

Liberty University

A Tree Away from the Forest

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Prologue

June 1991

My apple tree was out there. I imagined it waiting for me. All I wanted to do was to sit under its branches and be alone. I slipped out of the house holding an old, folded patched-work quilt. No book today. I couldn't read even if I wanted to.

The June sun was warm and inviting in the late morning. I still marveled at how green everything was in Pennsylvania. Not a single brown spot of dirt was visible on all of Cliff's property.

Walking down the gravel driveway, a few chickens ran away from me as I approached them. Passing the barn, I looked down at the hole that our woodchuck, Woodede, dug to hibernate two summers ago and disappeared forever. I walked past Mom's vegetable garden that was already producing radishes and peas, and past the salamander pond.

At the pond, my younger sisters, Katie and Evelyn were bent down on hands and knees, peering into the still water. They were discussing something. Gracie, the last of the three female turkeys, looked over Katie's shoulders, trilling and chirping as she cocked her head back and forth in interest. Our loyal half beagle, Buster stood close by watching my two younger sisters, ready to jump to their rescue if needed. I didn't stop to find out what it was Katie and Evelyn were discussing. I wanted to be left alone.

Cliff's Billy goat, our nemesis since we moved to Cliff's home four years ago, was securely tied to a post by the barn and contentedly munching on dandelions. Stretched behind him were the fields where I learned how to drive a stick-shift in the rusted-out Dodson. The fields were covered in hundreds, no thousands, of yellow dandelions, giving the massive black

goat a rather picturesque backdrop. I could smell him even from my distance and I wrinkled my nose. "I hate you, George," I said to the satisfied goat as he stood chewing and looking over at me.

I left the mowed section of wild grass and waded through the uncut part of the field that was now up to my calf. By the end of the summer, the Indian grass would be almost as tall as me, making a wall between my tree and the house—perfect for hiding. Except, this summer I wouldn't be there for the long grass. I was leaving. In fact, I was leaving tomorrow.

Reaching my destination, an old golden delicious apple tree, I stood and looked at it for a moment. The bark was thick and decorated with light green lichen. Some of the branches were dead. A robin's nest was nestled in one of the higher branches and I could see that it was occupied. I listened for chirps but didn't hear any.

I am not sure when I decided this was my tree, maybe it was the time the cows showed up in late fall during our first year at Cliff's house. Joshua and I had spotted cows walking towards the tree—five black and white females.

"Where did they come from?" we asked Cliff.

"I'm sure they're the neighbors' cows that got out." Cliff answered.

"Can we go closer?"

"Yah, sure. They seem pretty tame."

Joshua and I ran outside in our bare feet and scaled the tree, perching ourselves on a branch before the cows arrived. They walked right up to the tree and started eating the fallen apples. We were so close that we could almost touch them, and Joshua decided that we should. He wrapped his legs over a solid branch and let his upper body down, slowly, head first, until his face was less than a foot away from the back of one of the females. Then he reached down,

slowly putting his hands on the sides of the cow's back and rubbing her gently. The cow's skin shuddered, but she didn't budge.

"Try it!" Joshua whispered.

I had learned from experience that I wasn't as agile as Joshua. But I did want to touch a cow. I climbed to a lower, thicker branch of the tree and straddled it, leaning forward until my chest was secured to the limb. With one arm and both legs wrapped around the branch to keep me from falling, I reached down until my pointer finger touched the bristly hair of the cow just under me. I turned and smiled at Joshua. He was sitting back on his branch, looking very satisfied, and smiling back at me.

We stayed, shivering in that tree for about twenty minutes, until the cows moved, all at once, into the woods. Dainty snowflakes were falling from the sky. Cliff's 76 acres of property looked like a storybook picture with hints of dark red, green, and orange smudging into the darker winter brown. Pennsylvania was beginning its hibernation for the winter.

That seemed like years ago. And now, in June, the tree looked very different. School had only let out a week ago, and the apple tree was bushy with medium reticulated leaves. It was just far enough away from the forest to be surrounded by sunlight, providing a perfect in-between hideaway for me when I wasn't interested in exploring the woods and I didn't want to be in the house. Nobody seemed to care about the tree except for me, which, in my mind, made it mine.

I laid the quilt half under the shade and half in the sunlight. Flattening the grass underneath, I spread out on my back, looking up into the silver-grayish green canopy with glittering sunlight sparkling in the open spaces. The apples were hard and green, barely the size of a cherry. In the fall, when the leaves were yellow and orange, the apples would be mostly ignored—splotched with soot from our neighbor's fireplace. When I asked what those splotches

were, Cliff explained that the neighbors still used coal in their fireplace and the soot carried over. Our neighbors were Amish and kept to themselves, but they were friendly with Cliff.

Holding a medium soot covered apple, I once asked, "Can I eat it?"

"Yah, just rub the soot off."

I did rub the soot off, revealing a golden yellow skin. When I bit into the apple, it was crisp and sweet, much better than the store-bought apples Mom brought home. This was quite a discovery for me.

"What kind of apple is this?" I asked Cliff.

"Golden delicious"

"It is my new favorite," I said, taking another bite and sucking up the sweet juice that flowed out of the bitten part.

Cliff seemed pleased. He always seemed pleased to see us enjoying his property.

I sighed to myself, thinking about how free it was here under the tree. No assignments due, no little sisters bothering me, no fights with Mom and Cliff. No mean girls at school. Just me and my thoughts...and the bees.

The weather was pleasant with the temperature still lingering in the seventies. A subtle breeze wafted over me, and I watched a dozen or more bees hum busily as they gathered pollen from nearby flowers that were shooting up in the swampy area next to the pond; the purple swamp verbena and periwinkle, mixed with white Queen Anne's lace and tiger lilies. I could smell the wild mint from where I was on the blanket and it intensified my satisfaction. This was the perfect spot.

Under this tree, I could process last night. I could think about being with him. I hardly believed how happy I had been...how happy we both were to finally be together. It had been better than my daydreams, better than any dream.

How was it that the worst year ever could end up so perfect? How could I leave? Last night, he asked me to stay. Stay for him. I dozed with this thought fluttering through my mind. Maybe I COULD stay.

Suddenly, I heard a rustle and lifted my head to see what it was. Mom stood between me and the pond, her right arm crossing her stomach, her hand holding onto her left arm that was relaxed against her blue blouse and loose jeans. Even at age 50, she had a perfect hourglass figure. She never worked out. She would say that she was just blessed with being thin. She had the same hairstyle as she had had in college. It was short and she used old-fashioned curlers, just like she had during the 60s. Although, within the past five years, she started to dye her hair a light brown to hide her graying strands. Mom said that she didn't think she looked good with long hair, but she didn't look good depressed either. Looking at her, I could see her sadness. She was worn down, her big blue eyes practically hollow.

As I stared at her standing there, watching me with a curious look on her sad face, Cliff's words came to my mind. "You should've seen her eyes when she was younger. She was such a beauty, and her eyes were so blue and full of life. If eyes could dance, hers were always dancing. Your dad took that away from all of us. He hurt her and made her a shell of who she once was," he had said to me.

When he told me this, it was just Cliff and I sitting in his 1954 Chevy truck. I had followed him outside, after he yelled at us, finalizing his tantrum with, "You guys never had any intention of letting me into your lives, did you?"

I found him sitting in the driver's seat, with his head bent down and resting on the steering wheel. Opening the door, I slid into the passenger seat next to him. He didn't have the keys; he was just sitting there. The interior looked and smelled new. Cliff had recently had the inside of his car professionally reupholstered and the outside repainted a shiny teal color.

I don't know why I followed him after that argument. I can't even remember what it was about. Sometimes I just felt bad for him and would let him complain to me. Mom was his fourth try at marriage and I knew that opening his house to independent kids was not easy—especially when we were always breaking his stuff. But I didn't expect him to tell me that my dad had ruined Mom. I sat silent for a moment. Then I said something I shouldn't have.

“The way I see it, Cliff, you were her second chance at love. You could have put happiness back into her eyes, but you didn't. You made them worse.”

Cliff hated me after that.

Mom's voice brought me back to the present. “Naomi, are you coming for lunch?”

“What time is it?” I asked.

“It's one.”

I shrugged and stayed where I was.

Instead of walking away, Mom surprised me. She came over and sat on the quilt. We hardly talked these days, but I knew she knew about last night. From upstairs, I heard her pick up the phone and say hello to Alexa's mom. And, I could REALLY hear how upset Alexa's mom was. Mrs. Vinci's high-pitched voice was shrill through the cordless phone, no doubt she was reporting how Alexa and I had snuck out and that I was gone until sunrise. With a boy.

“My guess is that you are thinking about last night,” Mom said.

I shrugged.

“Naomi, you don’t HAVE to leave. This is what YOU wanted.”

“According to you and Cliff, I’m the worst kid ever, Mom.”

Mom sighed and shook her head. “No, I know that you’re not. You’re just really really sassy.” Mom smiled a bit. “Do you remember that time you told Cliff not to come near you or you’d kick him so hard his false teeth would pop out? I will never forget the surprised look on his face. And he did NOT come closer to you, did he?” She looked out over the pond and chuckled.

“No, he never did.”

I thought about that fight and how Mom had stayed quiet as I stood up to Cliff for mocking her. Suddenly I felt emotional and angry, and a tear burned down my cheek. I wiped it away quickly so Mom wouldn’t see. It was hard to be strong like Mom, who never ever cried.

Mom looked over at me and leaned back, her arms bracing her body like a lawn chair. “Well, I’m guessing you’re struggling with a decision right now. I don’t really want you to stay for a boy. In fact, I REALLY don’t want you to stay for a boy. But I won’t force you to leave. Neither will Cliff. I just want you to know that.”

“You’re not angry about last night?” I asked, surprised.

“Yes, I’m upset. But what am I going to do about it? Punish you during the drive across the country? No, you’re sixteen now, and you’re most likely leaving. It’s time you take what I’ve tried to teach you and do your best with it.”

I nodded my head and stared into the woods.

“Maybe some advice will help you. I know a few things, even if you see my whole life as a mistake.” She paused and waited for a response from me. When I stayed quiet, she continued.

“God will guide you to make the right decision if you allow Him to help.” She paused again.

“Meaning...it’s up to you to seek His opinion.”

I looked at her critically. “God is going to talk to me? I highly doubt that.”

“Well, most of the time, He answers you from within. Like the feelings you have in your inner gut. But you have to spend time asking God what He thinks you should do, and then you have to pay attention. God cares about us, and He doesn’t leave us alone to make big decisions.”

“How do you know that? Is He helping you now?” I practically seethed.

“Naomi, He is,” she said. Then, after thinking about it, she added, “It is most often during the hard times that we see His hand in our lives. That’s a hard concept, I know, but we rarely feel God during the good times. Look at you? Do you really think it is by chance that Samara called when she did?”

I shrugged.

“Anyway, just try what I’m suggesting. There is no harm in it,” she said.

“Okay,” I said, nodding slightly.

“Yah?” Mom responded. She seemed surprised, but gazed softly at me for a moment before clasping her hands together to finalize our talk. “Then I won’t worry about you.” She got up to leave. “And either way, we’re still driving out together and I want to leave first thing in the morning. I know you’re packed already, but at some point, come and help the rest of us. And no going out tonight.”

“I know,” I said.

“Oh, and Alexa called. She said something about riding her bike out after dinner to say goodbye.”

I laid back on the quilt and watched Mom step through the grass towards the house. Katie and Evelyn were gone, probably eating lunch already.

I closed my eyes and thought about him again. Last night had been so perfect, and I was pretty sure I was in love.

“Small towns are like hidden gems waiting to be discovered.”

(Anonymous)

Chapter 1

June 1987

“Dish, get up! He’s here.”

I wiped the sleep from my eyes to see Joshua’s small wiry frame sitting upright. He was looking at me intently, his honey-brown hair sticking straight up, a splash of freckles around his nose, and his blue eyes alert. We were camped out on the floor in front of our big picture window in the living room.

Dish is what Joshua, my older brother by twenty-two months, called me because of my dishwasher brown hair. As unflattering as it was, the name stuck with everyone in the family except for Mom. I didn’t mind. Naomi always seemed too elegant for me. I was known for following Joshua around, playing in the dirt, and fighting better than most boys. That was until recently, when I noticed the boys were letting me win. I hated that more than losing.

Rubbing my eyes, I tried to remember who Joshua was talking about. Then it came to me—Mom’s fiancé, Cliff. We had only ever talked to him on the phone. He was supposed to arrive last night. He was here to marry her. And then, in eight days we were moving to his home in Pennsylvania, right next to the town where Mom grew up.

I popped out of my sleeping bag and climbed onto the sofa to look out the window. It was still twilight. Parked in our driveway was the Cozy Comfort van that Mom had told us about. Cliff bought it specifically for the purpose of bringing us back to Pennsylvania. It almost sparkled, new and white with a blue lightning bolt stripe painted through the middle.

“Did he come inside already?” I whispered to Joshua as I analyzed the van.

He shook his head. “I don’t think so.” He rubbed his eyes and added, “If he did, we’re really heavy sleepers.”

I nodded in agreement and watched the van for some kind of movement.

“Let’s go see if he is sleeping inside,” Joshua said, with that mischievous sparkle in his eyes.

We hurried to the front door of the simple split-level home, stepping out onto the sidewalk in our bare feet. Joshua shut the door behind us, making sure the only sound made was a soft click as it closed. Our toes were already chilled, but they were used to being barefoot. We only wore shoes when absolutely necessary.

We lived in a desert valley surrounded by extinct volcanoes and a perky mountain butte called Molly’s Nipple. The town where we lived was called Hurricane; nestled on the border of Utah and Arizona, and named after its ferocious spring wind. Mom discovered this town when she visited Zion National Park years ago. The entrance to Zion was only twenty minutes away. The summers were hot and dry until August, when the town experienced awesome rain and thunderstorms. Occasionally, someone would be struck by lightning.

But in the morning, especially at twilight, outside was refreshingly cool. Mourning doves softly cooed in the nearby mulberry trees. I could hear roosters from nearby farms loudly greeting the day. Looking behind the van, we could see an extinct volcano that we called the Cinder Knoll. It appeared to be closer than it really was.

On the left and across the street, a row of Cottonwood trees lined what we called the Wash—a deep cut into the brown terrain with only a trickle of water flowing at the bottom. The purpose of the Wash was to catch the torrential rain water that came from Zion’s mountains and

funnel it to the nearby Virgin River. Sometimes it came as a wall of water, flooding everything in its path, no less terrifying than a Tsunami to the folks in Hurricane.

But that had only happened once in the whole eight years that we had lived there. Most of the time, the Wash was dry or contained only a small trickle of water. This was our play area. We built forts in the sand and caught water skeeters, crawdads, and frogs. I loved to go there just to sit under the lofty green trees and listen to the peaceful trickle of water.

If we followed the Wash northward, maybe a five-mile journey, we would arrive at Virgin River—the river that created Zion National Park, cutting deep into the nearby red and yellow sandstone mountains. These mountains were mixed with black lava rock, with ancient flows still visible to the wandering hiker. Past the river and sandstone and lava rock stood a majestic purple mountain called Cedar Mountain. The layers of these mountains, with their unique colors and towering heights, were spectacular. People came from all over the world to see them. But I was twelve and this was simply home. I focused again on the new van in our driveway.

Joshua crept ahead of me, his knees bent and his back arched to make him a foot shorter than he really was. I followed his example and slinked behind him, crossing the grass, wet from the automatic sprinklers that started at 5 am, and into the driveway that was layered with tiny gray rocks. Everything was perfectly still as we moved to the side of the van with no windows and stood erect, our backs up against the blue lightning bolt. Joshua put his finger up to his mouth to signal me to remain quiet. Then he crept to the side window to look in. He cupped his hands over his eyes and stayed looking. I did the same.

Inside, the van was dark. But with our hands blocking the fresh sunlight, we could begin to see a plush blue and gray interior. We peered from the large door on the right of the van, the

one that opened and swung sideways for its passengers to get in and out. The other side of the van didn't have a door. Instead, it had a large picture window that went all the way down to the floor of the van. There were two very comfortable passenger seats, a small round wood-grained vinyl table, and a small, built-in refrigerator. In the back, there was a bed and a lump under an orange and green Afghan blanket. The lump was completely still.

"It's Cliff." I whispered.

Joshua nodded and gestured for me to follow him to the back of the van for a better look. We crouched down again, creeping along the van, avoiding the small window near Cliff's head. We stayed crouched below the windows of the two small doors that opened in the back.

Before standing up and looking in, Joshua remained frozen for a moment. I guessed that he was building up his bravery. If Cliff was awake, he would see us, even before our eyes adjusted to the dark. And I knew that neither of us wanted to be caught spying.

Finally, Joshua inhaled deeply, letting out a collective breath of confidence before putting his face up against the window. I watched him for signs of alarm. When he didn't draw back, I followed.

My eyes adjusted again to the dark inside. I could see the back of Cliff's bald head, snug against the back corner of the bed. The Afghan rose and fell slowly with his breathing. We waited for Cliff to roll over, so we could see him better, but he never did.

Eventually we found ourselves bored, having watched for a few minutes. I looked over at the big mulberry tree that stood between our house and the neighbors. Half of the canopy reached over our front yard. Perched in its branches, mostly hidden, was a secured board about 8 feet in length and six feet wide. I thought it would be a good place to keep watch.

"Let's go to the tree hut and wait for him to wake up," I whispered.

Joshua nodded and we silently hurried over to the tree, stepping up the three-foot fence that framed our front yard, and hoisting ourselves up the trunk and onto the fort. We lay flat on our tummies, propping our heads up with our hands and watching the van. From the tree hut, we were only 12 feet away from the front door. Even from behind the leaves, we could easily watch for movement from the van.

“Josh, do you think we will like him?” I whispered.

“He seems nice enough.” Joshua answered.

I had my doubts, but said nothing more about it. Cliff was here, and our house was mostly packed. There was no use even questioning now.

