

Spring 5-2014

Flock

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Recommended Citation

Schulz, Erin K., "Flock" (2014). *English Honors Projects*. Paper 31.
http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/english_honors/31

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Chapter 1

On Wednesday, the sheep escaped again. I was half-wearing my nice school shoes that are a little scruffy but overall intact when Dad shouted that the sheep were out. I kicked off the shoes and pulled on my barn boots, which are no good for school because they're crusted over with years' worth of mud and sheep shit. I ran out on the porch and jumped over the bit where the stairs are broken. Fifty-six sheep stood in our back yard, and every one of them looked up at me with the same blank eyes.

Sheep are about as dumb as any creature on earth. I love my flock, but facts are facts. When they get out in the world it's not like they've got a plan. They don't huddle before hand and say, "Hey, you know that green pasture over on the north side? I'll distract the farmer and you run around him that way." Nope, they all trot around together without a thought to what they want.

I guess I startled them when I landed in the yard, because Missy let out a bleat and started hoofing it down the driveway. The rest of the sheep followed after her, the way sheep do.

Dad sidled down hill towards their pasture and tried to coax them back where they're supposed to be. I stood still at the bottom of the porch for a moment and listened to his voice. He dropped it way down, like it came from inside the earth instead of his vocal chords, and he bellowed, "Come on, come on." Not in two clipped words, not the way teachers say it when they want me to hurry and get the answer. "Cooooomeooooon." It sounds like I think a foghorn would sound, except foghorns warn you away and Dad is calling the sheep back.

Most often they obey Dad but take their sweet time about it. When the sheep get out I run fast to the bottom of the driveway and cut them off so they don't end up trotting down the gravel road on their stick legs. But I gotta do it without spooking them into running away faster. My barn boots clomp-clomp-clomped on the hard packed dirt. Today was just an off kind of day, and the sheep heard me coming. Dumb Noel, who managed to bully his way into the lead, like usual, looked at me in a real spiteful way and broke into a run. The other sheep figured that if Dumb Noel ran, their must be some reason to run. I stopped running, cause sheep may not look like they're built for speed, but I've never found much use trying to outrun four-legged creatures.

Dumb Noel isn't all bad. We called the last ram Mean Murphy. He was a nightmare. At least with Dumb Noel, Dad doesn't feel too nervous about having me and him run free in the same pasture. He could be real stubborn, though, and he was set on getting a mouthful of almost-bloomed tulips from the neighbors' garden.

"Dumb Noel," I called. "Come back here."

Dumb Noel turned around and looked at me. He didn't even bother to baa because he figured the look he gave me said it all. It's true. He has kind of a surly face. If you can imagine a sheep with a sneer, then you've got Dumb Noel.

Fine, if he didn't want to reason with me, I wouldn't waste my time. I closed my eyes and focused on the pasture where the sheep belonged. And then I sparked the sheep magic awake.

I looked down at my hands. They started out a soft pink, then grew warmer and leaned toward the yellow of the early-morning sun. I held a hand out toward the sheep and hummed, "Come on, come on." Dumb Noel's eyes shifted from left to right. He shifted his rump around so he could look at me face-to-face. "Come on, Dumb Noel, you belong in the barnyard. Leave the Lafayette's tulips alone, and I'll give you pellets tonight."

Dumb Noel cocked his head.

"Okay. Tomorrow night, too."

He took a step towards me, and the ewes gathered around him shifted and bumped into each other's padded sides. "Come on, Dumb Noel. Come back, Glinda."

It took plenty of time to coax the sheep back into their own field, even using magic. When even Limpy Lady came home, wagging her tail behind her, I swung the gate shut and looked at Dad.

A thunderstorm gathered between his eyebrows and his chin, and I took a deep breath before I asked, "How'd they get out?"

"The damn gate was wide open."

This was the second time in a month we'd found the gate open, and another time we found part of the fence clipped clean off. We hadn't seen anybody poking around. I had my suspicions.

"Dad?"

"You're already late for school. Get in the truck, Gracie."

I obeyed without speaking up about my boots being wrong and the fact that my jeans were mud halfway to my knees now.

Dad gunned the truck and we shot down the driveway. I pushed the button the dash to start the country radio station.

I waited for the thunderstorm on Dad's face to break apart and for him to sing along. The sun would break into his voice first, and then his eyes, and in the end it would erase his frown. But the music didn't work this time. Even when I sang, Dad just brewed over there in the driver's seat.

I stopped singing and watched him again until he felt my eyes and looked over at me. He put his hand on my knee and tried to will away the lines on his forehead. It didn't work.

Dad always says I look like my mom, but even Dumb Noel could tell you I take after my dad's side. Brown hair, squished down nose, and skin that is slowly turning out like a baseball mitt from spending all my time outside. If there's anything about me like my mom, it's that I'm so small. Dad's basketball-star tall, and I can't even reach the top shelf in my locker.

Everyone in my social studies class turned around to look at me when I walked in. Bailey Alders sat near the back, and she put on a real show, choking and plugging her nose. I glared at her. I didn't smell like the inside of a classroom, but I didn't smell like a port-a-potty either.

"Miss Corbin. Nice of you to join us."

I guess Mr. Paul put up with me being late from time to time, but he's my first teacher of the day. I can't always get to school when it starts. I got a real short temper when it comes to teachers using their so-nice-of-you-to-join-us voice on me.

"Mrs. Lowe's office. Now."

I left the classroom quick. Bailey's gag started to spread, and I didn't need to stay there any longer. But sending me to the guidance counselor was a low blow, and wouldn't teach me any history.

I stood in the doorway of the counselors office for five minutes before she sniffed, then looked up and saw me. The new GC had glasses that slipped down her nose and shoes with heels. She looked nicer than the old GC, but nice only went so far.

I walked in before she could say anything and slumped in the seat across from her. She started off talking about how she had been real excited to meet me for some time, because she was new and wanted to make friends at our school.

"You better talk with somebody else. I'm not going to help you make any friends."

Facts are facts, but she made a pouty face like I wasn't being fair and changed the subject to me being late. I explained about having to take care of the sheep, but it wasn't like I expected her to understand. Her clothes told me she was city and couldn't birth a lamb if her life depended on it.

“Gracie, I understand you care about your farm. But school is more important right now. You need to focus on succeeding here. Your grades don’t show me that you understand that.”

I did a thing with my jaw where I relax all my muscles so that it just hangs there, and I look especially stupid.

“If you need extra help with your schoolwork, Grace, we can match you up with a high school tutor.”

“I don’t need a tutor. Can I go?”

“Hold on, Gracie.”

I gritted my teeth. “Grace.”

“Grace. We don’t know each other very well yet, but I’m on your side. I want you to do well in school.”

“I don’t care if I do well in school. Neither does anybody else.” Least of all her. She was a GC, so she had to pretend, but I could see through that.

“Principal Emmons cares.”

It seemed like she was getting closer to my face, and her glasses were getting lower and lower on her nose so she was giving me just the sort of look I imagined the librarian would if I ever showed my face around the library again.

What’d she know? I had enough to worry about just with the farm. I didn’t want to worry about school, too. Principal Emmons and the guidance counselor and everybody else could find somebody else to worry about.

I stuck my fingers through the hole in my shirtsleeve. “Principal Emmons doesn’t even know who I am, and he doesn’t care what I do in class.”

She shrugged. “Principal Emmons cares who goes on to the ninth grade.”

“I’m going to the ninth grade,” I muttered. I didn’t see any way of avoiding it.

“I’m not sure you are. You aren’t on track to pass the state assessments. Some of your teachers think you could do ninth grade if you’re enrolled in summer school, but there are a few pushing for you to repeat the year.”

I kept slouched over in the chair, but my voice got stiff and quick. “Are you blackmailing me with summer school?” I wouldn’t go to summer school. No way. Summer was a busy time on the farm. We had sheep to shear, and a garden to weed and water, and in August there would be harvest, and I wasn’t gonna miss it by sitting around a classroom.

“I’m offering you a chance. I think you could be passing. I think you could do just fine in high school. But you’re not trying. If you want to move on to the ninth grade at all, you’re going to have to prove that you can work hard in school. Next year you’re going to be in high school, Grace, and those grades are going to matter a lot more. You have to prioritize.” She offered me a smile that showed lots and lots of teeth. “I’m on your team, Gracie.”

Nobody who said that school was more important than my farm was on my team. I stood up and pushed the chair into her desk so it clanged.

She winced. “I’ll see you later, Grace.”

When I got back to Mr. Paul’s class, everybody was working in little groups on a worksheet. Bailey Alders looked up when I walked in and said, loud as anything, “Did the counselor finally have that talk with you about personal hygiene?”

I couldn't hit her in class. I put my head down on my desk and imagined taking one of the whiteboard erasers and starting at my toes, then erasing every bit of myself until I wasn't anymore. The first time I erased myself was in the fifth grade. Most days at school I did it at least once, imagined erasing myself from toes to nose. I never erased myself at home, or in the grocery store, or church, even if kids from school showed up those places. It was just here I needed erased.

Mid-April the sky held its light long enough for me to do my chores in the twilight. I fished my knife out of my pocket and sliced through the twine on a couple of bales of hay, then gathered up big chunks of it in my arms and started tossing it into the mangers. The grass in the pasture wasn't quite grown and green enough for the sheep to do without hay yet, and the pregnant sheep needed full bellies. While I threw hay to the sheep, I sang them a song Dad learned when he lived on a sailing ship.

*“Cape Cod boys they have no sleds, heave away, haul away.
They slide down hills on codfish heads. We're bound for Samana.”*

I've never been to Samana sure as I've never been to the moon or New York City, but my Dad used to sail between all those clustered-up East Coast towns and down to the sweaty Caribbean. It was his runaway phase before Mamma told him that if he wanted to marry her he better figure out where he wanted his feet and keep them there. He picked the land where our my grandpa and great-grandpa and great-great-grandpa lived and died. Eastern Washington farm country. I don't know that it was Mamma's first choice, but Dad picked a place, and she kept up her own end of the deal.

I sliced open another bale and kept tossing hay. Straw was already sticking into my sides and stomach in a real uncomfortable way and I knew that later I'd have to spend an hour picking out little bits of pokeys that the washer wouldn't get, but I didn't care.

*“Cape Cod girls they have no combs, heave away, haul away.
They comb their hair with codfish bones. We're bound for Samana.”*

After I tossed five bales into the manger I walked around the barn to the separate pen where Dumb Noel lives. It's just coming up on lambing season now. Warm enough to be outside without a coat, but still sweatshirt season. Anyway, that means Dumb Noel's got no cause to be mixing with the ewes, so I got him his own hay. And pellets, just like I promised. I scooped them up in a coffee can and poured them neat into his trough. He turned his smug face up toward me and baaed low in his throat. It's no wonder he thinks he's special.

I wandered over to the fenced-off area for sheep who are near ready to pop out their lambs. I laid my hands on Missy's wool, and she craned her neck to look back at me. As I ran my fingers across her sides and then to her swollen belly, they started glowing an orangey light, like the sky when the sun just goes past where you can see it. Missy bleated once, a sort of protest about how stretched out her insides were getting, and I focused on comforting her. My hands sparked brighter, and Missy baaed again. The tone sounded more contented to me, but it's hard to tell when sheep were trying to tell me something and when they're just making noise. I checked on Eleanor Roosevelt after that. She seemed about as irritated as I'd expect her to be what with two or so lambs squirming around in her belly, but this wasn't her first birth.

