

ALEX GODOVYKH

NEW OZ

FINDING THE SPIRAL



READ THE MODERN CONTINUATION OF
THE BELOVED CLASSIC TALE

Alex Godovykh

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Finding the Spiral

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By Alex Godovykh

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This book is intended for entertainment and educational purposes only. Readers are encouraged to use their imagination freely—and remember, not every door is meant to be opened... but some are worth finding.

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Book Description

What if *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* wasn't just a story—but a map?

When curious third-grader Alex discovers a strange green door in the hallway of his school, a forgotten library book leads him into a fractured world high above Earth—a broken version of Oz, where pieces of stories drift through the sky and magic is slowly fading.

Guided by an ancient map, the belief of his little sister Maria, and a flame that holds the last unwritten story, Alex must journey through the Spiral—a hidden pathway that connects all stories ever told. But the Spiral is unraveling, and the world of imagination may vanish forever.

To save Oz—and the magic that binds all stories together—Alex must make a choice that will change everything.

A story about courage, memory, and the power of imagination, perfect for fans of classic tales and new adventures alike.

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The Spiral Knows

There's a path that turns where no path shows,
Through silent halls where the whisper goes.

It curls in ink, in sky, in stone—

A spiral waits, but not alone.

It winds through tales both lost and true,
Through dreams forgotten, old and new.

It finds the ones who dare to see

The door that isn't... but could be.

It speaks in stories, hearts, and flame,

And calls the reader by no name.

But once you step beyond the known—

The Spiral knows.

The Spiral's grown.

So turn the page and do not fear,

The map begins...

And starts right here.

Introduction

To the reader who picked up this book—whether by chance or curiosity—this part is for you.

Before we begin, I want to tell you a secret.

Every story you've ever loved still exists somewhere.

They don't just end when the final page is turned or the book is closed. They drift. They echo. They wait.

Not just in libraries or memory—but in places deeper than that.

In dreams.

In questions.

In moments when you notice something no one else does.

Maybe it's a green door that wasn't there yesterday.

Or a hallway that seems a little too quiet.

Maybe it's a drawing that appears in your notebook—and you're sure you didn't draw it.

That's where this story begins.

With a curious kid named Alex. A hallway. A book. And a door no one else sees.

You probably know *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. A girl named Dorothy. A lion, a scarecrow, a man made of tin. But what if the story didn't end when Dorothy went home? What if Oz was still out there—only changed, forgotten, scattered across the sky like pieces of a puzzle no one remembered how to solve?

And what if someone like you found their way in?

This book is about Alex, yes. But it's also about *you*. It's about what it means to believe in something that others can't see. About how courage can take many forms: a roar, a heart, an idea... or a quiet step toward something unknown.

It's about siblings. And spiral staircases. And the strange power of bedtime stories.

It's about imagination—and the responsibility that comes with it.

Because stories aren't just made to entertain us.

They *guide* us.

They *connect* us.

And sometimes... they need us.

You'll find a lot of mystery in these pages. A few riddles. Some maps. Doors that open and close. Worlds that flicker between memory and magic. You'll also find moments where the story goes quiet—and that's when I hope you'll lean in close and listen. Because sometimes, the Spiral only speaks when we're truly paying attention.

If you've ever felt like there's more to the world than
what you're told...

If you've ever wished a story would choose *you*...

Then maybe—just maybe—this one already has.

So turn the page when you're ready.

And remember:

The Spiral never ends.

It only waits to be found.

— The Author



Part I

The Door Between Worlds

Chapter 1: The Door

No One Sees

Alex had always been the kind of kid who noticed things. Not the loud things—he didn't care much for noisy games or flashy videos. It was the quiet, hidden things that grabbed his attention. The odd tilt of a classroom poster. The breeze that moved through a hallway with no open windows. A crack in a sidewalk that curved just a little too perfectly, like part of a symbol. He'd always believed the world was full of secrets, if you were patient enough to look for them.

But even Alex had never seen anything like the door.

It happened on an ordinary Tuesday at Pinecrest Academy, a red-brick school not far from the airport in Orlando. The building had only one floor, but it was freshly remodeled, with new windows and a bright playground that squeaked under sneakers. Still, to Alex, the place felt older than it looked—like it had a memory all its own.

That week, Alex's third-grade class had started reading *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Their teacher gave them options: read it online or bring your own copy. Most kids

clicked through pages on their laptops, or flipped through thin, colorful paperbacks. But Alex had something different. The weekend before, he'd gone with his dad to the Orange County Library downtown and asked for the oldest version they had.

His dad, who once made him pirate maps and had taken him on "treasure hunts" to real islands, seemed almost as excited as Alex was. They browsed the quiet rows together until a librarian led them to the back, near the Melrose Center. That's where Alex found it—a cloth-bound book with faded green covers and gold letters worn nearly blank. The pages smelled like stories and secrets. He didn't know why, but it felt like the book had been waiting for him.

He devoured it. Read late into the night. And then read it again. It wasn't just a story—it felt like something unfinished, like there was more just beyond the last page.

And then came the door.

It was just after recess, and the class was lining up for lunch. Alex was near the back, fiddling with the edge of his backpack strap, letting his eyes wander the hall. That was when he saw it.

Between two red brick columns just before the cafeteria, where there had only ever been a stretch of smooth wall, there now stood a door.

Not a classroom door. Not a janitor's closet. This one was smaller, narrower. The wood was dark green, carved with looping, swirling patterns like vines or waves or stars. And in the center was a doorknob shaped like a silver spiral.

Alex stopped walking.

He blinked. Rubbed his eyes. The door didn't vanish.

It didn't open either. It just stood there, quiet and calm, as if it had always been part of the school. And yet—he *knew* it hadn't been. He'd walked this hallway a hundred times. That patch of wall had always been blank.

He turned to ask the girl behind him if she saw it too, but she was busy talking and laughing and didn't even glance his way. No one seemed to notice. They passed by without so much as a flick of the eyes. The hallway had swallowed the door whole.

Alex turned back.

But the door was gone.

There was nothing there now but smooth brick wall and a smudge of shadow that might have been his imagination.

He stood frozen, heart thumping hard. It had been there. He was sure of it.

At lunch, he barely touched his hamburger. His eyes kept drifting to the hallway's edge. The door was gone—but the feeling it left behind was not. It was like a hook had been set in his chest, pulling him toward something. He didn't know what, but he *needed* to find it again.

That afternoon, back at home, he tried to shake it off. He read another chapter from *Oz*, but even the Emerald City felt dull compared to what he'd seen in the hallway.

He lay in bed that night staring at the ceiling, replaying the moment. The color of the wood. The silver spiral. The way it looked real, but... impossible.

Something inside him whispered: *Look again.*

So he made a decision. The next morning, he would go early. He would walk that hallway before anyone else. He would see if the door was real—or if he'd imagined it all.

And if it was real?

He would open it.

Chapter 2: The Hidden Map

That night, Alex couldn't sleep.

He lay in bed, the blanket pulled up to his chin, the old book resting on his chest. He had already read *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* once—twice, actually—but something kept pulling him back to it. It wasn't just the flying monkeys or the yellow brick road. It was something deeper. Something that felt like it had slipped between the lines of the story and curled up in the shadows, waiting.

And now, after what he saw in the hallway—that door—it all felt connected.

He flipped to the end of the book again. The final pages were quiet. Dorothy returned to Kansas. The curtain had fallen. But when Alex turned past the last page, his fingers brushed something strange—something folded, thin, and crinkled with age.

He sat up fast.

Carefully, he reached inside the back cover and pulled it out. It was a square of paper, browned at the edges and

soft as cloth. Someone had folded it over and over until the creases had become part of its skin. Alex unfolded it with care, spreading it out across his comforter.

It was a map.

Drawn in pencil. The lines were faint but sharp, like they'd been sketched with a careful hand long ago. In the center was a spiral—just like the shape of the doorknob he'd seen that day. Around the spiral were tiny symbols: a lunch tray, a hallway, a tree, and near the bottom, a small stick-figure flagpole. And in one corner, written in tiny, curling letters:

Café Hall.

Alex stared. Then he blinked. Then he stared again.

The hallway.

It was his hallway. At school. The stretch between the front entrance and the cafeteria, where kids usually waited during fire drills and rainy-day recess. Where he'd seen the green door. The one no one else had noticed. The one that disappeared.

His heart thumped hard.

This wasn't pretend. This wasn't some old bookmark or doodle left behind. Someone had made this on purpose. Someone had *hidden* it—right there, inside the book—waiting for the right person to find it.

He climbed out of bed, slipped the map under the lamp, and traced the spiral with his finger. It didn't feel like just a doodle. It felt like a mark—a signal. The hallway. The door. The spiral. The book. Somehow, they were part of the same mystery.

His thoughts raced. Had anyone else ever checked out this copy? Had they seen the map too? Had they followed it?

He turned the map over. Nothing on the back. But the paper still carried a faint scent—dust, maybe, or something older. Like parchment that had been waiting years to be found.

Alex leaned back against his pillow, the map still open beside him. His room was quiet. Only the soft hum of the air vent above his bed kept him company. But his mind was loud—buzzing with questions.

Who had drawn the map? Why was it hidden in the book? And why did it match his school?

He reached over and placed the old book beside the map. The cover was soft and worn beneath his fingertips. He knew this wasn't just a story anymore.

Something was happening. Something real.

The door had appeared.
The map had found him.

And tomorrow, he would carry it with him to school.
Just in case the door came back.

Chapter 3: Storm Drill

The next day was a Wednesday, which usually meant a shorter day and rainy weather. But instead, it brought something else entirely—an unexpected hurricane drill.

It started right after morning announcements. The intercom crackled, and the principal's voice came on, calm but firm:

“Attention students and staff, this is a hurricane safety drill. Please follow your class procedures and move quickly to your designated shelter areas.”

Around Alex, chairs scraped back and notebooks snapped shut. His classmates groaned. A few rolled their eyes. Hurricane drills weren't exciting. They were just another thing to sit through—tucked in a hallway, packed shoulder to shoulder, waiting for someone to say it was over.

