

Veronica and the Volcano

Geoffrey Cook

illustrated by Gabrielle Shamsey



www.violetmoon.com

Veronica and the Volcano

© 2017 Geoffrey Cook

www.geoffreycook.com

All rights reserved. Except for the purposes of reviewing/discussing the work and then only in relation to passages in the aggregate of less than 1000 words, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission from the author or the publisher. For information regarding permission, please visit the contact screen at www.geoffreycook.com. VioletMoon icon from: www.handdrawngoods.com. Illustration of blue horses in Chapter 27 was modified from the original 1913 work *The Tower of Blue Horses* by Franz Marc.

Illustrations: Gabrielle Shamsey

Design & typesetting: Shanna Compton, shannacompton.com

Published by VioletMoon

www.violetmoon.com

Deluxe Color Hardcover

ISBN-13: 978-0-692-89200-8

ISBN-10: 0-692-89200-1

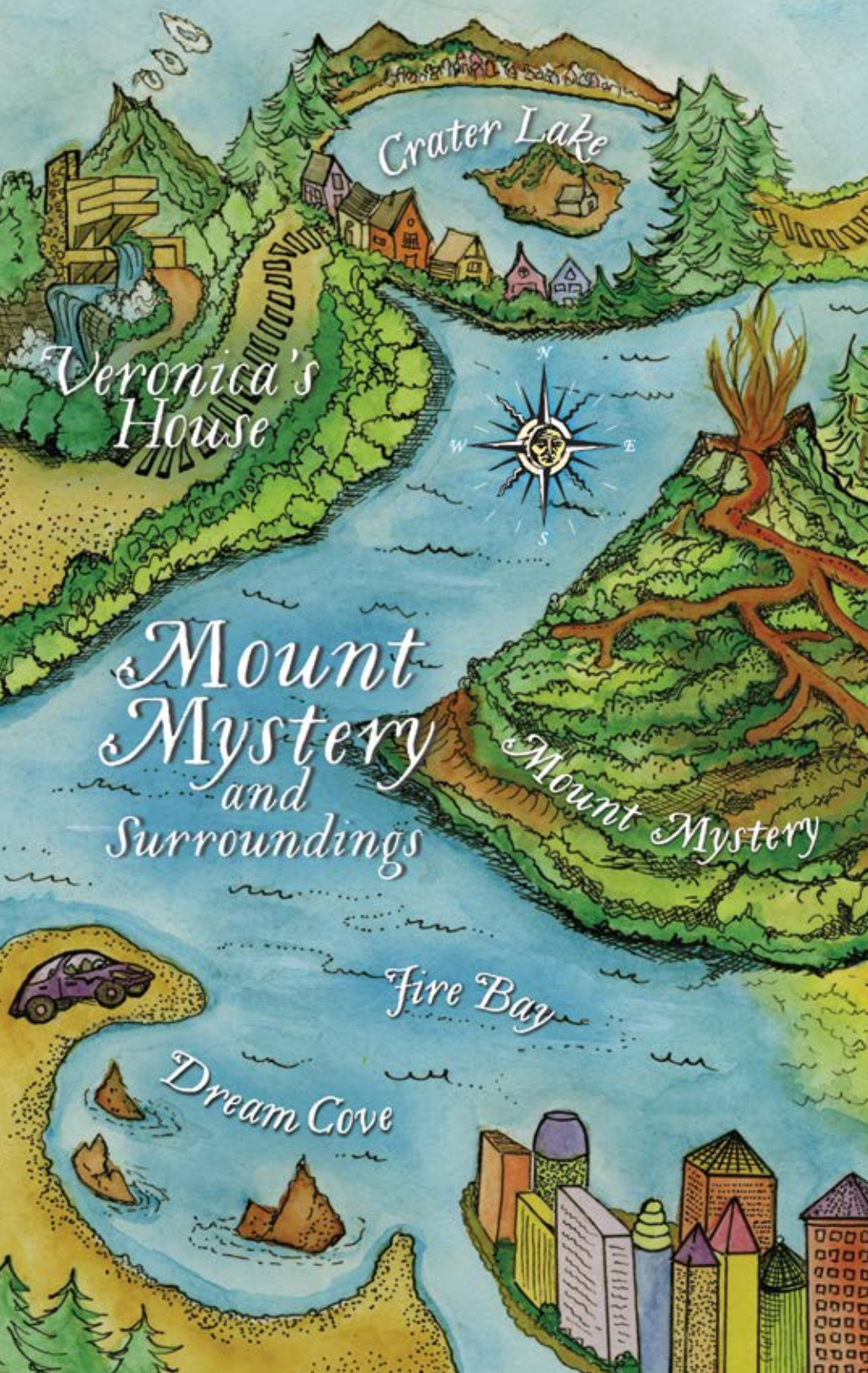
Contents

ONE	Volcano Pearls	9
TWO	Ice Tires	18
THREE	Eruption	27
FOUR	Packing the Car	34
FIVE	On the Road	44
SIX	Babeltown	53
SEVEN	The Gravesite	62
EIGHT	Magma Pass	73
NINE	Wolf Creek	80
TEN	The Cloud Forest	86
ELEVEN	A Chance Meeting	94
TWELVE	Setting Up Camp	102
THIRTEEN	The Torch	109
FOURTEEN	The People of Wood	115
FIFTEEN	The Cinnamon Forest	127
SIXTEEN	Yellow Lake	134
SEVENTEEN	Glittering Geyser	142
EIGHTEEN	The Crater	150
NINETEEN	Broken Boy	159
TWENTY	White Pearl	167
TWENTY-ONE	Escape!	176
TWENTY-TWO	Dream Cove	186
TWENTY-THREE	Home Sweet Home	197
TWENTY-FOUR	Gathering Gloom	210