I climbed up the gate and perched on top, watching the sky do twilight and singing the last verse of Dad's shanty.

*"Cape Cod men they have no sails, heave away, haul away.
They sail their boats with codfish tails. We're bound for Samana."*

Silhouetted in the sun-going-down light I saw Jordan Lafayette running across the field. My sunset feeling dropped right out of me, I didn't move off the fence, but every muscle inside of me curled tight. I didn't like seeing anyone from school on my own time, on my own land. Least of all Jordan. He was a sneak, and a liar, and I figured he was the one leaving gates open to cause trouble for Dad and me.

Jordan stopped running and stood looking at the sky for a while. I focused my glare on the back of his head and hoped he'd get the feeling he should head home. But my glare didn't make Jordan antsy. He just stood there and enjoyed the sunset.

Jordan Lafayette was taller than me, but not too much, so I figured he was one of the shortest guys on the basketball team. When he first moved here his hair was longer and sort of floppy but now he'd buzz cut it like the rest of the boys. With the last bits of April light coming through, it looked like a field of wheat stubble mown too short to cover the earth.

Next day I rode home from school on my bike, which works except for the brakes. Dad stood there with a couple city guys in suits. Dad's head was bent in towards the other men, but they stood real straight-spined. I dragged my school shoes in the gravel and stopped next to them so bits of sand and gravel sprayed across their shoes. I unhooked my helmet.

"Why don't you head inside, Gracie," dad said.

He didn't introduce the men to me, so I kept my stranger glare trained on them, dropped my bike handles, and headed for the house. I jumped the broken steps and turned around to get another look. The town guys were tracking me with their eyes, waiting until I was inside before they said anything else.

I stood at the window for five minutes without hearing anything, so I gave up and dumped my backpack on the chair in the living room. I went to Dad's room to see if I could hear better from there, but no such luck. I did see Jordan jump over the fence by his house and run a long stretch through our spring pasture.

Dad came inside later with a stormy face. He turned on the oven and paused with his arms braced on either side of the stovetop.

"Dad, what's going on?"

"It's money stuff, Gracie. Don't worry about it. You got chores to do."

I did, too. But I always did my chores without him having to tell me. And Dad told me things, like how much we paid to plant and the going price for wheat and how much it cost to feed the sheep. We talked about money stuff. This must be real bad news.

I pulled on my barn boots and plodded down the hill to the barn. The sheep saw me coming, and a couple of them made a beeline for their dinner table. It didn't take long for the rest of them to catch wind and crowd around the mangers.

Soon as I stepped through into the dusty dim of the barn inside, my stomach clenched tight, like the knots Dad uses at the end of ropes to weigh them down. I looked around for

something wrong to pop up, but everything looked okay. Maybe my insides were just starting to get as worried as my head about Dad's not-answers to my questions.

The feel of the warm handle of my knife as I cut through the bales settled me some. I opened the tub and scooped a bucket of pellets. Dumped them into the trough. As the sheep started snuffing them up, I noticed that there were skinny pellets mixed in with the normal kind. I set down the can and reached into the manger. A glow shone through the palms of my hands and started working into the ends of my fingers. I scooped a handful of the mixed together pellets up to my nose and sniffed. Instead of oat-dust, I smelled bad garlic. A spark of light shot from my right hand to the left.

"Dad!" I screamed. My heart pounded toward my mouth and stopped my tongue from working right. "Dad!"

I dropped my handful back into the bucket and started scooping the pellets away from the sheep. Irwin peered curiously at me while he and Eleanor Roosevelt kept lipping up their dinner. "Stop," I screamed at them, waving my arms to try and frighten them off. They shuffled back, still chewing.

I screamed for Dad while trying to stuff handfuls of the pellets back into the bucket. He stumbled out of the house and down the hill. His eyes were sharp on me, full of worry.

"Gracie?"

"Dad, somebody tried to poison the sheep."

Dad's pace slowed. "Grace. What are you talking about?"

"These aren't our pellets." Tears burned at the back of my eyes. "Dad, somebody's trying to kill the sheep."

Dad reached my side and grabbed my hands, stopping me from scooping up the poison. "Gracie, calm down."

He took a couple of the pellets in his hands and examined them closely.

"Rat poison," he muttered.

"Dad."

He picked up the trough and dumped it back into my bucket, then started carrying the bucket back to the barn.

"Dad."

"What, Gracie?"

"Why was somebody trying to kill our flock?"

He walked back to me. "Nobody was trying to kill our sheep."

"That's not true." I drilled a fierce look at him. "Was it those guys in suits?"

He set down the bucket of bad pellets and wrapped me in a hug. "No. Gracie. If someone wanted the sheep to die, there are smarter ways of doing it than a handful of rat poison. And the men from the bank have no reason for that."

I knew it wasn't them. They were dressed up too nice to sneak around our barn. "Why would anybody do this?"

He let go of me and answered. "I imagine someone's trying to send us a message."

"What kind of message?"

He picked up the bucket again. "I don't know, Gracie. A warning."

He disappeared into the barn, and I turned around to face my sheep. Eleanor Roosevelt and Charles Schultz and Irwin were the pushiest of the herd. They'd been the first ones to the trough and they'd probably eaten the most. I ran over to Irwin and whispered, "Are you okay?" He was only a year old, and he butted his head against my hand to see if I would play.

I pulled in a breath and ran my fingers over this mouth and throat. They lit up with the warm afternoon. No sparks, though, which felt safer. “You’re going to be okay,” I whispered, trying to feel out whether he was sick, whether the poison was eating him inside.

“Gracie, what are you doing?”

“I don’t want Irwin to die.”

Dad smiled at me and pulled me to my feet. “I’ll take care of this one. Rat-poison has a non-magic antidote.”

I let my fingers fade. “They’re gonna be okay?”

He tossed hay into the trough and sprinkled vitamin K powder over the top. “There. I’ll use my magic this time.”

Dad didn’t usually stop me from using magic when I did my chores. At first he kept asking me if it was still working, like it might stop just as sudden as it started, but after a while we both just got used to it. “Are you sure? I could—maybe I should use the magic just to be safe.”

Dad smiled, “Trust me, everything will be okay.” I liked seeing Dad smile, but he’d said that before and I knew how much weight to give his words.

I went on a walk that evening to try to shake off the smell of rat poison and the sound of Dad’s six words plunking into a bucket. A lot of the kids at school liked to go running. Sometimes I saw them bobbing past the end of our driveway, wearing short-shorts and pumping their arms. Running served a purpose, but it didn’t help me think. My thoughts already rushed too much. I needed the heartbeat-steady rate of walking.

More than Dad’s promises, the living things poking from the ground told me that things would be okay. Wild onions sprouted up in all the shallow puddles, and I stopped to dig a couple out. I bent over one of the puddle-ponds, scrubbed the dirt from the onion, and ate it whole. The bite of the onion crowded out the wrongness of the pellets.

On my way back to the house in the near-dark, I found a lamb all tangled up in the fencing. Trying to get through to new growth the lamb had managed to get its feet stuck all through the fencing, and now a line of barbed wire was poking into his back.

“Sh, sh,” I whispered, holding out my hands. He was only a couple of weeks old, I was surprised that his mama wasn’t out here shaming him for getting stuck and missing his dinner.

He bleated sharp and jerked. The barb stuck him good.

I held out my hands and urged him to calm down. The magic lit up my fingers the same color as a red moon rising from the very edge of the earth before I thought to call it up.

“It’s gonna be okay,” I promised, taking his stick-skinny limbs in my hands and easing them out of their binds.

Sheep magic was easy to me now, like my times tables after Dad drilled me on them at the end of sixth grade. The junior high math and science teacher, Mr. Connolly, seemed to think I should be able to do that stuff before I started Jr. High.

I got the magic and figured out times tables around the same time, actually. A couple of months after we buried my mamma, when I birthed Glinda and her twin, Ozma. I went down to the barn to feed the sheep, and Dad was there already. “Gracie, I could use your help.”

I leaned over the manger to look at him, and there was Dona Nobis, lying on her side and panting.

“What’s she doing?” I panicked.

“She’s lambing.”

I could see that. “Something’s wrong.”

Dad nodded. “Twins. They’re mixed up.”

I leapt over the manger. Dad was wearing his lambing gloves, feeling around for the right parts. The red-marbled water bag had already popped all over everything, which meant a little nose and two front hooves should be sticking out. Instead there was a little bit of a tail-end. That wouldn’t have been such a problem, so long as the hind legs were sticking out, too. I frowned. The one leg that I could see poked out in the wrong direction.

“That looks bad.”

Dad nodded. “Dona Nobis isn’t a bit happy about it.”

“What’re you going to do?”

He shook his head, still feeling gently for the right parts. “There’s not much I can do. Dona Nobis isn’t so small, but with the two right there, my hand doesn’t fit.”

I’d watched Dad help with births before. I’d watched when things went wrong and Mamma kneeled along side him. She cooed encouragements and worked her hands gently into the tangled parts.

Now that Mamma couldn’t help, it stood to reason I’d be the next best thing. My hands were small, so I’d be able to maneuver. Dad scooted out of the way and handed me the gloves and lubricant.

The moment I touched the sheep, I knew what was wrong. I knew what to do. Not in my brain, the way I know how to do long division. My hands had the knowledge. The first leg belonged to the wrong lamb, so I unbirthed that bit and started feeling, oh-so-gently, for the right set of legs. The little guy had his tail in the right place, but he still wasn’t ready to come out. His legs were tucked up under him like he was resting soundly on a bed of hay.

Dad leaned over me, “Now you need to—“

“I know, Dad.” And I did. I grabbed hold of the fetlocks, both in one hand, and wriggled them clear.

Dad nodded. “Quick, now. If the cord breaks, he could drown, and if it doesn’t, we gotta watch out that he gets some oxygen.”

“I know.” But it wasn’t the lambs that needed help anymore. Backward lambs are as easy as anything, long as you’ve got the legs right. It was Dona Nobis that I was worried about. She’d rest easier now that things weren’t plugged up, but I didn’t know how long she’d been in labor. Her sides were heaving hard.

“Dad, what about Dona?”

“Sweetie, sometimes the mamas don’t make it. You know that. You’re doing a good thing to help her deliver.”

I knew what happened to orphan lambs. We’d bring them bottles of milk a few times a day until they got big enough to chomp the grass. They’d grow up fine. But at the moment, I couldn’t stand to think of those twins starting life without a Mamma. I rested my hands on Dona Nobis’s fleece. “Don’t die, don’t die, don’t die.”

“Gracie, we can’t stop nature from taking its course. Look at the lambs. They’re going to be a healthy pair.”

One smeary lamb had spilled out, and the twin was coming out nose and toes, which was the best way. Dona Nobis was barely pushing now, barely breathing.

“There’s nothing you can do, Gracie.”

I wove my fingers through her greasy wool. “C’mon, Dona, don’t die.” I didn’t realize I was crying until teardrops landed on Dona’s side. I stared down at the water droplets and my breath caught. Dona was glowing.

I blinked away my tears. No, my hands were glowing. They threw back sunset light brighter than any reflection. My fingers felt like I was pouring water out through my fingers, like their tips weren’t the end of me anymore, like I just spilled over into Dona Nobis’s heaving sides.

She perked up her head and let out a low baa, and in a few minutes she was licking her twins. Dad looked at me real hard, and I kept watching the new family, trying to think of a name for the twins.