But not for Alex.

His heart began to pound as soon as the words left the speaker. He knew exactly where they were headed: the long hallway between the cafeteria and the front entrance.

Café Hall.

The name from the map echoed in his mind like a secret being spoken aloud.

As the class lined up and moved out of the room, Alex slid his hand into his pocket. The folded piece of paper was still there. He had carried the map with him all morning—not because anyone told him to, but because something deep inside him *knew* this day would matter.

“Quiet feet,” said his teacher as they turned the corner. “Let’s move quickly, please.”

Alex followed, but his attention was locked on the hallway ahead.

At first glance, nothing seemed unusual. The usual red brick walls. The windows covered with storm shades. The lunch counter at the far end. The hum of the lights above.

But then—there it was.

The green door.

It was there again.

Just like before.

Tucked between two brick columns, quiet and narrow. The wood was deep green, carved with swirling patterns like vines or stars. The silver spiral doorknob gleamed faintly in the hallway light.

Alex stopped breathing.

No one else seemed to notice. The other kids were settling onto the floor, some complaining softly, others adjusting their backpacks. His teacher turned to count heads. But none of them looked at the wall. None of them *saw it*.

Alex crouched down with the others, pretending to listen as directions were given. But his eyes were fixed on the door. It wasn't just similar to the one from the day before—it was identical. It looked like it belonged in a dream. Or a story.

Or a map.

He pulled the paper from his pocket slowly, unfolding it behind his knees. The hallway drawn there matched exactly—right down to the placement of the spiral. The door was exactly where the pencil marks pointed.

The same hallway. The same door. *The same spiral.*

His fingers itched to move. To walk toward it. To reach out and twist the doorknob and see what lay beyond. But just as he began to shift his weight, a voice cut through the air.

“Alex?”

He blinked and looked up. His teacher was watching him. Her tone wasn't angry, but it was firm. He nodded quickly and shoved the map back into his pocket.

When he dared to glance back...

The door was gone.

The wall was bare again—red bricks, nothing more. The swirling green wood had vanished as if it had never been there at all.

But Alex knew the truth.

It had been there.

He had seen it *twice now*.

And it was calling to him.

The rest of the drill passed in a blur. He didn't hear the instructions. He didn't notice when the all-clear was given. He stood when everyone else stood. Walked when everyone else walked.

But in his mind, he wasn't in the hallway anymore.

He was at the door.

And next time, he wouldn't wait.

Next time, he would go through.

Chapter 4: Before the Bell

That night, Alex could hardly sit still. He kept glancing at the old book on his desk, as if it might open by itself. The green door had returned. Twice. And each time, it had looked exactly like the one drawn on the map—down to the spiral-shaped doorknob and the way it seemed to shimmer just before vanishing. But what was behind it? Why was it there at all?

He had the feeling—no, the certainty—that the next time he saw it, something would change. Something was waiting.

So he made a plan.

That night, before bed, he packed his backpack with unusual care. Notebook. Map. The library book. Pencil case. Then, without quite knowing why, he added his green medallion—the one he'd laser-cut at the Melrose Center months ago. A simple disc of plastic shaped like a leaf. It had once been part of a make-believe treasure hunt with his dad. But tonight, it felt different. Important.

The next morning, Alex woke up early. Not because of his alarm—it hadn't even gone off yet. He just opened his eyes and *knew* it was time.

Downstairs, the kitchen smelled like warm couscous porridge. His dad was at the stove, giving it one last stir as steam rose in lazy spirals.

"You're up early," he said, surprised. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," Alex said, sliding into his seat and trying to sound casual. "Can you drop me off early today? I want to do my homework before classes start."

His dad gave him a suspicious look. "Homework before school?" He raised an eyebrow. "Who are you and what have you done with my son?"

Alex grinned, stirring his bowl. "Just finish your couscous," his dad added, chuckling, "and we'll go."

The drive was quiet. The sky was still a deep blue with streaks of gold, and morning mist clung to the sidewalks. When they reached Pinecrest Academy, the parking lot was nearly empty. No buses. No car line. Just the faint hum of lights through the front windows.

"Thanks," Alex said, hopping out of the car.

His dad leaned over. "Don't forget your lunch this time!"

"I won't!" Alex called back, already hurrying up the walk.

The front doors were unlocked, but the school felt different—like a theater before a show. Quiet. Still. Expectant. He stepped through the lobby and into the hallway, where only the buzz of overhead lights kept him company. His sneakers made soft squeaks on the freshly polished floor.

He passed the office. Turned the corner. Then froze.

There it was.

The green door.

Right where it had been before. Between two brick columns. Not hidden. Not disguised. Just standing there—calm, quiet, and completely out of place.

Its surface was carved with spirals and curves, like vines curling around stars. The doorknob was a silver spiral, just like the one on the map. It didn't shimmer this time. It didn't disappear. It was solid. Waiting.

Alex stepped closer. His backpack thumped gently against his back. With trembling fingers, he reached inside and pulled out the folded map. He opened it slowly and traced the hallway drawing. The symbols lined up. The flagpole. The lunch tray. The spiral in the center.

This was it.

He glanced up and down the hallway. Still empty. Still quiet.

He stepped forward.

The doorknob felt smooth and cold in his hand. For a moment, he hesitated, heart pounding in his chest like a drum. Then he turned it.

Click.

The latch gave way with a soft sound, like a whisper.

The door creaked open.

Inside was a room unlike anything he'd ever seen at school. The walls were made of rough, gray stone. No posters. No shelves. No whiteboard. Just stone. Dust hung in the air like mist, and the light was dim—soft, like early dawn.

Alex stepped through the doorway.

And the door closed behind him.

He turned. The green door was gone.

There was no handle on this side. No seam in the wall. Nothing but the stone chamber and the quiet stillness that settled over everything.

He stood frozen for a long moment, listening to the silence.

Then, slowly, he turned back toward the center of the room.

There, rising out of the floor, was a spiral staircase made of dark stone. It twisted upward into the shadows, disappearing into darkness.

Which was impossible.

Pinecrest Academy only had one floor.

Alex swallowed.

The air smelled of dust and time. His hand slipped into his pocket and brushed against the smooth curve of the green medallion.

He took a breath.

And then, one foot at a time, he began to climb.

Chapter 5: The First Step

The staircase was colder than the room. Each step was made of rough, dark stone, slightly worn in the center, as if others had climbed it long ago. The spiral wound tight and narrow, curving into the shadows above. There was no railing, no lights, no windows. Just the steps. Just the silence.

Alex took another step. Then another.

The door had vanished behind him. No way back. And somehow, that didn't scare him—not yet. What he felt wasn't fear. It was something quieter, deeper. A pull, like the tug of a dream you don't want to wake from.

The air changed as he climbed. It wasn't just cooler—it felt older. As if the staircase didn't belong to the school at all. As if, the moment he passed through the green door, the world had started to fold itself into something else.

His footsteps echoed faintly, the sound curling around the stone walls like whispers.

He didn't know how far he had gone. There were no signs, no landings. Just the endless spiral upward. The

staircase didn't creak. It didn't crack. It simply went on, step by step, as steady as a story moving toward something important.

He thought about the map.

The spiral drawn in the center.

The hallway. The symbols.

None of it had explained this.

Alex paused and touched the wall. It was solid, slightly damp, and rough beneath his fingers. He looked down.

He could no longer see the floor of the chamber where he had entered. It was gone, swallowed by the curve of the staircase below.

And when he looked up, he couldn't see the top either.

It was like he was climbing through time itself.

He kept going.

Upward, upward, until he began to feel the first shift in the air—not cold now, but warmer. Lighter. Like the hush before sunrise. A soft glow began to seep through the walls, faint as moonlight through a curtain.

Then came the scent.

Not the dust and stone of before, but something new. The smell of fresh grass. Wildflowers. Rain on warm earth. Impossible smells, rising up from nowhere.

Alex's chest tightened. He knew this was it.

Something was waiting.

One more step.

And then the next one.

The glow above grew brighter, filling the spiral with gold and green.

And then—he reached it.

The final step opened not into a ceiling or another hallway, but into light. Not electric light. Not sunlight. Something else entirely. Light that shimmered and moved, as if it were alive.

Alex stepped forward.

And the world changed.



Part II

The Sky Beneath the Stories

Chapter 6: The Spiral Sky

The light poured over Alex like a wave—soft and golden and weightless. For a moment, he couldn't see anything at all. Then the brightness faded, and his eyes adjusted.

He wasn't in the school anymore.

Not even close.

He stood on a wide, circular platform made of smooth white stone. It floated high above the earth, suspended in a vast sky that stretched in every direction. Around him were drifting pieces of land—broken walkways, staircases that led nowhere, bridges that twisted and vanished into mist. Some floated gently like leaves in water. Others spun slowly in place, glowing faintly along their edges.

The sky itself shimmered with color—not just blue, but streaks of violet, emerald, and silver. Clouds moved like wisps of silk. The air was warm, with a breeze that carried the scent of green things and something else, something sweet and ancient.

Alex took a step forward, then another. The stone beneath him was cool and solid, though it seemed to hover on nothing. No ropes. No walls. No edges. He looked down—far, far below—and his breath caught.

He saw the earth.

The real world.

It was massive, spread out like a glowing map. He could see the edge of Orlando, tiny clusters of buildings, patches of green trees, ribbons of roads. He even thought he spotted the flat roof of Pinecrest Academy. It looked impossibly far away—and impossibly *huge*.

That's when he realized: he had shrunk.

He wasn't just floating above the earth—he was *small*. Everything here was smaller. This world, this strange sky above the sky, was like a memory, tucked into the corners of the real world. Or maybe a story someone had once told and nearly forgotten.

He turned in a slow circle, taking it in.

In the distance, he could see pieces of buildings—parts of castles and cottages, the curled tips of giant shoes, even a patch of road that sparkled yellow. Some parts looked familiar, like pictures he'd seen in *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. But others were broken, floating at odd angles, or flickering like candlelight.