Cliff was someone Mom had known when she attended Edinboro, a state college in northwestern Pennsylvania. They were both majoring in elementary education and had several classes together. When they graduated at the same time, both accepted teaching jobs only 30 minutes away from each other in California. Mom said that it was something a lot of teachers were doing back then because California needed teachers.

The summer between graduating and teaching, Mom and some of her teacher friends decided to caravan to California together. Cliff asked if he could join them. In the end, it was just Mom and Cliff that did that cross-country drive. Mom said that he was a perfect gentleman, watching out for her and staying in separate hotel rooms. She knew that he was in love with her, but she wasn't interested in him. In California he visited her a few times, but always as friends. But when Mom met my dad, a good-looking Navy pilot, Cliff became jealous and they never talked to each other again.

That was until about a year ago when he called Mom out of the blue, almost 25 years later. We had never heard about him until that time. That one call turned into many calls. He kept calling her.

When he called, Mom would sit on a stool in the kitchen, usually after we had eaten dinner, talking and laughing for hours—with the cord stretched tight on our only household phone. She looked happy. That’s what we noticed most. Mom was happy.

Then one day in February, she told us at the dinner table that she was thinking about marrying Cliff. She wanted us to get to know him by talking to him on the phone.

“Why doesn’t he come out and visit us?” Jean said. Jean was my older sister who was turning seventeen at the end of the month. Guys thought she was gorgeous, with her perfect model shape and her bleached blonde hair, permed and teased high. She wore blue and pink eye-shadow, and lathered her eyelashes with dark mascara to make her blue eyes pop.

“He hates planes, and he is too busy to be taking two weeks off to drive out here. He’s a school principal with a big house and a lot of property to maintain,” Mom said. “It’s not that easy.”

“Sounds sketchy,” Jean replied, rolling her eyes and looking down at her pink fingernails.

The rest of us turned to look at Mom.

“It’s not sketchy. I married your dad, who was popular and good-looking, when I should’ve married Cliff. I thought he was a nerd back then, but now I see him as loyal, hard-working, and so, so nice. I think he will be good for us. Just talk to him and you will think so too.”

The first time I talked to Cliff, I was surprised with how low his voice was. He threw me off even more by saying, “Hello, good looking.”

“Why did he call me good looking?” I asked Mom after having a short conversation with Cliff about his property and whether there were turtles in his pond. I was obsessed with turtles.

“I don’t know, Naomi. He thinks you’re a pretty girl and he’s being nice.”

“But how does he even know?”

“I sent him some pictures of us, that’s how.” Mom replied, unfazed.

“Well, can you ask him not to say that? I don’t like it.”

Mom looked at me steadily, understanding more, and nodded her head. “Yes, I’ll let him know.”

Cliff didn’t call me good looking after that. When I talked to him, I asked to hear about his pond, the stream that ran near his house, the woods, his big barn, the chickens, and his house. He described his house as having four gables, a room with a loft in it, an attic that would be used as a bedroom, a cellar, and a big rec-room over the garage where he planned to build two more bedrooms. I imagined it to be a mansion. We all did.

Cliff and I also teased each other. Mom told him that I was a prankster. He told me that he was a prankster too, and I had better watch out. Well, I was ready to start pranking as soon as he woke up. I had bought a plastic ice-cube with a dead bee sealed inside it at a Joker-Joker store. Joshua and I planned to slip it in his water when he wasn’t looking.

Coming out of my daydreaming, I realized my elbows were aching from the hard board underneath. The van was still motionless. Joshua had turned and was now on his back and looking up into the tree canopy.

“What time is it? I feel like I’ve been here forever,” I said, sitting up and rubbing my elbows.

“It’s probably been forty-five minutes. So maybe seven?” Joshua answered.

As if on cue, the side door of the van slid open and Cliff stepped out. We froze as we watched him. Then Joshua slowly turned back on his belly while I slid down, silently.

Cliff walked around to the back of the van, opened the two doors, and pulled out a small plaid bag and a water cooler. He reached further into the van to grab a washcloth and then opened the cooler and dumped water onto the cloth and washed his face. Then he brushed his teeth and combed what little hair he had. Putting his kit away, he got back into the van. It looked like he was cleaning up and maybe folding up the bed, but I wasn't sure.

When he stepped out again, he stood looking at the house. The night before, Mom and Jean had gotten out the ladder and hung up a large paper banner that Mom made at the school. It spanned the entire length of the house and said, "Welcome Cliff! This is the right place!"

Cliff stood looking at the banner and the house for what seemed like a long time. Like Mom, he had also sent pictures, so we already knew what he looked like. He was not a very tall man, maybe five-foot-nine inches. He seemed tense in his long sleeve button-down green shirt, tucked into relaxed jeans. He was fit, but I thought I could see a slight pouch above his belt. The top of his head was bald, with a dark grayish brown band of neatly trimmed hair around his ears and the back of his head. His most dominant feature on his face was his nose—a perfect eagle beak framed under dark eyes, heavy eyebrows, and a graying beard that was neatly trimmed.

We held our breath as he walked past us toward the front door. Then he knocked, loud and confident.

*

When the door opened, Cliff seemed to lose his confidence. He looked vulnerable standing alone and staring inside. I thought he looked like a shy school boy, or maybe Bashful from Snow White and the Seven Dwarves.

“Hello, Birdie,” he said in a calm, low voice.

We leaned as far as we could to the right, to try to see Mom just inside, but it was no use. All we heard was her say, with a tone of relief, “You’re finally here. Come in!” Cliff walked through the front door and closed it behind him.

Joshua and I scurried down the tree, ran to the back of the house, and down the basement stairs. We opened the basement door slowly and quietly and climbed up the stairwell to the main floor, trying to look innocent, like we hadn’t been spying.

As we came into view, we could see Mom, standing in the middle of the front room, looking pretty, smiling, ready for this day...this new life. She was talking to Cliff about Evelyn and Katie, who were both clinging to her legs.

“They usually aren’t this shy,” Mom said, nervously laughing. Then adding, “Well, Katie isn’t anyway. Don’t be fooled by her sweet look.” She ruffled Katie’s bed hair. “Evelyn, on the other hand, well...we are trying to get her to talk more. You’re too quiet, aren’t you Evelyn.”

Evelyn shrugged her skinny shoulders. She was ten, turning eleven in August and almost as tall as me. We were exactly eighteen months apart. But Evelyn was tall for her age and thin—maybe too thin, with dark brown, curly hair, and freckles. The rest of us had different shades of lighter brown hair and much darker skin—skin that tanned well in the desert sun. She was fairer, and the only one of us that could really claim freckles. Joshua had a few, but not like Evelyn.

Katie was eighteen months younger than Evelyn. She was too small, looking like she might be five instead of nine. As the baby of the family, she was also spoiled rotten. We all knew it, but we couldn’t help spoiling her. Katie had lots of opinions and a lot of attitude. Her flyaway hair, like mine, always gave her an appearance of being unkempt. And her hand-me-down clothes were usually too big, making her look like the orphans in the movie *Annie*.

Joshua and I sat on the top stair, somewhat hidden behind the iron railing, watching Mom try to get Evelyn and Katie to interact with Cliff. He had squatted down to become eye-level with the two, and he was asking them about Buster.

“I hear you have a dog that you want to bring along. Is that true?”

“Yes, Buster. We don’t want to leave him. He will miss us too much,” Katie said quietly.

Evelyn nodded.

Buster was lying under the bench of our upright piano, with his nose between his paws, watching Cliff cautiously. He was smart and he knew when to keep a low profile.

Katie then added, “He won’t take up much space. He’s small because he’s part beagle. He loves us too much to run away.”

Cliff listened to her and in a low, principal-like voice said, “I think we can bring him along. Would that make you happy?”

Both girls nodded.

Joshua and I had been concerned about Buster too. Mom wasn’t sure if we would take him. Pets in our home were known to disappear when she got tired of them.

Just after school let out, she told me that I couldn’t bring my water turtle, Scratch. She said that the trip would be too hard for him and that she had found him a home. The next day we walked together, just Mom and me. I was holding my precious pet in a box, listening to his long nails make scratching noises on the cardboard as he tried desperately to escape. Mom assured me that the new owner, an older retired man, already had two red-ear sliders and that Scratch would be happy because he would have friends. I was sad, but I believed her. When we arrived at the house, I said goodbye, wishing my turtle a happy turtle life.

But Buster was different. We'd had him since he was only a few weeks old and he thought he was one of us. It was a relief to hear Cliff tell my sisters that he could come with us.

Mom finally spotted Joshua and I behind the railing. "Come over here," she said, motioning with her hands.

Joshua stood up and walked over. I stayed sitting just a bit longer, making sure that he had plenty of time to be the first to be introduced.

"This is Joshua," Mom said, smiling. "The man of the house."

Joshua stood a little taller when Mom said that. At fourteen, he was small and there was something wrong with his hips. The doctors told Mom not to let him play sports because if he was hit wrong, he might become paralyzed. Something about the ball joints deteriorating. But Joshua craved being active and was usually doing activities much more dangerous than sports. He could fly through the trees like a monkey, and he did jumps on his dirt bike like he was a professional. Mom said that his hips were getting better because of an herb called Comfrey that she made him drink every morning. He hated those drinks, but he drank them anyway. He was good like that.

Cliff reached out and shook his hand. "Nice to finally meet you, Joshua," he said.

Mom looked over at me again. "Come over here, Naomi."

I stood up, suddenly aware of myself and straightened my faded gray T-shirt and pulled down my cut-off jeans so they weren't so short. My permed hair was wild, I was sure of it. But it was too late to do anything about it. Usually I had to wet my hair down, pick through it with a hair pick, and then stiffen it with a lot of Aqua net hair mousse to make it look okay. Jean said that it looked good that way.

I walked over to Cliff and held out my hand.

“Well, hello good looking,” Cliff said, putting out his hand to shake mine.

I cringed and looked at Mom, who nodded at me, reminding me to keep my manners.

“Hi,” I said.

Breaking the sudden awkward silence, Mom looked around and realized that Jean wasn't there.

“Joshua, go wake up Jean so that she can meet Cliff.”

Joshua hurried down the stairs and returned within a minute. “She says she is too tired.”

“No, tell her that I need her to wake up. I am going to go get breakfast with Cliff and I want her to be in charge.”

“Why can't I be in charge?” Joshua asked.

“Because you harass your younger sisters too much, and Jean quit work so she could help me, so this is helping me.”

Joshua headed down the stairs again, mumbling, “She quit her job to be with her boyfriend.”

It was a surprise to all of us that Jean, who was going into her senior year as a popular cheerleader with a hot college boyfriend, was willing to move to Pennsylvania. But she was. She said that she always wanted to be a Southern Belle. And if she couldn't be a Southern Belle, she would be an Eastern Belle while exploring the old mansions of Pennsylvania. She had a way of making the move to Pennsylvania sound romantic and adventurous. Cliff once told her he thought he knew where some old mansion ruins were that she could explore. That was all Jean needed to hear. She declared herself an explorer, wanting something more than small-town Hurricane could offer. Cliff's home sounded like the mansion she knew she deserved.

Five minutes later, Jean walked up the stairs wearing a see-through tank-top, revealing her cream-colored bra underneath, and a pair of orange and yellow Bermuda shorts. Mom's eyes bulged a little and she glared at Jean, motioning for her to fold her arms and cover herself. Cliff seemed humored.

Jean looked at Mom and rolled her eyes, but folded her arms, hiding some of her perfect breasts. She knew they were perfect and often taunted me with them, "You know you WANT these Dish, but you've gotta start wearing a bra first. Then maybe you'll get lucky too."

Those taunts made me never want to wear a bra.

Jean stopped at the top of the stairs and gave a quick half wave as a hello to Cliff.

"Hello Jean. Thanks for watching the girls so I can take your mom out. We should be back by lunch, but I can't promise you that. It's been a long time and we have a lot of catching up to do."

Jean nodded.

"Well, okay then," Mom said. "Please be good, like nice to each other." She paused, "I mean, really, please!" Pausing again, she said, "Actually, Naomi and Joshua, eat breakfast and then play outside. That's probably best."

Joshua and I, preferring this anyway, nodded and headed into the kitchen to find something that contained sugar. Mom considered herself a "health-nut" and didn't believe in feeding us sugar. But since everything was chaotic at the moment, she was more relaxed with what she bought at the store. We even had cold-cereal in the house; Kellogg's Corn Pops, Kix, and Raisin Bran.

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Even though it was just 9 am, it seemed like hours had passed when Joshua and I settled ourselves under the mulberry tree in the front yard. We perched ourselves on top of one of the round log rails of our three-foot fence. Mom and Cliff had only been gone a half-an hour, and with the van gone, we were normal kids again, waiting for friends to arrive. They always did.

Tanya, dressed in a purple and white striped mini-skirt jumper, with matching purple tights underneath, came first, riding her bike on the dirt road next to the Wash. We usually called each other and met in the middle of our two houses, but she knew today was going to be different. Parking her blue, banana-boat bike under the shade of the tree, she quickly asked. “Did he come?”

“Yah, he came,” Joshua and I both answered.

“Where is he?” she asked, looking at us with her dark brown eyes and flipping her thick brown hair that fell to the middle of her back.

“He took Mom out to eat breakfast,” I responded, staying on the fence.

Tanya walked over and perched next to me. “What was he like?”

“He looks like a logger,” Joshua said.

She scrunched up her forehead and furrowed her eyebrows. “A logger?”

“Yah, a logger.” Joshua said, sounding annoyed.

Tanya was smart. In fact, she was so smart that her mom put her in a private school. She was also mature and knew stuff, like about sex and make-up. She knew the most recent songs by Michael Jackson and Madonna and any other singer that mattered. She wore panty-hoes and high heels to church, and she could sing. Sometimes she sang in front of the whole congregation at church.

When Tanya wasn't around, Jean and Joshua teased me about trying to be like her. If I said I didn't like ham, they would say, "Oh, because TANYA doesn't like ham, right?" They teased me all the time, but Tanya and I had been best friends since first grade. She might be smart and proper, but she also had older brothers, so she knew how to get dirty. She liked to smack when she ate too, which I found fascinating. I was never allowed to smack.

Tanya was still trying to process what a logger looked like. "Does that mean he has a beard and wears flannel?"

"Well, he wasn't wearing anything flannel, but he does have a beard. I guess that's what Josh means," I said.

"When's he coming back?"

Joshua and I both shrugged.

"So, what are you going to do until then?"

We shrugged again.

We heard a door close behind us and turned around to see Daniel. He was our neighbor from the duplex house next to us. Daniel was a year younger than Tanya and I. His hair and eyelashes were so white, and his eyes were so icy blue, that he looked like he could be an albino. Maybe he was. We never asked. He was about as tall as me, but thick, maybe twice as thick as I was.

"Hi Danielson!" I said with a teasing voice.

Daniel ignored me. He looked at Joshua and said, "I saw your new dad leave with your mom. That van is pretty rad."

"He's not my new dad," Joshua shot back. "He's our mom's new husband, that's all. And they aren't even married yet."

“Yah, but they are getting married, like in three days,” Tanya responded.

“So,” Joshua retorted. Something about Cliff was bothering him, so we stopped talking and sat quietly for a while.

Breaking the silence and realizing I had some time, I turned and said, “Danielson, want to box?”

We had been given two sets of padded boxing gloves, passed on to us about six months ago in a large donation box from our dad’s cool brother, Uncle Rocky. There had been tons of fun things in that box, but our favorite were the gloves. We all took turns boxing each other and having fun—even Katie and Evelyn boxed sometimes. But Daniel would cry when he and I boxed. He said I kept hurting him on purpose...which was probably true.

“No, you cheat.” He glowered, his white face turning red.

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do.”

Joshua brightened. “How about I coach you, Dan. You can finally beat her before we move.”

“Well, if you coach me, maybe. But she cheats.”

“Define cheating,” Tanya piped in.

“She kicks.”

“Why can’t I kick?” I asked.

“Cuz it’s boxing, that’s why,” Daniel said, glaring over at me.

“Okay, I promise I won’t kick,” I said.

“Well...”

“Come on, don’t be a baby. I’ll help you kick her butt,” Joshua said, jumping off the fence.

“Well, okay, if you coach me.”

“Then I’m Naomi’s coach!” Tanya said, jumping down.

Joshua was already running into the house to get the gloves.

He returned and threw a set of gloves to Daniel and a set to me. We put them on, tightening the Velcro around our wrists, and began punching our fists together. The front of each glove, where our knuckles could do the most damage, had two inches of soft padding. These were boxing gloves to have fun with, not to hurt.

“Okay, Dan, come over here and let’s talk strategy,” Joshua said.

Tanya and I watched him walk Daniel to the other end of the yard and demonstrate how to block a punch, crouching down and putting both hands in front of his face. Then he showed him an uppercut punch, a jab, a hook, and then a combination of the three. Left jab, followed by a right hook, followed by a left uppercut.

Daniel was naturally awkward, but he tried to do what Joshua was teaching him. Tanya and I stood under the tree watching, with our hands on our hips.

“How do I work my feet?” Daniel asked.

“Like this,” Joshua said, planting his feet into the ground to serve a punch, then switching feet, pretending to avoid a hit.

I was growing impatient, and slightly worried that Joshua’s coaching might actually help.

“Let’s go, already!” I yelled.

“Okay, huddle,” Joshua said, pulling Daniel close and talking softly.

Tanya, realizing she wasn’t doing her coaching part, and said the same. “Huddle!”

We put our heads together, placing our hands on each other's shoulders so that we could strategize as well.

“So, I don't know anything about boxing, but make sure he feels pain. No mercy,” she said in a stern voice.

We pulled apart and both looked over at Daniel, who was puffing and hitting his fists together. Joshua drew an imaginary circle under the Mulberry tree and yelled, “Round one!”

We came together, circling. Daniel threw a punch and I dodged easily. We stepped closer towards each other. He threw another punch and I dodged again, then jumped towards him and threw a counter punch, hitting him hard in the chest. Daniel inched closer, his fists covering his face like Joshua showed him, and swung again. I was ready, dodging before throwing a combination of jabs; left, right, left again. Daniel stumbled and his face began to redden.

“Remember what I told you!” Joshua yelled.