“Dona was dying,” Dad observed.

I nodded. I guessed anyone could see that.

He took both of my hands in his and stared while the last of the shine died back into my blood. “Looks like you got sheep magic in those hands.”

I didn’t ask a lot of questions about the sheep magic. I found out quick that Dad couldn’t answer them, and I didn’t have anyone else to ask. I just knew it was a gift. It let me save Dona. I figured the magic gave me that uneasy feeling about the sheep pellets.

Open gates and rat poison couldn’t match up to that. I’d keep my flock safe.

Chapter 2

I pretended I had to go to the bathroom in my class right before lunch so I could be the first one in the lunch line, because sometimes if I didn't get into line first, I ended up getting shuffled far back by the bigger guys.

When Mrs. Davani booted up the computer, I handed her my free lunch card, and she scanned it. I stuffed it deep back in the pocket of my jeans after that. There's nothing wrong with getting free lunch, I guess, only I can't always make myself not be embarrassed about the things Bailey Alders and Mark think that I should be.

I sat down at the table farthest away from the door, which is where I always sat. We've got these real long rows of tables, and all the eighth graders are supposed to sit in this same row. There are only forty-some kids in my grade, anyhow.

I watched Jordan walk in through the door. Watched him shuffle each spot forward in line, scan his free-lunch card, and get his handful of chicken nuggets. While he was moving through, the eighth grade table filled up with people who brought their own lunches from home. Allison Granger sat herself down next to me and started unwrapping her egg-salad-sandwich-with-pickles.

"Why are you staring at Jordan, Grace?"

"I'm not staring at him, I'm glaring at him."

"How come?"

"I can't tell you, Allison, I'm waiting until he comes over here so I can tell him."

She took a bite of her sandwich and chewed with real small, even motions. Allison is a small, even person. She has very straight hair, which is because her mom straightens it every day before she goes to school, because otherwise she has kind of floofy hair like I do. She doesn't have very many freckles, but enough to notice. She is my best friend in the school, and probably my best friend in the world who is not a sheep, but I have stopped going to sleepovers at her house since I know that her mom hides her jewelry and change jar when I come over.

On the other side of Allison, Beretta opened her lunch box and took out a thermos of soup.

Beretta Winchester is named after guns for both her first and last name. She has two older brothers who are called Colt and Ruger, and a little brother named Gatlin. They are the only family I know where everybody is named after guns, but there are other boys named after guns in the elementary school. Allison thinks I don't know, but Beretta started going to sleepovers at her house after I stopped.

Beretta put her coat and hat on the seats near her to save places for her boyfriend on the basketball team and her best friend, Laney. As if they'd have nowhere to sit if she didn't save them seats.

The next table down was where Mark and Bailey Alders sat, so their table was filled up with that pack. Laney and Beretta and Allison were friends with Bailey sometimes, but they didn't make it into Bailey's inner ring. Laney could be sneaky, Beretta and Allison couldn't muster up enough mean to meet Bailey's requirements.

Jordan Lafayette slumped into the seat across from Allison like a spineless sea-cucumber. He probably could've sat down with Mark and Leo, because of playing basketball with them, only I think he preferred sitting with Allison. I didn't complain about it because who knew which one of us Allison would rather sit with? I don't like Jordan, but Allison has her own taste, and Jordan makes her giggle a lot.

I plinked my fork down on the tray and glared across the table. “Jordan Lafayette, I know you been sneaking around our farm. You put rat poison in our sheep food, and you better have something good to say for yourself or you’ll find out what happens to people who mess with my flock.”

Jordan’s eyebrows drew down and together. “Why the hell would you think that?”

“Don’t pretend it’s not you. I saw you running around our place. In the last month we’ve had no end of trouble with our fences, and now somebody mixed poison in with the pellets. Irwin and Eleanor Roosevelt would’ve been in real trouble if I didn’t catch it.”

I guess our voices were plenty loud, because the basketball boys next to Jordan and Beretta were all staring at us. Mark spoke up. “Just think, Jordan. If she wasn’t totally in love with her sheep you would have gotten away with it.”

Bailey swallowed her bite of sandwich and chimed in. “Grace, you’ve always been a little strange, but I’m pretty sure this makes you fully crazy. Paranoia? That’s right. You’re paranoid and deluded.”

“You’re deluded,” I snapped. “And Jordan’s trying to kill my sheep.”

Jordan plunked his own fork down on the table and glared at me a minute. I was sure expecting him to either shout something at me or go ahead and slug me in the face, but instead he stood up and left the table.

After muttering some more about me being crazy, Bailey and Mark went back to their lunches.

“What was that about?” Allison asked. She broke her cookie in half and gave one piece to me. If Jordan had still been at the table I would’ve only got a third of the cookie. That was one good thing about him huffing off without answering me.

“He’s been coming around our place at night and cutting fence and swinging the gate open. The sheep have been out some four times in the past month cause of that. That’s one thing. But Irving could have died last night from eating rat poison if I didn’t notice.”

“What makes you think Jordan did it?” Allison asked, cocking her head. “You guys are friends.”

Allison’s sweet, and rich as pie. Plus, she gives me cookie every lunch. I couldn’t ask for a better friend. But she’s got moments where I wonder if they ever bothered to turn her brain on.

“No we’re not,” I explained. “Just cause you like both of us doesn’t mean we like each other. You like everyone. Anyhow, I’ve seen him sneaking around our land, and you know Cody Fair said Jordan stole his bike.”

Allison tapped her chin with her cookie, causing bits of it to crumble onto the table. “Cody said that because he’s racist, and so is his dad, so he’s not going to get in trouble for losing his bike if he tells his dad Jordan took it.”

I skewered my free-lunch pineapple. I guessed Jordan probably didn’t steal the bike. I’d never seen it around his house, and it would be real hard for him to hide it from me.

“He didn’t even say it’s not him, Allison,” I pointed out. “He could have just told me that he didn’t do it. But instead he ran off.”

“I don’t think you’re being fair,” Allison frowned.

I shrugged. Didn’t matter what Allison said. I didn’t care that Jordan and his family moved in next door from the Rez, I just cared they moved onto my land.

I was on my way to Mr. Connolly’s science class when Bailey and Mark and their pack of coyotes stopped me. I like to think of them as coyotes because coyotes hunt scared. In the

daytime, or when they're alone, they skulk around shadows and only go for weak animals. They need their buddies around to egg them on when it comes to snatching sheep.

"What is that smell?" Bailey Alders asked, looking all around me but never quite at my face. I've known Bailey since we were both four years old, when she would sometimes kick me in the shins during recess because I could run faster than her.

The other kids laughed. I tried to walk past them. I wasn't gonna fight them on the subject of my smell. But they weren't even going to let me walk on past. I tried to squeeze between Mark and his buddy Devin, but they pressed their shoulders together and braced their legs so I couldn't get anywhere.

When they surround me like this I pretend I'm a ram and put my head down so I can push right through. I pretend like I have horns that haven't grown out of my head yet, but they will. I took two steps running and rammed my head into Mark's chest. He let out an ooph of air, but didn't fall back. He grabbed me by my shoulders and pushed me up against the lockers.

"I thought you got running water in your shack now." His face got closer to mine than I liked when he talked, so I could feel his breath on my cheekbones. I tried to slide away down the lockers but he kept me in place. Mark has clean blonde hair and very neat teeth, but that didn't mean I wanted him so close to my face. "How come you still aren't showering?"

Mark had no business knowing about when I did and didn't shower. Mark had no business touching me. But I couldn't keep my face getting warm. My fingers curled into fists.

"I would die if I was your Dad," Bailey said. She still wasn't looking straight at me, now she was examining the locker behind me. "If I couldn't do any better for my family than that old trailer you live in, I would literally die of shame."

I lunged at her, fast and sudden enough that I slipped past Mark. I swung my right fist wildly at her. It's not like I cared about living in our little house. I loved the water-stain patterns on the ceiling and the way the carpet's been beaten down by so many footsteps. When Dad talked about moving I told him I had no mind to live anywhere but home. But it wasn't about home, it was about Dad, and Bailey Alders saying he should be ashamed.

Usually I'm not too bad a sort of person to have on your side in a fight. I'm small, but I mostly use my fists smart. Not this time. I was so wild-angry that my punches swung in crazy arches that Bailey could duck away from. Plus, I was holding onto my science binder so I could only use one hand. I managed to land a few grazing blows against Bailey's ribs, which made her shriek and stumble back. But when I tried to go after her, Mark tripped me, and I fell on the ground in the middle of all of them, spilling everything from my science binder.

Bailey drew her foot back, and I flinched into a ball so my tough outside could keep soft parts like my lungs and heart and stomach safe. Bailey just laughed and kicked my binder so the papers scattered out through the whole hallway.

That's when I realized that I was real near to crying, and I have a rule about crying in front of this crew. I tried to scramble to my feet but somebody gave me a shove. There was a real good chance I was about to break my own rule.

"What's going on?" A hand reached down and yanked me to my feet. Jordan's hand. I let go quick so nobody would say anything about me holding hands with Jordan.

Bailey glared at Jordan. "What are you doing?"

"I'm headed to class. What are you doing?"

"Relax, Jordan." Mark sneered. "We just wanted to remind Grassy Gracie."

"Remind her what?"

Mark didn't answer. Maybe Jordan didn't know what Mark's saying, but I knew they were showing me back to my place. Mark shoved past me on the way down the hall.

This left me and Jordan Lafayette standing face to face, set to be late for class.

"I don't need you butting in," I said. I made my eyes stay like lasers on his chin. He couldn't just swoop in here and pretend to be the good guy. I wasn't going to forget his suspicious behavior.

"Looked like you had it under control."

I wanted to punch him as hard as I could, prove that I could have taken Mark down if Jordan had let me alone, but instead I gritted my teeth, spun around, and headed for the bathroom, leaving my spilled out binder behind.

I worked myself into quite a mood by the time I made it to Mr. Connolly's science class. I kept running over the hallway scene in my head, trying to think how I should have handled it so I didn't end up getting rescued by Jordan. I wasn't paying real close attention to the teacher as he yammered on about the spring project.

"Grace Corbin, what did I just say?"

I looked up. "What?"

Someone in the class snorted, and Laney rolled her eyes.

"Grace, attention. You might actually like this assignment."

I guessed that was about as likely as me sprouting wings from my shoulder blades and flying to New York.

"You all have to find at least ten wildflowers. Press or sketch them and figure out their name, and their scientific name, and any possible uses. Keep a journal about where you find them, and any other relevant information."

My knee started bouncing under the table. Outside homework? How did Mr. Conolly think that one up? How did he know that I'd care?

"I encourage you to be personal as well as scientific in your documentation. Mrs. Durham has offered extra credit in English to those of you who journal at least a page to go with each wildflower. Remember, the greatest scientists are those who make real connections to their work, so don't be afraid of including emotions. Just make sure the scientific facts make their way in, too."

By the time I got to remedial reading, my brain was on a big old vacation in the direction of the rolling hills behind my house, thinking of the best places to find wildflowers for Mr. Connolly. Remedial reading is a waste of my time. I know it's supposed to help me pass the state tests for reading cause I didn't pass them the past couple of years, but the teacher just sits in her desk and talks with the girls on the cheerleading team the whole time, so she doesn't notice that I never open my reading workbook or level-appropriate novels. I was pretending to consider some of the books on the shelves by staring at their back and inside covers.