TWENTY-FIVE	Something to Say	222
TWENTY-SIX	Darkness Day Two	233
TWENTY-SEVEN	The Tube	241
TWENTY-EIGHT	Hidden Chamber	251
TWENTY-NINE	Surrounded	258
THIRTY	Sacred Ceremony	267
THIRTY-ONE	Heart of the Volcano	284

ABOUT THIS BOOK	Free Necklace
	Glossary
	Acknowledgments
	About the Author
	About the Illustrator

*Train your telescope to the edge
Of what cannot be seen but only felt
And know that everything imaginable must be.*



Crater Lake

Veronica's
House

Mount
Mystery
and
Surroundings

Mount Mystery

Fire Bay

Dream Cove

Babeltown

Magma Pass

Cinnamon Forest

Cloud Forest

Yellow Lake

Chowilawu

New Lava City

Open for 5 Years
Dramatic Magma
Send us Back to





Volcano Pearls

CHAPTER 1

In another lifetime, in a land of lava and love, there lived a young girl named Veronica. Veronica had brown hair and beautiful hazel eyes. She wore a strand of pearls every day, even to bed, because her middle name was Pearl. Veronica had a mom and dad, who loved her very much, and a little sister, Elyse, who loved to play. She was, in fact, a perfectly ordinary girl, except for one very important thing—Veronica lived on a volcano.

“Lava bomb!” Veronica called brightly from the passenger seat, as her father backed the lava car out of the garage. She heard the telltale shriek and saw the orange glow. A flaming boulder, about the size of a school desk, streaked through the summer sky.

She pressed the red button in the center of the dashboard—a button clearly marked LAVA SHIELD. The lava bomb struck with the force of a lightning bolt. Showers of

incandescent stones hailed down upon them, as if from a volcanic thundercloud.

But Veronica and her dad hardly noticed. Above them, a clear lava shield rose out of the hood, extending over the car like a glass umbrella. Veronica watched the flames roar above their heads, die out, and then vanish. She pressed the red button again. This time the lava shield retracted, tucked back under the hood, and folded neatly out of sight.

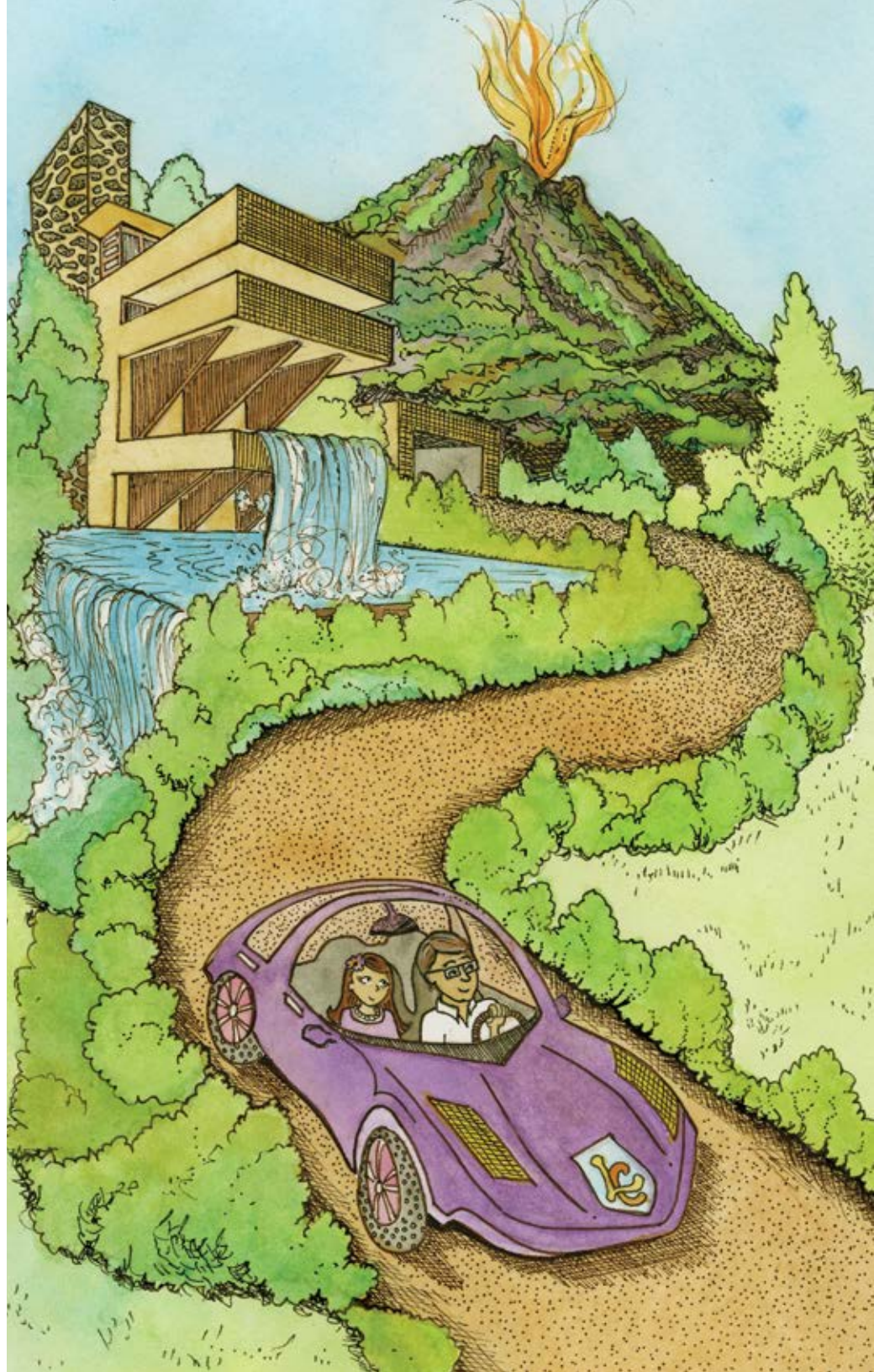
“Dad, you do *really* think they’ll have volcano pearls in town—don’t you?” she asked.