Daniel nodded his head and tried to crouch down further, using the same combination Joshua taught him. I put up my fists to cover my face. When he paused, I threw a right hook punch and smacked him hard in the jaw. His eyes began to water, and I smiled at him.

“Looks like you're going to lose again, Danielson...too bad. I'll move away and you'll always know that you couldn't beat a girl,” I taunted.

Daniel looked at me like a bull facing a red Muleta. He charged, hitting blindly. I dodged, blocked, and ducked from him until he seemed winded. Then I started my blows, hitting hard, in the face, in the chest, back to the face. But suddenly, Daniel wrapped his arms around me, pinning my arms to my side, and squeezed. His face was red, puffed up like a bullfrog, and he looked determined.

I couldn't get out of his grip. Daniel was clearly much stronger than I imagined.

“Foul!” I yelled.

“That’s a clinch! Totally okay,” Joshua yelled back.

Tanya had been cheering from near the fence, but she didn’t know what to say about this situation. Suddenly she yelled, “Use your legs!”

I listened, and kneed Daniel right in the crotch. He let go of me and fell to the ground, crumpled, and started to cry.

“That’ll work.” Tanya said, looking down at him.

“Don’t hug me, you moron,” I said.

“Darn it, Dish!” Joshua said, bending down to help. “Are you okay, Dan?”

“No!” he gasped.

“Here, let me help you up. Don’t let her see you like this, you’re tougher than you think, Dan. If she hadn’t kneed you, you probably would’ve won.”

“Fat chance,” Tanya said.

I was straightening my clothes, and pulling back my hair. I hated to admit that I couldn’t get out of his grip. It made me angry. I watched Joshua help Daniel up, pulling off the gloves, and getting him over the fence so that he could cripple back inside his house.

“You don’t have to be so mean,” Joshua said, turning to me. “Now what are we going to do for entertainment?”

We didn’t have to wait long. As Daniel slammed his door closed, we heard the sound of tires on our gravel and turned around to see four boys, dressed in faded t-shirts, ball caps, and shorts. They were Joshua’s friends, pulling up to our house on bikes, their tires crunching the gravel in our driveway as they came to a stop.

“Hey guys,” Joshua said, still looking frustrated that I had ruined his fun so quickly.

“Hey! Did he come?” Kelton, Joshua’s closest friend asked.

“Yah, he came. He’s with Mom right now, eating breakfast somewhere and talking, I guess.”

“When are they coming back? We want to see him.” Darrin, another one of Joshua’s friends, piped in.

Joshua shrugged. You can stay and wait. That’s what we’re doing.

Kelton looked over at our front door. “Is Jean home?”

“Yah, she’s inside.”

“Royd has something to say to her,” Kelton chuckled.

Royd nodded. “Kelton does too, and Darrin, and Carl.”

They all smirked and laughed, shifting off their bikes.

“You guys are stupid. Don’t you know she’s a witch?” Joshua said.

“She’s hot,” Royd said.

“Like Weird Science, Kelly LaBrock hot,” Carl shot back.

“Are you here to see Cliff, or to see Jean?” Joshua said, looking unenthusiastic.

“Jean,” They all responded.

Tanya and I sensed that something fun was about to happen. These boys were all two grades older than us in school, and all of them were pretty cute—farmer boys with visible muscles. Probably from throwing bales of hay on a tractor. We planted ourselves back on the fence under the tree.

“Go ahead, ring the bell and ask for her then,” Joshua said, “See what happens.”

The boys looked at each other, somewhat unsure. “You do it,” Kelton said to Darrin.

“No way, you do it. I double dog dare you to go ring the bell and tell her you love her,” Darrin said.

Joshua's impish spirit returned and he joined Darrin in challenging Kelton. The others did too.

“Okay, I'll do it. What can she do to me?” Kelton finally said.

“Be ready to run, she's fast.” Joshua said, slightly concerned.

Kelton walked over to the front door and stood there for a few seconds before ringing the bell. Then he looked over at his friends and made a face. He stood waiting for what seemed like ten minutes, but I'm sure it wasn't that long. Finally, he rang the bell again, twice. More minutes passed, but then the door opened. Jean stood looking at Kelton, “What?” She said in an irritated voice.

“Um, well, I just wanted to let you know, we all just want to let you know, that we're kinda in love with you, and we don't want you to leave, cuz we think you're pretty hot,” Kelton managed to squeak out.

Jean stood looking at him and then at the rest of us under the tree. “Did Josh set you up to this?”

“No, he didn't.”

Jean looked over at Joshua, who shook his head vigorously and put up his arms. She looked back at Kelton, “Right. Don't ring this bell again.”

She slammed the door closed. Kelton looked like he wished he could melt into the ground. He turned to us and shrugged before walking back to where we were all sitting.

“Now you do it,” Joshua said to Darrin. “She needs to be bothered. I double dog dare you.”

Darrin, suddenly more confident after Kelton's humiliation, got up, smiled at us, walked over to the front door, and rang the bell. Noone answered. Darrin rang twice more. Then three times more. He finally shrugged and walked back to us.

"Let's get her to come out and chase us," Royd said. He walked over to the front door and rang the bell, over and over again. Still there was no answer, so he headed back to the fence. "Carl, it's your turn."

Carl, realizing that Jean might be waiting on the other side of the door to catch and beat the next violator, ran to the front door. He rang it at least ten times in a row, and ran back to the group.

"Josh, you do it," Kelton said.

"No way. She can outrun me, and she has those long nails. I'm telling you, she's a witch," Joshua said.

I agreed with Joshua. Jean had no mercy. She would grab you, throw you to the ground, and hurt you any way she could. She had this new thing she called a "mule bite" that hurt so bad! None of us wanted Jean to give us one of those.

Kelton stood up and ran to the front door, ringing the doorbell over and over before running away. Royd followed him, doing the same. Then Carl, then Darrin. They kept ringing the bell, over and over, and running to the edge of the yard. It was a sort of Russian roulette, each time they felt they were closer to getting Jean to open the door, but she never did.

As Royd started for his turn, he suddenly stopped, just short of the front door. And looking to the right side of the house, he froze. We all joined his gaze. There was Jean, smoldering, like an angry dragon. She was just standing there, in the shadow of the house on the other side of us, watching. She must have come out the back door.

Before Royd could gather his wits, Jean flew at him, grabbing him by the hair. The rest of the boys, including Joshua, began screaming and yelling, “Run for your lives!” They scattered like ants in a frenzy. Tanya and I sat watching, somewhat in shock, but also in delight.

Jean threw Royd down on the grass and told him to start eating. “The grass?” Royd asked, looking up at her?

“Yes, you little peon, the grass.” Looking at me, she said, more as a command, “Yell for me if he gets up.” Then she took off towards Carl and Darrin.

“She’s like Athena,” Tanya said, watching Jean catch, almost simultaneously, Carl and Darrin.

Royd looked up at me and I could tell he was thinking about getting up and running, all the way home. “I have to yell if you try to leave or she’ll make me eat grass too, but I won’t tell if you don’t eat it,” I said. Royd considered his choices and decided it was better to stay on his hands and knees.

Jean drug Carl and Darrin to where Royd was, and shoved them to the ground. “Start eating,” she said. Then she began walking towards Kelton, who was on the other side of the road, considering what to do.

“I’ll come on my own!” Kelton shouted, putting his hands up in the air and walking toward his friends. “Anything for my goddess,” he said, smiling at her, trying hard to keep up his flirting.

She looked at him and pointed to the grass. Then she turned and focused on Joshua, who was far down the road, looking back to see if he needed to continue running.

Jean stood on the side of the road in front of our house, with her arms folded, squinting in the sun at Joshua. I knew she was considering whether the chase was worth the trouble. He stood

in the middle of the still road pointing his butt at her and shaking it. The rest of us quietly laughed at his absurd gestures. The taunting worked and Jean started walking down the road.

When Joshua realized that she was coming for him, he walked backwards, casually, keeping his eyes on Jean. She sauntered towards him in her bare feet. Like Joshua and I, Jean was used to not wearing shoes. She began to walk faster and then she took off like a cheetah, kicking into a hard run with her hair streaming behind her. Joshua, seeing her take off, flipped around and sprinted, turning left at the first road he came to and disappearing out of sight. Minutes later, Jean disappeared after him.

As soon as she was out of sight, Kelton, Carl, Darrin, and Royd assumed relaxed positions on the grass. Tanya and I stayed on the fence, now interested in the four older boys on my lawn. For a few minutes we all stayed quiet. I guessed Joshua would outrun Jean, even though she was five-foot-eight and at least four inches taller. But Joshua was the most agile person I knew. He had all sorts of escape routes and tricks to pull from.

“Maybe we should leave,” Carl said, breaking the silence.

“No way, we’ve gotta find out if Josh dies or not,” Royd responded.

Kelton was lying on his back, with his arms behind his head, staring up into the canopy of the mulberry tree. He looked deep in thought. He was the best looking of the four, with chocolate brown hair that was longer in the back, poking out of his navy-blue LA Dodgers ball cap. Kelton had already developed a dark brown tan from all the work he did on the farm each day.

“Why’s she so mean to us?” he asked, to no one in particular.

“Are you serious?” Tanya laughed, “You dorks just rang the doorbell like a hundred times.”

“She was mean to me first,” Kelton said, looking offended.

“You’re little boys compared to the hunk she’s got as a boyfriend.” Tanya said.

“Yah, we need to move on,” Royd sighed, throwing a wad of picked grass at Kelton.

“Let’s find another hottie to harass. Jean’s too mean, and she’s moving anyway.”

Carl nodded.

“Too bad Dish is moving away too,” Tanya said. She’s going to look just like her.”

All four of the boys turned to look at me, with dumb faces, seeming to consider this possibility for the first time. Self-conscious, I swatted at Tanya, who dodged and giggled. She had a boyfriend, so she thought it was okay to say what she wanted to Joshua’s friends.

The truth was, I was pretty sure I wouldn’t be gorgeous like my older sister. A few weeks earlier, when my friend Autumn slept over at my house, we had a chance to look at our reflections while in the bathroom, brushing our teeth and getting ready for bed. Autumn stood in front of the large mirror behind the sink, easily combing her silky ash colored hair with a fine-toothed comb. She finished, put the comb down, and continued to look at herself in the mirror.

“I’m as beautiful as a princess,” she said, smiling at herself. I looked at her reflection too. She did look like a princess, with big blue eyes and contrasting long black eyelashes against her fair skin. She looked like that little princess in *The Never Ending Story*.

I turned to my own reflection. I wanted to say the same, that I was as beautiful as a princess too. But staring in the mirror, I knew I wasn’t anything like a princess. I couldn’t help but compare my eyes to Autumn’s. My eyes were a green and brown hazel, set under eyebrows that looked like Brooke Shield’s. They blended in with my reddish bronze skin. My ears stuck out, so I made sure to cover them with my wild hair—already multi shades of caramel brown from the sun. At least my hair wasn’t the color of dirty dishwater anymore. But it was so thick and

unmanageable that I stopped trying to comb it with real combs and only used picks to rake it into order.

My lips were full, much fuller than Autumn's thin dainty smile. And unlike her heart-shaped face, my face was rectangular. In the mirror, I could see a light dimple set in the middle of my square chin. I was not a princess. I looked like the tomboy that I was. There was no getting around it.

Kelton and the boys didn't stare at me long before we all turned around to noises of fighting and scuffling. Soon, we saw a dusty cloud with Jean pushing Joshua through the dirt unwillingly. Jean had one hand in his hair and her other hand held his arm, twisted behind him in a police escort position. Joshua was digging his heels into the gravel and calling her names—barf bag, tramp, witch with a B, bodaggit. But she didn't seem to care. As they came closer, I could see that Jean was digging her nails into Joshua's tanned flesh, pushing him forward, and not saying a word.

Quickly realizing I would get into trouble if I wasn't doing my assigned duty, I said, "Guys, pretend that you're eating grass!"

All four recognized the importance of keeping up a show, and got back on their hands and knees and pretended to chew.

When they made it to the lawn, Jean threw Joshua next to the other boys and told him to start eating.

"No!" Joshua said.

Jean walked to the side of the yard and picked up a long stick and walked back to smack his side with it.

"I'm telling Mom," Joshua seethed.

“Will you?” Jean said, with one hand on her hip, the other hand holding the stick like a cane. “Cuz I’m pretty sure it won’t do you any good when I tell her how many times you rang that bell.”

“I didn’t ring the bell! Ever!”

“Your friends did, that’s pretty much the same thing as you ringing it,” Jean said, “Eat up boys!” she commanded.

I recognized it was time to get out of Jean’s way, and whispered to Tanya, “Let’s go to the Coyote Willows.”

She nodded and we slipped off the fence and headed toward the Wash. I turned around to see Jean standing over the five boys, leaning on her stick, watching them take delicate bites of grass in their teeth and chewing.

“You’d better be where Mom can call for you!” Jean yelled.

“I will be!” I hollered without looking back.

Crossing the road and heading past the tall Cottonwood trees, we arrived on the sandy banks of the Wash. We dug our heels to steady ourselves from falling down the steep incline, and ran down the hot sand, jumping over the small trickle of water at the bottom. We both were startled at the crackling sounds of two bandwing grasshoppers, taking to the air in a frenzy to avoid us, showing off their bright red and yellow wings. At least they weren't rattlesnakes. Sometimes we saw those down in the Wash.

At the bottom, we walked past dozens of Indian whiskey plants with their large white trumpet flowers, a prickly pear cactus, and several wild sun-flower bushes—not yet in bloom. Then we came to the crowded mess of Coyote willows. The willows were no more than fifty

yards from my house. I knew from experience that I would be able to hear calls to return home when it was time.

Looking around to make sure we were alone, Tanya opened up the branches that exposed a little path, barely visible. Seeing that no one was around, we got on our hands and knees and crawled through the path to the clearing.

The clearing was maybe the size of a twelve-by-twelve-foot bedroom, and the ground was covered with thick beige sand—not the red sand that was most common. This sand had been carried down from the mountains by the torrents of flood water. We discovered the willow den a few years before and decided it was perfect for when we wanted to be alone. It was like our own natural fort.

Tanya threw her shoes to the side of the clearing, sat down, and began pushing the hot sand to one side of her, revealing the cool damp sand below the surface. I did the same, but then decided to lay on my belly and use my arms to make a frontward angel.

“Who am I going to come here with when you’re gone?” Tanya asked, as she finished preparing her damp hole and sat in the middle of it.

“I guess you can invite Cory, now that you guys are going with each other.”

She thought about this for a minute. “No, it’s for us. I’ll just have to wait until you come back. In four years, right? That means we’ll be in 11th grade.”

“Yah! That’s what Mom says. When Cliff retires....”

“He’d better keep his promise then.”

I nodded. It had never occurred to me that he might not keep his promise. But four years seemed like such a long time. It was hard to imagine being that old. It was hard to imagine being any older than twelve.

“Now that you’ve met him, do you really think it’s going to be good? Like, to go to some place you’ve never been and live with a logger man?”

I turned onto my back, laying the same way Kelton had, with my arms propping my head like a pillow. I stayed quiet, knowing Tanya was waiting for an answer. I was thinking about Pennsylvania, Cliff’s house, his pond, catching turtles, and exploring the woods by his house...It sounded fun.

“I don’t know,” I finally admitted.

I still had my doubts, a prick of worry deep in my soul somewhere, like having a small goathorn at the very inner tip of my shoe.

*

Three days later, the five of us kids sat together on folding chairs in someone’s home. I had never been there before. We were wearing our best church clothes. Katie, Evelyn, and I wore the same pattern of dress, full of lace and frills that Mom had made for our school’s spring dance festival the year before. They were still the nicest dresses we owned. Katie’s was pink, Evelyn’s yellow, and mine was beige. We had color coordinating ribbons that covered the rubber bands holding our hair up into half-updos. Our hair that was left down was curled by Jean earlier that morning—using almost a whole can of Aqua Net hairspray. I hated the smell of Aqua Net, and had almost puked as she sprayed my hair to the stiffness of a helmet.

Joshua sat next to me and wore a button down checkered blue shirt and beige dress pants. His hair was slicked back with the gel Jean had purchased for him a few days earlier. “You need this,” she said to Joshua, who was suspicious of anything going into his hair. Because of the gel, his hair was also a well combed helmet.

Jean looked lovely and bored as usual. Her hair was sprayed high, her eyes dressed in purple and blue eyeshadow with black mascara. She wore long looping earrings, and a silky purple flower-pattern dress, a white belt pulled tight around her thin waist, and open-toed white-high heels. Clay, her boyfriend, sat next to her in a white shirt, a paisley blue tie, and blue dress pants. He was holding her hand, rubbing his thumb over the top of it in a circular motion. Jean didn't seem to notice.

A minister was in front of us, marrying Mom and Cliff. Mom's friends, mostly elementary school teachers and church ladies, were behind us, filling the twenty-five chairs that Joshua and I had unfolded and put into rows earlier that morning. Mom was smiling, wearing a silky navy-blue dress with a high neck and sleeves that came to her elbows. She had on a pink and white corsage pinned neatly just below her left shoulder. Cliff stood awkwardly in a gray suit and a navy-blue tie.

The minister was talking about something...the circular ring representing eternity somehow. I was sitting upright, my legs twisted at my heels, trying to be proper. But I wasn't paying attention to Mom, or Cliff, or the minister. I was thinking about what had happened since Cliff's arrival. There had been a few incidents with Cliff that had me wondering if Mom was making a mistake. Mom was really good at covering up her feelings, but I wondered if she was wondering too.

It wasn't that I didn't want Mom to marry Cliff. When I really thought about it, I didn't really care. She had made up her mind and I didn't know a thing about grown-up choices. It was like that Serenity prayer that says, "God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change..." I guess I didn't really care because I couldn't change things anyway. I just wondered

why I was the only one that had doubts about this man. And how was he going to come and live here someday if he couldn't deal with the heat?