And that's when the GC showed up in the doorway.

"Hello, Mrs. Gordon. Can I borrow Grace for a bit?"

Great. Jordan was in this class, even though he had no business there. Bailey Alders wasn't there, but Mark was, and he stuck out his foot in the aisle as I walked past. He'd find a way to bring this up next time he pinned me against a locker. I left the room as quick as I could, so maybe everybody would forget what even happened.

I sat across from the GC again in her tiny office and kept my eyes stuck on my knees while she stared at the top of my head.

“Hi Gracie.”

“Grace. I don’t want to be here.”

“You seemed like you needed some time to think about what I said last time. But you should know that I’m going to keep checking in on you. I want you to succeed, Grace.”

I figured she could say this speech to her own mirror, so I wasn’t sure why I had to get called out of class to listen.

“Mrs. Durham says you haven’t turned in any of your homework for her this month. That’s not a good way to set yourself up for success. Why didn’t you turn in your homework?”

“I forgot.”

“All of it?”

“Haven’t you ever forgot anything?” I crossed my arms over my chest and waited for her to answer like she was defending herself in front of some kind of court of law, but that didn’t come. “I’m going to do extra credit for her class.”

“Really?” Her glasses squiggled up her nose with her big grin.

I didn’t like how triumphant she looked, so I explained the assignment and told her how I was only doing it because it fits with the important things I already have to do. It didn’t make her grin fade, though.

“Can I read your flower journal?”

When she said flower journal it made me want to gag because of how girly that sounded. It was a scientific wildflower project. Which was different. But I shrugged. If the teachers were reading it, she could too.

“You know you have to do your other English homework, too.”

“Can I go now?” It wasn’t fair for them to bring this up in April and expect I could catch up now. It wasn’t fair that my teachers were talking about sending me to summer school behind my back and none of them warned me. I needed to put my head down on my desk and erase.

She looked like she had more speeches to give, but she waved her hand, and I left.

Yellow Bells*Fritillaria pudica*

I know I can put yellow bells in my wildflower notebook because I find them every year. If I hadn't already pressed one, it'd be too late now. The last three years it's the first wildflower I've found poking out of the mud.

I remember exactly what day I found the first Yellow Bell last year, cause it was the same day as I found Jordan Lafayette poking *his* head around. March 22nd, a little over a year ago. I'd been walking out in the north pastures, looking for signs of spring with my dog, Homer. A Ford pick-up truck stuffed full of cardboard boxes, a rocking chair, and three cages of chickens and a middle-young Indian couple pulled up. Dad warned me they were coming that day, to move into the double wide trailer on land that used to be ours. This was his new plan to make ends meet, at least until we could sell the lambs.

I climbed up on a gate and hooked my feet under the second bar so I could watch them moving in and letting their chickens scrabble in the dirt. I tried to weigh out whether or not I liked them. I heard the woman laugh, and she had a real nice laugh, but I didn't trust men with long hair, and the man had a mullet of hair hanging around his shoulders. While I was trying to decide, Homer looked up at me with big curious eyes and took off after their chickens.

I tore after him. I didn't want to go anywhere near the strangers unpacking their lives onto my backyard but I needed to keep Homer out of trouble.

Homer was fast but got distracted easy. I tackled him, and he wrestled back with me, distracted from his mission to greet the neighbors. I managed to push him off me after he painted my face with dog slobber. That was when another stranger untangled himself from the back of the pick-up truck and jumped from the tailgate with a cardboard box. I stopped playing with Homer to stare. I could tell he was near my age, and it took no time at all to figure out I didn't like him. Didn't like the way he was looking at me, or the way he was standing, or the fact that he was a strange boy moving in next door. I scrambled to my feet and dragged Homer back to our own yard.

The day they moved in I felt jumpy. It didn't seem safe to go out in the pastures with my dog when there was a boy my age right next door. Coyotes and hawks make me nervous, but I know how to deal with them. Kids my age are unpredictable. I wasn't safe with them. Homer and I sniffed around by the firepit, which wasn't technically our land anymore, I found a Yellow Bell. I picked it and ran back towards the house, excited to show Dad the first flower of the season and convince him it was time to get the garden planted.

I guess Homer was more interested in making friends than I was, because it turned out he had a taste for real rare chicken legs every once in a while, which is how come he doesn't live with us anymore.

Chapter 3

On Sunday Dad and I walked the fence, looking for weak spots. It was just about my favorite job on the farm, since it meant walking all the way around our land and making sure it was all safe and bounded. A lot of times I do jobs like this by myself. Dad has enough on his plate with repairing the beat up cars that people bring here for him to look at. I know that at the end of a day with his head up in the underbelly of a truck, Dad needs to go back to the house and lean back in our reclining chair. I do as many of the chores as I can to make this go smooth, cause I know that the mechanic work is what pays the bills, but the farm is what keeps us alive.

On Sundays, though, Dad takes a clean break from working on cars because of it being the Sabbath. I don't know if it's really playing by the rules to spend the day working on the farm things instead, but that's how Dad does it.

We turned onto the stretch between the railroad and the car graveyard. I saw the problem before Dad did, cause he was singing quiet and looking up at the sky. For a moment I wondered if I could stop him from seeing it because I knew how it would crash over him. Three panels of fencing were down, and they weren't just sitting there on the ground, they were mangled. Bent and twisted, and lots of the wires had been snipped with wire cutters. The pallets holding the panels up hadn't just been knocked over, they'd been hacked to pieces.

"What the hell?" Dad asked. He broke into a run. I slowed and checked the fence that he sped past. It wouldn't do any good to miss some flaw in the fence just cause there was a bigger problem.

When I got next to Dad, I looked around at the destruction. In the places where it was hard to drive metal fenceposts, Dad stacked pallets, the kind you get at gas stations, and we tied the fencing panels to those with baling twine. Sometimes we cut extra pallets up as firewood in the winter, and that's what this looked like. Someone turned our fence into firewood. They'd used an ax, I imagined, looking at the way things were split up.

Didn't take much time to swing a gate open, or clip the baling twine so a few fence panels fell in. It couldn't even take too long to mix poison into pellets. But this much destruction took so much work. What's more, only reason to mess with these fences was if somebody wanted to give the coyotes real easy access to our pastures. We'd already lost a couple of sheep that month to coyotes. Sometimes that just happened, but I wondered if the sabotage had something to do with me following a trail of shredded fleece to those two hollowed out carcasses next to the silos.

I stared at Dad, waiting for him to tell me what was going on. He'd picked up a plank and looked over it like it'd tell him some sort of secret. "Gracie. The men who came here yesterday, they came to talk with me about the farm. They want me to give it up."

"I knew that." I didn't really know that, except in the way deep down way that you know things like that something is wrong with your mom when she comes home from the hospital in the city.

"Gracie, you know I love the farm, honey."

I started gathering the orange baling twine out from the hacked pallets. It looked fine, so we could use it again.

"But it's been so hard to keep an eye on everything. You're a big help. But Gracie, I don't understand why there was rat poison in the pellets last night, or why this fencing is all hacked up. Maybe it's a sign."

"You said it was a warning."

“And maybe we should listen.”

I stared. Listen to whoever wanted to scare us away? “Dad, we can’t.”

“I know you love the sheep, but at some point we just have to accept that we tried our hardest. If the whole world’s against us, there’s not much the two of us can do.”

I turned my back on him so that I was facing the willow grove. I sort of tripped over the uneven ground with my first steps away, and more of Dad’s words came at me like big balls of hail falling on the roof of the barn, “I won’t keep you around here if you’re going to be in danger.”

I ran fast, so that my feet barely had time to sink in the spongy ground before they lifted off again.

The Case of Grace and the Sheep Saboteur: Part 1

It was a nice day for early April. Too nice. Too nice in the sense that the warm weather this early in the season kicked my allergies into high gear, so before I left the house, Mom told me to take Kleenex with me. Now that I'd escaped her watchful eye, I was swigging Mountain Dew and staring into the placid water of the pond by the willow trees.

I saw her long before she noticed me. Gracie Corbin. Or Grace, as she liked to be called by anyone she didn't consider a friend. She made it clear that I fell within the realm of people who could refer to her as Grace.

I considered sitting very still until Gracie finished her cry and went home. Or maybe I could sneak off without catching her attention. She seemed preoccupied with her tears. My instinct for survival didn't want Grace to notice that I snuck onto her land only a couple of days after she accused me of trying to sabotage her sheep food. This was the first time I'd ever seen Grace cry, but I'd seen her fighting more than once. Out here, there was no one to hear me scream for help if she turned her fists my way.

I wished there was a way I could go over to her and do something nice. Comfort her maybe, or give her a Kleenex (since I had enough for a small allergy-prone army) without getting her mad.

Ever since I jumped out of the back of Hank (which is what my parents called our pickup) and seen Grace wrestling with her boarder collie, I wanted to be on Grace's list of people who can get away with calling her Gracie. It wasn't a romantic attraction, as Mark would like to believe. But in the moment when I first saw Grace, I recognized that being friends with her would be an adventure. That she was the sort girl who made things happen. If I could get close enough, I could be part of those adventures.

My mom likes to remind me that I read too much. I probably let my imagination run away with me when it came to our neighbor. Evidence indicated that Grace Corbin was the kind of girl who jumped to conclusions and wanted nothing to do with me. Even so, I let my imagination run for a moment—pretending I could stride over to her and fix whatever set her crying. And then, I'd be the one she'd confide in when she found an adventure.

One consequence of letting my mind wander is that I failed to quash the itching sensation building in my nose, which cumulated in a sneeze loud enough to send the couple of birds roosted in a nearby tree squawking airwards.

She instantly assumed a defensive position, and although she kept her fists at her side, they were a present threat. "You go sneaking around on our land, creeping up on me when I—when I think I'm alone, and then you get all huffy when I think you're the one trying to hurt our sheep."

In a gesture of peace, I offered her a Kleenex. She hesitated. "Take the tissue," I insisted. "You need it."

She snatched it from my hand. The sound of her blowing her nose was followed by silence.

"What are you doing out here?"

She shot me a look. What a dumb question. Anybody could see she came out here to cry in private, and what made me think she wanted to talk with me about that? I couldn't take back the stupid question, so I did the next best thing and kept my mouth shut.

She closed her eyes. "What would your family do if we had to sell our land?"

"Huh?"

“If we couldn’t keep the farm anymore. Couldn’t afford it. Would your dad buy the land and kick us off?”

I laughed. “Yeah, if we had a million dollars.” Dad didn’t want to live on the Corbin’s land any more than Mr. Corbin wanted us living there. He kept telling Mom and me that living on the Corbin’s land was temporary, but Dad seemed to mix up temporary and permanent.

Her fists tensed and started hovering closer to a coiled position. “That’s what I thought. That’s why you’re trying to kill my sheep. And bringing a Kleenex out here doesn’t change anything, cause you can’t get out of it by pretending to be nice.”

She took a few steps toward me, and I determined it would be safer to step out of her way. “I said if we had a million dollars. Hell, you get kicked off your land, no way we’ll get to keep our spot. If we had money, do you think we’d be here in the first place?”

She took another step toward me and raised her fist, but her eyes were narrowed in thought. “That makes sense. Somebody else might not be as patient when you’re late on your rent all the time.”

