

Chapter One

Fidius

LAST JUNE, MY PARENTS JUMPED OFF A ROOF because of a pinky ring.

Beware of jewelry, especially if it's more than a thousand years old. And definitely beware of your own brain. Imagination is part of life, but also it sucks.

I'm not actually allowed to say "sucks."

Fidius had imagination. Every bedtime until I was almost six, he curled up on my pillow in his tattered jacket and knee breeches, not too close because touching him could give a person frostbite. Three inches tall, barefoot, and scraggle-haired, he told me about his elegant youth: the beautiful clothes, how everyone insulted each other, what they ate, how popular he was. I dreamed of (a) cockroach fricassee, (b) minuets, (c) winged ladies dressed up like Cinderella.

If you organize your thoughts and assign numbers and/or letters to them, they stop being imagination and turn into scientific inquiry, which is safer.

Fidius lived with us in our Boston apartment, which was the size of a French king's closet. One day when I was five, I sat in the tiny kitchen with my Winnie-the-Pooh plate empty except for summer squash, all soft and

Small Persons with Wings

slimy. “You’ll sit there until you eat it,” my mother said, in Model Mom mode. She left the kitchen so my father could do the dishes like a Model Dad.

“Pssst.” Fidius made a transforming sign, a loopy *q*. The squash turned into candy corn, which I didn’t love, but anything beats squash. I scooped it into my mouth, realizing too late that Fidius hadn’t done a thing to (a) the taste or (b) the sliminess, only (c) the looks.

“Bleah,” I said.

Fidius cracked up. “That’s what you get for having a sense of taste,” he whispered. He wasn’t mean—there were just things he didn’t understand about being big and warm and human. I gulped my milk and I didn’t feel hurt at all. Not. At. All.

A week later, I scattered three sets of LEGOs over my bedroom floor, organized by shape and color because Fidius was going to make Versailles, the palace of the French kings. Mom said I had to put them all back in the right boxes so she could vacuum. “They’re organized by shape and color,” I told her. “We’re going to make the palace of the French kings.”

“It’s too late to make the palace of the French kings today,” Model Mom said. “You should know that, Fidius.” She wasn’t looking at him—she hardly ever did—so he went all beady-eyed and stuck out his tongue at her. “The two of you, pick up those LEGOs or no macaroni and cheese, just broccoli.”

We ignored her, because it was my room and she wasn’t

Fidius

the one with a building plan. But then I smelled macaroni and cheese, which is my favorite, and broccoli, which isn't. Mom yelled, "I'm coming in there now. Those LEGOs better be picked up, dang it." She didn't actually say "dang it." She always uses a swear word that means exactly the same thing and yet I can't repeat it until I'm sixteen. This makes no sense but what can you do.

Anyway, Mom was coming and Versailles was all over the floor. Fidius flew around and moved his pointy fingers in a "go away" sign, like brushing a spider off your sleeve. One by one, the piles of LEGOs disappeared. "Whoa. It worked," Fidius said, so low I almost didn't hear. He sounded surprised.

"Where'd they go?" I panicked, because he didn't sound like he knew what he was doing.

"They're still there. Or somewhere."

"What happens when she vacuums? Will she suck them all up because she can't see them?" I felt around with my hand, but there was only carpet.

Fidius's iridescent wings turned mud color. "Am I a *magus*?" he snapped. That's what his people call a scientist, and talking about *magi* made him cranky. "I don't know where they went." But then his wings lightened; some faint purples and pinks appeared. His thin lips stretched in an almost-smile, the closest he ever got to an expression on his pale, pointy face. "Don't worry, Turpina. They're pretending to be gone. It's a trick of the eye."

Fidius almost always called me Turpina—my last

Small Persons with Wings

name with an *a* stuck on the end, which made it a girl's name in Latin, his first language. When I annoyed him he used my full name, Melissa Angelica Turpin, which he said was "of lineage," although he never explained what that meant.

He pronounced "Turpin" in French, his second language, with not much *r* and absolutely no *n*—"Tooghh-peh," kind of. Grand-père pronounced it that way too. Dad said "Turr-pinn," with as many *r*'s and *n*'s as he could shove in there.

Fidius tried to be helpful. One time he fixed a hole in my jeans before my mom saw it, but the hole opened again ten minutes later. He said he was too lonely and depressed to make a spell last. That's why he was all raggedy—he had some magic in him, but not enough.

He made My Little Pony come alive and gallop around the room for five whole minutes, which was cool except that she ate a hole in my Wild Things bedspread and pooped squishy blue plastic BBs, and when the magic died she didn't have any tail left. I started to cry and Fidius laughed.

"Bring back her tail," I sobbed. "You can do it. You're a fairy."

Fidius whirred at me, wings darkening, tiny, sharp fingers curled into claws. "Fairies!" he snarled. "Figments!" His frigid fingers were an inch from my eyes.

I cowered and that lightened him up, wings and all. "We are not fairies, Melissa Angelica Turpin," he said.

Fidius

"We are Small Persons with Wings." He went out to the living room to watch the DVD player open and close, so I was the one who had to clean up all the blue plastic poop, and my pony never got her tail back.