The day after Cliff arrived, we found out pretty quickly that he didn't like to be hot. Mom made the mistake of having us take him to see the local dinosaur tracks after 11 am, when it was already nearly 100 degrees out. We didn't think about Cliff until we saw how much sweat was streaming down his forehead. Walking the ten minutes to the tracks, Cliff wiped his face over and over again with the white handkerchief he kept in his pocket.

When we arrived at the site, Cliff looked down at the preserved display of toe pads, nodded to Mom's explanation about the four different types of dinosaurs, wiped his face, watched Mom pour water into the footprints to make the tracks more visible, and wiped his face again. Then he looked up and took in the scene around him—the creosote bushes, a dry washbed, flaming red mountains, and a roadrunner that stood looking at him from a nearby boulder. The roadrunner seemed to be wondering why such a foreign creature was even there.

“Well,” Cliff said, “this heat is something.” He started heading back to the van. All of our eyes followed him as he got into the driver's seat and started it up.

“Birdie, I've got to get out of this heat.” he yelled, turning on the air-conditioning to full blast. We looked at Mom, who looked at us, shrugged, and headed for the van as well. We all followed, loading ourselves into the large and comfortable back. We didn't say much, but I decided he was right. It was pretty hot after all.

The next day Cliff and Mom went to the bigger city, St. George, that was about twenty minutes southwest of Hurricane, to pick up a U-Haul. His plan was to have it loaded and ready to go before the wedding. That way he and Mom could spend a couple of days away before the long drive to Pennsylvania.

As soon as he and Mom pulled up to the house, he was a man on a mission. He began loading up our packed boxes at such a fast pace that we struggled to keep out of his way. Within twenty minutes, his clothes were wet from perspiration, and sweat beads rolled down to the tip of his eagle shaped nose and began methodically dropping to the ground. I had never seen a man sweat like that before. *Was he just working really hard? Or did he have a sweating problem?*

During that time, Jean was in charge of helping Evelyn and Katie finish packing up their room. Joshua and I carried boxes with Cliff, while Mom stayed stacking and organizing inside the U-Haul that was parked under the shade of the mulberry tree. Cliff worked so fast that he overlapped Joshua and I.

After a long hour and a half, Joshua asked Mom if we could take a ten-minute break. Mom said yes, and we disappeared into the house. As we stood in the kitchen, drinking cold tap water, Joshua asked, “Where’s your bee ice-cube?”

“It’s in my suitcase,” I said.

“Go get it, and let’s have Evelyn ask Cliff if he needs a glass of water. He’ll trust her.”

I didn’t argue with the last statement. It was true that Evelyn looked so sweet that no one would ever think she was up to something. I ran down to get my plastic ice-cube and when I came back upstairs, Joshua had already called Evelyn from her room, and was telling her what to do. She nodded, thinking our plan funny, and went outside, where Cliff was helping Mom stack the boxes in the U-Haul.

“He says yes,” she stated upon returning from her mission.

Joshua grabbed a tall clear glass from the cupboard, filled it with tap water, and then added a few ice-cubes from the freezer.

“Put the cube in,” he said.

I looked at my plastic ice-cube with the dead bee frozen in the center, and smiled in anticipation as I popped it into the glass. But my smile didn't last long. Instead of staying on top, with the real ice, my plastic cube sank to the bottom of the glass.

“Darn it! It's not going to work. He'll see it as soon as Evelyn hands him the glass,” I said, wishing I had purchased a different prank.

Joshua thought for a moment, then went back to the cupboard and took out a plastic, less see-through, glass. He poured the contents of the first glass into the new glass and my plastic ice-cube settled to the bottom again. But it seemed less obvious.

“Hold the glass like this,” Joshua said to Evelyn, cupping his hands around the bottom. “And don't look guilty. He'll know you're up to something.” She nodded and went outside holding the plastic, not-so-see through glass with both hands cupped around the bottom. Joshua and I went to the picture window in the living room and positioned ourselves in the folds of the drapes to watch Cliff's reaction, trying hard to stifle our laughs.

Outside, Evelyn walked up to the U-Haul and called Cliff, who came to the opening. She handed him the glass and he thanked her, and emptied half of its contents before noticing the dark shadow at the bottom. He stopped drinking, pulled the plastic glass from his mouth and peered inside with a sour expression of realization. Then dramatically spitting out the rest of the water from his mouth.

“Oh, he's mad.” Joshua laughed.

Angrily, Cliff flung the water and ice-cubes onto the road, and said something to Evelyn. She replied and pointed up into the window at Joshua and I. Cliff looked up and we ducked out of sight, then bolted out the back door and hid under the deck.

“Well, he didn’t like that prank at all,” Joshua said, squatting uncomfortably against the back of the house.

“Yah, I guess he lied about liking pranks.” I said, somehow feeling offended. “I hope he didn’t break my ice-cube.”

Joshua shrugged.

It wasn’t long before Mom found us. She was upset too. “You two certainly know how to prank someone at their worst moment. Cliff is about to lose his mind in this heat. And he is allergic to bees! How was he supposed to know it was a prank? You need to apologize.”

“He’s been telling me for six months that he likes pranks, Mom,” I said, not wanting to apologize.

“Well, not in 110-degree weather, Naomi! He isn’t used to the desert like we are.”

I folded my arms and stayed sitting. There was no way I was apologizing willingly, or even if she tried to force me.

Joshua was less stubborn. “I’ll say sorry for both of us,” he said. He didn’t like to upset Mom.

Mom nodded and said thank you, looking only at Joshua. Then she went back into the house.

“We don’t want to make him too mad, Dish. We have to live with him,” Joshua said, as he got up and headed into the house after Mom.

I stayed under the deck, where it was less hot and out of the way of everyone. Buster found me. He nuzzled his nose under my hand for a few scratches and gazed up into my eyes. It was as if he could smell unhappiness on one of his people. He stayed with me while I fumed and thought about how much I was beginning to dislike Cliff.

That had happened a few days ago. Still sitting properly, I turned my thoughts back to the wedding when I heard, “You have expressed your love by exchanging vows, now you may symbolize your commitment by exchanging rings.”

Cliff put a gold band on Mom’s finger and she put a matching gold band on his.

“By the power invested in me, I pronounce you husband and wife,” the minister said. “You may kiss your bride.”

Cliff kissed Mom lightly and the crowd of ladies behind us clapped. The ceremony was over. They were married, for better or for worse. I hoped the cupcakes had good frosting.

*

“Why are you letting her just sit out there with him while we’re all waiting?” Joshua huffed, looking at Mom from the front passenger seat of the van. “Didn’t you say that you wanted to leave by nine am? It’s almost ten!”

The van was running, blowing cold air over our faces. I sat behind the driver’s seat and turned to look through the back window at Jean and Clay. Jean was leaning up against Clay’s red 1980 Mercury Capri with Clay was facing her. Their hands were interlocked as they stood talking to each other, appearing completely oblivious that we were all waiting.

Mom sat in the driver’s seat of the van and looked out the side mirror at Jean. She looked over at the U-Haul and raised her arms at Cliff who was waiting to drive away. She looked back at the rest of us. Evelyn and Katie were in the very back, nestled in with their favorite stuffed animals.

“You guys ready to leave?” Mom asked.

We nodded, and Mom finally got out of the van and stood in the driveway. “Jean, it’s time to go.”

Jean looked over at Mom and then back at Clay. He leaned in and kissed her. I could see him lip, “Be safe.” Jean nodded, and turned toward Mom as Clay got in his Mercury and drove away. She walked to the driver’s side of the van where Mom stood.

“Okay!” she said. “I’m driving?”

“Yes,” Mom said, “for the first few hours anyway. I want to ride with Cliff. Then I’ll drive for a while. Just remember, if you lose us for some reason, pull over right away. We’ll come back and find you.”

“Sounds good.” Jean said, climbing into the driver’s seat and shutting the door. She placed her large burlap tote bag between the two front seats.

“Joshua, you need to help Jean with whatever she needs help with. Don’t cause problems,” Mom continued.

Buster walked to the front of the van and jumped onto Joshua’s lap, sticking his head out the half rolled down window.

“And keep Buster in the back,” she added, poking her head through the driver’s window.

“I’ve got this, Mom,” Jean said.

“Right!” Mom looked at all of us, smiling. Then she patted the van a few times and turned toward the U-Haul.

Jean reached into her tote, pulled out a pack of watermelon Bubblicious bubble-gum, and threw it to Joshua.

“Pass it around,” she said. “We’re going to do this cross-country thing right!”

She reached back into her tote and pulled out a tape cassette of REO Speedwagon’s *Hi Infidelity* album and popped it into the van’s cassette player. The speakers boomed, “Heard it from a friend who, heard it from a friend, who, heard it from another you were messing

around...” Jean turned up the volume as the guitar introduced the next line to the song. “...They say ya got a boyfriend, you’re out late every weekend, they’re talking about you and it’s bringing me down...” She pulled down her white framed sunglasses and blew a big bubble with her gum and popped it with her tongue. Then she shifted the van into drive and followed Cliff out of the little town of Hurricane.

The rest of us sat comfortably, chewing our watermelon gum, and listening to REO Speedwagon’s *Take it on the Run* boom through the speakers as the Cinder Knoll faded out of sight.

Chapter Two

Six days later, Jean was in the driver's seat again, parking behind the U-Haul that had stopped on the side of a road just outside a small Burrough in Pennsylvania. I noticed a white road sign that said Route 27.

Mom hopped out of the passenger seat of the U-Haul and jogged over to the van, opening the door to let Jean out. "Cliff says we're only ten minutes away from Titusville. He thinks I should be with you when we drive through it," she said.

"How can he even tell where he is with all these trees?" Jean asked as she slid out of the van and went to the passenger side.

Joshua moved to the empty middle seat behind her. Evelyn and Katie came up from the back, kneeling between the two middle seats. I held Buster, who was alert and aware of the sudden excited energy in the vehicle. We all peered out the windows at the rows and rows of trees that seemed to block the view of everything. The green outside was beautiful and so different from what we were used to. Mom rolled the window down and gave Cliff a thumbs up. He slowly pulled back onto the road and we followed.

The last six days had not been without trouble. First, Buster got carsick thirty minutes into our drive and began puking in the back of the van. Joshua put Buster's head out the window while he was still heaving, and the wind caught Buster's fresh vomit—splattering it all over the outside of the van. Jean honked until Cliff pulled over and we spent the next thirty minutes trying to clean up. Cliff actually handled the situation pretty well.

On our second day, another incident happened somewhere in New Mexico on I-40. Joshua asked me, Evelyn, and Katie if we wanted to play *Rock, Paper, Scissors*. He explained

that the winner would give the losers a slap on their inner forearm with two fingers. We were all bored by then and agreed to his terms.

But Joshua kept winning. Somehow, he was able to slap at least two of us almost every game. When he won, he would tell us to turn our forearms out, exposing our soft arm tissue, while he licked his middle and pointer fingers together. Then he slapped us hard, causing red welts to appear. We writhed with each slap, but we were so bored that we kept playing.

Jean was in her own thoughts while this was going on, listening to Motley Crue's *Girls Girls Girls* and following the U-Haul. But Katie started to whine, "Tell him not to hurt us so much, Jean!"

"Yah," I said. "He doesn't have to hit us so hard."

Jean looked back at us and said, "Knock it off Joshua."

"Hey," Joshua said, "They don't have to play. They know the rules. If you can't take the pain, you can't play the game."

"We want to play, but you don't have to hurt us," I said. "Look at Evelyn's arm!"

Evelyn was crouched on the floor of the van, holding her severely welted arm and trying not to cry.

"As I said, if you can't take the pain, you can't play the game," Joshua piped.

The boredom was acute enough that we started to play again, saying, "rock, paper, scissors, shoot!" Joshua formed his hand into paper and my hand formed a rock.

"Don't hit me so hard," I said, exposing my welted inner forearm.

Joshua smiled wickedly at me, licked his double fingers, and raised his arm high. His hand came down with a slap that was so loud on my skin that even Jean could hear it over her

music. She turned and saw me holding my arm and rocking to soothe the pain. “You're such a jerk,” I seethed.

“Knock it off, Joshua,” Jean said again.

“What are you going to do about it?” he said, full of attitude.

Jean reached back in a flash and smacked him on the side of the face with her fist. The van swerved. Joshua kicked at her, and the van swerved on the road again. At this point, I decided I had better start helping, and began kicking Joshua. He swung at me, hitting me hard in the arm. Then Katie pulled out her own weapon—her fingernails—and began scratching at Joshua. He used one of his hands to grab her hair and force her head to the floor.

This went on for a few minutes as the van weaved from side to side of the road; Joshua swinging in every direction, Jean punching from behind, me kicking, Katie scratching, and Buster barking.

All of a sudden Joshua screamed, a high pitch holler of such intense pain that we all stopped fighting. I looked to see what was happening and spotted Evelyn, her mouth clamped on Joshua's thigh. Joshua let go of Katie, and reached down to pull Evelyn off. But she would not let go. She held on like a pit-bull as Joshua pulled at her hair and flailed his legs.

“Evelyn, let go!” I finally yelled.

She unclamped her jaw and sat up. Joshua lay writhing on the van floor and Jean pulled off the road behind the U-Haul. Mom got out and stomped over to the van. She opened Jean's door and looked at her, not saying a word.

“What?” Jean said.

Mom looked back at us and saw Joshua writhing on the floor, the three of us girls looking winded with our hair in disarray. “Joshua, go ride with Cliff,” was all she said.

Joshua rubbed his leg and glared at all of us, his eyes narrowing in on Evelyn. He sat up and pulled the handle to open up the sliding side door. We spotted a smudge of blood, even though he covered the bite with his hand. Jean, Katie, and I looked over at Evelyn, who looked quietly back at us. None of us knew she had that in her.

From that point on, Joshua rode with Cliff half the time. I think they both enjoyed hanging out. It gave Joshua time away from all his “annoying” sisters, and Cliff was the ultimate teacher. He showed Joshua all sorts of things as they sat up in that high truck cabin, looking down at the smaller vehicles.

The next day, Joshua’s bite mark was dark purple and scabbed around the edges where Evelyn’s teeth broke the skin. If anyone looked at it, they knew immediately it was a bite from a human.

The fight pacified all of us, I guess, because we got along pretty well after that. We spent hours listening to REO Speedwagon, Motley Crue, and Dan Seals—all cassettes that Jean brought along for the ride. We looked out the window—noting the changing scenery—brown rigid mountains that flattened to green grass and then morphed into trees surrounded by misty fog. We stopped to see cool sites, had picnics at rest stops, spotted interesting roadkill, and Cliff introduced us to Duncan Donuts.

“Birdie, I think you may have deprived your children of one of the luxuries of life,” he said, leading us into our first donut shop.

At the end of the day, when Cliff started looking for a cheap place to stay, there were promising sunsets, reminding us that life was special and to enjoy the ride.

We followed State Route 27 and started to wind down hill into a valley where we assumed Titusville was nestled. As we entered the east side of the town—we passed large factory buildings on the left and a baseball field and on the right side of the road. We caught a glimpse of tennis courts, with two women hitting the ball across the net with their rackets. We saw a pool, full of kids, a long line of them waiting to go down a light blue tube slide.

The houses were taller and narrower than the houses in Hurricane, with front porches and steep roofs. Cliff merged right as the road split at Y, the middle having a PNC Bank nestled between the two roads. Just past the bank, we glimpsed a long rectangular building covered with flagstone, a large iron gate set in the middle of it. Behind it was a field, and a rocket, propped up on a thick metal pole, painted brown and gold, with the word **ROCKETS** written in bold capitals.

“Is that a prison?” Jean asked.

“I don’t think so,” Mom responded, looking around in wonder like the rest of us.

We had merged onto a more residential street, with beautiful Victorian style homes—Italianate style homes with deep porches and cupulas, Greek Revival homes with porches framed in Corinthian style columns, Queen Anne homes with dominant and overhanging front facing gables and high turrets—all set back in large green lawns with symmetrical trees hanging over the street.

“Okay, that has got to be a mansion,” Jean said, pointing to a massive red brick building with six archways surrounding the entrance. We all stared and wondered.

“What road is this?” Joshua asked.

“East Main Street,” Mom said, looking at a green sign on the corner of a side street.

Cliff slowly turned right onto another road. “Drake Street,” Joshua said, reading the sign.

Drake street was lined with trees and homes similar to the first houses we had seen as we entered Titusville, but these ones were smaller and narrower. As we drove through, the town seemed to be perfectly symmetrical, with square blocks, and stop signs at every intersection.

Heading up Drake Street, we passed a large red brick building on our right with tall beige Greek columns lining the front entrance. "I think that's the school," Mom said.

"That's fancy," Jean replied.

The U-Haul started up a small, but steep hill, turned right at the T, and continued up a more gradual hill. "This is Brooke Street," Joshua said, noticing another green sign on a pole at the end of Drake Street. We stared out at these even smaller and more narrow houses and trees that hung over parts of the road.

"It looks like we are heading out of the town now," Mom said. "So, we have five miles until we get to Cliff's home." I felt a flutter in my stomach as I thought about finally seeing the home and the property that I had been so excited to explore.

Before long, the houses began to spread out as we gradually climbed back out of the valley. We passed green pastures with black and white cows next to a red barn. After that, we drove into large patches of forest.

"That sign said Spring Creek Road!" Joshua shouted.

"Well, that's Cliff's Road. We're almost there!" Mom said, smiling.

The houses were far apart, dotting the side of the road every few minutes. We looked at them curiously, wondering if Cliff's house looked like the nice yellow one we passed. But as we went further out of town, the homes seemed to look less and less nice and more like hillbilly homes.

“Okay, it could be any one of these,” Mom said, looking at another old house as the U-Haul passed it.

I felt tense coming up to each house, wondering if it might be our new home. But then we would pass that house and look ahead for the next house, wondering and dreading at the same time. The whole last mile Mom jokingly led us on by saying, “Oh, no! It’s this one!” Then it wouldn’t be, and we would loudly sigh in relief.

But eventually Cliff did slow down and turn on his left blinker. We looked ahead at the house that was behind three giant yellow pine trees.

“Oh gosh,” Jean said, “It’s worse than all the others.”