The way Grace said it wasn’t mean. Just factual. My parents mismanaged money. Fact. They were at least two months behind on rent. Fact. It still wasn’t easy to hear Grace say it.

She took another step toward me, and my attention was drawn back to my survival in moment. “So why are you trying to scare us away?”

“I didn’t do anything to hurt your sheep, and I don’t know why you’re so eager to pin it on me.”

Her fist dropped (and I let all my breath out in a rush) but then her shoulders curled around her ears and she sank back to the ground “I don’t understand. Somebody is trying to hurt us. I have to figure out who’s doing it and if it’s not you, I don’t know. I don’t have any other ideas.”

My heart pounded in my ears. I recognized this for exactly what it was. This was my invitation. My opening. I tried to act casual as I sat next to her and patted her shoulder. “We’ll figure it out.”

She shook my hand off her shoulder and picked up on the important pronoun. “We?”
“Yeah. You and me.”

She gave me exactly the look I was expecting, but she didn’t say anything, so I rushed ahead to make my case.

“Don’t say you don’t need my help. Because I know that your first theory was completely off, and you’re out of ideas. I can help. I live right next door, which is perfect for keeping watch, and I know this land pretty well, and...”

Grace interrupted. “I don’t like you.”

Leave it to Grace to cut straight to the point.

“And you don’t like me either.”

I shrugged. In the moments after she told me straight-up that she didn’t like me, she wasn’t my favorite person on earth.

“Why d’you wanna help me figure this out, then?”

What could I say to that? I couldn’t tell her I wanted to be friends. Or that I wanted to live something more exciting than my books. “I could have worse neighbors.”

That earned a reluctant nod. I was in.

Arrowleaf Balsamroot*Balsamorhiza sagittata*

I don't have a nickname for Arrowleaf Balsamroot. It's large and hairy, the stems are thick, and it lasts longer than any of the other flowers. It's a flower that deserves its six-syllable name. I had a hard time pressing one of the flowers because they are so thick and tough. I've never eaten any part of this plant, but the Internet says that the roots and seeds and even the young shoots are nutritious and delicious. The sheep agree.

Arrowleaf Balsamroot is related to the rest of the sunflower family. It's not tall like sunflowers you grow in the garden. Mom liked to grow those and sometimes sell them at the farmer's market, and by halfway through the summer I'd have to crane my neck up to see the tops. Arrowleaf Balsamroot never grows taller than my knees.

It's not my favorite flower, but it is the one I'm the most like. It's tough and grows where other flowers can't. I guess it's not very much like garden flowers, which have tiny delicate stems and eight petals arranged just so.

But Arrowleaf Balsamroot grows in little clumps. There's never one flower by itself. And I don't do that. I don't know how to do that. I'm only friends with Allison. When we were in the first grade I used to play all by myself at recess. Sometimes I'd just dig holes in the gravel with my bare hands, and I didn't notice that the other kids played games together. One time Allison came up to me and asked me what I was doing, so I told her that I was trying to dig deep enough to make a well in the middle of the playground. She dug with me for a week before she gave up and went back to playing a version of tag where the girls were always trying to catch the boys. But after that she always sat next to me at lunch and started inviting me over on the weekends. If Allison and I are a clump of flowers, then it's a big hairy Arrowleaf Balsamroot next to a Yellowbell or Prairie Star or something else sweet and small.

Chapter 4

After chores Sunday evening I climbed up on the gate. I linked my feet behind the bar and considered how I got myself into the current mess. I *liked* having time after chores on my own, so I could sing sea shanties and use sheep magic without anybody looking over my shoulder. Sunsets were best alone, and I had a pretty strong feeling in my gut that Jordan wouldn't get sheep magic. When Jordan started going off about how he'd come over after chores and he could scope out the barnyard, I'd opened my mouth to tell Jordan that I would rather meet another time. Like at school, where we could sit with our lunch table between us and I could eat Allison's cookie while he talked. But the second I opened my mouth, he interrupted, "Okay, I gotta go. See you later!" And he ran off. Out of the willow-grove and across the scrubby hills toward his house.

I sure didn't mean to team up with Jordan Lafayette, but after some thought, I figured he wasn't the worst person to have around. For one thing, he can be a strategic liar. Right as soon as Jordan moved in, he started playing basketball at lunch with Mark. It was officially baseball season, but the only reason anybody played baseball was to stay in shape for basketball. Jordan had steady hands and a clean jump shot, which made everyone else decide they liked him right away. Jordan even ate lunch right next to Mark his first three weeks at school.

During his third week at school I was holding my free lunch card in my hand and making a beeline for the lunch line, because Solly was trying to get their too, and Solly was the biggest eighth grader I had ever seen. If I didn't get to the pizza before him, there was no way I was going to get any of the pepperoni.

Mark stepped in front of me, and we nearly collided. "Watch where you're going, Grassy. You're at school, remember? They have enough to feed you here."

He shoved me, and I stumbled into Jordan, who was right behind me. I stepped to the left and pivoted so that they couldn't sandwich me in. So I could fight them both face-to-face. This put my back against the milk refrigerator.

"You two better leave me alone," I growled.

"Or what?" Mark grinned. Close to my face so that his breath was steaming up my forehead. "You gonna bury me in the junk heap in your backyard?" He laughed and nodded towards Jordan. "Would you come looking for me in Grassy's junkyard if I went missing?"

"Gracie doesn't have a junkyard."

Mark laughed, "I bet. They'd never pick up all the old mattresses and broken couches and crap out there."

I clenched my fist. Mark only knew what our house looked like cause he came over with his mom when my own mamma died and everybody was coming over and bringing us casseroles. I like Mark's mom quite a bit, and not just because she brought a gallon of ice cream instead of something made with tuna and pasta. She's calm and so clean and smells like fresh air. Seemed real unfair of Mark to bring up that kind of stuff when he only found out cause my mamma passed away.

Mrs. Davanni stood up from her computer and shouted. "Mark Thompson, if you're getting lunch, come to the front of the line. Otherwise, sit down at your table and behave yourself."

Mark stalled and gave me another nudge toward Jordan. “What were you saying about the junkyard?”

Jordan shrugged and shuffled his free lunch card from one hand to the other. “I dunno, they must’ve cleaned it up at least sort of, cause there’s nothing like that out there now. There’s a garden with some dead corn and sunflowers and stuff, but no couches.”

That wasn’t true. If Mark ever decided to poke around my house he’d find out Jordan lied, but at the moment it made him scowl and get out of my way so I pick a piece of square pizza and slushy fruit.

Jordan knew when to lie, and if I was gonna have anybody poking around, they better be discrete about it.

And even though we had to give up Homer after he moved in, we needed neighbors who would be willing to pay rent for some of our land. Because of property taxes and monthly expenses and growing ravines of worry on Dad’s face that finally eased up when Mr. Lafayette showed up and took long, cowboy-boot strides over the other half of our land and said he wanted it.

Jordan showed up with a Kleenex when I was sorely in need of one, and he said he’d help protect the sheep. There were worse people to work with.

*“Many thousand miles behind us, many thousand miles before
Ancient oceans have to waft us to the well remembered shore.
Rolling home, rolling home, rolling home across the sea,
Rolling home to dear old England, rolling home, dear land to thee.”*

“What’re you singing?”

I jerked on the gate I was sitting on and it banged loudly against the gatepost. “What’re you doing, sneaking around?”

Jordan Lafayette leaned up against my fence with one foot tucked up like he was oh-so-cool. “Told you I was coming. We’re supposed to plan out how to save your farm, yeah?”

“That’s not what I mean.” I jumped from the fence so I could be face to face with him. I landed lightly, but real close to where he was standing, so it made him flinch. “I mean why’re you sneaking around from my side of the fence instead of running from your own home?”

“Just looking around. For clues.”

Who’d he think he was, Sherlock Holmes? “You got a plan?”

“I need a better picture of what’s gong on before I can come up with a real firm plan.”

I figured he knew most of it, based on the fact that I already yelled at him in the cafeteria and said exactly what the problem was.

“Some people showed up and talked with Dad. Guess they wanted him to sell, and that night I found poison—“

He took a pocket sized notebook out and shook his head. “You can’t just tell me about it, you gotta show me around.”

I tucked my arms across my chest. When Dad used those notebooks they seemed practical, but Jordan looked like he was holding detective props. “Sure, so you know your way around better and can get to our sheep whenever you want.”

“I guess that would make it easier for me to help, wouldn’t it?” He smirked at me.

“I’ll show you the barn,” I muttered. “Hope you brought shoes you can get shit on.”

I had to give him the grand tour of everything before he'd finally go home, even though I looped back to his side of the land a few times and it was starting to get kind of dark. The barn, and where we kept the pellets, which now Dad was keeping a heavy metal barrel on top of, as if that would stop somebody from getting into it. I walked Jordan all the way over to the stretch of fence between the car graveyard and the railway. Dad had stacked up some new pallets but didn't get rid of any of the old mess. I pointed out the spot by the silos where I found dead sheep.

"I know what we'll do. We'll sneak out here tomorrow night and keep guard. See if anybody comes around when you'd be sleeping."

"I don't think we should be out here after dark. There's coyotes, and if someone is sneaking around, they could be real dangerous. Besides, our parents are going to say something if we disappear in the middle of the night."

Jordan's face paled and I knew he hadn't thought about any of those things.

"You're right though. I'll figure out a way to sneak out without my Dad noticing and get a flashlight. We'll go to the bird-blind, and hopefully coyotes won't come that close. Meet me after chores tomorrow and we'll figure out the details of the plan."

Jordan had no idea what he was getting into, but he'd be at least as scared as me of anything we ran into, and that made me feel brave enough. He pressed his lips together and nodded.

That next night, before Dad came in to check on me, I popped the screen out of my window and hid it under my bed. I left the window open a crack but closed the curtains so Dad wouldn't notice. He knocked twice, then poked his head in.

"Did you take care of all your chores?"

"Yeah. Missy's uncomfortable and all stretched out, but I bet she'll give birth in a week or two."

He took the two steps from my doorway to my bed and petted my hair back. "Sleep tight, Gracie."

"You too, Dad."

I watched the numbers tick by on the radio clock Dad bought me for Christmas. Jordan said we should meet at eleven, so I lay still and pretended to be asleep for an hour before I slid my window open all the way and hopped over the windowsill from my bed. I landed barefoot on the hay bales that we stacked around the skirt of the trailer to keep the house insulated. I forgot my shoes altogether, and I was still wearing the real large t-shirt and basketball shorts I wore to bed. Well, my barn boots were on the porch anyway, cause they were far past how smelly and muddy I'd bring them into the house. I snuck alongside the house, grabbed them off the porch, and ran down the hill with a boot in each hand.

Jordan was already there, perched on top of the gate.

"You gonna sit up there all night?" I asked. "Cause as long as you're sitting up in plain sight of God and everybody, I guess nobody is going to come mess with the sheep."

He hopped down from the fence trying to be real cool, but he almost fell over and made the gates clang together real loud. I ducked down and hoped Dad didn't hear, cause if he did he'd probably come out with the twenty-two.

"Come on, Gracie. You got the flashlights?"

"Grace." I corrected. "I could only find one." I switched it on and kept it pointed on the ground.

We headed for the bird blind at the corner between our land and the bird sanctuary. Jordan had to agree with me that it was a good spot for spying, mostly because it's built to be a place where you can watch what's going on without anyone, including the birds, noticing you.