It was Oz.

But it wasn't.

Not the Oz from the book, not exactly. It was fractured, floating, dreamlike. Like someone had taken the original story and dropped it, and the pieces were still falling into place.

At the center of the platform beneath his feet, a spiral was carved into the stone. The same spiral as the one on the map. The same shape as the doorknob. It glowed faintly now, as if it recognized him.

Alex knelt and touched it.

It was warm.

He sat there for a while, cross-legged on the stone, watching the sky move around him. His thoughts were spinning just as slowly. He had stepped through a door, climbed a staircase that shouldn't exist, and arrived in a sky that wasn't real—but *was*.

He should've been scared. But instead, he felt something else.

Right.

Like he had found the edge of a secret, and now it was inviting him in.

Whatever this place was—whatever had happened to Oz—it wasn't finished.

And somehow, Alex was part of the story now.

Chapter 7: Looking Down

Alex stood at the very edge of the floating platform. There were no railings, no warning signs—just a sheer drop into shimmering air. He didn't feel dizzy or afraid, only curious. Carefully, he leaned forward and looked down.

What he saw made him gasp.

Far below, spread out like a quilt of color and motion, was the world he knew—Earth, whole and glowing. He saw the blue curves of lakes, the tight patterns of neighborhoods, the long, gray lines of highways cutting through green. His eyes moved slowly, scanning for something familiar.

And then he found it.

Pinecrest Academy.

Small as a toy. The red roof, the blue top playground, the grass field where they used to play soccer. The airport was nearby too, its runways striped like a barcode, tiny planes frozen mid-motion like plastic models. Orlando

looked like a city in miniature, too large to hold in his hands, too far away to reach.

But that wasn't the strange part.

The strange part was *how big* it all seemed.

The school, the roads, the trees—they weren't just far away. They were *enormous*. Alex felt it in his chest like a pull: he wasn't just floating above the earth. He was *smaller*. Shrunk somehow, like Alice down the rabbit hole, or a character in a story tucked between two pages.

The sky-world, this broken version of Oz, wasn't only high above—it was a world within a world. Like a forgotten layer. A secret space.

"I'm inside a story," Alex whispered aloud.

The thought gave him chills.

He stepped back from the edge and sat down on the stone platform, his knees pulled to his chest. Above him, more land masses floated slowly across the glowing sky. One looked like a castle tower, split in half. Another was just a crooked yellow bridge with nothing on either side.

So many pieces.

So many *fragments*.

It looked like Oz had broken—like it had come apart at the seams, and no one had stitched it back together. The

yellow brick road was here, but it didn't lead anywhere.
The buildings were scattered. The characters were gone.

Alex had read the book. He knew what Oz was supposed to look like: green towers, cheerful Munchkins, roads that sang beneath your feet.

But here, Oz felt empty. Beautiful, but lost.

Like it had been forgotten.

Or abandoned.

He pulled the map from his backpack and unfolded it carefully. The spiral at the center glowed faintly now, reacting to something—maybe the platform he stood on, or maybe to him. Around the spiral, the lines were beginning to shift, just a little. The pencil strokes were still faint, but something about them looked alive now, as if the map itself were waiting for him to notice more.

He looked back down at Earth.

Was anyone down there thinking about Oz right now?
Reading the book? Telling the story?

Was that what had kept it alive this long?

Alex didn't have the answers, but he had a feeling. Oz wasn't dead. It was still here, just... in pieces. Floating in a sky no one remembered. Shrinking, maybe, with each person who forgot the magic of it.

And maybe—just maybe—if he kept going, he could find the part that could bring it back.

He stood, brushed the dust from his jeans, and looked across the nearest floating bridge.

It didn't matter how far down Earth was now.

He had come this far.

He was going forward.

Chapter 8: Fragments of a Story

Alex followed the nearest floating bridge. It arched from the edge of his platform like a question mark, swaying gently in the sky. The bricks beneath his feet were golden, but not bright—not like the yellow brick road in the book. These were cracked and dusty, faded like old memories. Some bricks were missing, leaving gaps he had to step over carefully.

As he crossed, the wind stirred his hair and carried strange sounds—whispers, maybe. Or echoes. One whisper brushed past his ear so closely, he turned around, half expecting someone to be there. But the bridge was empty behind him.

The bridge ended at another floating island, this one shaped like a wide spiral shell. It had no walls, no buildings, just pieces—fragments scattered like puzzle parts waiting to be rearranged.

Alex stepped onto the platform and froze. A weathered scarecrow hat lay on the ground, straw poking from its brim. A rusted oil can sat beside a broken wheelbarrow.

A velvet ribbon—faded blue—fluttered from a hook nailed to nothing.

Alex's heart pounded. These weren't props. They weren't decorations. They were memories—pieces of Oz that had once meant something, now left behind like forgotten toys.

The air smelled faintly of wood smoke and old books. A scent that tugged at his mind, like it belonged to someone else's childhood.

He wandered farther in, his sneakers crunching over dry leaves that had no tree.

Then came the shadows.

They weren't dangerous, but they were eerie. Faint outlines flickered across the platform—images that blinked into view and vanished again, like pages turning too fast to read. One moment he saw a Munchkin with a striped hat, arms waving joyfully. The next, a tall gate with green glass panels that flickered out before he could step closer.

It was like the story was trying to replay itself—but couldn't.

Everything was unstable. The pieces were there, but the connection was missing.

Alex knelt beside the ribbon and picked it up. It felt cool and soft in his hand. He turned it over and found a name

stitched into the edge in thread worn to near invisibility:
Dorothy.

His breath caught.

Suddenly, the platform trembled slightly beneath his feet. Not violently—but like something deep below had shifted.

He stood quickly and looked around.

Floating just above the spiral's curve, a page spun slowly in the air.

It was different from the others—not a shadow or memory, but something real. Paper. Pale and delicate, curling at the edges. He reached for it, fingers stretching through the wind.

As soon as he touched it, the page burst into golden dust. But before it vanished, he saw a line—just a single sentence written in looping pencil:

“Stories don’t disappear. They drift.”

The dust scattered into the air, glowing for a moment before fading like fireflies.

Alex stood very still.

Pieces of Oz were here. They were everywhere—hidden in the sky, buried in the Spiral. The story wasn’t gone. It was just... floating. Waiting.

Waiting for someone to bring it back.

Maybe the map hadn't just led him to the door.

Maybe it had led him into the story itself.

and maybe—just maybe—it wasn't finished.

Chapter 9: Dorothy's Son

The path ahead twisted through floating islands of light and mist. Each one shimmered faintly, half-real, as if deciding whether to stay or vanish. Alex walked carefully, following the stone spirals and memory-shadows like stepping stones. He didn't know where he was going, only that the Spiral itself seemed to guide his feet.

Then, on a platform ringed in soft green mist, he saw someone standing at the edge.

The figure didn't move, didn't speak. Just stood with hands behind his back, looking out over the sky.

Alex slowed.

The boy looked about thirteen—taller than Alex, dressed in old-fashioned clothes: suspenders, scuffed boots, a shirt the color of faded cornflowers. His hair was the same golden brown as the dried grass blowing across the Spiral. He seemed familiar and strange all at once, like someone from a story Alex had almost forgotten.

The wind tugged gently at the boy's sleeves. Still, he didn't turn.

Alex stepped closer, cautious but curious. "Hello?"

The boy didn't answer right away.

Then, in a voice quiet and distant, he said, "You found the map."

Alex blinked. "How did you —?"

The boy turned slowly. His face was kind, but there was something faded in his eyes. Not tiredness. More like... time. Like someone who had waited too long for something that might never come.

"You're not the first to climb the Spiral," the boy said.

"But you might be the last."

Alex swallowed. "Who are you?"

The boy gave a soft smile. "My name doesn't matter. But my mother's does. You know it already."

Alex's breath caught. "Dorothy?"

The boy nodded. "She found Oz by accident. But I was born here. Raised in this sky. I saw what it was before it broke."

Alex's heart thudded. "What happened to it?"

The boy turned his gaze outward again. "People stopped telling the story. Or they told it wrong. Or they forgot

pieces and filled in the gaps with whatever made them laugh. They turned the magic into costumes. Into shows. They kept the shell, but let the soul drift away."

He gestured to the air around them, to the floating fragments. "Oz didn't disappear. It came apart. Slowly. Like a dream unraveling."

Alex stood beside him in silence. There were no answers in the sky—only more questions.

"But it's still here," Alex said finally. "Broken, but here."

"For now," the boy said. "The Spiral holds it together. But barely. And the Spiral only survives because a few still believe. A few still look for doors no one else sees."

Alex looked down at the spiral carved into the stone beneath his feet. "What is it? Really?"

"A thread," the boy said. "A way between worlds. Between stories. It connects the old ones and the not-yet-told. But it's fraying. And if it snaps—Oz won't be the only place that falls."

A hush settled between them. Then the boy turned, his eyes sharper now.

"You're not just here to look," he said. "You're here to choose. The story is waiting."

Alex felt the folded map in his pocket begin to warm.

"What do I do?" he asked.

The boy smiled again, gently this time. “The Spiral will show you the way. But not all at once.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out something small—something green.

A single leaf.

He pressed it into Alex’s hand.

“When the path twists, follow the truth,” he said. “Even if it’s hidden.”

Then, just like that, the boy stepped backward into the mist—and was gone.

Alex looked down at the leaf in his palm. It was shaped like his medallion. Almost exactly.

The wind stirred. The mist rolled back.

And ahead, the Spiral path began to glow.

Chapter 10: The Spiral's Map

Alex stood alone on the platform, the green mist swirling gently at his feet. The leaf in his hand shimmered faintly, warm against his skin. The boy — Dorothy's son — had vanished into the air, but his words lingered like an echo in Alex's thoughts.

"You're here to choose. The story is waiting."