We followed the U-Haul into the driveway, all of us looking at the house. It had dark olive-green shingles covering it, a deep front porch, and a porch swing.

“Those are asbestos shingles, I remember them from my childhood,” Mom said.

In the front yard, two large black walnut trees stood one in front of the other. The driveway was gravel. We rolled down the windows and listened to the U-Haul’s tires crunch on the rocks, looking up at the side of the house. We could see that there was an unfinished extension made to the house. Some of the olive shingles had been chipped, and a few were missing altogether, revealing flapping black paper underneath. Behind the house was the giant barn with light graying wood that comes with age. Between the barn and the house was overgrown grass, several piles of junk, and an old truck with oil drilling gear on top.

Mom stopped behind the U-Haul and we watched Cliff get out and begin walking over to us.

“Be nice! Cliff loves his home!”

That was all Mom had time to say before he arrived at her window.

“Well, this is it.” Cliff said, looking up at his home and then around at the yard. “I’ve been away for long enough that it needs a good mowing. You may as well get out.”

Jean opened the passenger door and stepped out of the van, looking over at the chicken coup. “You have chickens?” she said.

“I had thirteen when I left,” Cliff responded. “Everything from raccoons to owls try to eat them, so hopefully they're still there.”

Jean just stared at the coup, the junk, the long grass, and then looked back up at the house. The rest of us got out of the van and stretched our legs, including Buster, who raised his nose in the air and began to sniff. We joined Jean in looking up at the house. It was nothing like I thought it would be.

“Can I go look at the pond?” I asked, not giving the house much thought after the realization that a witch might dwell inside.

“Not until we go through the house,” Mom whispered.

Cliff heard Mom and said, “Let’s go inside.”

She smiled and turned to look at us with her eyebrows up and her lips closed—her way of telling us to be on our best behavior. Then turning back to Cliff she said, “Okay!” Her voice sounded strained. We all followed them to the front of the house and onto the porch. Cliff opened the door and let us all in.

Inside, the house was dark and cool. It smelled musty and of aged wood. Cliff flipped a switch and a dim light turned on, showing a wood paneled room and a yellow and brown linoleum floor. There was a large desk, covered in books and yellow lined 8x11 inch notepads. Next to the desk were two old rocking chairs. On the back wall there were six rifles on display

and a large painting of a country scene with a hunter and his dog. Next to the rifles was an old hutch, filled with mismatched teacups and plates.

A set of stairs stood to the right of us, with another section of the house, perhaps the visiting room at the front. The kitchen was on the other side of the stairs.

Cliff walked us into the visiting room. It was actually nice in some ways. The walls were covered in expensive looking wallpaper, a rich red with small blue flowers forming vertical lines down to the floor. The windows had thick velvety red curtains that hung ornately from silver curtain rods. There were more rocking chairs and three guitars and another desk. This one was an antique roll top desk that was rolled down. The yellow and brown tile was the same.

The visiting room led to the kitchen that had worn brown cupboards and a small table next to a simple sink, stove, and an old refrigerator. We filed through, to the back of the house where there was a mud room, full of windows without curtains, flies and wasps were dancing up and down the panes, avoiding the several strands of sticky fly ribbon that hung from the ceiling. Below the stairs was a door that led to the cellar.

Cliff took us down a hallway and opened another door to show us a large bathroom, the size of a bedroom with a yellow clawfoot bathtub in the middle. I noticed that the inside of the tub looked like someone had put orange dye in the water and then drained it, leaving a brownish orange rim around the center. A lime green scrub brush hung on the wall next to the tub.

“This is the garage. It’s full of antiques and oil well paraphernalia that someday I want to display. And that’s my old 54 chevy truck that I’m hoping to fix up,” Cliff said.

We peered down the steps from the door at what seemed a dusty disaster. Stuff, junk, was everywhere—two old pianos, stacks of cans, a rusting truck, broken chairs stacked on one side, a yoke for oxen, glass jars full of nails, two old motorcycles in the back left corner.

“Up there also needs to be cleared out, but that’s where I plan on building the two bedrooms for you guys, maybe this month.”

Katie and Evelyn poked their head through the rest of us and looked up the stairs that ran next to the wall to the right of us. Jean had her mouth slightly open, appearing to be in shock.

“Well, let me show you the upstairs and then we can start unpacking,” Cliff said.

We followed him back to the middle of the house and to the stairs. Every step seemed to creak as the seven of us filed up, crowding the small hallway that led to the master bedroom. The wall was covered with portraits of straight-faced people. We looked at them as Cliff explained that the large picture was his grandmother, the two together were his parents. That black and white picture was his great, great uncle.

“Those are some ugly ancestors,” Josh whispered to me, while eying Cliff to make sure he wasn’t listening. I nodded, looking at the largest portrait, an eleven-by-seventeen-inch framed lady with a unibrow and a frown.

“Here’s the upstairs bathroom. The door on the other side is the room above the garage. Here’s my bedroom, the attic, and another bedroom right here,” Cliff said, pointing to the different doors.

“Where’s the loft room?” I asked. This was the room I wanted for myself, and was most excited to see. I had daydreamed about having my bed up in the loft and looking down at everyone from up top. Cliff walked over to a cherrywood door, intricately paneled, and opened it. We all peered into a small eight-by-ten-foot room, with an antique bed in the corner, and a ladder leading up to the loft. There were old lace curtains hanging from the windows and several lazy wasps floated from window to window. The room was hot and I could hear buzzing up in the attic.

“Can I look up there?” I asked.

“Yah, just be careful. There might be a wasp nest.”

I climbed up the ladder and looked into the darkness. The loft was more like an attic space, with a triangle ceiling, and only high enough to crawl and sit in the center of it. The air was stifling, hot and moist. I could hear the wasps buzzing lightly.

“Does that light work?” I asked, seeing a lightbulb in the center of the triangle ceiling.

“It works.” Cliff said.

Because of the wasps, I decided to stay on the stairs and then stepped back down. Joshua took his turn climbing the ladder, then Katie, and then Evelyn. Jean stayed in the hallway.

Cliff showed us the Master bedroom. It also looked like it had been somewhat renovated, with white and blue wallpaper and beige silk curtains. Two end tables framed a queen size bed, simply made with a colorful star patterned quilt. A set of solid and ornate dressers, and a mahogany armchair with an elaborate designed back sat in the far corner of the room. Mom looked relieved to see that it was livable.

Finally, Cliff opened up the last door, next to the master bedroom. “This is the attic,” he said. We peered into another room with a triangle ceiling, but this one you could walk upright in the middle. We were not surprised that it too was full of stuff—old wooden chests, more wooden chairs, piles and piles of books, ancient fur coats, a bedframe, an accordion.

“That’s it,” Cliff said.

We were beginning to feel hot upstairs and I asked, “Where’s your swamp cooler?”

“I don’t have one.”

“Do you have an air-conditioner?”

“No.”

We all looked at Cliff in surprise.

“It doesn’t get that hot here,” Mom said, trying to make things less awkward.

“It’s hot now!” Joshua said.

“Not down stairs. You can go down and it’s much cooler.”

That was all we needed to hear and all five of us hurried back down and stood again on the yellow linoleum. Mom and Cliff lingered upstairs for a few more minutes, talking about where our stuff should go. It looked to me like there really wasn’t a place for any of our stuff, but at least we could make room for our couches. I noticed that Jean was wandering. She looked like she was going to cry.

When Mom came down the stairs, I walked over to her and asked, “Now can I go to the pond?”

Mom turned to Cliff, who shrugged his shoulders. She nodded back at me. I looked at Joshua and said, “Are you coming?”

We hurried out the door and down the steps into the gravel driveway. The temperature was enjoyable for us—no higher than 80 degrees. Large towering cumulus clouds floated freely in the sky. The sun popped out from behind one of them, shining down on us for a split second before disappearing again.

We walked up the driveway toward the barn, knowing the pond was somewhere between it and the woods. Joshua stopped right in front and looked up at the massive doors.

“Are you sure you don’t want to check this out first?” he asked.

“I really want to see the pond,” I said determinedly, looking around for signs of water and then heading in the direction I thought it was. Joshua sighed and began to follow me through the tall grass just to the left of the barn.

The pond was way closer than I expected—hidden in the tall grass that encircled it. It was a small oval of water about the length of the U-Haul and maybe three times as wide. Joshua arrived at my side and we stood looking at it together. I scanned the perimeter for turtles, but saw nothing. Walking closer, we caught glimpses of at least ten green and brown frogs rocketing from the bank, making little splashes as they disappeared somewhere below the surface of the dark water. I crouched to look for more. Next to me, Joshua lunged at a frog that simultaneously leaped in the water and was gone before his hands swept through the grass.

“Man! Those are quick little buggers,” he said as he stood back up.

After walking around the pond and failing to catch a single frog, I convinced Joshua to sit still with me until they forgot about us. We squatted down in the grass and waited. It didn’t take long until we spotted a series of frog eyes, two-by-two, peeking up out of the murky water.

“Look!” I whispered, pointing to a brown snake slithering through the glassy water on the other side of the pond. We resisted the urge to go see it closer, realizing the longer we sat there, the more we saw.

We focused on the water and perceived that we could see into it, depending on when the clouds rolled overhead. As another cloud cast its shadow, we saw small fish darting around, and little black salamanders with two rows of yellow dots swimming in the shallow muddy water near the bank. I shifted onto my hands and knees, crawled to the bank, and peered into the pond. Little water snails inched along tiny green reeds, and water skeeters darted about on the surface.

I stretched out on my tummy and watched all the little creatures, fascinated with the complex ecosystem surrounding me. When a salamander swam within reaching distance, I used my expert-lizard-catching hand and quickly reached through the water and trapped it, letting the silky mud at the bottom seep through my fingers. I could feel the little creature squirm under my

fingers and reached in with my other hand to bring it out of the water. Cupping both hands, I peered in at my catch. The salamander wiggled from side to side, trying to get out of my grasp.

“Cool!” Joshua said, walking over to look. He was determined to catch something of his own, and crept low around the pond. Before long, he dove into the grass again and came back up with a green spotted frog that was desperately kicking to get away from him.

“Nice catch!” I said, holding my salamander next to his frog. Both creatures looked miserable. We held them for a little longer, then I dropped my salamander gently back into the water and watched it swim away, its entire body swishing from side to side. Joshua opened his hands to do the same. His frog blinked and sat stunned where it was.

“Give it a nudge,” I said. He used his thumb to nudge the back of the little frog and it immediately leaped into the water and disappeared. We sat back down near the bank and began to consider what was now ours to discover. Beyond the pond was a clear wall of trees—the start of the woods.

“Let’s go in there,” I said.

Joshua looked over at the woods and said, “We should probably wait and ask, since we could get lost.”

“When have you ever been afraid of getting lost?”

“I don’t know, but something’s creepy about dark woods. Don’t you remember watching *Watcher in the Woods*? I think we should wait.”

I stared into the trees, marveled at how dark it appeared, and then decided he was right.

“Yah, okay,” I said. I turned back and Joshua was already halfway to the barn. Standing up to follow him, I watched as he slowly opened the small door in the lean-to, just left of the massive barn doors.

“Let’s go in here,” he said, not really caring how I responded. Before I could catch up, he disappeared inside, the door shutting closed behind him.

I hurried, feeling like I might miss out on something. But before I could get to the door, I heard a loud bang and thumping come from inside the barn. I stopped abruptly, and suddenly worried, called, “Joshua?”

After another few seconds, there was more thumping, then a crash. Joshua pushed the door open and almost flew out, running to where I was standing.

“Holy mother of something evil!” Joshua yelled, looking back at the barn. “There’s a thing inside there with big yellow eyes. And it stinks!”

We heard the thumping again and then to our horror, the same door pushed open a few inches, and closed again. Then, it pushed open again and closed. Joshua and I instinctively moved closer together and watched the door intently.

For the third time, the door began to open. A black nose poked through the opening, followed by a large black head with a long scraggly beard and horns that curved backward like a banana. With another push at the door, the thing emerged in full glory. It was a massive black Billy goat, stumbling and blinking in the bright sunlight.

Joshua and I stood frozen, staring at the goat. It spotted us and began walking toward us, its legs doing a funny high step. We noticed its toenails were way overgrown and the goat was high stepping so it wouldn’t trip.

As it got closer, Joshua began to walk backwards. The goat snorted loudly, and I turned to run for the house. Then I heard a chuckle behind me.

“I wondered how long it would take you to find George,” Cliff said, standing in the driveway in front of the U-Haul.

“Is that yours?” Joshua asked.

“Yah, he’s mine. Got him as a gift when he was a baby, but he’s got a bit of a rough edge to him. He likes to stand on people and relieve himself,” he said, trying not to smile.

We looked at Cliff in disbelief and then back at George, who was flapping a purple tongue at us and coming closer.

“Is it mean?” I asked. I thought about Cliff saying he liked to play pranks and that this might be one of them. George was the biggest goat I had ever seen and I could smell him from where I stood, an awful smell, like strong musty urine that made me want to gag.

“Yah, he’s a bit mean.”

“What else is in that barn?” Joshua asked, still backing up.

“Just George,” Cliff said, heading toward the goat. “And some dynamite in the little room on the other side, so don’t go in that room.”

George began to rear up when he saw Cliff coming.

“Come on George,” Cliff said, grabbing a thick black collar on his neck and leading him away.

“I tie him up to eat the grass behind the barn during the day, so you two can check out the barn if you want. Go on through the big front doors and keep them open for light. It’ll also air out the barn a bit.”

Joshua and I walked to the big doors and lifted the hinges. I grabbed the long handle of one of the wooden doors and Joshua took the other handle and we pulled them open, slowly. The bottoms scraped against the dirt and ripped up grass underneath.

With the doors securely open, we stood at the doorway looking in. A square beam of light shone down from a square window at the top center of the barn. Below it was a loft, stacked high in the back with bales of hay. The front was covered with loose hay. A rope hung from a beam

that looked to be twelve inches thick in the middle of the barn. It had a large knot, half the size of a soccer ball tied at the bottom. I thought I might be able to grab it from the ground.

The barn was divided into three sections. We could tell that the left side was George's side. We saw that it had a trough full of hay, built in the wall and facing the middle section.

The middle section was much larger. It was the area where we stood between the doorway with the loft. Below the loft sat two tractors, one green one that looked fairly new, and a larger rusted orange one. The floor was dirt and above us there were thick twelve-by-twelve-inch beams crisscrossing to frame the roof above it.

On the right side of the barn was the small room that Cliff told us not to go into because of the dynamite. It was divided into three open stalls and covered in hay and dilapidated boxes. Behind that room was an open space full of stuff, mostly old plywood, wooden poles, and beams—thrown and stacked too high to make it safe to walk.

As we looked in, Cliff returned and stood next to us. "My great nephews like to swing down from the loft on that rope," he said.

"How do they get up?" I asked.

Cliff pointed to a wooden ladder at the right corner of the loft. "They hold onto the rope while they climb up," he said. "Or they just throw the rope up and someone catches it."

"Cool!" Joshua said. He ran over to grab the rope. I hurried over to the ladder and climbed up. Joshua was right behind me, holding the rope with one hand and climbing with the other.

The hay was surprisingly fresh smelling as I climbed up into it, looking around at the bales leading up to the open window. Joshua was pulling himself onto the loft. Cliff stayed standing in the large doorway of the barn, watching us.

“Do you stand on it or sit?” Joshua yelled down.

“Either one,” came the response.

Joshua, held onto the rope and leaped off the loft, sandwiching both feet around the knot. I watched him fly across the barn, then swing back toward the loft, hooting and hollering. Cliff seemed pleased, standing in the doorway with his arms crossed, a satisfied smile on his face.

When the rope settled, Joshua hung upside down and then lowered himself to the ground. He then brought the rope to the ladder where I was waiting.

“Just throw it to me,” I said, reaching down to catch it.

With the rope in my hand, I hurried to the edge of the loft and did as Joshua did. The initial drop sent a thrill down my core and the air whipped through my hair. I hollered too, laughing as I swung back and forth until the rope slowed down. I saw that Mom, Katie, and Evelyn had arrived at the doorway.

“Come try it!” I hollered at them.

Katie and Evelyn climbed up the ladder and took their turns swinging, but they sat on the rope knot instead of standing on it. Mom stood in the doorway smiling up at us, cheering us on as we leaped from the loft into the open air. This was a nice break for all of us.

Eventually she turned to Cliff and said, “Should we start unpacking the U-Haul now?”

Cliff glanced over at the U-Haul and said, “Let’s do it tomorrow. I’ll have a few guys come over to help so it’s not just Joshua and I lifting the couches. But we can unload the van and figure out dinner and where everyone is sleeping. That’ll be enough.”

It must’ve sounded like a good plan to Mom because she told us we could have fifteen more minutes. Then she and Cliff walked back into the house.

*

For dinner, we ended up eating all the leftover fixings from our cross-country trip. We were so done with sandwiches, but we also knew Mom wouldn't make anything else if there were leftovers to be eaten, so we ate them. We dumped broken chips onto our paper plates next to our flattened whole-wheat bread sandwiches and picked at the pithy apple slices Mom cut up for us to eat. She had her own look of satisfaction for using up everything and not wasting. One of her favorite things to say was, "Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without." We hated that saying.

As we sat around the table, I realized that Jean wasn't talking. She was slumped in her chair methodically eating, as if in a trance. Cliff ate his sandwich and then told Mom he was going to bring George back to the barn and then check on the chickens. Mom smiled and nodded as she walked over to pick up the plate he left on the table.

As I took my plate from the table and dumped my half-eaten sandwich into the trash, I asked, "Can I go outside again? It's not dark yet."

"No, it's time to get settled for the night," Mom responded. "We're going to have all of you sleep down here in this room next to the kitchen until we can get your bedrooms set up."

Jean seemed to wake up from wherever she was in her head and looked at Mom. "How long will that be?" she asked.

"Not long. Building those rooms above the garage is the first priority."

"That'll take at least two weeks," Jean said, looking upset.

"Maybe so," Mom responded. "But what can we do about it?"