I usually had to wriggle on my belly to get under the first fence because when Dad wasn't with me, nobody could hold the barbed wire out of the way for me. Jordan was noisy but at least we could hold the wire out of the way for each other.

When we got to the bird blind he pulled out a bag of Cheetos and started crunching down on them.

"What are you doing?" I hissed.

He looked at the bag in confusion. "You want some?"

"Jordan, we're not gonna hear anything if you're crunching on chips."

He laughed and shoved the bag back into his jacket pocket. I noticed that he was dressed a lot better for a midnight spy mission than me. He was even wearing a black stocking cap. Once he got quiet I could hear coyotes. They yipped off to the left, somewhere to the west. Night could make things sound close when they weren't, I reminded myself.

The flashlight I was holding dimmed until it was like I was holding a candle. Jordan and I both stared at it. I tried to will it back to life, but it gutted out. It felt pretty dim before, but now it was real dark.

"Didn't you check batteries before you left home?"

"It turned on at home," I growled. I hit the flashlight against my palm, hoping I'd jolt the batteries into a few more minutes of light, but no such luck.

"Grace, look." Jordan pointed toward the railroad tracks.

There were two lights bobbing around out there, the way two even-spaced headlights would bob along on the front of a car. Or a truck, I guess, if it was bumping through our rough hills. It took a path that would lead it real close to our barn, but on the other side, where it would be hidden from the house.

"Let's go check it out," I breathed. The truck couldn't go too fast on this terrain, so I imagined that if we were at two different points of a triangle, we'd meet up just south of the barn, so I picked up my feet and headed that way.

Jordan and I walked closer together than I wanted. Part of it was so we didn't lose each other in the dark, but I wanted to be sure I knew exactly where the other noise-making human was so I could panic about any noises he didn't make. From the jittery way he kept looking over his shoulder I figured he thought the same way.

Before we met up with the truck, the lights stopped bumping along and steadied next to each other. I heard the clanging of a tailgate coming down, followed by two sharp barks.

Jordan stopped walking and I heard him suck his breath in quick.

"Move your feet, Jordan."

"I didn't sign up for getting lost in the middle of the nature preserve at night without a flashlight," Jordan grouched.

"If you wanna go home I can do this by myself."

He started walking towards the tracks with quick, maybe angry steps but kept angled toward my barn, not toward home.

But I wasn't done. "You know, if Homer were still here, we wouldn't have to worry about it, cause he'd be looking out for the sheep."

I couldn't tell how Jordan responded cause I couldn't see his face, but my voice still leaked out angry when I talked about Homer.

Our night-vision got better when we got closer to my house, and I guess it “I’m sorry about your dog. Hang on. You see that, Grace?”

He squatted down in the mud and got his face close to the ground, so I bent down next to him. “We gotta go, Jordan. What are you doing?”

“I think this is where the truck came through. It left a perfect imprint of the tires through this patch of dirt.” He pulled a notepad out of his back pocket and sketched an outline of the tracks. I couldn’t tell how it’d be useful, since it was too dark to get a real clear view of the prints and his sketch wouldn’t be an exact match even if he took a long time on it. But he was the expert.

“Let’s go, Jordan. They’re gonna leave if you stay here all night drawing.”

I started jogging toward the barnyard, and he followed. It was easier to see where the light from the house and the barn spilled into the fields, and the dogs kept exchanging threatening throat-barks. I scrambled to the top of the fence and spotted the two big beasts tearing around the yard while the sheep swirled around one another in panic. These dogs weren’t just chasing the sheep around to herd them and have a good time, the way Homer used to do. No. One of the dogs caught Glinda by the leg and dragged her down. It stood over her like a bully in the school hallway, and I saw him snapping right for her throat.

I ran at that dog with a half-baked plan to grab its fur in my hands and throw it over the fence.

“Gracie!” Jordan called, “You can’t take on that dog.”

“Get out of here,” I yelled at the mutt. My voice wasn’t a commanding foghorn, it was a shriek, a whistle. But Jordan ran behind me, clapping his hands and shouting. The dog perked up his head and released Glinda. It backed up a few paces, snarling at us and shifting from foot to foot. Then it took off, slithering under the barbed wire and making for the road.

The other dog followed after, barking his promise that he’d be back, when we weren’t around.

Jordan ran all the way to the fence, yelling at the dumb mutt to bite a snake next time, but I didn’t care about the dogs anymore. I fell on my knees in the mud by Glinda’s side. Water was seeping into my basketball shorts, spreading and heavy, same as Glinda’s blood slipping through her fleece. I couldn’t see well, but I could feel it, real warm and sticky on her wool.

Jordan’s feet sunk into the mud on Glinda’s other side. “Is she okay?”

I shook my head. I didn’t know if he could see me, but I didn’t guess I cared much. Glinda was mine, not Jordan’s. She was the first lamb I’d ever delivered. And the way warmth kept pooling in my hands, the way I could see shadows spreading on her wool, I figured she was bleeding out.

“She’s gonna die,” I whispered.

“Can’t we do something?” Jordan dropped to his knees next to me in the mud.

I remembered holding Glinda in my hands for the very first time, before she was even full pushed out of her mom, and the way my fingers lit up that first time.

Jordan had taken off his stocking hat and pressed it against Glinda’s throat. I didn’t know how he managed to find the actual place the blood was coming from, if he even did.

I dug my fingers into Glinda’s fleece. I could feel the glow building up in me, but I hesitated. No one on earth except Dad knew about the sheep magic, and that’s how I wanted it to stay. Kids at school already thought I was a freak. I knew what they’d say about this. Jordan wasn’t my friend, I didn’t care much if he thought I was some radioactive mutant. But I didn’t need to give them any new reasons to call me crazy.

The light spilling across the barnyard from the house let me see Glinda's round dark eyes. They were stupid and blank, but they were resting on me. I guessed it didn't matter much if Jordan was around to help me save the farm if I couldn't even save Glinda.

I guess there's something I can do," I muttered.

The Case of Grace and the Sheep Saboteur: Part 2

I hadn't been on too many stakeouts, but enough to know that this was all wrong. I stared in horror at Grace kneeling beside the bloody sheep. The adrenaline that shot through me while I chased off the dogs drained when I saw tears running tracks down her cheeks.

I thought I'd been ready for whatever happened. I came prepared with the right clothes to blend in with the dark. I packed snacks because from everything I read, staking out involved a lot of boredom and waiting. Grace didn't come as prepared. I didn't know that she would bring a dead flashlight, but that's what I got for trusting the gear to her.

I hadn't calculated on losing my cool the moment something actually happened. When we spotted the truck, my teeth clacked against each other no matter how hard I clenched my jaw. I counted on the fact that Grace was so focused on getting to her sheep to keep her from noticing how green I was acting. She couldn't. She'd cut me from the team if she knew I turned into jelly in the face of danger.

Now she'd ditch me anyway. She'd never want to talk to me after tonight. Not if her sheep died. "Can't we do something?"

The panting of an injured ewe was my only answer, so I tugged off my stocking cap and held it against the sheep's neck where the blood was spurting. The scent of blood assaulted me, and I focused on keeping my Cheetos down.

Gracie pushed my hat out of the way and placed both hands on the ewe, near the spot where the dog tore its throat out. She closed her eyes, and her breath started coming slow and even. For a moment, the blue light of the sky seemed to be glowing from her hands, and the bloody fleece around her hands appeared more vivid. Had to be a reflection. Hands don't generate light of their own. Mom was right. I read too much. Gracie was just trying to staunch the flow of blood, or comfort the sheep as she died.

Grace's fierce voice hissed, "C'mon, Glinda. C'mon girl."

I shifted and put my hands on either side of hers. My skin was darker than hers. It was the contrast that made it seem like her skin was giving off blue light.

"C'mon girl," she whispered. "Glinda, time to stop bleeding, got it?"

A moment later, Grace removed her hands from the sheep's neck and dropped them into her lap. I tried not to stare, but it was hard to buy that her hands only seemed dark now because they were in shadow.

The ewe lifted its head and lipped Grace's knee.

Grace patted the sheep and said, "Stop that, Glinda."

Glinda drew her skinny legs up under her and heaved to her feet.

I blew out my breath in a low whistle, and Gracie's shoulders relaxed. "I think she's okay."

I stood. "Do you have something we can put on the cut?"

"There's an antibiotic on the shelf just inside the barn door."

I took a few steps toward the barn and told myself that there was nothing strange going on, that the sheep had just stopped bleeding, because blood clotted. If I asked Gracie about it, she'd think I was crazy.

I stopped just before the barn door. Curiosity was a weakness of mine. "What the hell did you just do?"

She looked at her hands. For a moment, kneeling in the mud with her oversized basketball shorts and blood on her hands, she looked like a heroine from a Bible story. Like a stained-glass window.

She wiped her bloody hands on her basketball shorts. “Dad says I have sheep magic.”

Sheep what? Did she say sheep magic? I walked to the barn and back, taking deep breaths. I had to be cool.

As far as I could deduce, there were three possibilities. Grace could be just as crazy as the kids at school said she was. But then I was, too. I saw the light. I saw her save the sheep. Second option: Grace did this to mess with my head. But taking care of her sheep was important to Grace, and messing with me wasn't. Which left me with the conclusion Grace possessed sheep magic.

I returned with the antibiotic and Grace tried to wash off the blood from Glinda's fleece with water from the trough while Glinda bleated. She didn't seem to like the washing process. Grace took the tube from my hand, and a light switched on in her house.

“Dad's awake. You should go.”

“What are you going to do?”

She slathered ointment on Glinda's wounds. “I'll sneak back in the window. Hopefully he'll come check on the sheep before he checks on me.”

I opened my mouth to make a plan for debriefing, but she dropped the tube of antibiotic in her pocket and loped toward the fence.

I didn't wait around for her dad to catch me out there alone.

Chapter 5

Getting out of bed for school isn't my favorite thing on a good day, but after spending half the night running around the barnyard and sneaking around so Dad wouldn't know I was out of bed, getting up was a real unpleasant chore.

Dad took a swallow of coffee. "Did all that noise last night wake you up?"

"What noise? Coyotes?"

"Sounded like dogs. Don't tell me you slept through all that."

I didn't know how long I could keep talking about last night without giving something away. "Are we out of cereal? I got state testing today."

That got him, because he'd forgotten about state testing, which he promised we were going to study for.

Today was the reading part, and tomorrow was math, and then on Thursday I was supposed to do science. I hadn't been worried about the state testing until that little chat with the CG earlier this week. I didn't assume that I'd pass, I just didn't think they could do anything about it if I didn't know which letter to fill in on the bubble sheet. Now I suspected that failing was the sort of thing that would weigh against me in judging where I'd spend my summer. Maybe I should've gotten the eight hours of sleep the teachers recommended. Didn't matter for Jordan, he would pass the reading test in his sleep.

Dad drove me into school. He usually kept the truck windows rolled way down and the country music cranked way loud, so by the time I got to school I was half deaf and my hair had the sort of windswept hair style that the models paid so much money to get. I liked to think of my hair as supermodel messy and not as "lice paradise" which Bailey called it.

But today Dad pushed the button on the dash to turn the music off. "I don't want you to worry during the test. But if you're going to go outside after school today, you need to let me know where you'll be going. And I want you back in the house and done with chores before dark."

"Is this because of the poison? Did you figure out who's trying to hurt the sheep?"

He shook his head. "Nobody's going to hurt the sheep. I just want you to be careful, Gracie."