I never saw anyone love appliances as much as Fidius did. "Electricity is the same as magic, Turpina," he said, "except it doesn't decay your body." I didn't know what he meant by that, and he wouldn't explain because he was too busy posing for himself in the mirror. He unfurled his wings in towering iridescent glory, the shimmery pearls and blues and golds catching the light and improving it.

He always expected you to gasp when he unfurled his wings. And I'm sure I always did, always.

Wings have to be groomed. Fidius pulled them through his sharp fingers, the way a bird pulls a feather through its beak. They flowed through his hands as if they were liquid, the colors rippling and swirling like oily puddles at a gas station when you stir them with a stick. Imagine having something so beautiful on your body, and you'd flap them and they'd carry you up into the air.

No, don't imagine any such thing. It doesn't happen. It's not real. Item A on the list of made-up stuff.

It was my fault that Fidius went away. One day he was sleeping on my pillow and disappearing the Cheerios off the floor, the next he was gone and I had a little china guy that looked like him except he had a chipped elbow and no wings. I talked to the china guy as if he were alive, even though I knew he wasn't. Not for one minute did I

Small Persons with Wings

think that little guy was anything but china, with that stupid painted smile.

I remember every second of Fidius's last day, and I do think a lot of it really happened.

Nobody said not to talk about him. Nobody said, Talking about a little guy with iridescent wings won't get you invited to Janine Henry's birthday party, won't help you ride a bike, won't take away your excess vocabulary. You will still be not-skinny with not-blond curls and say "not necessarily" and "who's SpongeBag SquarePants?"

It was the stupid birthday party that set me off. Everybody in kindergarten was going except me and Marshy Talbot, who threw up every time she ate ice cream and insisted on eating it anyway. They were going to Janine's on the school bus Friday, and all the parents had to write notes saying that was okay. Except mine and Marshy's.

Marshy cried, but I didn't. Did. Not. When Inez Whatsername asked me right out loud if I was going—she knew I wasn't invited—I said I had something important to do.

"Oh yeah? What?"

Everybody kept doing their puzzles of the fifty states, but they all were listening. I didn't decide to say it, I heard the lie coming out of my mouth: "It's Fidius's birthday too. He is my priority."

"What does that mean, prioriddy?" Inez knew perfectly well that I couldn't define half the words I used. I couldn't define this one either, and I turned red.

Fidius

"If something is a priority, that means it's important," the teacher's aide said, being nice.

"Fidius has wings," I said. "And he's teeny and he cleans up my Cheerios."

"So he's a *f-a-a-a-i-i-iry*," Inez said, and everybody hooted like a streetful of car alarms.

"A Small Person with Wings," I said.

"Fat Mellie has a fairy friend!" That was Inez again, chanting. "Fat Mellie, Fat Mellie has a fairy, fairy, fairy!"

"Fairy Fat," Janine screamed.

"Fairy Fat, Fairy Fat," they all chanted. It took a full five minutes for the teacher's aide to calm them down.

"Hey, hey, hey," she said. "We all have imaginary friends."

"He's real," I said. "He vanishes dirt and turns squash into candy corn."

"That must be why you're so fat," Janine said. "Too much candy corn."

"I'm not fat. I will grow into my grandeur." My mom told me that when I started school and found out my family was officially overweight. I was an alien from Round World stranded on The Skinny Planet.

I couldn't define "grandeur," but it sounded all right to me.

"What's grandeur?" Inez screamed. I returned to my puzzle and pretended I was deaf. Inez was inconsequential, which means she didn't matter.

Small Persons with Wings

At recess, Mina Cardoza and three other girls cornered me by the swings, but they didn't poke me in the belly like usual. "Do you really have a fairy at your house?" Mina asked.

"A Small Person with Wings," I said.

"What does he look like?" another girl asked.

I told them about Fidius's raggedy clothes and beautiful wings and the LEGOs and I don't remember what else. They sat with me at snack and story time, voted for me to put the sun-and-clouds sticker up on the weather report board. As we tidied up the classroom before the bus they grumbled at Janine because I wasn't coming to her party.

"She can come if she wants," Janine said, but I couldn't because I didn't have a note for the bus driver. When Marshy and I got off the bus at the Shady Acres Day Care stop, all the girls hugged me good-bye except Janine and Inez. Marshy was bawling, and nobody hugged her.

"Bring your fairy on Monday, okay?" Mina whispered. "You're my best friend."

I spent the whole time at day care trying to figure out what had just happened to me. Up to that year Mom and Dad had shared one teaching job, so I spent all my time with one or the other of them or with Fidius. When I got old enough for kindergarten, my parents each took a full-time job in the industrial arts department of Alton H. Blackington High School and cast me into the world.

Fidius

I'd never had anything interesting to tell the other kids before. When it was my turn for show-and-tell, I brought in my mom's palm sander and found out that I had no idea what it did.

During nap time at the day care center that afternoon, it dawned on me that not everyone had fairies living with them. I imagined the whole class and the teachers spell-bound at show-and-tell, while Fidius groomed his wings and vanished the craft aprons. I imagined my next birthday party, to which I would invite everyone except Janine and Inez. Mina would sit next to me because she was my best friend.