“Maybe Cliff could’ve had them built knowing we were coming,” Jean said, biting down on a pithy apple slice. “It doesn’t look like he did anything to get ready for a big family to come and live here. Like, nothing!”

Mom stopped wiping the table and looked at Jean. I noticed bags under her eyes and a look of defeat. “We’ll make the best of it,” she said with a hush in her voice.

For the next hour we pulled our mattresses out of the U-Haul and put them on the floor in the visiting room. Mom opened the bin that was marked *sheets* and covered the mattresses. We found our blankets and pillows in garbage bags and made our beds. As we did all of this, Buster was on the front porch, looking into the picture window at the commotion.

“Why can’t Buster come in?” Katie asked.

“Cliff doesn’t want dogs in the house,” Mom said. “But he’s going to make a nice dog bed for him on the porch.”

Evelyn walked over and looked out at Buster through the picture window. Buster looked back at her, his sad beagle eyes begging. “Look, he’s shivering!” she said.

We all hurried over to the window and looked at Buster looking back at us, shivering dramatically.

“Poor Buster,” I said.

“Poor Buster,” Katie parroted.

We opened the door and rushed at our dog, who wagged, and wined, and looked at the door. I could tell that he just didn’t get why he wasn’t allowed to go inside.

That night, when all the lights were off and Mom and Cliff were upstairs, it was quiet except for Jean’s soft sobs. The rest of us lay on our twin-size mattresses, lined next to each other, listening to her, not knowing what to say. We had always believed Jean to be tough. But

this wasn't tough. She didn't even care that we were listening to her—knowing that she regretted coming, ...that Cliff's home wasn't what she thought it would be. The house was indeed awful, there was no getting around it, but the outside was amazing. I fell asleep wondering what else would be different from what we had imagined.

*

The next morning, we slept in. I awoke briefly to hear Mom and Cliff leave the house, and woke again when they returned an hour later with bags of groceries. Cliff went outside while Mom started putting the groceries away.

Still dreary, I watched her open and close cupboards, looking for plates, forks, pots and pans, and a toaster. She pulled out a package of English muffins and a carton of orange juice and placed them on the antique oval table with six mismatching antique chairs. She took out a stick of butter from the fridge and searched for a butter dish, found one, washed it, and put the butter inside; adding it to the table as well. Then pulling out glasses and plates, she smelled them and gave them a quick wash. She smelled them again, wrinkled her nose, and then turned on the faucet and leaned over to smell the water. She wrinkled her nose and shrugged her shoulders and sighed.

Opening the drawers near the sink, she found silverware and a few faded hand towels, and began drying the dishes and placing them on the table. Before long, she pulled out eggs and a cast iron pan. I sat up and watched her crack the eggs in a medium size bowl. She looked over at me.

“Good morning! It's a beautiful day outside!” she said, smiling.

Katie and Evelyn were also sitting up, looking disheveled from their sleep. Mom smiled over at them. “Come toast some English muffins, Naomi. Evelyn, you can set the table for

everyone. Remember there are seven of us, so you'll need to find another chair. And Katie, will you put out the napkins?" she said as she mixed the scrambled eggs and poured them over the sizzling butter in the cast iron pan. Joshua was also sitting up, but Jean lay still with a blanket pulled over her head.

"What time is it?" Joshua asked.

I looked around to see the time for myself. There were several antique clocks scattered around the different rooms, but they all seemed to say a different time.

"I think it's close to eight," Mom said. "Jean, breakfast is ready."

Jean didn't move. Katie started toward her with the intention of helping her wake up when Mom said, "Let her sleep, Katie." Katie stopped and looked back at Mom and then back at Jean. Then she went to the table and sat down.

Just then Cliff came into the house. "It smells good, Birdie," he said, grabbing an old tea kettle that was sitting on one of the stovetop burners. He filled it with water and put it back on the stovetop. Then he went to the cupboard and pulled out a jar of brown granules. The blue and white label said "POSTUM" in capital letters. The smaller print said "Original" and the lid said "There's a reason." I watched with interest as I finished toasting the English muffins, spreading butter on each half and placing them on a plate.

The tea kettle started to scream and steam shot out from the small hole in the spout. Cliff turned off the burner and grabbed the handle of the tea kettle, pouring the hot water into a white pyrex mug with turquoise roosters and corn cobs on the sides. He took a spoonful of the Postum from the jar and stirred it into the mug. A rich molasses smell, like coffee, wafted in the air. He put his hot mug next to his plate and went back to the refrigerator and pulled out another jar and brought it to the table. It looked like a jar of brown jam. While Mom dished out the eggs, Cliff

grabbed two English Muffin halves and started to lather the brown stuff on them. He noticed us watching him and said, "This is apple butter from our Amish neighbors. Try some."

"What's that?" I asked, pointing to his mug. "Is it coffee?"

"No, it's Postum. I stopped drinking coffee because of the caffeine about a year ago. This is a substitute. People drank it a lot during World War II when all the coffee was being shipped to the troops. I've learned to really like it."

"Is it bad for you?" I asked, knowing that Mom was listening.

"No, it's not bad for you. You can have some if you like, you may want to add a little sugar to it."

I looked over at Mom and she shrugged. "As long as you're not trying to drink it because it looks like coffee," she said. "Cliff, can we say grace before we eat?"

We bowed our heads while Mom blessed the food. After the prayer, Joshua reached for the apple butter and I stood up to prepare myself a mug of Postum. The idea of putting sugar in it made me think it must be good. "Where's the sugar?" I asked.

"The sugar is in the same cupboard," Cliff said as he dipped a folded half of an English muffin into his hot Postum.

I mixed a spoonful of Postum in the hot water. The water turned dark and the roasted molasses smell floated to my nostrils. I added a spoonful of sugar and tasted it. Then I added another spoonful and tasted it again. *Delicious!*

After breakfast, we cleared the table and washed the dishes. Instead of helping, Cliff reached for a newspaper and read. I noticed a pleased look on his face as we cleaned around him and felt annoyed.

“Who’s that?” Joshua said, looking out the window.

Cliff lowered his newspaper and glanced outside. “That’s Jacob and Rick, my nephews,” he said. “They probably heard you were here.”

I went to the window and saw two boys getting off their bikes. They looked about mine and Joshua’s age. Both had brown hair that was left longer in the back. One was taller with glasses and the other was thicker with a cute face.

“Go out and say hi,” Cliff said, looking back at the newspaper.

Joshua, Evelyn, Katie, and I hurried outside, not caring that we still needed to get ready for the day. The sun was already warm and bright. It shone down through the black-walnut trees near the gravel driveway. I noticed that the driveway was lined with faded purple irises, something I had missed from the day before.

The two boys stood lingering on their bikes, when the four of us rounded the corner. They looked at us and waved, shyly.

“Hey! How’s it going?” Joshua said.

“Fine,” the tall one answered. “You just get here?”

“Yah, yesterday afternoon. Where’d you come from?”

“From over there,” the shorter boy answered.

We all turned and looked in the direction he was pointing and only saw trees.

“What’s your names?” I asked, anxious to have friends.

“I’m Jake,” the taller one said, “and this is Rick.”

“I’m Joshua, this is Dish, Evelyn, and Katie,” Joshua said as we walked up to the boys, looking at their bikes and at them. “What do you do around here for fun?”

“I don’t know. We come here sometimes and swing in the barn,” Rick said, looking over at the barn. “Have you guys met George yet?”

“That thing scared the crap out of me,” Joshua said, nodding. “Does it really jump on you?”

“Oh, you don’t even know. He’s wicked! He’ll get loose and come to the edge of this driveway where he can see if those neighbors come out of their house. Anyone for that matter. And if he sees someone, he goes after them. He’ll jump up and start pissing all over them if he catches them,” Rick said, maybe forgetting that we’d just met.

“I don’t believe that,” I said, laughing.

“It’s true,” Jake said, “Just wait.”

“Have they peed on you?” Katie asked.

“No way! We take off as soon as we see him.”

We all laughed.

“Why does Cliff keep him?” I asked.

“Beats me. I guess he likes animals. Did he tell you about his dog that just died?” Rick asked.

“No, he didn’t,” I said, “But Mom says he had the dog for seventeen years and it went everywhere with him. But its name was just Dog. Doesn’t it seem kind of weird that he loved the dog so much, and never gave it a good name?”

“Yah, that’s kinda weird,” Jake shrugged, “but it was a nice. We felt bad for Cliff when Dog died.”

Rick looked down at Buster, who had just arrived from somewhere near the chicken coup and was sniffing him curiously. “Hey buddy,” he said, putting his hand down for Buster. He

wagged and Rick scratched the top of his head and then sat down in the gravel to give Buster a good rub. We watched them for a minute and then sat down in the gravel as well.

“This is Buster,” Evelyn said, finally speaking. “He’s a good dog too.”

The boys nodded, then looking at the house. Jake asked, “Did you hear the accordion last night?”

“No. Why would we hear an accordion?” Joshua said.

Rick’s eyes widened. “Cliff didn’t tell you that the house is haunted?”

Joshua, Evelyn, Katie, and I looked at Rick like he was crazy.

“Okay, first of all, you’re lying,” Joshua said. “But second of all, of course Cliff wouldn’t tell us something like that. Like, ‘Oh, by the way, you’re going to love my house, it’s got ghosts.’”

We all laughed, including Jake and Rick.

“No, but for real, the house is haunted,” Jake said. “It was built around the time oil was first drilled here, and that was before the Civil War. Lots of people died in that house. So, when Cliff married his third wife, I can’t remember her name, he moved in with her for a while and rented this one out to a family.

“Yah,” Rick added. “There was a kid about our age named Clyde, and he told us that every night at around one in the morning the accordion in the attic would start to play. Just for a little while.”

I remembered the accordion I had seen in the attic yesterday.

“Yah, Jake and I didn’t believe it,” Rick said. “So one night we slept over and we set Clyde’s alarm for 12:45 am. He slept in that loft room. When the alarm went off, we went and sat on the stairs to listen. Sure enough, as we were sitting there, we heard the rocking chair creek

back and forth and then the accordion started to play. I was so freaked out that I started to cry. Clyde's parents woke up and tried to tell me that the ghosts were harmless and just to go back to sleep, but I wasn't having it. They had to take us home in the middle of the night."

Jake sat nodding in agreement. "He was such a baby," he laughed.

"Shut up," Rick said. "It freaked you out too! You were just glad I was the one saying we had to go home."

We stared at Rick, processing what he just said. I broke the silence by laughing. "No way! You guys are so bad. I can't believe you came here to scare us!"

"No, we're serious!" They both insisted.

"Why didn't you go and look at the ghost," Joshua asked, trying to poke holes in their story.

"No way was I going to go look at a ghost," Rick said laughing. "All I wanted was my mommy!"

"Yah, no way," Jake added. "But you can! Then let us know what you see."

"Well, what if that family was doing a prank on you?" I asked.

"It was a good prank then," Jake said, considering the possibility.

Joshua looked at Evelyn and Katie, who sat quietly with wide eyes. "Well, we didn't hear an accordion, so I think we're fine," he said. "What else do you want to talk about?"

Jake looked at Evelyn and Katie and seeming sheepish, said, "Well, that was like three years ago, so I'm sure it's fine now. Did Cliff get George out of the barn yet? If he did, we can go swing."

"I think so. He was outside for a while before you came. I'll go ask him," Joshua said, getting up and running to the house. He returned within minutes and said that George was in the

back of the barn already. We all got up and headed for the swing, except for Evelyn and Katie, who went back in the house to find Mom.

Joshua and I spent the next two hours swinging on the barn swing and crawling around the barn rafters with Jake and Rick. Then we went to the chicken coop and they taught us how to catch the chickens. It was a great time.

Eventually Jake said they had to go home for lunch. We told them to come back whenever, that we'd be here. And they said they would come next time they visited their dad. Waving goodbye to Evelyn and Katie, who were swinging Buster on the front porch swing, they rode their bikes down the road until we couldn't see them. Joshua and I decided to check on the status of our own lunch and headed into the house.

*

Inside, Jean was sitting stoically at the kitchen table, writing a letter. She looked showered and ready for the day and very serious. Mom was preparing spaghetti and frozen peas for lunch. Joshua walked over to an antique rocking chair.

"You're not going to believe what Jake and Rick told us!" he said, plopping himself into the chair. We heard a huge crack and all looked over at Joshua. He sat still in the chair, his eyes wide, hoping for the best.

"You broke it," Jean said accusatively.

"I didn't know it would break so easily," Joshua said, getting up and looking at a split piece of wood that connected to two rockers at the bottom.

"Well, you'll have to tell Cliff when he comes in for lunch," Mom said, looking at the rocking chair from where she stood at the sink. "You have to be careful with antiques."

“Everything is antique!” Joshua said, looking disheartened. He moved over to the kitchen table, and made sure to sit down gently. It was clear that he didn’t want to tell on himself.

When Cliff came into the house, we were all waiting for him. He washed up and joined us at the table. Mom served spaghetti, peas, and a salad. When we were done eating, Cliff sat and let us clean up around him again. Again, I felt annoyed that he was comfortable having Mom and all of us clean around him. It didn’t matter to me that it was his house and he was letting us live there. I noticed that even Katie and Evelyn were giving him side glances and guessed they must be irritated too.

As we finished washing the dishes, Cliff spoke up, “Naomi and Joshua want me to show them the woods. I can take anyone who wants to go in about thirty minutes. That way you can see the borders of my property.”

“Awesome!” Joshua said, “I’m going to go brush my teeth, since I never did this morning.” He laughed guiltily and hurried away, forgetting all about the chair. I followed, since I needed to brush my teeth too.

Thirty minutes later, the six of us, and Buster, followed Cliff through the freshly mowed grass that he had just mowed earlier that day with his tractor mower. We passed the pond and headed to the edge of the woods. For the first time, Jean seemed to brighten up with this adventure. But before long she was consumed with swatting at the gnats.

“Oh, you’ll want to be careful of the No-see-ums,” Cliff said, watching her.

“How can you be careful of something you can’t see?” Jean asked, swatting at the tiny bugs that buzzed around her head. She and Mom were the only ones bothered by the gnats.

“The gnats go to the highest part of your body,” Cliff said, stopping and looking over at them. “They're also attracted to all that perfume in your hair.” He paused and watched them swat at the gnats, realizing it was going to be a problem.

“You mean my shampoo?” Jean asked.

“The hair spray too,” he said. “Raise your hand up high and watch them float to the top of your hand. I'll get you some peppermint to rub on your neck and arms. Bugs don't like the smell of it.”

Cliff walked back toward the pond, and reached down to grab at a plant near the swampy area. When he had a handful, he walked back over to us. “Here, crush these leaves in your hands and rub the juice on your skin. Get behind your neck.”

He handed Mom and Jean a lot more than he gave the rest of us. We all crushed the peppermint leaves, inhaling the sweet smell and rubbing the leaves on our skin. Jean reached into her shorts and pulled out a hairband, quickly putting her hair into a high pony-tail. The gnats left her face and flocked to it. Cliff watched for a while, seemed satisfied, and turned and led us onto a rough tractor path leading into the trees.

Stepping into the shade, the feeling of peacefulness and quiet was almost immediate. Cliff pointed up into a large tree at a racoon peeking out at us. “That coon likes to come down and snoop around the chicken coup,” he said.

We all looked up at the curious creature peering down at us and Katie giggled, “He's so cute!”

“Yah, he's cute,” Cliff said. “Trouble too.”

He continued walking, leading us to a quiet stream where he pointed out large patches of moss. “There are over twenty-five types of moss in these woods. This is cushion moss, and over here is plume moss. See how it looks like feather plumes?” We looked and nodded.

“Look at those mushrooms,” I said, walking toward several mushrooms that were popping out of the green cushion moss, all with earthy red tops covered in white polka-dot spores.

“Don’t touch them,” Cliff said. “Those are fly agaric, a type of toadstool mushroom. They’re poisonous.” He paused for a few seconds before adding, “In fact, it’s just better not to touch any mushrooms. Some are poisonous and some aren’t, but it’s better to be safe.”

“I’ve seen these in picture books,” I said, still looking down at the perfect little mushrooms.

Mom walked over to where I was standing. “You’re right. They are in that Grimm brothers’ fairytale book we have,” she said.

A short distance from the mushroom, Cliff knelt down on one knee. “Come here,” he said.

We followed him and squatted to see what he was looking at. “See these tiny plants that look like pine trees? They’re called ground pine,” he said. “And right here is one of my favorite wildflowers. They look like mushrooms, but they’re not. They’re called Indian Pipe. Look how delicate the white stems are and how the top spreads out to look like a pipe.” Again, we nodded and looked interested.

Walking further into the woods, Cliff pointed out ferns. “These are called a hay-scented fern. Reach down like you’re shaking the ferns hand, like this.” He grabbed a large stem and pretended to shake it like he would shake the hand of a person.

“Now smell your hand. It smells like hay. The people that named this fern had a tremendous grasp for the obvious.” Cliff said, chuckling dryly at his own joke. “And over there is a different type—the spleenwort fern. It has thinner darker green fronds that stand more upright.”

“What are fronds?” Jean asked, appearing bored and looking in the direction of the house.

“That’s what the leaves of the ferns are called.”

Mom slapped her arm and said, “Hey, I think these bugs have feasted enough on me for today. I’m going to head back to the house.”

Cliff looked at Jean and Mom and said, “Yah, okay. Then let me show you where we are.”

Pointing in one direction, he said, “My property ends the road on this side and the telephone towers in the far back on that side.” Then pointing in the direction behind where his house was, he continued, “It goes all the way to the end of that second field. I’m sure the neighbors won’t mind if you go into their woods a bit, but you should probably stick to my property. I have enough for you to have fun in.”

“Do you hear that, Joshua? Naomi? Stay in Cliff’s woods if you go exploring. These people probably have guns,” Mom said. “Okay, I’m going back. Anyone want to come with me?”

Jean nodded and started toward the light at the end of the woods where we entered. Evelyn looked over at Cliff and said, “Thank you for showing us the woods.”

“Thank you,” Katie said, running to catch Mom’s hand.

