

### Chapter Three

Jessica knew it had been a bad night the moment I walked into third period English the next day. She took her brush out of her bag and ran it through her strawberry blond curls- her mom teasingly told her they were dirty blond, but Jessica preferred the term strawberry blond. Then she passed it to me, and I stared at the brush then handed it back to her.

“I brushed my hair this morning.” I told her.

“But you were in a rush.” She told me, smiling. “I can always tell. You woke up late, right?” I nodded, pulling the hair tie from my ponytail and raking my fingers through the shoulder-length strands before putting them back up. “Was it a long night?” Jessica asked. I nodded again and let the subject drop as class began. I knew she thought a long night meant I fought with my mom, or Sara was in trouble, or I had a lot of homework. She had no idea that a ‘long night’ was a nightly occurrence on the nights when my dad wasn’t around.

“Today we’re going to begin our last project on personal narratives.” Announced Mrs. Kline. She was a young teacher with straight black hair I suspected was dyed. Jess said no one ever really had black hair- no one with skin as pale as Mrs. Kline’s, in any case.

“First of all, will everyone please hand in your papers to Jess?” Jessica was always the teacher’s pet. Or, more accurately, the teacher’s bad dog. Mrs. K, like most teachers, loved her work, and Jessica always knew the answers in class. But Jessica knew more than Mrs. Kline, she never hesitated to start debates in class. Teachers never quite knew how to deal with her. Jessica accepted our paragraphs describing our morning routines without comment and carried them over to Mrs. Kline’s desk, as the teacher continued.

“Instead of writing a personal narrative of our own lives, we are going to begin personal narratives based on other peoples’ lives. Rather like Little House On the Prairie, the books based on the life of Laura Ingalls Wilder. I advise you all to read those books, if you have not.” Mrs. Kline turned to the board to outline our possibilities, then caught sight of Jessica’s hand in the air and sighed. “Yes, Jess?” Jessica cringed at the abbreviation of her name, but smiled at the teacher.

As she began to speak she fiddled with the Grumbacher Artist pen on her desk. Jessica bought me an art supply kit for my birthday last month, and I traded her the pens in the kit in exchange for the white chocolate part of the chocolate house I bought her in honor of my birthday. She had used no other pens since that day.

“Mrs. Kline, Laura Ingalls Wilder wrote the Little House series. Do you mean you want us to write about our lives from the third person, as she did, or write about other peoples’ lives from the first person, as a personal narrative suggests?” Jessica had no mercy on Mrs. K, ever since October when she received an ‘A’ on a paper she had written the night before. I wondered if Mrs. K was surprised that the day after the first ‘A’ in the class, the student had stopped showing her any respect. I felt an involuntary tension begin in my lower back, even though I knew Mrs. K wouldn’t get angry.

“I’m sorry, Jess, I misspoke.” If Mrs. Kline was upset, or even noticed Jessica’s tone, she said nothing. “We will be writing a first person, true narrative of another person’s life. I’d like to call them our “Definitions.” Can you suggest an accurate example?”

“Only in fiction. The Red Tent follows the story of Dinah from the bible, told in the first person, as does Third Witch, but neither character lived- so far as history can prove. I doubt anyone here has read it, though.” Jessica glanced at me and then looked at the pen in her hand guiltily. She scribbled a note and handed it to me.

*I hate sounding prissy. It just comes too easily sometimes! ;-)* It read. I grinned at her and turned the note over to make a sketch of her hand. She loved the Grumbacher pen because of the way her fingers curved naturally around the nib, and I loved sketching the way she held it.

“Regardless, let’s get on, shall we?” When in doubt, Mrs. K was excellent at changing the subject. The class murmured in agreement. “For these personal Definitions...” Jessica shook her head and passed me another note. This one read *what are you doing later? Do you want to come over for dinner tonight? I was thinking about setting up a study hall for a bunch of us – there’s a guy I want you to meet.* I shrugged in response. I hated thinking about after school, and though I loved staying with Jessica’s family I had no interest in meeting some random guy. *Maybe.* I passed back. I would decide when the bell rang.

It took forever, but the last bell finally rang. I did want to go to Jessica’s, for all that her mother always seemed to ask a few too many questions about why I ate with them at least once a week. But I was saved from unwanted questions, an unwanted study date, and home on top of it all by a car horn. There was Brian’s grey Volvo, and there was Brian waving out the window.

“Come on, I want to show you something.” I waved Jessica goodbye and pulled the car door shut all in one motion.

“What’s up?” I asked. Brian was antsy as usual, but today he seemed particularly so. His short curly hair never needed brushing, but today it was as unruly as it could be. I was fairly certain I hadn’t seen him in days, though I’d heard the door shut when he arrived the night before.

“Do you have Tae Kwon Do or anything to be back for tonight?” He asked.

“No, but –“

“And Sari doesn’t have piano tonight, right?”