As I made the jump from Dad's passenger seat to the gritty gravel below: I decided not to worry about that until I got back home. First I had to find Jordan Lafayette and make sure he knew how to keep his mouth shut.

More words spilled out of Dad's mouth as I slammed the car door. I pointed toward the school and shook my head like I was gonna be late if I didn't go now. After school I'd sit down and listen to him try to make excuses and try to spin okay-ness out of thin air. Just not now.

I found Jordan playing basketball at the hoop just by the doors to the Junior High. It was mostly guys playing, but I watched Beretta snake an arm around Mark and steal the ball before he knew what was happening.

I waited off to the side and looked around at the other kids coming in so I didn't seem just like those girls who were standing and giggling at the basketball players like hormonal college recruiters. I did like watching basketball. This past winter Dad and I didn't make it to a whole lot of the games, but we liked to go when we could.

Beretta passed the ball to Jordan, and he cut through the defense like a one-man battle force, throwing elbows and knocking people over when they got in his way, dribbling so that the ball never popped up above his calf. He took one of his jump shots and the ball passed through the net just before the whistle blew for us to head in for class.

Leo, Cord and Beretta all clustered around Jordan and congratulated him on the last shot. I took a step forward, then hesitated. They all looked friendly enough right now but I figured their faces would change if I walked up.

The four of them walked past me while Cord reenacted highlights from the game.

“Jordan!” I called.

He didn’t look at me, but some of the other guys did. Mark threw the ball at Jordan and hit him in the back of the head. “Hey Lafayette, your girlfriend is calling you.”

Jordan didn’t even turn around. I saw his shoulders hunch up angry around his neck as he walked in to the school.

“Aw, did you have a fight with your boyfriend, Grace?”

Why didn’t he turn around? It wasn’t like I wanted to walk to class holding hands with him, I just wanted to make sure he didn’t blab to his basketball buddies.

I waited until everyone else went into the building before I walked in.

The GC snatched me before the test, only she worked to make it look like she was being sneaky about it. She poked her head out into the hallway and made eye contact with me. Then she nodded toward her office. I kept walking toward Mrs. Durham’s class, because I was in no mood to chat and also because Mrs. Durham told me she was going to call Dad herself if I didn’t show up on time for the state test.

I stopped by Allison and waited for her to unlock her locker. She wasn’t having a lot of luck because she’d never memorized her combination. Most days just left the lock dangling open, the way a lot of kids did. The big prank around the Jr. High hallways was to run down the hall locking everyone’s lockers, because nobody remembered their combination. “Gracie, I think Mrs. Lowe wants to talk to you.”

That figured. The GC gave up on subtle head nods and worked her way towards me through the crowd. I gave up evading her and nodded her way.

I took out my wildflower notebook and slapped it on her desk.

“Hello, Grace. How are you doing? You look a little down today.”

I nudged the book towards her.

“Thanks. Why don’t you tell me a little bit about your weekend?” Her patient voice made me want to throw the potted plants on her desk through the window.

“I’m not in the mood to chat with you. I got the reading and writing test in three minutes.”

“Are you nervous about the test?”

“No.”

“It’s okay to feel a little stressed. Nerves can help you focus in and do your very best.”

Or they could make my eyes jump from one question to another so fast I didn’t read the words. They could make me check seven times whether I was really filling in circle B and whether it really was problem seventeen.

“I just wanted to see how you were feeling about the test. If there’s anything I can do to make it seem more manageable or help you feel more in control, just let me know.”

Every time she said the word test, my breath got caught. “I have to go,” I growled,

She sighed and leaned way back in her wheelie chair, but she didn’t say anything to stop me.

Sagebrush Buttercup*Ranunculus glaberrimus*

I've never noticed the Sagebrush Buttercup before the flower project. I guess I didn't look close enough. They're small, and even though the internet says they can grow as tall as my hand, the one I found was barely holding its head off the ground. Something about its smallness and bright-yellowness makes it seem brave, even though it's small.

Does it even matter if I make it to the ninth grade? My teachers already don't like me, and they aren't going to like me in high school, either. The thing is that when teachers don't like you, they sometimes think that you're dumb and ignore you and let you sit in the back and pick staples out of everything they pass back instead of raising your hand and giving answers. So I don't see how it's going to help for me to be in school for four more years picking staples. I'm already good at that now.

I heard that all you learn in ninth grade is how to pass the high school state testing and make out with boys under the bleachers, and I'm not interested in learning either. Also in ninth grade girls have to shower after gym with all the other girls.

I used to think that every school year was brand new and fresh. I thought that things could change in a getting-better way. Now I know that just doesn't happen, at least not to me. Now every new school year starts with the feeling I had in my stomach when I gave Mrs. Durham my test packet. She tried to make me look at her, like she could read from my eyes if I passed or not, but I kept my eyes on my school shoes. I filled out all the bubbles and wrote fifteen sentences total for the essay part, and if I pass it will be a miracle.

I used to go to school hoping that I'd make new friends and get along with my teacher and that everything would be okay, but now I just hope that the year will go by quick. I don't grow fresh, with small yellow petals, light green petals at my base, and hope. The GC wants me to be that way, but I can't. I wish I was that brave.

Chapter 6

When I got home from school I saw that we were nearly out of wood inside, so I changed out of my school jacket and shoes to clothes that I could get cruddy. During April I carried in a lot less wood than January, but we still needed some extra heat during the night. Dad usually had fires in the stove at some point every month from September through June. I grabbed a pair of work gloves and was on my way out when Dad joined me.

“How was the test?”

“It was okay. I finished it.”

“Gracie, we need to talk. About what I said on Sunday.”

I sipped air into my mouth. I paid attention to how it pumped in and out of me so I wouldn't forget that I had enough and that my lungs worked fine. The last few years that happened sometimes, I'd feel like there wasn't any air to breathe, and my lungs would try to climb my ribs. My heart would start beating around inside me like it was pounding on a locked door.

Dad stopped by the pyramid of wood next to our back porch and waited with his arms outstretched while I loaded them up with wood. “I know you don't want to hear it, Gracie, but those guys who came around last week—“

“They wanted you to sell the farm to them.” I started stacking wood into my own arms. This pile of wood was all hardwood, which was heavier and burned longer. I focused on the weight in my arms.

“Gracie. They came to talk about money that we owe. They told me it's only a matter of time until they foreclose. The land and the farm equipment would all go to them—they could just take them because we can't pay the money we owe. Technically the house wouldn't be, but I don't know if our house would quite stick together for another move.” He tried to laugh about that.

“A matter of how much time?”

“It doesn't matter. I'm giving them the farm at the beginning of May, Gracie. If they have to take it, it'll be another level of trouble for us. And all the trouble we've been having this month... I just think it's best to start fresh.”

He was just going to hand everything over before we had to? “What about the sheep?”

He tried to turn and look at me, but I was already on my way back into the house, so he followed. “We would sell the flock. The money would help us pay for a place in town. I could invest in setting up my mechanic shop there, and I imagine I'd be able to draw a lot more customers if we lived right there in town.” His voice stretched toward me and begged me to agree.

We pushed through the door. I stacked my wood in the wood box next to the fireplace while Dad waited for me to answer. “We can't do that. We can't sell the flock.”

“I don't want to. You know I don't want to, hon. But this is the best decision for both of us.”

I leaned against the wall. We'd have to move out before school got over. Before the wildflower book was even due. “Is this because the Lafayettes never pay their rent on time? If they paid up, would we be okay?”

“Gracie, you know the Bible story about the man who owed money?”

I shrugged. I didn't see what that had to do with Jordan's family paying what they owed us.

“There was a man who owed the king thousands and thousands of dollars that he couldn’t pay, and he told the King, ‘I can’t pay all that money.’ So what does the King do? He tells him ‘Forget it. Don’t pay a penny.’”

I restacked the wood Dad dropped so that we could fit more in the wood box.

“But that man went to his neighbor, who owed him a few dollars, and shouted at him. ‘You owe me money, and if you don’t pay me right now, I’ll have you thrown in jail.’ The King heard what he did, and said to the man, ‘I let you get away without paying when you owed me so much, and then you couldn’t do the same for your neighbor.’”

“I know the story, Dad.”

“The Lafayettes don’t owe us enough to be worth it, Gracie. This farm has years of debt stacked up.”

“So why does it matter now?”

“The bank came here. Somebody put rat poison in our sheep food. There comes a point, Grace.” He tossed his work gloves on the floor of the house and walked out.

Breathe in and out. Air through a straw. Dad’s footsteps down the stairs.

After chores, I climbed onto the fence more clumsy than I liked. Maybe because air still came in and out of my lungs a little unsteady. Maybe because I couldn’t see colors right now, just dark and light and streaks of light swimming.

“And it’s haul away girls, steady and true, Polly and Dolly and Sally and Sue, Mothers and sisters, sweethearts and all, haul away, all the way, haul away--”

“Jordan Lafayette I know you’re sneaking up on me, and I got no time for talking to you.”

“What’s that you’re singing?”

“I wasn’t joking. Go home, Jordan.”

“What’s biting you? If you’re mad about this morning, I thought it would be better if everybody doesn’t know we’re working together.” He climbed up on the gate so he could stare right at me.

Jordan hung pretty low on the list of things that upset me, but he was the only one handy. “Everybody’s going to find out one way or another, so if you don’t want your friends to find out, then you probably shouldn’t come over here anymore.”

“You’re right.”

I jumped off the gate and wiped the rust from my pants. I didn’t need his help to take care of my sheep.

He climbed down so we were level again. “Besides, we might need to plan at school. So forget trying to keep it secret. So, tonight?”

If I’d stayed in bed last night, we would have discovered another sheep carcass in the barnyard. I had to be there for them. Jordan kept his eyes on me and waited for me to answer. My throat swelled with things to say, but anything I said would come out with a sob. I nodded to him and walked quick for the house so I could cry while I showered and the tears would run into the drain with the hot water and dirt and sweat.

The Case of Grace and the Sheep Saboteur: Part 3

After that night in the barnyard, I did a bit of poking around on the subject of sheep magic. Google revealed nothing useful, just a lot of songs and references to role-playing games.

I went to find an informant I trusted more with questions of the metaphysical. I found her in the garden, up to her elbows in dirt.

“Sheep magic?” Mom wiggled a marigold seedling out of its tray and paused while she massaged the roots in her palm. “Like sheep medicine? I haven’t heard of it. But there’s a lot I haven’t heard of.”

Before I could read, I got all my stories from my mother. One night she’d tell me a story about robots trying to destroy humans in an inter-galactic battle, and the next night it would be the story of Turtle Lake and the very high wave. I blamed her for raising me to ask too many questions and read too many books.

“Could there be a medicine that heals sheep?”

She stood up and started digging around a thick clump of grass. “I don’t know, Jordan. I know a story about coyote and a big-horn sheep.”

I waited for her to tell the story, but she was too focused on the clump of grass for a real story telling. “The big-horn sheep pushed people off of a high cliff. He even tricked coyote and pushed him off the cliff. But coyote came back to life and went back to trick the big-horned sheep.”

Coyote got into it with just about everyone, I wasn’t surprised that there was a sheep story. “But that’s a wild sheep. What about domesticated sheep?”

“Don’t know. Maybe you should ask your grandmother.” She leaned on the handle of her shovel and gave me a look. “What’s all the concern about sheep?”