Alex reached into his pocket and pulled out the old map. He had unfolded it so many times already, the creases had begun to soften and tear. But now, as he held it under the strange light of the Spiral sky, something began to change.

The map was moving.

At first, the pencil lines flickered like candlelight, but then they shifted, curling outward from the spiral in the center. New lines drew themselves across the page, glowing silver. The hallway at school faded into the background as new places took shape — floating platforms, bridges, castles in fragments. Some looked like Oz, but others were completely unfamiliar.

He watched, eyes wide, as delicate arcs connected worlds like constellations. One circle pulsed faintly near the edge—Earth. Another spun more brightly—Oz. Between them, the spiral connected both, like a living thread sewing one story into another.

He touched the glowing spiral at the center of the map with one fingertip.

The moment he did, a trail lit up.

It began at his platform and stretched forward through the sky, curving around floating pieces of memory and across glowing bridges. The path twisted, then turned sharply, coiling toward a symbol at the far end.

A green flame.

Alex stared at it.

“What is that?” he whispered.

The flame pulsed once, and new symbols shimmered around it—three small icons, drawn in ink so faint he hadn’t seen them before.

A heart.

A brain.

A lion’s paw.

Alex felt a chill race up his arms.

He had seen these before—in the book. The Tin Man's heart. The Scarecrow's brain. The Lion's courage. But here, they weren't just parts of a story. They were *signs*—clues, maybe. Or trials.

His breath caught as he realized something else.

The Spiral wasn't guiding him randomly.

It was testing him.

Every step forward was part of something bigger. It wasn't just about Oz being broken. It was about what kept it alive—emotion, thought, and bravery. And if the Spiral needed to be repaired, it would take all three.

Alex traced the trail again with his eyes. The path ahead glowed steadily, like a pulse, beating beneath the sky.

The map had changed.

But so had the story.

It wasn't just a journey now.

It was a challenge.

And Alex knew—deep in his bones—that the Spiral was waiting to see what kind of hero he would become.



Part III

Becoming the Story

Chapter 11: The Heart of Iron

Alex woke with a jolt.

For a moment, he didn't know where he was. The sky above him shimmered silver and gray, and the platform beneath him was flat, silent, and cold. He tried to sit up—but his limbs didn't move the way they used to.

His arms were stiff. Heavy. When he lifted one and tapped it against his chest, it echoed—clank, clank—like striking the inside of a metal drum.

He looked down.

His body wasn't his own.

His arms were silver. His hands were flat and jointed. His legs moved like hinges. His chest was round and metallic, and in its center, right where his heart should be, was a hollow circle.

Alex had turned into the Tin Man.

For a few stunned seconds, he just stared. It didn't feel like a costume. It didn't feel like a dream. This was real. His joints creaked. His knees squeaked. And when he

opened his mouth to call out—his voice came out thin and tinny, like the echo of a bell.

At first, it was... cool. Strange, sure, but kind of exciting. He could feel the weight of his steps, the power in his arms. He didn't need to breathe. He didn't need to blink. He could stand perfectly still, like a statue, and feel nothing at all.

Nothing.

That was the first problem.

He didn't feel tired. Or hungry. Or nervous. But also—he didn't feel curious. Or excited. Or afraid. Or anything.

The wind whispered around him, but it stirred nothing inside. He walked to the edge of the platform, looked down at the swirling Spiral sky, and felt... quiet. Empty. Like he'd been unplugged.

Something rustled behind him.

Alex turned, the movement awkward and clunky, and spotted a flickering image on the far edge of the platform—a memory-shade, like the ones he'd seen before. It was a figure curled beneath a tree stump, small and shadowed, trembling.

He knew it wasn't real—not exactly. But still, something about it pulled at him. Or at least, should have.

He forced himself to move closer, his metal feet clanging with every step. The shadow didn't look up. It just shivered, its shoulders hunched as if waiting for help.

Alex stared down at it.

But he didn't feel concern.

He didn't feel anything.

He wanted to. He knew he should. But his chest remained cold and hollow.

"I don't like this," he said aloud, his voice echoing like a spoon dropped into a pot. "I don't want to be the Tin Man anymore."

The shadow curled tighter, its hands over its ears.

Alex clenched his fists. "Why won't you talk to me?"

No answer.

Something deep in his memory stirred. The Tin Man from the book had wanted a heart. Not because he needed it to live—but because he wanted to feel. To care. To matter.

Alex knelt beside the trembling shadow. He didn't know what it was. Or who. But he reached out and placed his cold metal hand gently on its back.

"I'm sorry you're scared," he whispered.

The words felt strange coming from his tin mouth.

But something happened.

The shadow looked up.

Its shape flickered, just once, and a face blinked into view. Young. Soft. Familiar. It wasn't someone Alex recognized exactly—but the sadness in the eyes hit him like a drumbeat.

For a moment—just one heartbeat—the emptiness in his chest cracked.

Warmth bloomed there. Soft and slow.

The shadow shimmered—and vanished into light.

Alex staggered back.

He looked down at his chest. A soft green glow was forming inside the hollow space—faint, but growing.

The metal began to soften.

Not melt, exactly. But bend. Fade. Shift.

He looked at his hands. They were no longer silver.

His skin had returned.

The Tin Man was gone.

And in his chest, right where the metal heart had been, he felt something beat.

Just once.

Then again.

And then—silence.

But not the hollow kind.

The kind that came before the next part of the story.

Chapter 12: Mind Full of Straw

Alex didn't notice the change at first.

The platform beneath his feet shimmered, and the sky above rippled like fabric in the wind. He stepped forward, steady again on his own two feet—skin, not metal. Breath filled his lungs. His heart beat normally now. And for a moment, he felt like himself again.

Then everything tilted.

Not the ground—his thoughts.

Ideas flooded his brain so quickly he couldn't keep up. Questions buzzed like bees: Why was the Spiral broken? What if Oz was only one piece of a bigger map? Could time bend here? Could he draw a door? What if stories were alive?

He stopped walking and grabbed his head.

It didn't hurt. But it felt... full. Overstuffed. Like his brain had turned into a balloon someone kept inflating with questions and answers that didn't match.

He looked down at his arms.

Straw.

His sleeves were burlap. His fingers were stitched together with twine. A soft breeze stirred the strands poking out from his cuffs and collar.

His hands were no longer hands.

He was the Scarecrow.

Alex took a step, and his left leg wobbled. His foot turned sideways. His knee bent the wrong way before correcting itself. He stumbled but stayed upright, straw spilling from his shoulder as he straightened.

His thoughts buzzed louder now.

So many ideas. So many thoughts. But they were all tangled—like a library where every book had been shelved in the wrong section.

He tried to remember what he was supposed to do.

Walk the Spiral. Follow the path. Fix Oz.

But now he wasn't sure. What if he was wrong? What if he'd imagined it all? What if the green door wasn't real, and the library book never had a map, and—

A wall of mirrors rose around him, one by one, like dominoes standing tall.

He saw himself reflected over and over again—each version slightly different. One had glowing green eyes.

One was still the Tin Man. Another looked like the boy he used to be, sitting on the RV bed while his dad read him stories by lantern light.

“Who are you now?” the reflections whispered.

Alex spun in a circle, his breath coming quicker. “Stop it,” he muttered. “I need to think. I need to—”

But he couldn’t.

His mind was full of straw.

That’s when he heard it.

A voice. Tiny. Familiar.

“Alex? Are you in there?”

He froze.

The mirrors shimmered. Then steadied.

The voice echoed again, far away but sharp, like a string pulled tight across the wind.

“Alex! Hellooooo?”

Maria.

His little sister.

Alex squeezed his eyes shut. He focused—not on the mirrors. Not on the questions.

But on her.

He thought of her chasing a butterfly near a campsite. Of her sticking glow-in-the-dark stars to her ceiling. Of the way she leaned over her bowl of couscous porridge and whispered secrets about her stuffed animals.

"I remember," Alex said, his voice cracking through the straw.

The mirrors cracked.

"I remember you, Maria."

The walls shattered.

The platform opened, light pouring in from above.

Alex looked down at his hands. The burlap faded. The straw vanished.

His thoughts, though still quick, settled into place—like books falling into their proper shelves.

He was himself again.

He had found something true to hold onto.

And it had pulled him back.

Chapter 13: The Roar Inside

The world shifted again.

Alex blinked, but the sky didn't shimmer this time. There was no spinning, no flashing light. Just a slow, steady change—like a drumbeat rising in the distance. He stood on a narrow stone bridge now, stretching between two massive cliffs that floated like islands. The wind howled around him, sharp and cold, tugging at his clothes.

He took a step forward—and stopped.

His feet were enormous.

He looked down. His hands were covered in soft golden fur. His nails had thickened into claws. A tail flicked behind him without his permission. His heart pounded fast and loud—too loud.

He didn't need a mirror to know.

He had become the Cowardly Lion.

Almost immediately, he felt it—the fear.

It slinked into his chest like a cold draft under a door. Everything around him looked dangerous now. The sky above the bridge seemed darker, the cliffs farther away, the stones beneath his feet more cracked and unstable than before.

He stepped again—and the bridge creaked.

He froze.

His pulse sped up. The roar building in his throat wasn't from anger or courage. It was from panic.

"What if I fall?"

He took another step. The wind screamed past his ears.

What if I never find the way back?

Another step.

What if I'm not brave enough to finish this?

He crouched low, clutching the edge of the bridge with clawed hands, trying to steady himself. His breath came in short bursts. His thoughts didn't buzz like they had when he was the Scarecrow—they shook. Every shadow seemed alive. Every sound a threat.

"I can't do this," he muttered.

He wanted to turn back. To run. Even though he knew the bridge behind him had already vanished into mist.

And then, through the wind and the thunder in his chest,
he heard it.

A sound—small and soft.

Crying.

Alex lifted his head. Just ahead, on the far side of the
bridge, something flickered—a memory-shadow, curled
beneath a crooked streetlamp. It wasn't a monster. It
wasn't a trap.

It was a small creature. Fur matted. Eyes wide with fear.
Alone.