“Absolutely—definitely, umm, maybe,” he stammered, not sure at all. “But if they don’t, you know you can always make her something. Mom loved your painting from last year.”

Veronica rolled her eyes. “Another painting? Mom’s going to be forty this year, and she needs something special—something she’ll take with her everywhere she goes. Something like these.” And she thumbed at the pearls around her neck.

The town of Crater Lake was a fifteen-minute drive from Veronica’s house, and she knew the way by heart: Turn right at the end of the long driveway, then go another mile or two down the volcano, following the road along the riverbed for five more miles. The river spilled into Crater Lake, and the town by the same name hugged the lake’s northern shore.

Both the town and the lake sat in the crater of a supervolcano. Supervolcanoes are particularly large volcanoes, of the world-ending sort, that can blanket the earth with ash and blot out the sun. Scientists say this supervolcano last erupted five million years ago, before there were any humans around to



see it. Now, these same scientists say it is extinct—completely inactive—and of no threat to anyone.

But the volcano Veronica lived on was far from extinct. It was the closest *active* volcano to the town of Crater Lake, and everyone in town heard it rumble nearly every day.

As active as the volcano was, it had no official name. The townspeople referred to it as Mount Kaboom or even just Kaboom. But Veronica's family never did. They referred to it as that Old Girl, the Red Lady, or simply She. (Veronica always thought Veronica's Volcano had a certain ring to it. But her sister, her parents, her friends, and most everyone else disagreed.)

Veronica's volcano was smaller, not at all of the world-ending sort, but worrying enough to the townspeople of Crater Lake. *Their* world, at least, could easily meet a fiery end from the right-sized eruption. Luckily, that eruption hadn't happened—at least not yet. For as long as anyone could remember, Veronica's volcano never did anything more than put on a show. Sure, it smoked every now and then, and erupted a bit of lava here and there, but that was about it.

Still, it was a volcano. The townspeople never quite understood *why* Veronica and her family chose to make their home in such an unforgiving place. But *how* they did so was no mystery.

Veronica's family had no special powers. Yes, they had guts and brains—and some special lava gadgets—but above all, they had respect for the volcano they called home. They knew when to stay, and they knew when to run. But today Veronica and her father were simply driving to town to pick up a birthday present.

The lava car rolled to a stop in front of the town's only jewelry store. Veronica hopped out and walked briskly to the entrance. She noticed the sideways sign on the door and cocked her head to read the odd words: NOT CLOSED.

She opened the door gently and saw an old man behind a counter full of glittering gems. Crooked crayon portraits decorated every wall of the store. Some hung right-side up, some upside down, and some backwards. On another wall hung a sideways mirror. Veronica smiled at her reflection and straightened her pearls.

"Excuse me, sir?" she asked politely. "Do you—err—have any volcano pearls here?"

The old jeweler said nothing. He wore dark sunglasses in the dimly lit room. He looked to be at least seventy-five years old, with hair as white as snow and teeth as yellow as the sun. A tall, stiff collar rose from his frumpy jacket. The man grasped his chin and scrunched his forehead, as if thinking of something very far away.

Veronica noticed her father quietly enter the room. She repeated her question in a louder voice. "Excuse me, sir, do you have any volcano pearls here?"

"I'm blind, girl, not deaf," he said, his voice as old and gravelly as his face. "I think we sold the last one yesterday, or maybe an hour ago, or maybe the year after the week before that. But . . . it's possible, yes, that just maybe—" The jeweler stopped. "I might have a whole drawer full . . ."

He crossed the room slowly, tapping his cane with every step. He stopped at a large chest of drawers and slid the top one

open. Veronica gasped. A pale white light reflected off his dark glasses. For a moment, he looked younger, familiar, alive.

Thud. He slammed it shut. “Nope, didn’t think so,” he said. “But you do know where *else* you can find volcano pearls, don’t you?”

“Let’s go, Veronica,” her father said. “It’s time to leave.”

The old man ignored him. “Volcano pearls are cooled lava. They are mostly black, but sometimes—sometimes—they come in different colors. And white is the rarest of them all.”

“Yes, I know that,” Veronica said excitedly, clutching her pearls. “My grandmother left me these. I’m wearing them, see? White ones!”

“See?” the old man said. “Can’t you see? I’m in the *dark*! There was a time that I could see, and I have seen. I’ve seen what those pearls can do. And if you’re wearing what you say you are, you’re asking the wrong person for more.”

“Huh?” Veronica said. “But—this is a jewelry store. Who else would I—”

“Ask your daddy,” the old man said.