"Did you have a good day at school?" my mom asked driving home.

"Yeah," I said, with more feeling than she was used to.

"Really? That's great. What happened?"

There was no simple way to explain. "Nothing."

"But what was so good about it?"

"We had cupcakes for snack."

She frowned, and gave me the lecture about food not being recreation, even though we both knew when we got home we'd sit down with Dad and eat one chocolate chip cookie apiece. We'd break off pieces and pretend each one was a whole cookie.

"I know all about food not being recreation, Mom."

She snorted. "You're not supposed to achieve that tone of voice for another seven or eight years." She's always complaining about how rude teenagers are. But even at

Small Persons with Wings

five I knew Mom liked a girl to stand up for herself. I hoped she never saw the way I was at school.

I couldn't wait to tell Fidius that Mina was my best friend, and that he was coming to school with me Monday.

The walls of my room were a jungle. Fidius waved his hand and the palm trees swayed in a breeze. I lifted my face to feel the breeze on it, but there wasn't one. It was all pretend.

"Look quick," Fidius said. "I can't keep this going for long."

I wandered around admiring my private jungle. Pretty soon it all faded into my dad's plain cheery yellow paint. I didn't care, because now I could tell Fidius about my day. I didn't tell about not being invited to Janine's party—I didn't want him to look down on me, since he'd told me he was so popular at home. I made it sound like everybody was talking about their pets and I happened to mention him.

I don't know why I thought it was a good idea to compare him to a pet.

He was curled up on my pillow. Before I finished talking he unfurled his wings with an angry *fwap!* and flitted around like a wasp, banging off of things. His wings were brown as mud, mud, mud.

"I didn't mean a *pet* pet." I ducked as he buzzed past my head. "I didn't mean to say anything about you at all. It just came out." *Zip! Zoom!* "But you have to come to school with me Monday, so I can show them—"

Fidius

He hovered in front of my nose, wings beating. "I am not your servant. I am your secret."

"Why? Why are you my secret?"

He put his hand on the end of my nose, kept it there until it froze me so much it burned. He made a swoopy gesture with the other hand, stared into my right eye.

A memory burst into my head, but it wasn't mine. I was trapped in a jar, no room even to unfurl my wings. A boy's nose and eyes appeared, huge. A girl said, "What is it? Give it to me a sec." Hands fought for the jar, and I crashed from side to side. I pounded my fists against the glass.

The memory faded. "I'm sorry," I said.

"You take me for granted. You think everyone has a Small Person with Wings making magic for them. And now you betray me, as the large always betray the small."

"I don't take you for granted." But I kind of did, and we both knew it. I felt I'd broken something that couldn't be repaired, and I was scared of what might happen next. It never occurred to me that he might leave. I couldn't remember a life without him.

He slept on my pillow that night, wings all calm and colorful, and the next day he was gone, leaving the little china guy in his place.

I stayed in my room almost the whole weekend, waiting for Fidius to come back. My insides felt like sawdust. I couldn't believe he'd leave for good because I did one stupid thing. Sunday night I almost smashed the little

Small Persons with Wings

china guy to wipe the smirk off his rosebud lips, but then I couldn't because he was a present from Fidius.

Mom and Dad came in not looking at each other, always a sign of trouble. They sat on my bed and waited for me to talk.

"He's gone," I said. "And it's because of something I did. He made a frostbite handprint on my nose. And he left me this china thing."

"Don't break it," Mom said. She reads minds. "You'll be glad to have it later."

"It always seems like it's your fault when they go," Dad said. "But it isn't. Fidius left in his own good time."

"This happened to you before?"

"It always happens. Life goes on and gets better."

"You'll have to eat squash on your own, that's all," Mom said.

"Or you could cook something that wasn't yucky," I said.

She smiled. "There's always that possibility."

On Monday morning I woke up with a knot in my stomach and tears behind my eyelids. I'd never cared before, but I'd been popular for half a day on Friday and I was hooked. In desperation, I took the china guy to school.

Normally everybody would have spent Monday talking about Janine's birthday party. But it turned out that the kids had spent Janine's entire party talking about my fairy, wondering what would happen Monday. They ex-

Fidius

pected me to come in with some little creature on my shoulder.

I would have given anything to have had Fidius on my shoulder. I felt like throwing up.

The classroom went silent long before it was supposed to. Everybody was in their assigned seats, and every single person was looking at me, even the teacher and her aide. Their eyes tingled my neck as I rummaged in my backpack.

I pulled out the sad little china guy, made myself turn to face them. I discovered I had nothing to say. I stared at my toes.

"Is he here?" Mina said, nearly breathless. "Is that him in your hand?"

I made myself look up, and the first person I saw was Janine. Our eyes met, and in that instant we both knew everything. She knew I didn't have a fairy on me. I knew she'd never let anyone forget this moment.

"We had a fight," I whispered.

"Speak up, Mellie," the teacher said.

I didn't want to speak up. Speaking up was going to suck.