It didn't see him.

But it was shivering.

He hesitated. The fear rose again. His legs shook. His
paws curled tight.

You can't even help yourself, a voice inside him
whispered. How are you going to help someone else?

He took a shaky breath.

And stepped forward anyway.

The bridge moaned under his weight, but he didn't stop.

Another step. And another.

Until he stood beside the creature. It looked up with
wide, glimmering eyes. Its body was barely more than

smoke and memory, but it leaned into him, just slightly, as if it had been waiting for someone to stand beside it.

Alex reached out a paw and rested it gently on the creature's back.

"You're okay now," he said softly. "I'm here."

A moment passed.

Then the creature faded, dissolving into golden dust that spiraled upward, caught in the wind.

The fear didn't vanish—but it shifted. It thinned. Beneath it, something else stirred.

A quiet strength.

Alex looked down at his hands. The fur was disappearing. The claws, the tail—gone. His heart still beat fast, but it beat with purpose now.

He was Alex again.

But not the same boy who had entered the Spiral.

He had faced fear.

And he had stayed.

Chapter 14: The Green Watch

The air was still when Alex stepped onto the next platform. Not silent—still. No wind. No hum of floating islands. Even the sky above seemed paused, like the Spiral itself was holding its breath.

He didn't feel like the Tin Man anymore. Or the Scarecrow. Or the Cowardly Lion. But something lingered from each—the echo of metal in his chest, a flicker of questions in his mind, the shake of fear just beneath his ribs. He was whole again... but changed.

At the center of the platform stood Dorothy's son.

He waited with his hands folded in front of him, his eyes calm, but serious. The strange boy in suspenders who had warned Alex about the Spiral, who had spoken of broken stories and fading worlds, now looked older somehow. Not in age—but in gravity. In understanding.

"You've passed through them," he said. "All three."

Alex nodded, slowly. "Was that supposed to happen?"

The boy gave a half-smile. "It had to. You can't fix a broken Spiral without knowing what lives inside it. Heart, mind, courage. Those aren't just parts of a story—they're the pieces that hold every story together."

He stepped closer, reaching into the pocket of his worn jacket.

From it, he pulled a small object and held it out.

An old pocket watch.

It was round and green, with an emerald glow deep in its center and tiny silver vines engraved across its surface. No numbers. No ticking hand. Just a spiral on the face and a quiet warmth that pulsed in time with something Alex couldn't name.

"What is it?" Alex asked, taking it gently.

"A watch that only works in Oz," the boy said. "And only when you believe in yourself."

Alex held the watch in his palm. It didn't tick. It didn't move.

Yet he could feel it. Like a heartbeat, low and steady.

"When you act with all three—heart, mind, and courage—it will glow," the boy continued. "And when it glows, the Spiral will respond."

"Respond how?"

The boy didn't answer. Instead, he pointed to the ground.

There, beneath Alex's feet, the Spiral was glowing again—bright and wide. The map carved into the stone had changed once more. The paths from earlier were gone. In their place was a single trail, spiraling inward toward a darkened core.

At the center was a symbol: a cracked circle with green light seeping out through the lines.

"The heart of the Spiral," the boy said softly.

Alex looked up.

"It's broken," he whispered.

The boy nodded. "And only one thing can repair it."

Alex swallowed. "What?"

The boy took a step back. "You."

The platform began to shift beneath them, slow as a carousel. The trail ahead brightened, stretching into the air like a glowing road.

Alex looked at the emerald watch again.

Still quiet.

Still waiting.

"Why me?" he asked.

“Because you were the one who noticed the door,” the boy said. “You were the one who chose to follow the story instead of just reading it.”

Alex tightened his fingers around the watch.

The Spiral pulsed.

And ahead, the path began to rise.

Chapter 15: The Three Reflections

The path ahead was unlike any Alex had seen so far. It rose like a ribbon of glass, narrow and gleaming, twisting through the air with no handrails, no walls—just a glowing trail against the endless sky. The Spiral stretched beneath him like a sleeping giant, vast and coiled, its heart still dark and cracked in the distance.

He walked carefully, holding the emerald watch in one hand. It pulsed faintly, in time with his steps.

Then the path opened into a circle—another floating platform, but this one smooth as a mirror. The surface reflected the sky above, the Spiral below, and Alex himself, standing at its center.

He looked down—and blinked.

His reflection didn't match.

In the mirrored surface, three versions of Alex stood where one should be.

The first wore silver, his skin smooth and metallic. His face was calm, unreadable, and his eyes shone with quiet logic.

The second had straw in his sleeves and straw poking from the collar of a patched-up shirt. His eyes darted restlessly, full of ideas, but unable to settle.

The third was covered in fur, golden and thick, with wary eyes that shifted at every sound. His claws twitched, his breath shallow.

The Tin Man.

The Scarecrow.

The Cowardly Lion.

But all of them... Alex.

They stepped out of the reflection and stood before him.

The air around the platform shimmered faintly. Even the sky above seemed to hold its breath.

Alex's pulse quickened. It felt less like facing a test—and more like facing himself. Not who he wanted to be... but who he already was.

Somewhere deep inside, he already knew the answers they would ask.

He just didn't know if he was ready to say them out loud.

Then, in perfect unison, they spoke.

"Which one are you really?"

Alex stared at them. "I'm... I don't know."

The Tin Man stepped forward. "You don't need feelings. Feelings get in the way. Emotions distract. You felt nothing, and look how far you got."

The Scarecrow tilted his head. "No, no, no. You need ideas. You need plans and puzzles and questions. That's what gets you through the Spiral. That's what makes you special."

The Lion growled softly. "You need to stay safe. Brave is just a word people say when they're scared. Don't take risks. Go home."

They circled him slowly, each whispering their truth in his ear.

Alex felt himself shrinking inside.

Because part of him agreed with all of them.

He had liked the cold calm of the Tin Man. He had liked the swirl of clever thoughts in the Scarecrow's mind. He had understood the fear that lived inside the Lion.

Each form had taught him something. Each voice held a truth.

But he wasn't meant to stay in any of them. They were masks, not mirrors. And he couldn't move forward while hiding behind someone else's version of him.

He realized then: the Spiral didn't want a perfect hero. It wanted a *real* one.

He stopped turning.

"I'm not one of you," he said.

The three forms froze.

"I'm all of you."

They stared at him.

"I have a heart. I have a brain. I have fear, and sometimes I'm brave anyway. That's what makes me me."

He stepped into the center of the Spiral sigil that glowed beneath his feet.

He opened his hand.

The emerald watch glowed brighter—then tick. One sound. One beat. Then another. Tick. Tick. Tick.

The Spiral sigil lit up.

The three versions of Alex didn't vanish.

They stepped forward—one by one—and touched the watch.

In a burst of green light, they merged into him.

Alex stood tall, whole again.

Not one version of himself.

But all of them.

And in the silence that followed, the Spiral ahead opened like a door of light.

The path to its heart had been waiting.

And now—it was ready.



Part IV

Magic Between Worlds

Chapter 16: Oz Beyond Oz

The path through the Spiral was different now. It shimmered beneath Alex's feet, no longer made of stone or brick but of something softer—woven threads of light, gold and green and deep violet. They pulsed gently, like veins inside a living thing.

He walked forward slowly, careful not to break the rhythm beneath him. All around, the sky had changed. It was no longer just the sky of Oz. It was bigger. Stranger. And filled with fragments he didn't recognize.

Up ahead, the Spiral curved into a wide chamber—more vast than any space he'd seen yet. It was like stepping into the middle of a galaxy. Glowing strands of color stretched out in all directions, spiraling upward and downward into eternity. Each strand shimmered with motion, as though inside them scenes were playing—snippets of lives, of voices, of stories.

Alex moved closer.

Inside one thread, he saw a girl in a red hood racing through a forest. In another, a pair of glass slippers

sparkled beneath a ballroom moon. A dragon curled on a mountain of gold. A boy climbed a beanstalk. A witch stirred a cauldron in a tower above the clouds.

He stared, open-mouthed.

These weren't just stories from Oz.

They were all stories.

Fairy tales. Myths. Fables. Books. Dreams.

Each glowing thread was a path, and each path was a world.

And at the center of it all—the Spiral.

Spinning.

Holding them together.

Alex was still watching when the space began to shimmer. A shape emerged from the far end of the chamber, walking through the threads without disturbing them. She wore robes of soft green light, her hair long and silver, her eyes glowing like morning stars.

Alex didn't need to ask who she was.

He knew.

A Fairy. A guardian of the Spiral.

"Is this all Oz?" he asked quietly.

She shook her head. Her voice was calm, melodic. "Oz was only the beginning."

Alex turned slowly, taking in the threads again. "What is this place?"

"The Spiral," she said, "is the spine of all stories."

She raised her hand, and a dozen glowing paths sparked to life around her—some thick, others thin. Some pulsed like heartbeats, others flickered like dying candles.

"Every tale you've ever heard. Every bedtime story, every whispered legend, every wish made under a blanket of stars... they pass through here," she said. "But stories survive only when they're remembered."

Her hand dropped. Many of the threads faded back into darkness.

Alex stepped closer, awed. "Oz is breaking because people forgot?"

"Because they stopped believing," she said. "Stopped imagining. The Spiral is built on memory and wonder. When those fade, the stories unravel."

"Are there others like Oz?" he asked.

"Yes," she said softly. "And more are fading every day."

Alex looked around, heart tight in his chest. The stories he loved, the characters he knew, even the ones he hadn't

met yet—they were all real here. Connected. Waiting to be remembered.

“I don’t want them to disappear,” he whispered.

The fairy’s eyes gleamed. “Then keep walking, Alex. You’ve seen what the Spiral holds.”

She raised her hand and pointed down a narrow thread that shimmered like starlight. “But now you must see what it’s lost.”

Alex nodded, clutching the emerald watch at his side.

The Spiral was bigger than Oz.

And it was breaking.

But maybe—just maybe—he could help put it back together.