“Veronica, really, it’s time to go,” her father said again. “He doesn’t have the pearls.”

With wrinkled hands, the old man raised the cane high. “LOOKEE HERE!” he said, exposing a large white pearl handle. “Look familiar?”

Veronica clasped her hands to her chest. “Is that a . . . ?”

“You betcha!” he said. “The biggest one I’ve ever known. A child gave this to me yesterday, I think, or maybe it was tomorrow. One thing I know: Nothing on earth is rarer or more



beautiful than a volcano pearl. If you're lucky, you'll find them on the far side of Mount Mystery, somewhere in the black sands. And if you're unlucky, well . . ."

Veronica's father's face went white. "That'll be enough, sir. Thank you very much," he said, not meaning it at all.

But the old man was not finished. He bowed his head and looked at Veronica over the rim of his dark glasses. Where his eyes should have been were two hollow holes, black empty sockets.

Her mouth fell open.

"You see how evil man can be?" the old man said darkly. "When the volcano does blow, true colors will show. Nature is nature. It's always right. But man can be evil and man can be right. And man can be blinded by a terrible night. An evil is coming . . . he's coming in white!"

Veronica stood transfixed by his blind stare. Her father rushed between them. "What's wrong with you?" he said loudly. "As old as you are—scaring children—you should be ashamed. I'm sorry about your eyes, but it's no excuse."

"I'm sorry too," the old man said, and he straightened his glasses.

"Veronica! Let's go!" her father snapped. He hurried her out of the store and into the car.

Veronica wasted no time. "Daddy, where did my pearls come from? Are they *really* from Mount Mystery?"

"Uhh, well, I, uhh . . ." he faltered. "You know they were your grandmother's, so I, uhh, think you should probably ask your mother that question."

“So it’s true!” she said. “Can we go? To Mount Mystery? To the far side?”

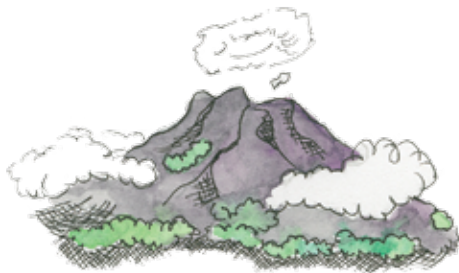
“Veronica Pearl!” he chided, hoping her middle name, sternly uttered, might end the conversation. “You know why it’s called Mount Mystery. Lava is dangerous enough, but Mount Mystery is something else entirely. Violent eruptions, poisonous geysers, pyroclastic flows, lava bombs as big as houses. It’s just no place for little girls,” he said, cringing as the last two words passed his lips.

“But Daddy, I’m not a *little girl* anymore,” she said. “I’m ten. And I *am* old enough. Where else can I find volcano pearls for Mom? The old man . . . he’s right, isn’t he?”

“Him? Right?” Her father laughed. “*Please* . . . he’s nothing but a spooky-talk-spewing kook.” He glanced away from the road and into her pleading eyes. “Veronica, listen to me, I *know* you’re not a little girl anymore. And your mother would love ’em, I’m sure. I’ll tell you what . . . I’ll think about it.”

Veronica smiled. *One parent down, one to go*, she thought. A *maybe* from her dad was as good as a *yes*. From her mom, well, that was a different story.

The lava car raced through the volcanic countryside. Veronica settled back into her seat, quietly gazing out the window, and daydreaming about the wonders she’d find in the black sands on the far side of Mount Mystery.



Ice Tires

CHAPTER 2

By the next day, Veronica had made her plan. She would climb Mount Mystery, take her best friend, Maddy, and leave tomorrow. But first, she would need her dad to help get ready, her mom to say yes, and Maddy's parents to let her go. Fortunately, Maddy happened to be sleeping over at Veronica's house that very night. *All in a day's work*, she thought.

Veronica found her dad in the garage, lying on his back, his feet protruding from under the car. "Is it ready yet?" she asked sweetly.

"Veronica, you can't just jump in a car and drive to Mount Mystery," he said in a muffled voice. "It takes preparation. It takes time. Everything needs to be perfect. Now, can you please hand me that tube?"

She grabbed a large metal hose on the garage wall and pressed it into his blindly grasping hand. "Here you go," she said. "Whatcha doin' anyway?"

“Just filling the ice tire tank,” he said. “I’m not about to get stuck on Magma Pass without ice tires—not again anyhow.”

Now, ice tires are not *exactly* what they sound like. They do not help with driving on ice, nor are they made of ice, but there is no better way to drive on lava. The tires themselves are titanium metal and covered in tiny pin-sized holes. When activated, supercold liquid nitrogen sprays out of the holes, coating the tires. When the liquid nitrogen touches lava, it turns to gas, forming a cocoon that prevents the tires from melting, at least for a little while.

“Dad,” Veronica said, addressing his still-sticking-out feet, “Maddy’s coming over for a sleepover tonight, and—well—I was wondering . . . if it would be all right with you if she came, you know—with us—to Mount Mystery tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow!” he yelled, sliding out from under the car. “You know perfectly well your mother hasn’t even said she’d let *you* go—let alone with a friend. If Maddy’s parents have any sense they won’t let her go, and if your mother has any sense she won’t let you go. But, somehow, if it turns out that nobody has any sense, then sure—why not?—at least the car will be ready.”

“Ready?” Veronica said, looking over the gleaming car. “It’s unplugged!”

