

The Traveling Jessie Barstow



Matt Warnock

A PORTAL-FANTASY ADVENTURE

THE TRAVELING
JESSIE BARSTOW



*“One special girl. One power-hungry queen.
One chance to save all of magic.”*

a novel by

MATT WARNOCK

FREE SAMPLE · CHAPTER ONE

Copyright © 2026 Matt Warnock. All rights reserved.

This excerpt may be shared freely; it may not be sold or altered.

jessiebarstow.web.app

CHAPTER ONE

JESSIE IN THE BOX

JESSIE BARSTOW BURST THROUGH THE door of The Magic Mart and slammed it shut behind her. The little silver bell hanging from a springy strip of metal chimed brightly as the door batted it back and forth.

Her face was flushed, and her breath came in great, panting gasps. Sweat stood out on her forehead, plastering loose hair to her skin. She brushed a few strands aside with an automatic swipe of her hand and glanced around, looking for a place to hide among the colorful costumes and pre-packaged tricks lining the walls of the small store. There were racks hung with simple magic tricks on cardboard backers, old, faded posters depicting some magician in a black coat and top hat, and a small stand of candy near the register.

“Hey, careful with the door!” called a young man from behind the counter.

Jessie started at the sound of his voice and spun to face him. Her long brown locks followed the movement, swishing through the air in a ripple of chestnut and cinnamon.

He didn’t look like one of *them*, one of the things that was chasing her. *They* looked like people, but their eyes glowed like jack-o-lanterns, and their mouths had too many teeth. He was tall and gangly, with long, thin fingers. Mousy, dirty blond hair hung limply on his head.

“I need a place to hide! Fast!” she said.

The man stared at her for a second, surprised by her intensity, then nodded toward the far wall. “There’s a vanishing cabinet on the back wall. It has a secret panel. You can hide in there.”

Jessie took off without another word. She scanned the far side of the store and saw a large, garishly colored box. As tall and broad as a door, the cabinet was

midnight blue with gold scrollwork at the corners and silver stars chased by swirls of red and yellow spread across its front. She glanced back at the man, who nodded, and slipped inside.

“Are you okay?” the man called. “Do you need me to call someone?”

She didn’t answer, feeling his eyes follow her as she closed the door with a soft click. The inside of the box was dark and musty. The sides were lined with fabric that was soft to the touch and *reeked* of moth balls. The smell reminded her of the ancient trunk in her grandma’s house full of old quilts. It was small inside, and would have been a snug fit for an adult. She shifted her backpack off her back and felt for the secret panel. A thin beam of light outlined the door behind her but did little to illuminate the space. She felt the wall in front of her and was able to shift the panel aside enough to slide into the even tighter space behind it before snatching up her bag and quietly moving the panel back into place. There was just enough room for her to stand in the cramped back compartment with her backpack on the bottom leaning up against her right leg.



Martin sat dumbfounded at the computer on the counter. It had been a slow day in the shop, and while he *had* been looking for something to break the monotony, he hadn’t expected a random kid to charge in like she was being chased by an angry mob.

A moment later, the mob showed up, or rather, two angry-looking boys in mud-spattered soccer uniforms. The bell above the door chimed again to announce them. They immediately separated in the modest store and began to look around. The larger of the two boys looked big and mean. His shirt was red and blue, with a dark splash of mud obscuring most of the team logo on the front. He was a couple inches taller than the girl, and looked like the type to take your lunch money *and* push you down. The other boy was short and thin. Clods of dirt fell off his shoes, and his face was streaked with the same dark mud

that covered his companion. His eyes roamed the store, burning with anger. He stayed closer to the door, blocking the exit. His jersey was mostly clean. It bore the same red and blue color scheme. A rearing lion on a yellow crest was emblazoned above his left breast. Both boys' black track pants were splattered with mud.

"Can I help you boys with something?" Martin asked.

The larger boy shot him a suspicious glance. The smaller boy turned to him.

"We're looking for a friend of ours," he said. His voice brimmed with false cheeriness. "We saw her come in here a minute ago. She's got long brown hair and is wearing a yellow sweatshirt."

"Sorry," Martin said, "I haven't had anyone in since lunch. A couple kids usually come in after school, but you're the first I've seen all afternoon."

"Don't lie to us, old man," the bigger boy said. "We saw her come in here when we were chasing—"

"Shut up, Jimmy!" the smaller boy said.

"First of all, I'm 25, which isn't old," Martin said. "Second of all, no one has been in here. And Third, if you're going to track mud all over the place, I'd rather you leave."

The boys looked at him skeptically. Jimmy started to walk toward the back of the store. As he approached the vanishing cabinet, Martin's heart began to pound.

"This is a magic shop," Martin said, forcing some bravado into his voice. The boys turned to look at him. "Maybe she vanished, like this coin!"

He held up a shiny half dollar in his right hand, grasping it between thumb and forefinger. He gave it a little twist so the shop's lights winked off its polished surface. Then he passed his left hand in front of it with a flourish. The coin vanished.