Chapter 17: The Orlando Link

Alex followed the shimmering thread the fairy had pointed to, and it guided him downward — deeper into the Spiral. The air around him shifted, less like sky and more like a dream being dreamed just barely into shape. The path became softer beneath his feet, glowing like a gentle memory.

And then, he started to see them.

Objects. Real ones. From Earth.

A plastic tiara, floating beside a cluster of broken bricks. A toy wand with a glittering star on top. A single glass slipper, turning slowly in midair. A crumpled theme park map that looked just like the ones his family had used during a trip to Magic Kingdom last spring.

Alex stopped and reached out. The paper drifted into his hand.

It was warm.

The map shimmered for a moment, and he saw something printed in faint green letters near the edge:

“Once imagined, never truly gone.”

He let it float away.

More objects appeared as he moved forward—strange and familiar, like memories someone had left behind in the Spiral.

A rollercoaster cart, rocking in place.

A pumpkin carriage, cracked but glowing faintly orange.

A pirate flag, torn at the edges, wrapped around a lamppost.

Alex turned in a slow circle.

These weren’t from Oz.

They were from Orlando.

From his world.

The Spiral wasn’t just losing old stories.

It was being filled with new ones.

“Or... pulled,” Alex whispered. “It’s leaking.”

He stepped onto a circular platform where hundreds of glowing objects floated in and out of view. He saw a pair of Mickey ears. A shimmering mermaid tail. A snow globe with a castle inside, cracked along its base. They were drifting in from somewhere—his world.

And not just anywhere.

From Orlando.

Of course.

Orlando wasn't just a city. It was a crossroads of imagination—theme parks, fairy tales, stories retold again and again. Magic lived there in costumes and music, in fireworks and whispered bedtime dreams.

Alex knelt on the platform and placed his palm against the glowing spiral etched into the stone.

The medallion in his pocket pulsed once.

A soft click echoed through the chamber.

He looked up and saw a new doorway shimmering in the sky above. It looked like the one from school—tall, green, with a spiral handle. But this one shimmered through the clouds, like a window not just to another place, but another moment.

Another possibility.

A thought crept into his mind, gentle but sharp:

What if Oz isn't the past?

What if it's the center?

What if all stories touch it somehow, whether they know it or not?

Alex stood, eyes wide, heart racing.

The door at Pinecrest had opened because Oz had reached out.

But maybe... there were other doors.

Other schools. Other cities. Other kids.

And maybe some of those kids were already walking the Spiral.

Maybe someone else had seen a door and turned away.

Or maybe someone was about to open one now.

Alex looked back at the floating pieces of Earth scattered around him, caught in the Spiral like falling leaves from another season.

Oz was changing.

But so was everything else.

And time was running out.

Chapter 18: Maria's Message

Back on Earth, in a quiet Orlando neighborhood not far from the airport, Maria stood in her brother's room, clutching a small green medallion.

It was late afternoon, and the sunlight spilled through the window in golden stripes, dust dancing in the air. Her parents were downstairs, talking quietly, thinking Alex had simply forgotten something at school again. But Maria knew better.

She wasn't sure how, but she knew.

Alex hadn't just *left*. He had *gone* somewhere.

And something about his room felt different.

She ran her fingers over the spiral-shaped medallion he had left behind on his desk. It was warm. Warmer than it should have been. And when she held it up to the window, the light seemed to curl around it—as if it remembered him.

Maria frowned.

She was only four, but she'd always had a sense about things—like when stories were about to get good, or when a thunderstorm was coming hours before anyone else noticed.

She didn't always have the words for it, but she felt things. And now, she felt something calling.

She stepped up onto Alex's desk chair, climbed onto the desk, and pulled down a dusty old notebook from the top shelf. It was one of Alex's favorites—full of story ideas and scribbled maps and sketches of imaginary places. She flipped it open.

The first few pages were just drawings of Oz characters and doodles from months ago.

But then, in the middle of a blank page, something new had appeared.

It hadn't been there before.

A spiral.

Drawn lightly in gray pencil, almost glowing. A perfect curl, like the one on the green door Alex had told her about. She touched it.

The medallion in her hand pulsed with a soft, green light.

Maria's eyes went wide.

"Alex?" she whispered.

Then she did what she always did when something magical needed to happen.

She got her markers.

She grabbed her pink one first—her favorite—and on the next page, she drew her own spiral. Carefully. Slowly. One smooth curve at a time. Then she added stars, clouds, and a tiny stick figure boy climbing up the middle.

She capped her marker, closed her eyes, and whispered: “Are you still in the story?”

Far above, in the Spiral Sky, Alex felt it.

A tug. A light. A message, not in words, but in *knowing*.

He looked up.

There, stretching across the clouds, was a glowing spiral—drawn in pink, like a trail written in stardust. It curled through the air like a signal, floating gently above the path.

And in the middle, flickering faintly, was a child’s drawing of *him*.

Alex stepped forward, the emerald watch pulsing against his wrist.

“Maria,” he breathed.

She could see.

She *believed*.

Just like he had.

And now, he wasn't alone in the Spiral anymore.

Chapter 19: The Teacup Clue

Maria sat cross-legged on Alex's bed, the spiral she had drawn still glowing faintly in the notebook beside her. The green medallion lay on the blanket next to her, humming softly now and then, like it was breathing. She didn't tell anyone. Not yet. Not until she knew what it meant.

She looked around the room for something—*anything*—that might help.

Her eyes landed on the small pink teacup sitting on the nightstand.

It was part of her favorite play set, the one she always made Alex use when they played "Fairy Café" on rainy weekends. It had tiny purple roses around the rim and a tiny chip on the handle. Nothing special. Just a toy.

But right now, it was glowing.

Faint at first. Then brighter.

The teacup began to tremble.

Maria gasped and cupped her hands around it. “It’s okay,” she whispered, like she was speaking to a kitten. “I’ve got you.”

But the teacup didn’t stop. It lifted—light as air—and floated upward, drifting slowly off the nightstand. Maria stood on her tiptoes, reaching after it, but the cup kept rising.

And then—it vanished.

Not like something dropping out of view.

It disappeared.

Vanished into thin air.

Maria stood perfectly still. Then she smiled.

It had worked.

She didn’t know how she knew. But she knew.

The message had reached him.

High in the Spiral, far above the world, a small porcelain teacup spun gently through the air and landed at Alex’s feet.

He froze.

The teacup wobbled slightly, then stilled, its purple roses still perfectly intact—even the chip in the handle.

Alex knelt down and picked it up.

It was warm.

And he *knew* where it had come from.

“Maria,” he whispered again.

The Spiral answered with a soft shimmer in the clouds above him.

And then—something new.

A swirling ribbon of cloud began to twist itself into a bridge—narrow at first, then wider, stretching out across the sky. It glowed faintly, as if lit from within. Alex stepped forward to the edge.

Far ahead, near the end of the cloud-bridge, he saw a tiny figure.

Someone small.

Someone waving.

Maria.

She was far away, almost mist-like, but he knew it was her. Her hair, her bright shirt, her favorite sneakers.

“Maria!” he shouted.

But his voice didn’t reach.

She couldn’t hear him.

Still, she waved again. Then, slowly, she pressed both hands to her chest—right over where the green medallion had been.

Alex's eyes stung. He waved back, holding up the teacup.

She smiled.

She believed in him.

She believed in *this*.

And even though they were separated by worlds, stories, and sky—

They were still connected.

Because the Spiral wasn't just made of magic.

It was made of love.

And she had just sent him a clue.

Chapter 20: The Fairy and the Flame

The cloud bridge shimmered as Alex stepped away from the edge. Maria's figure faded slowly into the mist, but her presence stayed with him—warm and steady, like the teacup now tucked gently into his satchel. He didn't feel so alone anymore. He wasn't just walking this story for himself now. He was walking it for her, too.

But the Spiral was changing.

He could feel it.

The air around him began to pulse—not in rhythm, but in warning. The threads of light that once drifted calmly through the sky were twitching, fraying at the edges. The path ahead glowed faintly, but there were cracks forming across it, like frost creeping along a windowpane.

Something was breaking.

The Spiral was unraveling.

Alex stood still, the emerald watch ticking faintly on his wrist.

Then, in the middle of the platform before him, light gathered.

It began as a pinprick, like a single firefly in a jar. Then it expanded, swirling into the shape of a tall figure cloaked in folds of soft green and gold. Her presence was powerful—not loud or sharp, but ancient, like something remembered from a dream you didn’t know you had.

Her voice, when she spoke, was clear as wind through trees.

“You’ve come far, child of Earth.”

Alex nodded, his heart pounding. “Are you... a fairy?”

Her smile was gentle. “Yes. But not the kind with glitter or wings. I am what they were before the stories got smaller. Before magic became decoration.”

He swallowed. “Why are you here now?”

She stepped closer. “Because the Spiral is failing.”

Alex looked around at the flickering paths, the fading lights, the threads curling inward and vanishing. “Can it be fixed?”

“Yes,” she said. “But not by patching the cracks. Not by turning back.”

She held out her hands.

In one palm rested a glass orb, glowing faintly from within. Inside it flickered a single green flame, no bigger than a candle's flicker—but somehow brighter than the sky itself.

"What is it?" Alex whispered.

"A story not yet told," the fairy replied. "The last untold spark. It has no shape yet. It can become a bridge... or a fire."

She placed it in his hands. It was warm. Lighter than he expected. But its weight pressed into him in a different way—like it knew what it could become.

"You must carry it to the heart of the Spiral," she said.

"And there, make a choice."

Alex looked down at the flame. It danced inside the orb, changing color for a moment—green to gold, then back again.

"A choice?" he asked. "What kind?"

"If the Spiral collapses, Oz will fade. Earth will forget. And not just this story—all stories. All wonder. People will still read, still speak—but the magic behind the words will dim. The belief will fade."

He gripped the orb tighter. "Then I'll stop it."

The fairy tilted her head. "Stopping it is not enough. You must *restart* it. Renew it. Or let it go entirely."