“No. Where are we –“

“Great. We’re going for a drive.” We drove for nearly an hour into the mountains, and I didn’t bother to ask where. Brian relaxed the farther from town we got, though his knee still jiggled from time to time. He talked a mile a minute.

“You know, this town is so small, it drives me crazy. But you can’t live in a city and get the kind of view you can get from these areas in the mountains. And the real estate’s great. How much do you know about economics, Kris? Do you follow any of that stuff?” I shook my head. “It’s really cool. I mean really. Pretend you smoked – don’t make that face, just pretend. You’re spending five bucks a day on cigarettes. Now pretend you take that money and put it aside every day instead. It’s easy – if you smoked, you’d have to. Hear me out, Kris.

“Kris, I’ve been doing it. For like a year now. You can save money just by lowering your cost of living. So by quitting smoking, you’re saving five bucks a day. But it only counts if you aren’t spending it.”

“But you don’t smoke.” I protested, hoping it was true.

“No, no I don’t. Kris, that’s not the point! Don’t you get it? I’m saving the money anyhow. And land out here – Jesus, the land out here is so ridiculously cheap you wouldn’t believe it. For less than \$30,000 I could get so much land, it’s insane.”

“That’s a lot of money, Bri.”

“No, no it’s not. Not in the long run. And loans, and banks, it’s all there for us. Just think about it – if we owned a place out here.” We were far into the mountains at this point, surrounded by snow covered trees. The Volvo was spinning its wheels every mile or so, chugging farther out of civilization. “Don’t you see?” I saw, and it looked beautiful. “C’mon... c’mon Carmen, you can do it...” Brian was talking to his car now, urging her forward into the snow. But the road wasn’t plowed out here, and Carmen the Car wasn’t having any of that.

“Kris, let’s go.” I followed my long-limbed brother out into the woods. The snow was deep, almost to my knees at some points. It was no wonder Carmen hadn’t wanted to go out here. But Brian did, and I followed him as he cursed his way to a clearing on a lake. At the edge of the clearing, overlooking the water was the ugliest camp I’d ever seen.

The house was grey and poorly painted. It had a porch, that was true, a porch which was very nearly falling into the lake. I looked at it for a moment, then at my brother. He beamed at me.

“Isn’t it fantastic? I think this is the one. I’ve spent all week looking out here, and this is it. All it needs is a little foundation work, and I can do that – Hell, three years of tech classes oughta come in handy. And look at that view. I mean, in the winter’s it’s harsh, y’know with the insulation being what it is, but look at this place! We could bring a paintball team out here – you could play all week and not cover the same ground twice!”

From an artist’s perspective I saw his point. The woods were something from a Robert Frost poem, and I wondered if my camera would do them justice. But from a financial standpoint...

“Brian, why are you looking at houses? Didn’t you have to send off your college applications last week or something?” Brian had an impish look in his eyes I didn’t like.

“Don’t mention it on the home front, but those apps never had a chance. I chucked them.”

“Brian!” I had no words. “Brian, you’re... you’re... you can’t buy a house, Bri, you’re not even eighteen.”

“A month and a half,” he shrugged. “What’s up with you today?”

“I don’t know,” I hedged, “I need to think about this – it’s a new idea to me, you living out here.”

“You and Sari can come stay with me. You’ll have your license this summer, you can drive her out here next year, we’ll have a blast. Leave the Bitch behind to rot.” I flinched at his reference to Mom. He waited for a response, and I grinned at his impatience.

“C’mon Kris, let’s grab dinner before we go home. You’ll see; this place will be great.”

We snuck into the house shortly before eight o’clock that night, and I went straight to my room, complaining of a stomach ache. Brian smirked and Mom, clingy as I’d expected offered to bring me an aspirin, but I begged off. I wasn’t lying – my stomach was all in knots thinking of my brother buying a house. I didn’t understand what he meant about \$30,000 being inexpensive, and I especially didn’t understand why he threw out his college applications. Brian tended to obsess about new ideas, and for as long as I could remember, his ideas had involved getting out of the house. Starting last winter, that had involved college applications. He and I had road tripped to three or four schools – all impromptu weekend trips, and he had talked a blue streak about how amazing each one was, only to decide it was worthless compared to the next he found.

I loved listening to Brian talk – he could make me believe anything he said. He had that power over most people he met. But when he spoke to me I liked to think he valued my opinion and was making an effort to win me over. Sometimes I think he actually was.

I tried to imagine visiting my brother at his own place. I couldn’t do it. Brian was supposed to graduate this spring and go off to college, not buy some place in the woods. How would he get food? Where would he work? If I couldn’t answer these questions, there was no way Brian could.

Around nine o’clock my mother opened my door, but I pretended to be asleep. I couldn’t deal with her, with being nice. I heard Sari whining about going to sleep – she hated going to bed at night. She was afraid of the dark, afraid of under her bed – during the day she pretended to be fearless, so Mom thought she faked her night fears, but I knew better. I blocked out their nightly fight and pretended to be asleep. Eventually I stopped pretending.