“No it’s not, I—ugh!” he groaned, noticing the empty wall outlet. “Could you please umm—?” And he slid back under the car.

She laughed. “I guess we weren’t going to get very far.” She tapped the license plate, and it swung open, exposing the car’s

power cord. She grabbed the cord and extended it to the outlet on the wall. The underside of the car glowed red.

When a lava car charges, it first glows red, then orange, then yellow, then green, then blue, until it finally glows violet when fully charged. A full charge can take five hours but, once charged, the car can travel more than a thousand miles, in normal temperatures.

Her father returned to banging and clanging, the tube clattering against the concrete floor. She waited for a break in the noise. “Daddy? Could you tell me the story of our house again?” she asked, still speaking to his feet.

“Now?” he said. “Can’t you see I’m a little busy?”

“Just the short version,” she insisted.

“But . . .,” he began to protest. “Fine,” he sighed. Veronica’s dad liked to tell the story as much as she liked to hear it. “You were just a baby. Mom and I wanted the perfect house with the perfect view for our perfect family. We were house hunting on Crater Lake. She noticed a jet of steam erupt far in the distance and took it as a sign. We drove for miles, searching for the source. And we found it—right here—next to the most magical lava-heated pool.

“We asked a local scientist to survey the land. She discovered a vast underground magma sea, flowing right under our feet. She installed a device, called a turbine, to capture the steam coming off the vent and turn it into electricity. Without that electricity to run our lava pumps, we’d all be lava toast.”

He laughed, but she did not. She had zoned him out mid-story, certain she’d heard the back gate slam. “It’s Maddy!” she

said. “She’s here!” Veronica ran out of the garage, leaving her father alone under the car.

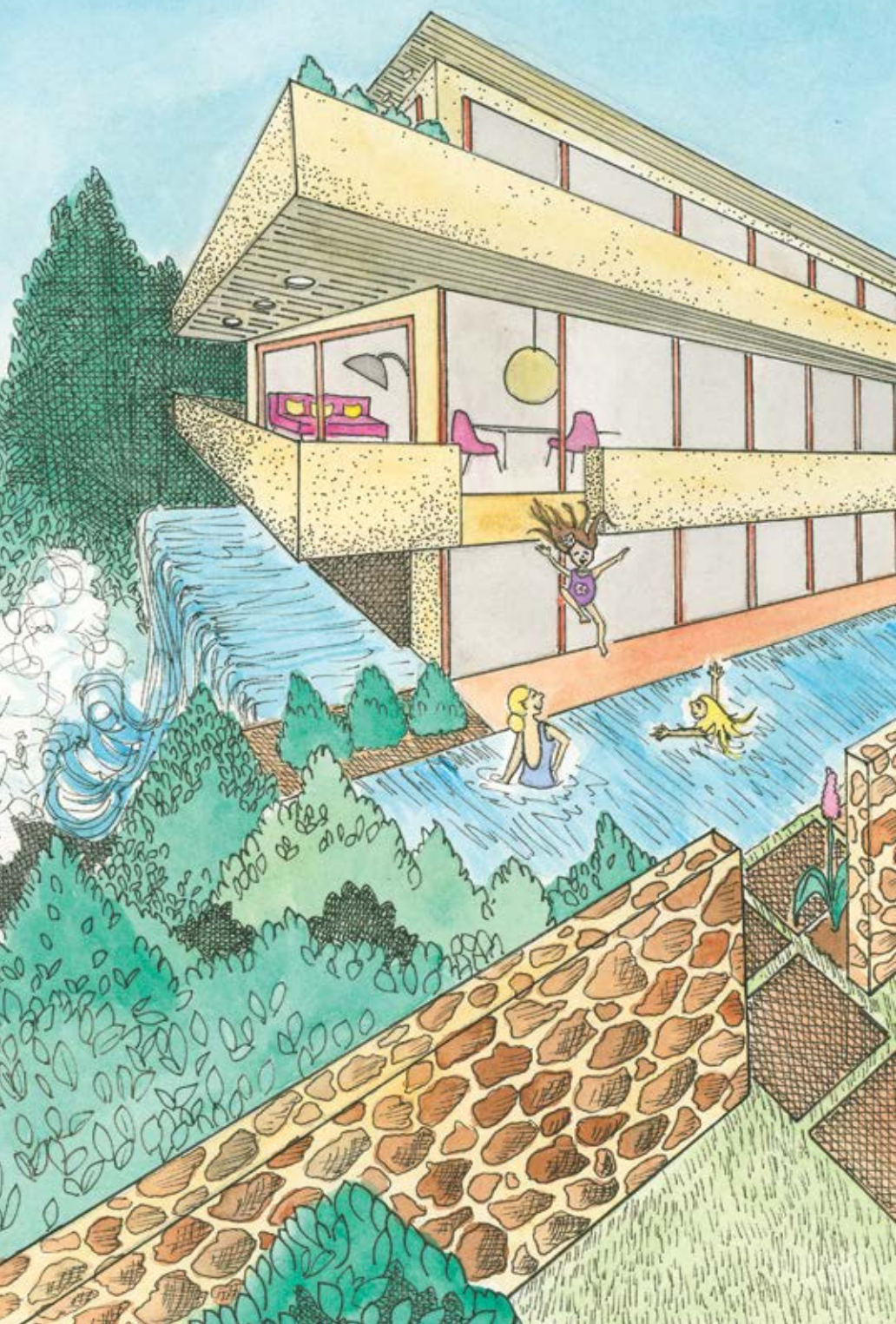
Maddy lived in the town of Crater Lake. Whenever she visited, her father dropped her off at the end of Veronica’s long driveway. Maddy knew better than to ring the doorbell. When she wanted to find her friend, there was only one place to look—the pool!