Her voice softened.

“You won’t just lose a story, Alex. You’ll lose the possibility of stories. Of ever opening another door.”

The Spiral around them trembled.

A pulse of wind roared through the sky, scattering stars from the threads like leaves in a storm.

The fairy’s cloak whipped behind her. “Time is running short. The center cannot hold much longer.”

She stepped back, her form already beginning to fade.

“Carry the flame well. It remembers only what you choose to become.”

And then she was gone.

Alex stood alone again, the orb cradled in his hands, the flame inside casting soft green light across his face.

The Spiral was collapsing.

And the next step would take him to its heart.



Part V

The Heart of the Spiral

Chapter 21: The Broken Center

The Spiral narrowed to a single glowing thread, leading Alex forward like the last sentence of a very old book. The wind was gone. The skies no longer shimmered. Light still surrounded him, but it felt thinner—tired, like a dream at the edge of waking.

And then, he reached it.

The center.

A massive floating chamber, suspended in emptiness, hovering like a forgotten planet in a sky that had stopped spinning. The Spiral's heart.

But it was broken.

Cracks webbed across the surface like veins of lightning frozen in glass. A dull green light flickered from within, pulsing irregularly, like a failing heartbeat. Shards of floating platforms drifted around the chamber—pieces of yellow brick road, broken gears, torn flags, the roof of what looked like Glinda's palace. Everything twisted slowly, orbiting the broken core like debris around a collapsing star.

Alex stepped onto the edge.

The platform beneath his feet groaned, stone flaking off the side and falling into the void. The air was heavy. Every step forward felt harder, as if gravity itself was stronger here. Not pulling him down—but inward. Toward the Spiral's fractured soul.

He passed through flashes of memory as he walked.

To his right, a rusted Tin Man stood still under a gray sky.

To his left, a cornfield grew backward, stalks wilting into the ground, wind twisting in reverse.

He saw a lion's pawprint vanish before he could touch it. He saw the edge of a blue gingham dress disappear into shadow.

These were more than fragments of Oz.

They were pieces of him.

Alex stopped.

Reflected in the shattered floor were flickers of his journey—him as the Tin Man, walking without feeling. As the Scarecrow, forgetting who he was. As the Cowardly Lion, frozen in fear.

But he also saw something else.

The green medallion. The map. The teacup. The spiral Maria had drawn in her notebook.

The things that had pulled him forward.

The parts that mattered.

The platform trembled. A long crack split the Spiral's edge with a sound like thunder underwater. The flame orb in his satchel flared once, bright and urgent.

Alex took another step. The crack beneath him widened but held.

He had come all this way. Through doors no one else could see. Through fear, confusion, and wonder.

And now he was here—at the end.

Or maybe... the beginning.

Because the Spiral wasn't just breaking.

It was *waiting*.

Chapter 22: The Spirit of the Spiral

Alex stepped into the center of the chamber.

The ground beneath him shifted like breath—solid one moment, rippling the next. The Spiral's cracks glowed more brightly now, casting strange shadows across his skin. The green flame in the glass orb he carried pulsed softly, in rhythm with the Spiral's flickering heart.

He looked around, expecting another door, another voice.

But there was no one.

Only silence.

And then—light.

It rose slowly from the floor, not like fire or starlight, but like memory. Glowing ribbons of gold, green, and violet formed in the air, circling him, dancing slowly around his head. They didn't speak with words, but with **images**. Feelings. Visions that poured into his thoughts like dreams returning after being forgotten.

He saw books opened by candlelight.

Voices telling stories across generations.

A child whispering to a stuffed animal by flashlight
under a blanket.

A classroom full of kids leaning forward at the edge of a
chapter.

Every story ever told—spinning together.

The Spiral was alive. Not like a creature, but like a
current, a force that lived inside imagination itself. Its
purpose was not to be seen or named, but to connect—
every story, every world, every bit of belief.

Alex stood still, his hands trembling.

He understood now.

The Spiral didn't just link Oz to Earth.

It linked *all* worlds of wonder—fairy tales, forgotten
lands, myths, bedtime stories, dreams whispered in the
dark. And it lived only as long as people believed in
those stories. As long as they remembered.

But now—too many stories had been left behind.

Too many people had stopped wondering.

The Spiral was weakening. Fading. Unwinding.

Then the light shifted again, swirling faster.

Three glowing paths appeared around him—floating symbols at the end of each:

A door with a broken lock.

A glowing memory—a birthday, a snow day, Maria laughing.

A mirror, dark and deep, showing his own face—afraid, alone, stepping into the unknown.

And somehow, Alex understood.

Three choices.

The Spiral was asking him to give something. To pay something real, something meaningful. Because the stories that mattered—the ones that lasted—*always came with a cost.*

He could:

Give up his way home, and remain in the Spiral forever to keep it alive.

Give up a precious memory, something that had made him who he was, so others could keep dreaming.

Or...

Give up his safety, to face the next part of the journey—even if it meant losing everything.

Alex's throat tightened. Each choice weighed differently in his heart. He had come so far. He had faced so much.

Could he really let go of the way back?

Could he forget something about Maria? About his life?

Could he risk what came next without knowing how — or if — he'd return?

He didn't know the answer.

Not yet.

But then, the wall ahead of him flickered — and a drawing appeared, slowly glowing into view.

A spiral.

Drawn in purple marker.

The one Maria had made.

Beneath it, in a child's shaky handwriting, were the words:

"Are you still in the story?"

Alex stared at it.

And suddenly — he knew.

Yes.

He *was*.

Chapter 23: Maria Crosses Over

At first, there was just a shimmer. A ripple in the Spiral's light.

Then—**footsteps**.

Tiny ones. Light and quick.

Alex turned, heart leaping into his throat.

From the edge of the broken chamber, just beyond the spiral-carved floor, a figure appeared—small, determined, and glowing softly in the green-gold light of the Spiral.

“Maria?” he whispered.

She stepped forward, her little shoes tapping gently on the cracked stone. Her pink shirt fluttered in the windless air, and around her neck hung the green medallion he'd left behind.

“I followed your map,” she said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"But—how did you get here?" Alex asked, rushing to meet her.

She held up her hand, and in her fist was a folded piece of notebook paper. "I drew the Spiral again," she said proudly. "And the teacup came back. It knew where you were."

Alex knelt down, trying to hold back the stinging behind his eyes. "This place... it's not safe. It's falling apart."

Maria tilted her head. "Then we need to help it, right?"

He couldn't speak for a moment.

Even here—**especially** here—his sister had found her way in.

The ground beneath them gave a sudden, low groan. A crack split the far end of the chamber, and a piece of Oz's Yellow Brick Road tumbled into the swirling void below. The Spiral was shaking apart, second by second.

Maria looked around, then stepped closer to the glowing core at the center of the floor.

"Is that it?" she asked. "The real Spiral?"

Alex nodded. "It's hurt. I think it's dying."

Maria frowned. "Then we have to do something."

He pulled the emerald watch from his pocket. Its ticking had slowed, barely audible now. In his other hand, the

glass orb still glowed, the green flame inside dancing more urgently than ever.

He looked at her. "If we fix it... we might lose everything. The door. The memories. Even this moment."

Maria was quiet for a long beat. Then she placed a hand gently on the Spiral's cracked center.

Her voice was soft. "If stories matter, we can't forget them. Even if we don't remember *everything*."

Alex stared at her.

Then he stepped forward, and together, they pressed their hands into the center of the Spiral.

The stone pulsed.

The flame brightened.

The spiral beneath them began to glow—brighter than before. The cracks lit up with green fire, weaving across the floor in brilliant, sweeping arcs.

Between their hands, the map reappeared—not just a scrap of paper now, but a living thread of light. It spread outward in every direction, drawing new paths, new doors, new worlds.

And for one perfect moment—

Everything held.

Chapter 24: The Choice

Alex stood at the center of the Spiral, Maria beside him, the glowing map still pulsing between their hands. Around them, the air had gone utterly still—like the world was holding its breath.

Above their heads, story-threads twisted through the sky, flickering in and out of view. Oz. Wonderland. Camelot. Places Alex had only read about. Places Maria had only heard in bedtime stories. All of them trembling, waiting.

In Alex's right hand, the emerald watch ticked once—then stopped.

In his left, the glass orb holding the green flame burned brighter than ever. It was no longer gentle. It was alive. Urgent. Ready.

He turned to Maria.

"If I use this," he said softly, "the Spiral will reset. Oz will survive. Maybe everything will. But..."

Maria nodded. "We won't remember."

He swallowed hard.

Not just the adventure. Not just the magic.

Each other.

He might forget the teacup.

She might forget the spiral.

They might forget they ever stood here together.

Maria looked down at the glowing map. "Will it hurt?"

Alex didn't answer. He didn't know.

Then the Fairy's voice echoed—not aloud, but inside him, like a whisper spoken directly into his thoughts.

"Let the story go... so another can begin."

He felt it again: the truth of it. This wasn't the end. It was a turning page.

Alex looked at Maria. "Even if I forget everything... I won't forget that you were with me. Somewhere. I'll remember *something*."

Maria reached into her pocket and handed him a drawing. A spiral. The one she'd made in his notebook. "Then take this. Just in case."

He smiled, blinking fast.

Then he stepped forward.

At the heart of the Spiral, the cracked stone split wide, revealing a glowing hollow like the center of a star. The

threads of a thousand stories spun around it—golden,
fragile, desperate to hold on.

Alex held the orb over the core.

“I believe in you,” Maria whispered.

He looked back at her one last time.

Then he let go.

The orb dropped into the Spiral’s heart.

The flame exploded in green light—

And the Spiral began to turn.

Chapter 25: The Reset

The green flame burst outward the instant it touched the Spiral's core.

Light surged through the cracks like a river of stars. The ground beneath Alex's feet pulsed once—twice—then began to rise, whole and healed. All around him, the floating pieces of Oz shimmered and turned, drawing back into place as if time itself were unwinding and stitching everything together again.