A small grin worked up the corners of Jimmy's mouth, but the other boy looked unimpressed.

“That’s nothing,” said the smaller boy. “My mom got a magician for my sixth birthday and he did way better stuff than that.”

“Oh yeah, Kyle,” Jimmy said. “I remember that guy. He did that trick with the goldfish.”

Martin thought for a second. “I know the goldfish trick,” he said, “but I’m fresh outta fish.”

“We don’t want your stupid fish,” Kyle said. “We saw Jessie come in here, and we want to know where she went.”

“Look, kid,” Martin said, “you’re the first ones in here all afternoon. Maybe she went into the candle shop next door. Did you try looking in there? Girls like candles.”

The boys didn’t look convinced.

“I’m not going to let you dig through my store and make a mess. So let’s make a deal,” Martin continued. “If I can make a coin disappear from your hand, *from across the room*, you leave. Without any problems.”

The two boys glanced at each other. “What if you don’t make the coin disappear?” Kyle asked.

“Then you still leave, but you’re a dollar richer.” He grinned at them. “Otherwise I’ll have to use my vast mystical powers to read your minds for your moms’ phone numbers and tell them you were loitering and chasing defenseless girls for their lunch money.”

“It wasn’t lunch money,” Jimmy snarled.

“Jeez, Jimmy, will you shut up!” Kyle said.

Martin put his fingers to his temples. “Last chance or I’m calling your parents,” he said. “I’m getting a phone number that begins with an...eight.”

Jimmy looked a little nervous, but Kyle wasn’t impressed.

“Fine,” Kyle said at last.

“Great,” Martin said with a wave of the hand. He nodded toward the door to the shop. “Now go stand over there so that when I make the coin vanish you

can leave. Immediately.”

The boys scowled at him, but they moved to stand by the door. Martin walked over and stood before them. He was more than a head taller than Kyle, but only six inches taller than Jimmy. He made a motion like he was plucking something out of the air between their heads, and the coin was suddenly pinched between thumb and forefinger. Neither boy looked particularly impressed.

“Who’s holding the coin?” Martin asked.

“I am!” Jimmy said and thrust his thick fist forward.

Martin looked at the fist and cleared his throat. Jimmy opened his clenched fingers and held his hand flat, palm up. Martin placed the coin firmly in the center of the boy’s hand and then closed Jimmy’s fingers tightly over it.

“Can you feel the coin in your hand?” Martin asked, his voice full of theatricality.

Jimmy nodded and squeezed his hand tighter.

Martin walked to the back of the store and placed himself directly in front of the vanishing cabinet. He planted his feet, held his arms in front of him, and began to wiggle his fingers.

“When I say the magic word,” he began, “the coin will disappear from your hand and you will disappear from my store.” He wiggled his fingers more, closed his eyes, and said “Sassafras!”

Jimmy laughed and Martin opened his eyes.

“I knew you couldn’t do it!” the larger boy said, opening his hand to reveal the coin sitting in his palm.

“Alright, I didn’t make it disappear, but a deal’s a deal,” Martin said. “Time to go.”

Jimmy turned to leave, and, with one last glance around the store, Kyle followed. On the way out he grumbled something about “stupid tricks.”



Jessie heard muffled talking through the cabinet. It was getting hotter by the second in the cramped, velvet-lined space. The man behind the counter shouted some kind of funny word, and then a minute later someone was opening the cabinet's front door. She tensed up, not sure what she was going to do. She was trapped. *Hiding in here was a bad idea*, she thought. The false wall of the box slid aside and there was the lanky man, a grin plastered across his face.

"The coast is clear," he said. "Those two jerks are gone."

The man moved back and gave her room to step out into the store. Jessie didn't move.

"There were only two?" she asked.

The man nodded. "Yeah, a big one and a little one. Why, how many kids did you cover in mud today?"

Panic flooded up from her stomach. "They're not the ones I'm worried about!"

"Then who—" the man began to say as the bell above the door chimed again.

Jessie's heart skipped a beat. They'd found her. There was only one way out now.

As the man turned toward the front of the shop she clamped her eyes shut, held her breath, and clenched her fists. The bell jingled again as the door shut. Jessie's face screwed up in concentration and her knuckles turned white. A moment later, with a small pop, she vanished.



END OF CHAPTER ONE

KEEP TRAVELING WITH JESSIE



*The door is open. Demora is already hunting.
Jessie's next step lands her a world away.*

Twenty-five chapters of strange and wondrous worlds, a magician who stopped believing, and a sorceress who will burn down every door to reach the Source of All Magic. *The Traveling Jessie Barstow* is available to preorder now.

PREORDER THE BOOK

books2read.com/u/b6noEW

Read more, meet the characters, and get launch news at

jessiebarstow.web.app

THE TRAVELING JESSIE BARSTOW · MATT WARNOCK