in? She spent long afternoons with her sketchbook in the park, losing herself in the hope that art might—if only for a moment—make the invisible visible.

If Ren had a superpower, she would have wished only for confidence, a quiet certainty that she belonged. She never expected to discover something truly uncanny within her own hands: the ability to shape the future with the strokes of her pencil. The revelation starts innocently enough, woven with skepticism and wonder, and will upend the ordinary world she thought she knew.

Before her journey bends into chaos and mystery, before the town's whispering turns

dangerous and her drawings tip toward darkness, there is this: a girl, a town, and the belief—fragile, defiant, untested—that art can matter, sometimes in ways no one can predict.

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CHAPTER ONE: Sketches in Charcoal and Sunlight

The morning sun, filtered through the attic's grimy dormer window, cast a sleepy, golden rectangle across Ren's worn drafting table. Dust motes danced in the light, a silent ballet accompanying the scratch-scratch of her charcoal pencil against the thick paper. She was working on a sketch of the Willow Glen town square, a familiar scene she'd rendered countless times, yet each time she found a new angle, a fresh nuance in its well-trodden paths and ancient oak trees. Today, she focused on the crooked lamppost near the old bandstand, its ironwork intricately twisting like a forgotten piece of Victorian lace.

Her focus was absolute, the kind of deep absorption that made the world outside shrink to a distant hum. A half-empty mug of lukewarm tea sat beside her, its rim smudged with charcoal, a testament to how long she'd been lost in the lines. This attic, her grandmother's sanctuary before it became hers, felt like a second skin. The air itself seemed imbued with old stories and creative ambition. She could almost hear the phantom click-clack of her grandmother's typewriter, the rustle of turning pages, the whispered hum of inspiration.

Ren worked quickly, her hand guided by an instinct she trusted more than her own hesitant voice. The details of the lamppost emerged first, then the faint suggestion of the bandstand behind it, its paint peeling in places like an aging beauty. She wasn't aiming for photographic realism; instead, she sought to capture the *essence* of the square, the way the light hit the weathered wood, the sense of quiet history it exuded.

Suddenly, a small, insistent whine echoed from beneath the drafting table. Ren sighed, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips. "Alright, alright, Captain," she murmured, setting down her charcoal. A scruffy terrier mix with an undeniably heroic name, Captain was her grandmother's faithful companion and Ren's most patient model, albeit an unintentional one. He blinked up at her with soulful brown eyes, his tail thumping a soft rhythm against the dusty floorboards. He was clearly ready for his morning walk.

"Five more minutes, buddy," she told him, but he let out another mournful whine, punctuated by a tentative paw on her knee. "Okay, fine, you win." She laughed, ruffling his coarse fur. "You always do."

She stood, stretching her stiff muscles, and surveyed her work. The lamppost stood proudly on the page, almost leaping out at her. Odd, she thought, how vivid it looked today. She'd even sketched a small, curled-up dog at its base, a whim really, adding a touch of life to the inanimate object. It was a common sight in Willow Glen, dogs

waiting patiently outside shops while their owners ran errands. She shrugged, attributing the sharp detail to a good morning's work.

After a quick change into jeans and a faded t-shirt, Ren clipped Captain's leash onto his collar. The house was quiet, her grandmother still asleep, likely dreaming up new nefarious plots for her fictional detectives. Ren tiptoed down the creaky stairs, past shelves overflowing with well-loved books, and out the front door.

Willow Glen awoke slowly. The air was cool and crisp, carrying the scent of damp earth and blooming lilacs. The brick storefronts along Main Street still wore their shadows like sleep masks, but the bakery was already a warm beacon, its yeasty aroma wafting down the street. Ren nodded to Mr. Henderson, the baker, who was hosing down the sidewalk, a familiar morning ritual. He offered a gruff but kindly "Morning, Ren," and she returned the greeting with a smile.

Captain, true to his name, pulled her along with purpose, his nose to the ground, sniffing out the day's most pressing news. Their usual route took them past the town square, a place Ren often found herself drawing. As they approached, a flash of red caught her eye. It was old Mr. Abernathy, known for his perpetually ruffled tweed jacket and his uncanny ability to always have a friendly word. He was standing by the crooked lamppost, stooping down.

A small dog, a terrier mix not unlike Captain, was curled up at the base of the lamppost. It was asleep, or perhaps just dozing, its scruffy fur blending with the shadows. Mr. Abernathy reached down, gently stroking its head. The dog stirred, then stretched, letting out a soft yawn before looking up at the old man with a contented blink.

Ren paused, a strange jolt running through her. It was the exact scene she had drawn, down to the breed of dog and its position. Her heart gave an odd little lurch. *Coincidence*, she told herself firmly. Willow Glen was a small town, and dogs curled up at lampposts were hardly an anomaly. She must have seen it before, unconsciously absorbed it, and then drawn it. Her artist's eye, always collecting details.

She continued walking, dismissing the flicker of unease. But as they rounded the corner towards Willow Creek, past the quaint, mismatched houses, another small, unsettling detail surfaced. Mrs. Gable, the town's resident gossip and owner of the most vibrant garden, was outside her house, not tending to her prize-winning hydrangeas as usual, but rather wrestling with a stubborn garden hose. She let out a frustrated yelp as the hose kinked, spraying water directly onto her immaculate white cat, who screeched and bolted for cover.

Ren suppressed a giggle, but then her breath hitched. In her charcoal sketch of the town square, she'd added a tiny, almost invisible detail in the background: a small,

mischievous sketch of a woman being sprayed by a hose while a cat fled in terror. It had been a fleeting thought, a silly flourish to add a touch of life to the static scene.

Now, her palms felt suddenly clammy. Two specific, slightly unusual details from her sketch had materialized in the real world within minutes of each other. The rational part of her brain scrambled for explanations. Perhaps she had merely observed these things before, filed them away, and then reproduced them. But Mrs. Gable and her cat? She had literally just *imagined* that moment. She hadn't seen it happen before.

Captain tugged insistently, pulling her out of her stupor. Ren followed him, her mind a whirlwind of questions she couldn't answer. She tried to shake off the strange sensation, attributing it to lack of sleep or perhaps too much strong tea. It was illogical. Drawings didn't predict the future. That was the stuff of fairy tales and her grandmother's outlandish mystery novels.

Still, a tiny, unsettling seed of wonder had been planted. It began to sprout in the quiet corners of her mind, challenging the comfortable boundaries of her ordinary world. The morning sun continued to stream, but its warmth felt a little less comforting now, tinged with a new, inexplicable chill. Willow Glen, the town she knew so well, suddenly seemed to hold secrets she hadn't dared to imagine.

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