The yellow bricks reassembled into a shining road, stretching out into the mist.

The broken Emerald City rose slowly on the horizon, its spires glowing with a color that had nearly been lost.

In the distance, Alex saw Dorothy's son—no longer flickering or ghost-like. He stood tall and real, hand resting on the gate of a garden that was growing green once more. He smiled and nodded, a quiet thank-you only Alex could see.

The shattered memories became whole.

The rusted Tin Man moved again, his chest full of warmth.

The Scarecrow stood taller, straw no longer falling from his sleeves.

The Lion let out a roar—not of fear, but of pride.

Characters long forgotten reappeared—glimmering fragments finding their places in the Spiral once more. The floating bridges linked. The broken threads rejoined. Stories found their voices.

Then came the last part.

The green door.

Alex saw it just beyond the Spiral's edge, standing between two floating stones. It closed with a soft *click*, its spiral doorknob gleaming one last time.

And then it, too, faded.

The light around him folded in on itself.

And Alex—

Vanished.

He opened his eyes to the smell of something familiar.

Couscous porridge.

Sunlight spilled across his ceiling. His bedroom looked the same. Backpack at the door. His laptop charging. A book half-open on his desk. It was morning.

A school day.

Normal. Except... something felt different.

Alex sat up slowly. His chest was calm. His thoughts were clear. But there was a strange warmth in his palm.

He opened his hand. There, faint but glowing, was the soft imprint of a spiral. It wasn't ink. It wasn't drawn. It was just... there. Like a memory too deep to name.

He closed his fist around it.

He didn't remember the Spiral.

Not clearly.

Not the bridges or the watch or the green door.

But he remembered the feeling.

Like he had once stepped into something vast and magical. Like someone had believed in him—and he had believed back.

He didn't know why he was smiling.

But he was.

And far beneath the surface of things—under homework and routines and the sound of cereal being poured downstairs—

The story waited. Quiet.

Not gone.

Just turned to the next page.



Part VI

The Spiral Never Ends

Chapter 26: Back to One Floor

The sound of birds outside his window.

The low hum of cars on the road.

The smell of breakfast—toast and something sweet—drifting up the stairs.

Alex opened his eyes.

Sunlight spilled across his blankets, warm and golden, like any other morning. His room looked the same. His backpack leaned against the desk. The poster of space explorers above his bed hung just slightly crooked. Everything in its place.

For a long moment, he just lay there, listening.

Something felt... different.

Not wrong.

Just quiet.

He sat up slowly. His heart wasn't racing. There was no flame in his hands. No glowing map. No ticking watch.

Just the usual stillness of a school morning. He swung his legs over the side of the bed.

His shoes were exactly where he'd left them.

His spiral notebook was open on the desk—but the pages were blank.

When he arrived at Pinecrest Academy, nothing seemed strange. Not the rows of bikes lined up outside, or the sound of sneakers squeaking in the hallway. Not the morning announcements echoing through the speakers, or the cafeteria smells drifting through the doors.

Everything was just as it had always been.

Just one floor.

One hallway.

No door.

He walked slowly between the cafeteria and the front entrance—the hallway where he thought something had happened.

But there was no green door.

No spiral doorknob.

Just brick walls.

Alex stopped, stood still for a second, and pressed his hand to the cool brick.

Nothing.

He turned and walked to class.

But as he passed the glass doors by the entrance, he looked up—just for a moment—and caught a flicker in the sky. Not a cloud. Not a plane. Just the strange feeling of something floating far, far above.

Something... waiting.

Alex blinked.

Then it was gone.

He shrugged off the thought and kept walking.

And yet—deep in his chest—there was a flicker.

A spiral.

Faint.

But still there.

Chapter 27: Something Still Glows

That evening, the sky over Orlando turned soft and blue, streaked with cotton-colored clouds. The breeze outside carried the last warmth of the day, and inside the house, everything was quiet—almost ordinary.

Alex sat at the kitchen table, poking at his dinner. His parents chatted about their day. The news murmured in the background. And across from him, Maria was unusually quiet, her eyes watching him closely over her glass of milk.

He couldn't stop thinking about the hallway.

The door that wasn't there.

The feeling he couldn't shake—like he'd lost something important but didn't know what it was.

He didn't remember a staircase, or a floating sky, or a broken world above his own.

But he felt... off-balance. Like a dream had whispered something important to him and then vanished the moment he tried to remember.

Maria set her cup down gently and climbed out of her chair. She walked over to him without saying a word and reached into the front pocket of her hoodie.

Then she held something out.

Alex looked down.

It was the green medallion.

The same one he thought he'd lost weeks ago. The one shaped like a spiral.

She placed it in his hand.

"It's yours," she said simply. "You dropped it."

He stared at it.

It was warm.

A soft, green glow pulsed from its center—barely there, like the heartbeat of a star seen through fog.

His breath caught.

He looked up at her. "Where did you get this?"

"I found it," she said. "In your room. The night you were gone."

"Gone?" he repeated.

Maria nodded. "You didn't just forget your lunch, Alex. You weren't here. But I saw you. In the sky."

He blinked.

Something stirred in his chest—slow, quiet, but real.

He didn't remember it exactly.

But he felt it.

That he'd been somewhere else.

That Maria had helped him find the way.

That the stories they used to tell each other at bedtime...
might not have just been stories after all.

He looked back down at the medallion. The glow faded slightly. Then pulsed again.

Not everything was forgotten.

Maria leaned in close, lowering her voice like she was sharing a secret. "I remember something, too."

Then she smiled, turned, and skipped out of the room like it was just another Tuesday night.

Alex sat very still.

In his hand, the spiral glowed faintly, like a door left just slightly open.

Chapter 28: The Green Book Returns

Three days later, on a quiet Saturday morning, Alex walked through the tall glass doors of the Orange County Library, the green-covered copy of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* tucked under his arm.

He moved slowly, as if his legs remembered something his mind had forgotten. The carpet was soft under his sneakers, the smell of paper and dust drifting through the air like something alive. Families moved between bookshelves, whispering. A baby giggled near the picture books. Somewhere, a printer hummed.

Alex passed the children's section, turned the familiar corner, and followed the signs toward the back.

The same librarian was behind the desk—the woman who had given him the book weeks ago, with her round glasses and knowing smile. She looked up as he approached.

Without a word, Alex held out the book.

She didn't take it right away. Instead, she tilted her head and looked at him for a long moment.

Then she smiled, kind and slow.

“You found something in it, didn’t you?”

Alex opened his mouth, then closed it again.

He wanted to say *yes*.

He wanted to say *everything*.

But no words came.

Instead, he nodded.

She scanned the book, the little beep of the system sounding almost too loud.

“You’re not the first,” she said softly, slipping the book back onto the cart behind her. “And you won’t be the last.”

Alex stared at the book as it rested there, plain and quiet, as if it hadn’t once glowed with magic. As if it hadn’t once hidden a map that changed everything.

But when he reached out and opened the back cover one last time—just to be sure—the map was gone.

Only yellowed paper and the final printed lines of the story remained.

He blinked, disappointed—and then, he saw it.

Scrawled in soft pencil in the bottom corner, almost too faint to read:

“The Spiral never ends. Look for the door.”

Alex closed the book slowly.

He turned to leave, the librarian already helping the next reader.

And as he walked back through the wide halls of the library, sunlight spilling through the windows, he knew one thing for sure:

The story wasn't over.

It had just changed pages.

Chapter 29: The Spiral Never Ends

That night, after the house had gone quiet and Maria was asleep in the room next door, Alex sat at his desk with the lamp turned low. The soft hum of crickets filled the air outside. He opened his spiral notebook—one he hadn't touched in weeks—and flipped past the empty pages.

Then he turned to a fresh one.

He picked up his pencil.

And began to write.

Not an essay. Not homework.

A story.

His own.

At first, the words came slowly. Just a few lines about a boy and a door. About a school that looked ordinary but wasn't. About a map hidden in the back of a forgotten book. But the more he wrote, the more the memories returned—not clearly, but like light shining through fog.

He didn't know exactly where the door had led.

But he knew how it had *felt*.

He knew how the wind sounded above the clouds.

He remembered the weight of the emerald watch in his hand, and the way Maria's spiral had appeared in the sky.

He remembered a choice. A cost. A green flame.

And the moment it all reset.

He turned to a new page and began sketching—a swirl of platforms, a spiral staircase, a bridge made of clouds. A girl in a pink shirt holding up a glowing teacup.

He drew floating islands.

And stories caught between them.

And a Spiral that connected them all.

He didn't know if it had really happened.

He didn't know if it was real.

But he believed in it anyway.

On the very last page, Alex drew a door.

It was small, half-hidden between two brick columns. Its paint was green and peeling. And in the center, he sketched a spiral-shaped silver handle.

He left the door just slightly open.

And underneath it, in tiny, careful letters, he wrote:

“For the next one who sees it.”

Chapter 30: The Next Reader

In another city, far from Pinecrest Academy and the skies above Orlando, a bell rang through the halls of a different school.

Students shuffled through wide corridors. Lockers slammed. Backpacks swung over shoulders. It was just another afternoon—ordinary in every way.

Except for one thing.

A boy—maybe ten, maybe eleven—walked a little slower than the rest.

He wasn't in a hurry.

He had a book tucked under his arm, a copy of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* with frayed edges and a faded green cover. He hadn't picked it from the school library. He had found it at a garage sale the week before. Something about it had called to him.

He stopped between two tall brick columns near the school's auditorium. The hallway was empty for a moment—quiet, still.

Then he saw it.

A door.

Not large.

Not flashy.

Painted a dull, deep green.

Most kids would've walked right past it. Maybe they had. But he didn't.

Because this boy noticed things.

And this door—he was sure it hadn't been there yesterday.

Its spiral-shaped handle gleamed under the flickering hallway light.

He looked around.

No one.

He reached out.

Placed his fingers on the cool metal spiral.

The handle turned.

The door creaked.

And the story —
began again.

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