Maddy and Veronica first met at the age of three, both crying in the hallways of Crater Lake Preschool, unwilling to leave their mommies. Playdates were arranged, and the girls became fast friends. They helped each other overcome their toddler fears, and they’d been helping each other ever since.

Veronica ran from the garage into the living room, where she stepped through the sliding glass door onto a stone patio overlooking a large pool. But where was Maddy? Instead, there was Elyse—her noisy, golden-haired sister—splashing and playing in the crystal-clear waters, along with her mother.

Veronica swam in the pool nearly every day, except during eruptions. Its naturally heated waters bubbled up from deep inside the earth. Even on the coldest, snowiest winter days, the pool beckoned like a warm bath. Veronica learned long ago to always be ready for a swim. She shed her clothes down to her bathing suit and ran toward the opening in the patio wall, an opening made for just one purpose: jumping in!

“Look out below!” she called. Elyse and Mom looked up, just in time to see Veronica falling through the sky in her bathing suit and pearls. A giant splash soaked them both.



“Hey, you splashed my eyes,” Elyse yelled, swimming over to do something about it.

Before she could, Mom grabbed Elyse’s foot and began to tickle it. “I’m going to put you in a bottle and send you across the sea,” she said, pretending to do just that.

“But then I’d cry all day,” Elyse said. She twisted out of her mother’s grip, shooting an imaginary burst of ice powers at Veronica. Veronica returned fire.

“Mom—I’ve been meaning to ask you,” she said. “Did Grandma find her pearls on Mount Mystery?”

Her mother’s face turned deadly serious. “What? Why? Where did you hear that?”

“At the jewelry store in town,” Veronica said. “The old man, he said the pearls can only be found in one place. Did they really come from Mount Mystery?”

“Well,” her mother began tentatively, “you know how much those pearls meant to your grandma. She wore them every day of her life. And she’d be wearing them still if she were still with us.”

Of course, Veronica knew all that already. A painting, a self-portrait of her grandmother wearing the pearls as a young woman, hung in their living room over the couch. Grandma had passed away when Veronica was nothing more than a heartbeat inside her mother’s belly. Still, Veronica knew her grandma. She knew her from the stories, the paintings, and the photos. She knew her from the pearls on her neck and the Pearl in her name.

“But Mom . . .” Veronica said, “you’re not answering the—”

“And why do we have to talk about sad things?” her mother said. “Can we just play three claps?”

“Fine,” Veronica said, hearing the name of her favorite game. “I’ll count.” She shut her eyes and spun around. “Ten-nine-eight-seven-six-five-four-three-two-one. CLAP!”

Her mom and sister each clapped one time. With her eyes closed, Veronica had just three claps to find one of them, no small task in such a large pool.

As Veronica clapped again, Maddy opened the back gate. She tiptoed into the yard, ready to swim in a purple one-piece bathing suit. She shushed Mom and Elyse with her index finger to her mouth and slipped secretly into the fairytale waters. She crept to within inches of Veronica.

“Clap!” called Veronica.

CLAP!

Maddy’s hands slapped together like a pistol shot. Veronica spun around and lunged at her, dunking them both. They surfaced together, coughing up water.

“What took you so long?” Veronica laughed. “I made a list of things to do: swim in the pool, make popcorn, watch a movie. Oh, and Mom, would it be all right if Maddy and I go to Mount Mystery tomorrow with Dad? Dad said it would be okay with him if it was okay with you.”

“*Oh—did—he—now?*” her mother said, glaring. She did not like always having to be the bad guy, but she liked even less the thought of her daughter dead on Mount Mystery. She prepared to deliver the terrible but fairly obvious news that Mount Mystery was out of the question, that Veronica was far

too young, and that she should just stop asking—at least until she was sixteen, or maybe eighteen, or better yet, twenty-one.

“Well, Veronica . . .” her mother began.

A frantic shout interrupted her. Veronica’s father had just stepped outside and noticed a ring of steam circling the volcano’s peak like a halo in the summer sky. Then another. And another.

Steam rings, he thought. “Get inside! Eruption!” he yelled. He hit a button on the garage wall. An alarm sounded, and vast lava shields began to emerge from the roof, extending over the sides of the house like a clear awning.

But lava shields only protected the house, not the yard. Once a week the family practiced timed eruption drills. Unlike a fire drill, they did not flee the house, they fled the yard. During an eruption, there was no safer place than their living room and no more dangerous one than their backyard.

As the volcano roared, the ground rolled and the pool water waved with the rhythms of the quaking earth. The girls darted toward the house, throwing open a side door. From the living room, they watched out the window as the volcanic beast breathed fire all over their backyard.

Veronica’s dad stumbled through the same door a minute later, his pants tattered and his knees bloodied. Dazed, he heard a ringing in his ears, but he picked up the phone, just in case. “Ahh, h-h-h-hello?” he managed.

“Ahh—*hallo?*—*hallo?* It’s me—John!” declared the voice. “You know—Maddy’s dad! What the HECK is going on? It looks like Kaboom’s about to blow. Get Maddy out of there, NOW!”





Eruption

CHAPTER 3

“Daddy, look!” Veronica said excitedly, staring out the living room window.