Cliff turned to look at Joshua and I. “You want to see a little more?”

We both nodded.

We cut across the stream and stopped on a sandy bank to look at raccoon and deer tracks. “Look at this,” Cliff said, sounding surprised. He bent down and put his hand next to a large flatfooted track, similar to a fat human footprint with five toe prints and tiny claw marks. “What do you think made this track?”

Joshua and I looked down at it, puzzled. “A baby Bigfoot?” I asked, only half-joking. As I looked around at the canopy of green above us, green sunlight streamed down in mystical beams, highlighting the ferns. The sound of trickling water from the stream was the only noise I could hear beside an occasional bird and our own voices. *This was a perfect place for Bigfoot to live.*

Cliff chuckled. “Close. It’s actually a black bear. I haven’t seen tracks in these woods for quite a few years, you’ll have to keep your eyes out for him.”

“That would be so cool to see a bear,” Joshua said. I nodded. But I wasn’t quite sure how close up I wanted to see a bear. Definitely not while I was alone.

Cliff led us around the woods for another hour, pointing out different trees—beech, red maple, sugar maple, pin oak, red oak, black gum, pawpaw, box elder, flowering dogwood, elm, american holly...there were too many to remember.

“Look here,” he said, grabbing a branch from a small tree with smooth yellow bark. He pulled off a lobed leaf that reminded me of the three-toed dinosaur tracks in Hurricane. “This is Sassafras. It’s one of the only trees that has three different leaves. This one has two thumbs.”

He pulled two more leaves from the tree. “This one has only one thumb, and this is just one round lobe.” He pulled out his pocket knife and cut a small branch off the sassafras tree and

whittled off the bark at one end. “Smell it,” he said, holding it out for us. Joshua and I leaned close to the branch and smelled it.

“It smells like root beer,” I said. Joshua nodded.

“That’s right. You can chew on the bark and it’s like having a root beer flavored toothpick.”

“Is this what they make root beer out of?” Joshua asked.

“Yah, it used to be one of the main ingredients. The Amish still make a really good root beer using sassafras. Next time I go to their country store, you can come and we’ll get some.”

We nodded and followed Cliff further, coming to several evergreen trees with long drooping branches and small delicate cones. Below the trees the ground was almost bare, covered only in soft fragrant needles.

“Most of the evergreens in my woods are eastern hemlock, like these,” Cliff said.

“Hemlock is the state tree of Pennsylvania because it was so useful to the early settlers. But it’s also beautiful in the winter, when all the other trees lose their leaves.”

Walking up to a tree with a trunk that was no thicker than his thigh, Cliff said, “This is the only American chestnut on my property, and anywhere around this area as far as I know. Still no chestnuts though. But it shows they’re making a comeback,” he said.

“Do you mean chestnuts like that Christmas song?” I asked.

“What happened to them?” Joshua asked.

“There was a blight that killed most of them at the beginning of the 1900s,” Cliff said.

“No more chestnuts roasting on an open fire after that. At least in America. So, this tree is pretty special. Hopefully it continues to live.”

Then weaving us through several more trees, Cliff touched the trunk of another tree with dark furrowed plates of bark and deep vertical rifts. Cliff touched a few round scars halfway up the trunk. “This is a sugar maple tree. I’ve tapped it a few times in late winter and it’s given me about a quart of maple syrup after being boiled down. It’s a lot of work to keep coming back for all that sap to boil down. After a few years of doing it, I decided I’d rather buy my syrup from the Amish.

“I love maple syrup,” Joshua said. “Can we get some of that from the Amish too?”

“Yah, we’ll get some,” Cliff said.

Joshua and I were pleased. We were learning all sorts of things from Cliff. But he kept saying Amish and I had no idea what he was talking about.

Just as I was about to ask, he said, “Well, I had better head back. I’m having a few of my friends help me build those two rooms upstairs, so I’d better start figuring out what to do with that stuff I have up there.”

“Do you need help?” Joshua asked.

“I could use help. Let’s get back.”

We headed to the same light that Mom and the others went toward, the opening near the pond. On the way out, Cliff showed us a patch of skunk cabbage, large green leaves with purple and green pods coming out of mud and decomposing tree leaves. He told us to lean in and take a good sniff. We did. The plants smelled just like a skunk.

As we emerged from the trees, we blinked in the bright sunlight. Nearing the house, Cliff showed us one last plant. There were several of them, growing together in the sunlight—tall green plants with speckled little orange flowers resembling snapdragons.

“This is jewelweed, but we call it touch-me-nots. See what happens when you touch one of those green pods,” he said.

Joshua reached out and then hesitated. “Aren’t they called touch-me-nots?”

Cliff chuckled his low dry chuckle again. “Just touch one.”

Joshua carefully touched a larger pod that was half the length of his finger. The pod immediately exploded, tossing seeds all around.

“Wow!” I said, reaching out to touch another pod and watching it explode. I studied the plants and was delighted to realize that there were hundreds of pods to touch. “We could be here all day!”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, but you can definitely stay for a little while. I’ll see you inside.” Cliff said, seeming really happy.

He was happy for quite some time after that. But he discovered the broken rocking chair later that day and his happiness disappeared. Joshua said he was sorry, but Cliff ignored him and carried the chair down to the attic—the place that would become a burial site for many antiques by the end of the summer.

Chapter 3

Jean sat next to a window in the visiting room, still lined with mattresses. She rocked back and forth in one of Cliff's antique rocking chairs, looking outside at the drizzling rain.

"I hate the green," she said to no one in particular. "It's, like, too green."

I looked over at her from the table where I was playing slap jack with Katie and Evelyn.

"I like it," I said.

Jean didn't respond. The house smelled of baked bread, ketchup, and sweet meatloaf. I could hear soft chirps coming from the bigger family room and smiled as I thought of the little baby turkeys Cliff and Joshua brought home from the farmer's supply store two days ago. They were in a medium-sized cage by the cellar door, contentedly chirping in their sleep under a brooder lamp. Mom was in the kitchen making lunch, and Cliff and Joshua were out again, buying wood for the rooms above the garage.

Looking over at Mom, Jean continued to complain, "Aren't you tired of cooking all the time already? You hardly ever cooked for us back home. I'm pretty sure you hated it."

"I still do," Mom said, standing with her eyebrows furrowed as she studied the burnt meatloaf she had just pulled out of the oven. "Maybe we'll have meatloaf sandwiches instead of just meatloaf. I can carve off the burned part and they'll never know."

"You should probably use recipes instead of just guessing," Jean said.

Mom pulled out a large serrated knife from the drawer and started shaving off the bottom of the meatloaf. Steam rose up, burning her hand, and she dropped the knife. "Who needs recipes? I'll figure cooking out eventually," she said, running her hand under cold water.

"Why are you making three huge meals a day anyway? I'm getting fat and it's only been eight days," Jean continued.

“That’s what Cliff wants,” Mom said, shrugging.

“It sounds to me like he scored big time. He’s got a built-in cook, a full-time maid, and little servants that clean up after him every time he eats.” Jean said. I glanced over at her as I gathered my card winnings. She was looking at Mom, one of her eyebrows up, as if waiting for a reaction.

Handing out new cards to Evelyn and Katie, I added my own thoughts, “I hate how he sits there and lets us clean up after him. How hard is it to take your plate to the sink?”

“Yah, why does he have to act like he’s a king over us?” Katie asked.

Mom was about to pick up the knife again, but stopped to glare at Jean. “Okay, first of all, he is king in his own house. But it’s not like he’s sitting around all day. He works outside during the summers and he works as a principal during the school year. He works all the time.”

“And I’m choosing to stay at home with you guys, ...something I haven’t been able to for a long time. This is how I prove that I’m worth having at home—by feeding the people I love.”

“Yah, sure Mom,” Jean said, pausing for a minute before adding, “Just so you know, this is the eighties. You’re going backwards thirty decades to when women's only worth was serving men.”

“We serve the people we love, Jean,” Mom said, shaking her head. “And, I’ll tell you something... from the perspective of an 80s woman that’s BEEN working for the past eight years while raising her five kids ... Maybe I don’t want to do it all, after all. It’s a fake idea. Women shouldn’t have to do everything. I’m exhausted, and you guys have had to sacrifice.”

“That’s because we didn’t have a dad to help out.” Jean said, a little annoyed. “Plus, I’ve helped a lot.”

“That’s true. But even so, I say no thank you to teaching all day, raising a family, cooking, cleaning, and still being mentally present for my kids. I wasn’t doing a good job.”

“I thought you were doing a good job,” Evelyn said sweetly.

“I thought you were too,” Katie said.

“Thank you, sweet girls,” Mom said, looking over at them and smiling. “But I want to do better.”

Just then we heard a knock at the door and looked out to see two men, dressed in dark blue pants, light blue shirts, suspenders, and yellow straw hats with dark bands around the caps. They seemed like they might be in their mid-thirties—both with bangs cut straight across their forehead and sideburns running down their faces to meet their rather long and unkempt beards. But their beards didn’t look like Cliff’s beard. These men didn’t have mustaches.

“Oh, they must be the gentlemen that are helping Cliff with the rooms upstairs,” Mom said.

Mom walked to the door and opened it. She told the men that Cliff wasn’t at the house yet, but he would be back soon. She invited them in, and they declined politely. We watched them walk out into the rain, still drizzling lightly, and back to the driveway, where there was a little black buggy with a bright orange triangle on the back of it. Attached to it was a horse.

“What kind of people are they?” I asked, looking out the window at them as they waited next to their buggy.

“They’re Amish. Don’t you remember Cliff talking about his Amish friends? They live all over this part of the country. I love seeing them.” Mom replied.

Katie and Evelyn peeked out another window and Katie asked, “What’s Amish?”

“It’s a type of religion here. The Amish people believe in keeping worldly things simple so that they can worship God better.”

“How simple? They don’t drive cars?” I asked.

“They don’t drive cars. They don’t use electronics. They make their own clothes, dress in plain colors, keep to themselves, and don’t like having their picture taken. They’re good people though. That’s about all I know,” Mom responded.

“What do the women look like?” I asked.

“Dark dresses, white aprons, black shoes, braided hair, and sometimes they wear bonnets.”

“They sound like pilgrims,” I said.

“Well, they came a little later than that, but not much. They haven’t changed. The rest of us have, which makes them seem so different now.”

Jean and I continued to look at them through the window. One grabbed a long weed and stuck it in his mouth.

After about fifteen minutes, Cliff and Joshua returned in Cliff’s old pick-up truck. The back of the truck was full of eight-foot-long two-by-fours. Cliff turned off the truck and got out and shook hands with the two men. I could see him introduce Joshua. They all stood outside in the drizzle talking when another car pulled into the driveway and another man got out. Then they all walked to the front door together.

“Birdie, this is Isaac and his brother Noah, and of course you already know my cousin Bob. They’ll be helping me with the upstairs rooms,” Cliff said as he led the group inside.

Mom smiled at them. “It’s nice to meet you.”

The men took off their hats and nodded at her, politely smiling, and saying hello to the rest of us as we stared unabashedly. Then Bob, Isaac, Noah, and Joshua followed Cliff upstairs and into the big room above the garage. From that point on, they went in and out through the garage, leaving us to listen to the banging and hammering and stomping above.

After they left, Jean walked over to the 22-inch color tv that was propped on top of a three-shelf rolling black metal cart. On the second shelf was a Sony VHS player. She picked up the only VHS tape from the third tier and asked, “Does anyone want to watch *The Three Amigos* again?”

Just then, we heard the knock on the door. I turned and saw through the big picture window a lady and a girl standing on the front porch. The lady held a plate covered in tin foil. Mom hurried over and opened the door.

“Hello! You must be Mrs. Vinci,” she said.

“Yes, but call me Meredith, please! Welcome to Titusville!”

Mrs. Vinci’s voice reminded me of a gentle melody sung to cheer up a weeping child. She handed Mom the plate. I watched her as she came in. She looked like an angel mom, with short golden hair feathered to one side of her face, a straight nose and blue eyes that I decided gave her an angelic look. Her skin carried the same golden hue as her hair and she was several inches shorter than Mom.

“Oh, my goodness, thank you!” Mom said, all smiles, “Come in!”

The girl followed behind her mom and looked over at me and smiled shyly. She was at least two inches shorter than me with shiny dark brown hair, beautiful blue almond shaped eyes, fair skin, and freckles. She wore a light blue softball t-shirt and cutoff jeans.

“This is my oldest daughter, Alexa. I believe she’s close to the same age as one of your daughters,” Mrs. Vinci said.

“Nice to meet you, Alexa. How old are you?” Mom asked.

“I’m twelve.”

“Okay, then you’re Naomi’s age. Please, come sit down. Would you like something to drink? We have tea, Postum, and orange juice. No drinking water though. Something’s very bad about Cliff’s water. You should see the kids try to gag it down at the dinner table. Cliff gets so offended,” Mom said, covering her mouth to hide her laugh. “Oh, and these are my kiddos; This is Naomi, Evelyn, Katie, and Jean is over there. Joshua’s my fourteen-year-old and he’s up helping Cliff.”

At this introduction, I stood up from the table and Jean put down *The Three Amigos*. We both waved hello simultaneously from different rooms. Then Jean sat down on one of the couches we brought from Hurricane, patiently waiting for the visit to be over.

Mrs. Vinci glanced around the house and looked at Mom sincerely, “Thank you, but we’re fine. How are you doing with everything?”

“Well,” Mom said, still smiling, “It’s an adjustment, but we’re getting there. Cliff is building rooms upstairs so that the kids don’t have to sleep on the floor down here. But they’ve been having fun exploring outside...”

I walked over to Alexa and said, “Do you want to see our baby turkeys?”

Alexa’s eyes brightened and she said, “Sure!”

I took her over to the cage and we crouched down to look at them. The turkeylings rushed over, chirping.

“They’re so cute!” she said. “They look like big baby chickens.”

I sat down next to the cage and grabbed some chick feed out of a feed bag next to the cage. Opening the door, I put my hand inside. "They really like people," I said. "Cliff says it's because they were hatched out of an incubator, so they never imprinted on their mother. We're kind of like their mother." The turkeylings ran to my hand and ate the small granules.

"Do you want to try feeding them?" I asked.

"Sure!" Alexa said.

I poured the remaining granules into Alexa's hand and she stuck her hand where mine had been in the cage. The little turkeys pecked at the food and she smiled. "It tickles," she said.

When the babies had eaten enough, they drank some water from their small water dispenser and returned to sleep under the brooding lamp, one by one closing their eyes.

Turning my attention back to Alexa, I asked, "Do you live near me?"

"No, I live in town. Right next to the school," she said.

"Oh, I know where that is. We passed it on our way out here."

"Yah, that's Drake Street, but we live on the other side."

"What are those big pillars for?"

"In the school? That's the entrance to the theater," she said. "But on Drake Street, you pass the junior high classrooms, where our classes will be. The other side is the high school. But everyone uses the theater."

"That's cool," I said. "Do you live in one of those big houses we've seen in town?"

"My house is big, but I think you're talking about the houses on Main Street, right? I don't live in one of those. I live on Kerr Street. It's fun to live there because we play tag after dinner with a bunch of kids that live nearby. You should come and play with us."

"That sounds fun. What are the rules? Do you play in someone's yard?"

“No way! We play all over a whole block of houses in Titusville. You just don’t want to go too far cuz then some kids forget about you, and just start playing a new game without you.”

Alexa paused and looked down at her white high-top shoes, tugging at the tongue of one of them. “My mom says you can come over tomorrow, if you want.”

“Really?” I asked.

She nodded. “I think she might invite your younger sisters to play with my younger sisters. She says all our ages match, which is pretty cool.”

“Yah, that’s great. So how do you guys know Cliff?”

“From church,” Alexa responded.

*

The next day, the rain was gone and the trees sparkled emerald green from a mixture of dew and leftover rain droplets. After lunch, Mom drove Evelyn, Katie, and I into town. On her lap was the drawing that Meredith had written out for us to find their house. Jean sat in the passenger seat with the window down. Both her feet were sticking out of the window in the sunlight.

Mom entered Titusville the same way we drove out of it, coming down into the valley by way of Spring Creek Road, Brooke Street, and down Drake Street. She turned left in front of the school and then made a right at the end of the school on Kerr Street. On the corner of Kerr Street, facing a school parking lot, stood a tall light gray paneled house with a dominant front gable and three small gables coming out on the sides. It had a matching detached garage on the right side. Next to it, there was a small set of stairs leading into a mudroom. The left side of the house had steps leading up to a small porch that had just enough room for a swing. Alexa and another girl sat there swinging and waved to us as we pulled up to their house.

Mom parked the van outside of the detached garage, opened the sliding door of the van, and told Evelyn and Katie to come with her. I jumped out and headed over to the other side of the house where Alexa and her friend were.

“Have fun, Naomi!” Mom called. “Mrs. Vinci is feeding you dinner tonight, so I’ll be back at about seven. Make sure you’re here!”

“I will!” I said, waving goodbye.

Alexa and her friend had gotten up and were starting down the stairs when I reached them.

“Hey!”

“Hey, you made it!” Alexa responded. “So, I was telling Karen that your name is Naomi, but your nickname is Dish, right?”

“Yah.”

“Do you still want to be called Dish? Or do you want us to call you Naomi?” Dish is kind of...” Alexa paused to consider the right thing to say, “different.”

I shrugged. “Naomi never really fit me. It’s like the wrong color on me or something.”

Alexa’s eyebrows went up.

Karen smiled, “I’m Karen by the way. I’ve always liked the name Naomi, but I know what you mean. I’ve never liked Karen either. How’d you get the nickname?”

Karen was much taller than Alexa and much taller than me, for that matter. She had thick strawberry blonde hair with bangs pushed to one side and the rest of her hair pulled back in a ponytail. She had brown eyes and was muscular, with broad features. She wore a white tennis skirt with a yellow cotton t-shirt. Alexa had a sleeveless emerald green shirt that made her eyes pop and beige linen shorts.

“I’m not crazy about Dish either,” I said, looking down at my worn flip-flops, palm tree printed Bermuda shorts, and turquoise tank top—wondering why I chose to wear such an outfit. “My older brother gave me that name when I was younger because I had dishwater colored hair. It was like his own secret way of calling me ugly,” I said. “But my hair’s not that color anymore, so I don’t really mind being called Dish. It fits me better than Naomi.”

“You’re definitely not ugly,” Karen said sarcastically.

“That’s a pretty bad reason to have it as a nickname,” Alexa laughed. “Let’s think of a better reason, cuz everyone will ask.”

“Sure. What do you suggest?”

In reality, no one had ever asked why I was called Dish before. It was just what I was called.

“I don’t know, I’ll think about it,” Alexa responded. “Just say you don’t know until we think of something better.”

“Alexa’s a bookworm, so she can come up with all sorts of stories,” Karen said.

“Okay,” I said. Ready to change the subject, I looked over at the school. “That school is huge! It takes up a whole block.”

“Well, it’s actually two schools in one. I guess that’s why it’s so big. But Titusville isn’t that big, really.” Karen said.

“It’s bigger than where I come from,” I said.

Both Karen and Alexa shrugged and didn’t ask anything more about where I came from. I guessed that they just thought I popped up out of the ground like a spring tulip.

“Can you ride a bike?” Alexa asked.

“Yah, why?”

“We thought we could take you for a tour around town, show you some fun places. Then after dinner we can play tag. We’ll bike to my cousin’s house and have him get some of his friends,” Alexa said. Karen nodded as if they had been talking about it before I arrived.

“That sounds fun, but I don’t have my bike here,” I said.

“You can ride my sister’s,” Alexa said. “I just need to let my mom know.”

Inside Alexa’s house there were all sorts of rooms on the main floor, ...all with high ceilings: a sun room, a waiting room, a dining room, a large playroom, a formal living room, a long hallway, and a kitchen with a mudroom. “How many rooms do you have upstairs?” I asked, marveling at how spacious the house was.

Alexa counted the rooms in her head and said, “Seven. My younger brothers share a room.”

“So, you’re the oldest?” I asked.

“No, I have a brother that’s three years older than me.”

“That’s cool. Your family’s bigger than mine. What about you?” I asked, looking at Karen.

Karen seemed to be content letting Alexa do most of the talking. “I’m the oldest. I have two younger sisters,” she said nonchalantly.

We found Mrs. Vinci in the playroom. She was with the four girls and Alexa’s two younger brothers, who looked about three and five years old.

“Hey Mom, we’re going to bike around town. We’ll be back for dinner at five,” Alexa said.

“Have fun!” Mrs. Vinci said.

“Your mom’s so cool,” Karen said, confirming what I already suspected.

*

“You can ride that one,” Alexa said, picking up her ten-speed from the five bikes that were laying in her front yard. Karen picked up her ten-speed bike and waited for me to get adjusted.

“Let’s go to Burgess Park first and show Dish the pool and then we’ll come back on Main Street and go to Taylor’s house. Then we can go over to the bike trail before coming home.”

“Whatever is good with me,” I said.

“Let’s do it then,” Karen said, kicking her bike into motion and taking a right turn at the corner. “Dish, you’re about to get a tour of the valley that changed the world!!”

Alexa and I followed, and then rode alongside Karen on the quiet road. Trees draped over us on both sides, providing shade and the perfect summer temperature.

“What do you mean the valley that changed the world?” I asked, after a few minutes of silence.

“You know, the oil,” Alexa said.

“Nope, I don’t know.”

“Petroleum was drilled here for the first time ever, like in 1859. You haven’t been to Drake’s Well yet?” Alexa asked.

“I guess not,” I said.

“Oh, you will,” Karen laughed, “Again, and again, and again, and again, till you’re so tired of hearing about oil and about Edwin Drake that you’ll want to plug your ears when the teachers start talking about how important the discovery was.”

At the end of the block, we turned left at a red brick wall that was about four feet high. It seemed to encompass an entire block. We followed it until we arrived at a massive red brick

estate with a U-shaped gray brick driveway. The middle of the U had a patch of cut grass and a smaller decorative gray stone fence with trimmed bushes in the front. The driveway was book ended with gray pillars that attached to the red brick wall.

The building was at least four stories high. Six red brick arches stretched from a dominant gable over the main entrance, with three arches on one side and three on the other. Above the arches were more windows and a three-sided torrent, covered with a gray slate roof and a little ornate window poking from the middle with its own open-book shaped roof. Two more little windows with the same open-book roofs stuck out from each wing of the slated roof. The building was magnificent. I stopped my bike and stared at it.

“That’s my sister’s mansion,” I said, remembering our first drive through Titusville.

Alexa and Karen turned their bikes around and came back to me. “You mean McKinney Hall?” Karen said.

“It’s not a mansion?” I asked.

“It’s a mansion alright, but it’s owned by Pitt now,” Alexa said. “There’s a historical marker over there.”

“What’s Pitt?” I asked, scooting my bike over to the marker that was situated to the left of the driveway. There was a picture of a dark-haired man with a thick handlebar mustache, named Carter. Another picture was of a grande clock, and there were two pictures of how the mansion used to look before the McKinny owner remodeled it.

“We call The University of Pittsburgh, Pitt. It has a branch in Titusville with like four or five hundred college students here,” Alexa responded.

“That’s really cool,” I said, looking up at the tall evergreens that framed the giant house. “I’ve never seen a mansion before.”

Alexa and Karen seemed to be considering this.

“Yah, I guess it’s a cool thing,” Alexa finally said. “We just see it and other houses like it every day. This town has all sorts of cool buildings. Back there is the old carriage stable.”

I looked back to where she was pointing and saw that it was the less magnificent brick building we had just passed. “This is what my older sister thought my step-father’s house would look like,” I said, giving a little chuckle. “I did too.”

“You thought you were moving into a mansion?” Alexa asked.

“Well, not really, but at least a big house like yours,” I said. “Instead, we moved into a haunted farmhouse.” I laughed.

Alexa and Karen stared at me. “Is it really haunted?” Karen asked.

“I don’t know. But these two kids came over the day after we arrived and told us that they heard an accordion play in the middle of the night one time in Cliff’s attic. My little sister was so freaked out that night that she couldn’t sleep, knowing that the accordion in the attic might be played by a ghost. So, Cliff had to take it to the barn THAT night. Then Katie freaked out about the rocking chair in the attic, and Cliff took that to the barn too. He brought the rocking chair back in the house the next day and put it with all his other rocking chairs, but that old accordion is still in the barn with George. Katie won’t have it in the house.”

“Katie’s her younger sister,” Alexa said to Karen.

Karen nodded. I could tell she wasn’t sure what to say about my story. Then she asked, “Who’s George?”

“Oh, he’s the demon goat that lives in the barn,” I laughed. I was starting to feel uncomfortable, and both Karen and Alexa were just staring at me like I was telling them a bunch of lies.

“Anyway, there are other cool things about Cliff’s house. He has a big barn with a rope swing and a pond where I catch all sorts of things—except turtles. I haven’t seen a turtle yet. And woods to explore, so I like it.”

We saw a car turn toward us, the first I had seen on that road since I stopped to stare at the mansion. We pushed off on our bikes, getting out of the way of the car and turning left with the red brick wall onto E Main Street.

“I’ll have to come to your house when it’s not raining,” Alexa said. “It sounds fun.”

“Me too!” Karen said.

I felt relieved that they didn’t think I was crazy. We rode another block to the swimming pool. On the right side of it was a parking lot, and a big white paneled house. In the back was a big grassy park going up a hill into the woods. The tennis courts that I’d seen that first day were to the far right behind the white house.

“That’s the pool, those are the tennis courts Karen and I have our lessons on, and that’s Tyc-Toc. It’s where all the high school dances are held,” Alexa said, pointing from the pool to the tennis courts, to the big white house. “Shall we move on?”

Karen and I shrugged. “Where to next?” I asked.

“Let’s go see Taylor. You should meet him since he’s in our grade.” Alexa said.

We started riding down Main Street, heading into the center of town. “Is Taylor cute?” I asked as we weaved around each other on the ten-speeds.

Alexa and Karen looked at each other, and Karen shrugged. “Yah, he’s cute. I mean, some people think he’s cute. He’s not my type though.”

“I think he’s cute,” Alexa said.

“Yah, but you’re biased because he’s your cousin,” Karen said.

“Not necessarily. I can look at him and say he’s cute without it being weird or biased.”

“What does he look like?” I asked.

Again, Alexa and Karen looked at each other. Both shrugged. “He’s got blonde hair,” Alexa said.

“And he’s pretty short,” Karen said.

“Compared to you Karen, but he’s about your height,” Alexa said, nodding to me.

“Yah, almost all the guys are shorter than me right now. It’s so annoying,” Karen said.

“But I have a boyfriend that’s as tall as me. He’s a year younger than us.”

“Do you have a boyfriend, Alexa?”

“Nope, I am young and S-I-N-G-L-E!”

“Me too,” I said.

Karen, still thinking about whether Taylor was cute or not, said, “You’ll have to be your own judge about Taylor.”

I nodded. “How bout this,” I said, “If I don’t think he’s cute, I’ll say hello when I meet him. If I DO think he’s cute, I’ll say hi. Then you’ll know.”

Alexa, who was riding in front of Karen and I, lifted one hand off her handlebars and gave me a thumbs up. Karen smiled and nodded. We stopped talking and I looked around at the houses that we were passing. They were all shapes and sizes; some smaller, many very large. Some were painted light pastel colors; others were gothic red brick. Some had classical embellishments and lacy overhanging eaves. A few had steep pitched rooftops and ornate wrap-around porches with columns. There were several that looked like they could’ve been in an Italian countryside, with low pitched roofs and a cupola on the top.

Between the sidewalk and the road was a section of grass, lined with maple, oak, and linden trees. As we rode our bikes through a pleasant summer breeze, the trees draped over us like decorative umbrellas. I looked down the roads that intersected with Main Street, and noticed several high steepled churches, and a road paved with red brick.

The atmosphere of this new town felt like I'd just gone back in time a hundred years. I imagined that at any moment, a woman would step out of one of these houses wearing a long pleated Victorian gown, complete with ruffles and frills. She would be wearing a lovely lace hat with feathers and a bow, and she would smile at me as she opened her lace umbrella.

While I was gaping at a beautiful yellow home with white trim, and a dominant turret above the front porch, Alexa and Karen rode onto the grass of a home across the street. Both of them stopped, facing the porch, and slid one foot off their pedals and onto the ground. I did the same. This house had at least four gables and was painted a light blue with white trim and a deep front porch supported by columns. The porch also had a swing at one corner and wicker couches with thick blue and white striped cushions.

A blonde-haired boy that looked about our age sat at a small table with a chess game set up on it. Two glasses were also on the table, full of lemonade. He looked up at us in surprise.

“Hey Cory, is my cousin here?” Alexa asked the boy.

Cory nodded his head, “Yah, he just went inside for a minute. Do you want me to get him?”

Alexa and Karen both nodded their heads and Cory went inside. A minute later, he returned with another boy that was slightly taller.

“Hey Taylor, this is Dish,” Alexa said. “She just moved here.”

Taylor walked over to the short wall that framed his porch and looked at me and smiled. My stomach flipped. Time seemed to stop as we focused on each other. Taylor's hair was like spun silk, pushed to one side above his sandy eyebrows, and longer in the back. He was fair, with a straight nose and a strong chin. His eyes reminded me of a young timber wolf—curious, intelligent, and yellow.

“Hi,” I said, suddenly feeling shy.

Karen and Alexa both whipped their heads around to smile at me. I ignored them.

Taylor propped himself on the small wall, still staring at me curiously. “It’s nice to meet you, Dish? Is that right?” I nodded. “Is that your real name?” he asked.

“Her real name’s Naomi. She doesn’t know why she has that nickname,” Alexa piped in, winking at me.

“Huh,” Taylor said, folding his arms and still looking at me. I noticed Cory gaping from behind. “Where did you move here from?”

“Utah,” I said.

“Where’s that?” Cory asked.

“Yah, where is that?” Karen parroted, realizing she had never bothered to ask me.

“It’s one of those western states,” Taylor said. “Above Arizona, right?”

I nodded.

“Wow! You are a long way from home. Do you like it here?” he asked.

“Yah, I guess so,” I said. “I love all the trees. It’s pretty deserty where I’m from, so it’s cool seeing all the green.”

Taylor nodded. He seemed to be thinking about my comment when Alexa interrupted his thoughts. “So, we’re thinking about playing tag tonight after dinner. Do you want to join us?”

“All of you?” Taylor asked.

“Yes, all of us,” Alexa said, rolling her eyes.

“Yah, I think so. What time?”

“Dish’s mom is picking her up around seven, so maybe 5:30ish? We have to eat dinner, but that shouldn’t take long.”

“Sounds good. We can walk over to your house.”

“Bring some other friends too,” Alexa said, glancing at Cory and then turning her bike back in the direction we had come. Karen and I followed her lead.

Realizing we were about to ride away, I turned to say goodbye. “Nice to meet you Taylor...and Cory.”

“You too,” Taylor said.

Cory said nothing. He was just standing there staring as we rode away.

We rode our bikes the same way we came and turned left on Franklin Street and headed for what looked like the center of town. We rode past a white courthouse with four massive Greek pillars in front and several quaint shops inside a large red brick building. Continuing through a few stoplights, we rode over train tracks and past a McDonalds until we came to a steel truss bridge. As we rode over the bridge, I asked, “What river is this?”

Kayla laughed. “It’s a creek, not a river. Oil Creek!”

I looked down at the water below and yelled, “That’s bigger than the rivers where I come from!”

We turned left after the bridge and coasted down a road that seemed to run parallel with the creek, passing smaller homes, then some baseball fields. The landscape turned to trees once

more, and finally I could see the creek again and a park next to another truss bridge. We slowed down and laid our bikes in the cut grass.

“That’s a ten-mile bike trail,” Alexa said, pointing to a paved path that led into the woods. “We’ll have to go on that when we have a whole day to do it. It’s really fun.” Pointing across the creek she continued, “That’s where Drake’s Well is. That big building is the museum, and behind it is a replica of the oil derrick that Edwin Drake built to drill oil.”

Just then we heard a distant sound of a train horn. “The train will be here in about five minutes,” Karen said. We waited and soon heard the click-clack of the train. A brown engine emerged from the trees with OIL CREEK & TITUSVILLE written on its side in bold yellow letters. It crossed its own steel bridge near the truss bridge and Alexa lifted her arm up and down like Joshua and I would do to get semi-trucks to honk. The man in the train pulled something and the horns of the train blew loudly.

“That’s so cool,” I said, smiling as the train cars passed us. “I don’t know if I’ve ever heard a train before.”

“Seriously?” Karen asked.

“Seriously,” I promised.

We walked down to the creek and skipped rocks in the water for a while, then Alexa looked at her watch. “Well, we’d better get back for dinner.”

Riding in the direction we came, we turned on a bridge that was closed off to cars, and crossed the train tracks again. We passed a football stadium with a flagstone rock building in front of it. The building was really just a wall supporting a roof over the bleachers. At the end of the field was the same rocket, propped up on a pole, that we’d seen on our first day. *So, it’s not a prison, it’s a football stadium.*

At the intersection, Karen said she was going home to check in and to eat and that she would meet us back at Alexa's house for tag. We said goodbye and within 5 minutes Alexa and I were back at her house. It was amazing to me that both she and Karen seemed to know every nook and cranny of their town.

We parked our bikes in Alexa's front yard and hurried in. Mrs. Vinci was making individual pizzas. She had her four younger children and Evelyn and Katie spreading sauce, cheese, and pepperoni on their misshapen personal pizzas.

"I have a bigger one for you two in the oven already," she said. "But wash your hands first."

"Excellent!" Alexa said, leading me to the bathroom. We washed our hands and Alexa asked Mrs. Vinci if we could help with anything.

"No, I think I've got it," Mrs. Vinci replied, pulling a pizza out of the oven and placing it on a hot pad. It was loaded with cheese and pepperoni. "Let's give the pizza a few minutes to cool down before we cut it."

Alexa grabbed two glasses out of a cupboard and filled them with cold tap water and handed me a glass. I took a long drink and sighed. "This water tastes so good!"

"Okay, you're weird," Alexa said, laughing.

"No, I'm serious! I haven't had good water since we moved into Cliff's house!" I promised. "His water has this nasty iron taste to it."

Alexa seemed to think this was really funny and kept laughing. I laughed too.

We both stuffed ourselves with pizza and then Alexa took my plate and went back to the kitchen. "Hey mom," she said, as she was putting our dishes in the dishwasher. "We're going to play tag until Dish's mom comes."

“I think she’s coming soon,” Mrs. Vinci said. “She called and said something about picking up nails for Cliff and that she didn’t want to have to turn around and come back into town right after being here.”

“We’ll play until she gets here then,” Alexa said as we headed out the door again.

“Thank you, Mrs. Vinci!” I said, following Alexa.

We stepped outside and to my surprise, Mom was pulling into the driveway. She waved at me as she turned off the van and rolled down the window. “Hi Naomi! Did you have fun?”

“Yah, but you’re like an hour early!” I said, feeling a wave of disappointment. “I was about to play tag with Alexa and her friends.”

“I’m sorry, but you’ll have to do that another day. It’s too far to be driving back and forth from Cliff’s house to town all the time, and Cliff needs these nails. Can you get Evelyn and Katie?”

I stood looking at Mom like she was the worst parent ever. Alexa turned to me and said, “It’s okay. I’m babysitting for my neighbors tomorrow, but maybe on Friday you can sleep over and it’s even more fun to play tag at night.”

“Okay, I’ll call you then,” I said, turning to go back into the house.

Mrs. Vinci came outside and talked to Mom through the van window for a few minutes as Evelyn, Katie, and I got into the van. We thanked her for dinner, one more time, and then Mom drove us back to home. I tried hard not to be mad the whole evening, but I really was.

That night, as I laid in my bed, surrounded by siblings in the middle of the visiting room floor, I had only one image in my mind as I tried to sleep. It was of a young timber wolf, curiously watching me with beautiful golden eyes.