The blue skies and yellow sun had turned black. Birds of every color flew in one direction, away from the volcano. Fiery lava gushed out in giant arcs from the volcano’s peak, as ghostly steam rings stretched for miles into the wild, ash-flaked sky.

Veronica grabbed the family iPad from an end table. Two years ago, for the third-grade science fair, she had set up sensors all around her yard to measure earthquakes. Her father monitored the sensors on an iPad app that showed something like an X-ray of the volcano, how much lava might pour out, and even the temperature of the lava and the ground. The app was also connected to sensors placed by other hobby scientists on other volcanoes, including the largest active volcano of all, Mount Mystery.

Her screen told her this lava was hot—more than 1,500 degrees—hotter than an oven. The app showed a web of different-colored lava tubes deep underground, carrying molten lava all around the volcano. The red and orange tubes carried hot lava right now, while the blue ones were cold and empty. But today Veronica did not need the screen to find the lava. Outside the window, a river of fire headed straight for the house.

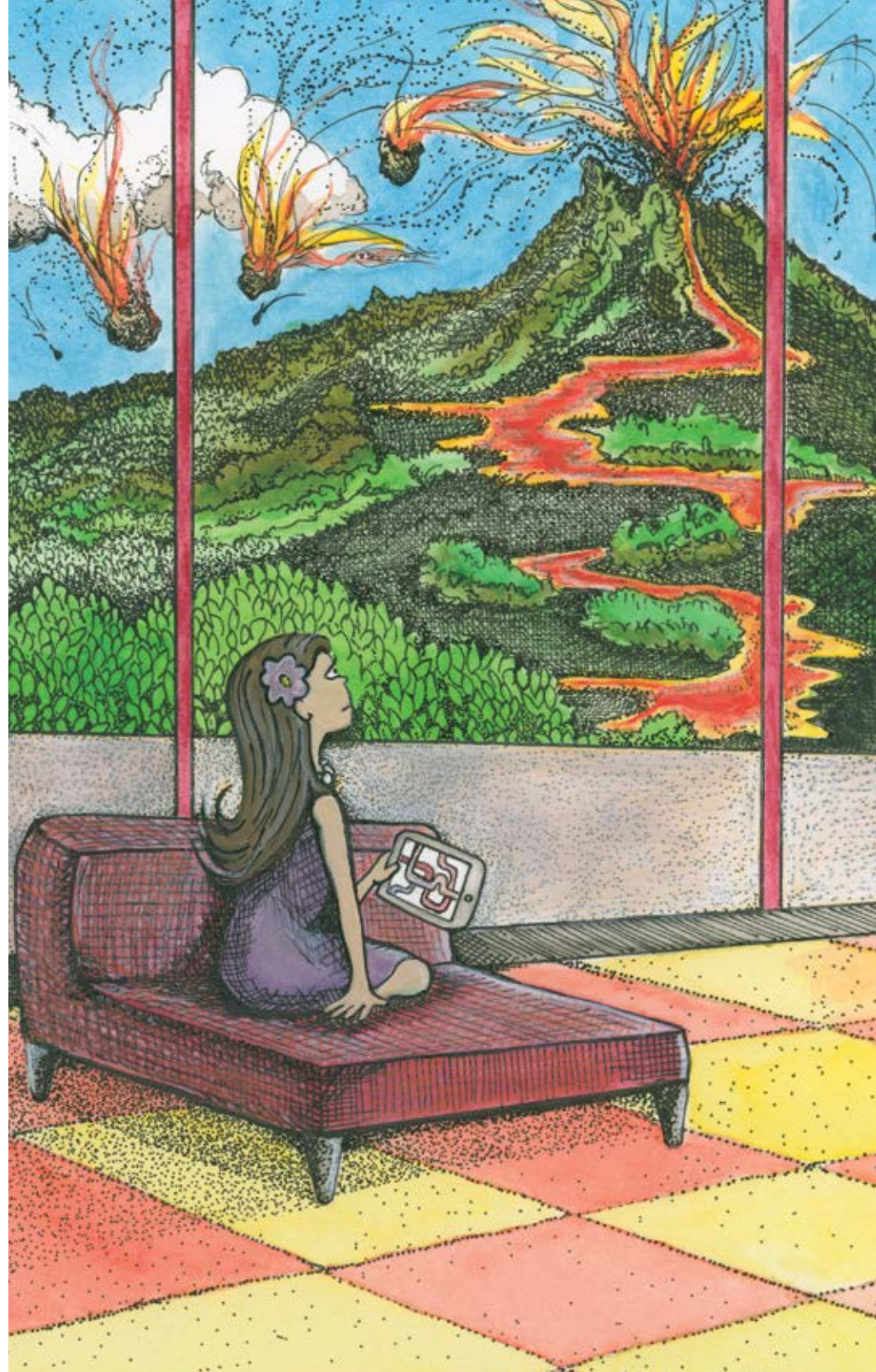
Still on the phone, Veronica's dad glanced down at the iPad. "That won't be necessary, John," he said. "Maddy's safe here. The Red Lady's just putting on a show. I'll call you back in a few." And he hung up.

Red-glowing rocks hurled through the sky, pounding the lava shields and rattling the windowpanes. The shields stopped the biggest bombs, but the smaller ones danced in on the wind, pelting the house like so many fireflies, blinking on and off all around them.

The approaching lava glowed dark red, almost black, punctuated by veins of orange-yellow. Trees and bushes burst into flames as the lava tongue licked ever closer. "It's coming for us," Maddy whispered, spellbound.

"No it's not," Veronica said. "The walls are space glass; they glow red hot but are safe to touch. It's the same glass that protects astronauts on spaceships. And you see those trenches around the yard? It's a lava moat. We're safe here. You'll see."

Though she had been to the house many times, Maddy had never gotten used to the eruptions, and she had never seen one quite this bad. She fidgeted with her hair, watching the trenches fill up. A garage-sized pump at the edge of the yard roared to



life, stopping the moat from overflowing. Pulsing like a metallic heart, it channeled the lava away from the house. Wave after wave of lava slid into the moat and diverted down the slope.

Veronica, meanwhile, popped a bag of popcorn in the microwave. She crunched her snack on the living room couch, watching the air ignite with lava fire. She gazed, mesmerized, as the geysers dotting the landscape erupted all at once, dancing like a choreographed fountain. Yes, Veronica loved a lot of things about living on a volcano, but she loved the eruptions most of all.

Safe in her living room, Veronica remembered the question she had asked her mother in the pool. “Mom?” she said again. “You never said . . . would it be all right if Maddy and I went to . . . umm . . . Mount Mystery tomorrow? You know, with Dad?”

“Pffftt.” A puff of air passed her mother’s lips. Her tongue pressed against the roof of her mouth, beginning to form the word *no*, just as her eyes fell on the portrait of her own mother, Veronica’s grandmother, hanging on the wall above the couch.

Veronica’s mother relaxed her jaw. Her mouth fell open, but no words came out. She daydreamed back ten years ago to the last moments of her own mother’s life.

“Mom?” Veronica pressed. “Well, can I?”

“Veronica . . .” her mother said at last. “There’s something I’ve been meaning to tell you about your pearls. Yes, the pearls were your grandmother’s, but what you don’t know is this: She found them on Mount Mystery with her dad, your great-grandpa, when she was no older than you. She wore the pearls every day of her life, just like you do now. She made me

promise to give them to you, Veronica, the granddaughter she would never know. But she insisted I not tell you about Mount Mystery until the time was right. And that time is now. Yes, Veronica, *yes*, you can go. You can go to Mount Mystery.”

Veronica’s mouth gaped open. She held her pearls in stunned silence, not sure whether to break down in tears or to jump up with joy.

Maddy chose the latter. “Woo-hoo!” she exclaimed. “You’re going to Mount Mystery!”

“No—*we*,” Veronica said. “*We* are going to Mount Mystery. You have to come too.”

Maddy shook her head. “You know my father will *never* allow that.”

“Yes he will!” Veronica replied dramatically. “Just tell him the truth: that you are *ready*.”

Maddy’s dad, John, or more precisely, Captain John, was a tall, friendly man with a booming voice. For as long as anyone could remember, his family had owned the biggest boats on Crater Lake. Five days a week, he captained the lake’s only steamboat, the *Minnehaha*. No man alive knew more about the lake than he.

Technically, he was Captain John the Seventeenth, although he was known around town simply as the Captain—and always with a capital C, owing both to his stature in the community and also his height. The very first Captain John was a man of legend, with a statue in town to prove it. Every firstborn boy in the family since had shared his name, including Maddy’s little brother, John the Eighteenth.

“Give me the phone. Here goes nothing,” Maddy said. She dialed her dad’s number, then switched to speakerphone so everyone could hear. “Hi, Daddy, umm, I just wanted to let you know that we’re safe now, and I love you, and, umm . . . one more thing, and it’s important. I want to go, that is, I’m ready to go . . . to Mount Mystery.”

She winced as she spoke the words. “You see, I’m getting older, and some kids in school have already gone. And Veronica and her dad are going tomorrow. And I want to go too!”

Captain John bit his tongue. Yes, of course, he understood she would go there someday. But that someday was not tomorrow.

“I understand that, sweetie,” he began, unaware of the speakerphone. “But I don’t think it makes sense for you to go with Veronica’s dad. You see, he doesn’t understand the volcanoes like I do. You’d be stuck up there if his gadgets broke, or, god forbid, his app crashed.” He snickered, or at least he meant to. But it came out as a big, booming laugh.

“So ask him to come,” Veronica whispered to Maddy. “Tell him there’s room.”

“Then why don’t you come too, Dad?” Maddy asked. “There’s plenty of room in the car.”

Veronica’s dad cringed. He knew that he and the Captain were from two different schools of thought—like a war between the newfangled and the old-fashioned. He imagined the long car ride to Mount Mystery and the dozens of jokes he’d hear, all at his expense. He rooted to himself quietly—*please say no, please say no*—as if concentrated wishes ought to matter.

Maddy called into the speaker, “Dad? Are you still there?”

The Captain imagined Veronica and her father both stranded on a volcano, lost and helpless, and he knew his daughter would fare no better. *They got nothing but book smarts*, he thought, *helpless book smarts*. He remembered his first trip up Mount Mystery as a teenager, and he realized Maddy would go there soon enough, either with or without him. He’d rather be standing by her side than worrying back at home.

“Yes, I’m here,” he said at last. “And, yes, you can go, and, yes, I’m coming too. I’ll be there—at 9:00 a.m. *sharp*. I love you.”

Popcorn flew. Whooping shrieks of total joy filled the room. Maddy high-fived Elyse. Outside, the eruption sputtered to a stop. The volcano lobbed its final gob of lava down the slope.

Veronica’s father stared out the window. “You’ll need your sleep tonight, girls,” he said. “Tomorrow, we leave for Mount Mystery.”