I shrugged. She knew I’d gone over to Grace’s house a few times that week, and she could put two and two together to figure out that if I was thinking about sheep, it had something to do with Grace. Which wouldn’t throw a wrench into the works, except I knew mom didn’t want me sneaking around in the dark all over the Corbin’s land. She sure wouldn’t want me fighting dogs and following dark trucks all over the countryside. If mom got one whiff of what we were really up to, she’d put a stop to it right away. It was time to cover my tracks.

“What about chicken magic? Is that a thing?” I handed mom one of the envelopes of seeds.

She laughed and flicked dirt at me. “I’ve never heard of chicken magic, Jordan. You read too much.”

Since all my leads came to dead ends, I decided I better talk straight to the source. I had a thousand questions I wanted to ask Grace, and even though I wanted to make sure didn’t freak her out by being too excited, the sheep magic had to do with the case.

I tried to talk to her after chores, but she looked like she was about to cry. My instincts said to wait until that night.

I flipped open a notepad and asked, “When did you first use this sheep magic?”

She looked from the pad of paper in my hands to my face and chomped on her gum. I got the message loud and clear. If she was going to share, it had to be off the record. I slipped the notebook into my pocket and leaned on the fence.

“This doesn’t leave here, got it. I don’t need people to think I’m more of a freak.”

I nodded, but it surprised me that Grace cared what the kids at school thought. If she ever tried to make them see her as normal, I’d missed it.

She picked a stem of goat grass and started picking at the head. “Started not long after we lost Mamma. Two years ago.”

I expected her to go on from there, but it looked like she’d need a little more persuasion. “How did you figure it out?”

She looked at me like she was talking to a fencepost. “I used it. I healed a sheep.”

I decided it was time to get a little firm. “Listen, Gracie. This information could actually make the difference between whether or not we can save your flock.”

“Okay. I’ve used it for lotsa little things. I heal sheep when they’re sick, and I calm them down if they get real anxious. Sometimes I just use it to make them get their tails back in the fences when they get out. It’s just like everything else I do, it’s part of my chores.”

“Couldn’t you do most of those things without magic?”

“I don’t expect you to get it. But if you don’t believe me, we don’t need to waste our time talking about it.” Her eyes sparked with hostility. I wondered if trying to be friends with Grace was worth it if she snapped at me once every five minutes.

Grace started walking. I watched for a moment to judge if she was leaving me or starting to patrol. She glanced over her shoulder to see if I followed, and I jogged to catch up.

“I believe you. I just want to make sure I’ve got the whole picture.” She didn’t spit back any retorts, so I rushed ahead with my first idea. “We should try something new. Do you think you can get the sheep to talk? If we could use them as informants, we wouldn’t have to creep around at night.”

“I can’t even get you to shut up, how’m I supposed to get a sheep to talk?” I examined her face for anger, but it *seemed* like she was making a joke. “Come on,” she ordered me, and she made her way to the manger, where the sheep were poking at the last bits of hay. She picked a little one and laid her hands on its throat. “Alright, Gao. Got something to say to us?”

Gao baa-ed, but Grace and I couldn’t understand her.

Grace shrugged. “I guess that’s okay by me, because I doubt talking sheep would be real practical.”

“You should try to meld your mind with the sheep. Then it wouldn’t have to talk, but you’d be able to see its memories, and you could see who put the rat poison in the pellets.”

Grace’s eyes narrowed. “I can’t tell if you’re crazy or if you’re pranking me. Did Mark pay you to make me look insane?”

“It’s sheep magic, Gracie, how can anything about it be too crazy?”

“If you tell anyone about this, you’ll regret it.” She knelt next to a different sheep—an older ewe, it seemed, and pressed her head against its skull. Under each ear she placed a glowing hand, and it was harder for me to convince myself that the reflection of the sunset caused the smoke-orange.

I held my breath for a moment, because both of them were so still. It had to be working. Then the sheep snorted and shook her away, and Grace stood up. “I know exactly what she was thinking.”

My face must have lit up, because Gracie laughed out loud. “She thinks I’m acting crazy. Didn’t take a mind meld to figure that out.”

I had a couple further ideas, but Grace was nearing the end of her tether with me. Time to bring out the big guns. I suggested she turn herself into a sheep.

“What? How am I supposed to do that? The sheep magic only works on sheep, not on people who want to become a sheep. Besides, what would I do as a sheep? If someone tried to come and kill me, I couldn’t do anything about it. Besides, I don’t have human magic to turn myself back after.”

“Okay.” Those were good points. I didn’t want to deal with the consequences if we turned Grace into a sheep and couldn’t get her back. “I just thought it was worth a try. It was in—it was just an idea I had.”

“Sheep would be terrible spies, even if I could talk to them,” she explained as we walked back toward the gate. “The only thing you’d learn from a sheep spy is what good green grass looks like up close. Also, I know you came up with those ideas from reading books. You don’t have to pretend like you don’t like reading, because I don’t care.”

What? It wasn’t—I mean, I didn’t pretend that I didn’t like reading. I learned before I ever came to Grace’s school that there were things not to advertise. And the fact that I would rather read fantasy books than run basketball drills was one of those things. I kept it on the down-low that I did all the readings for English, and I never let Mark and his buddies see the books I read for fun. How did Grace know?

My mind paused because Grace was talking again. “When I first got the magic, I tried a couple times to wake up sheep that were already dead. I knew from the moment I touched them that it just wasn’t right. There wasn’t any spark sending back to me. There wasn’t anything for the magic to boss around.” She paused. “I thought that Dad knew more about it than I did, cause he never seemed surprised. But then I asked him about it one day, and he said he’d never seen it before, either. We didn’t come up with any of your ideas. You have a lot of weird ideas.”

“I just want to be smarter than whoever targeted your farm. I need to gather as many pieces of information as possible to beat them. Everything we learn is a weakness for them.”

We split up to our houses. I chewed on what she’d said at the end. She’d finally volunteered information that I hadn’t needed to drag from her, but I wasn’t sure what it meant. Before I got too far away, I heard Grace’s voice again. “See you tomorrow, Jordan.”

Chapter 7

During first and second period I squeezed all the math knowledge out of my brain. I figure that's why Mr. Connolly, who taught math along with science because our school couldn't find enough people to teach both subjects and he was better at it than the P.E. teacher, had us making tessellations during third period. I just paid enough attention to know it was an art project that we had to share the supplies. We were supposed to turn it in tomorrow.

We were allowed to move our desks around and work in quiet groups. I looked up at Allison, she waved me towards her, so I dragged my desk that way. But Bailey Alders was already glaring in my direction. As soon as I got my desk over to their circle, she turned to Allison and whispered real loud, "Allison, seriously. You can be friends with whoever you want. It's really nice of you. But she can't sit over here."

Everything in my body shut. My shoulders hunched up toward my ears, my eyes squeezed closed, and my feet drew close together.

Allison ripped a sheet from the magazine in her hands. "Gracie has to use the glue, same as everybody else."

"I have an idea," Bailey smiled. "Gracie can take a glue stick and go sit over there. Downwind."

I didn't tell her I smelled marvelous because I showered the night before until we ran out of hot water. I just snatched the glue stick from her hand and took it to the desk in the back corner. I tossed my magazines on the floor with my math book. I glanced at Allison, who smiled apologetically at me, then turned her mind to cutting a tessellating shape out of her magazine page.

Jordan wasn't in math class with me. Good. That way he couldn't interfere.

Laney walked in front of my desk. "Hey Grassy," I looked up, then down again quick. Her mouth showed lots of teeth, but not in a smile. "I think I found a picture you could use." I didn't look up. I lost my curiosity for figuring out the different ways they wanted to make fun of me some long time ago.

"Come on, Grassy. I picked it out just for you." She slid the magazine onto my desk. I closed my eyes and swiped it away so it fluttered to the ground next to Mr. Connolly's desk.

Mr. Connolly stood and picked up the magazine. "Laney? Are you finished with your tessellations?"

He closed the magazine and set it on the corner of his desk. It didn't matter. I put my head down on my desk and imagined erasing myself again. Toes to head. Erasing my eyes and the image of a plastic surgery add still projected on the back of my eyelids. Until there was nothing left for them to laugh at or even a ghost for them to smell.

"You look like you got trampled." Jordan said to me after class.

I shoved the math book into my locker.

"Is this cause of the tests this morning? Or cause we were up last night?"

"The girls in my math class." I didn't want to go in depth with Jordan, cause even though he didn't call me Grassy or shove me into lockers, he didn't get picked on like this. I didn't want him to think about me as the Gracie that kids at school picked on. I wanted the me in his mind to be able to take care of everything.

"Bailey?" he asked.

I nodded.

“She’s deluded, and she’ll never make it anywhere in life,” he offered.

I poked around in my locker to see if I could find the science worksheet Mr. Connolly gave us last week. It didn’t matter to me if Bailey and her crew made it anywhere, it mattered that they were already here.

He laughed. “She got the funniest look on her face when you went at her face the other day.”

“What do you mean?”

“When you started swinging at her, her eyes got wide and she looked like she was trying to scream, but she couldn’t breathe. You looked like you were going to destroy her.”

I glanced at him to see if his face had an I’m-trying-to-get-something look on it, but it was just Jordan’s face. He wasn’t lying, just crazy. “Thanks.”

On Thursday, Mr. Connolly gave us time in class to work on the wildflower projects. I think he meant to give us a break after the science test, which was smart because they expected me to write so much on that test that I finally just put down my pencil and gave up.

Mr. Connolly walked around the class to look over our work. I had three pressed flowers stuck in place, one on each page, and writing beside them. Mr. Connolly flipped through my pages, then nodded once. “Nobody else has managed to find a Yellow Bell yet. I thought you might like this assignment.”

I wanted to explain that it wasn’t because I was girly and liked flowers or anything like that, that I only liked it because it was outside homework, but I never volunteered extra information about myself to teachers. “Can I use a computer?”

He nodded. There were four computers in the back of the room. Laney and Beretta took up two of them. Laney pointed at her screen and laughed, and Beretta leaned over to see what she found. Laney and Beretta wouldn’t cause too much trouble on their own. I sat at the computer on the other end of the row from Beretta and Laney and typed “Yellow Bell” into the search bar.

“Hey, Grace.” I got ten seconds of work done before they interrupted me. No wonder I was failing eighth grade. I clicked on the first result even though it wasn’t even about flowers, just so I looked busy.

“Grace, Beretta wants to ask you something. You’re being rude.”

I glared at Laney. “I’m trying to do my homework and you’re bugging me. That’s rude.”

Laney rolled her eyes and muttered something about there being a first time for everything, but Beretta used the moment to press on with her questioning.

“What flowers have you found so far?”

I thought through the question, trying to figure out if she was setting me up. Instead of answering her, I pointed to the first page on my notebook where I had listed the flowers I’d already pressed and the ones I knew I could find soon.

“Hey, you’re almost done. I’ve been looking for Yellow Bells because they’re supposed to bloom in April, but I haven’t found anything except, uhm, Arrowroot?”

“Arrowleaf Balsamroot.”

“Right. Those were easy to find, cause they’re so big, but harder to press.”

I navigated back to Google and typed *Yellow Bell Flower*.

“I bet you’re able to find a lot of different flowers on your property.”

Laney nudged Beretta on the shoulder and showed her something on her computer screen. While Beretta leaned away from me, Laney whispered, “Why are you talking to her?”

Beretta shrugged and turned back to me. “If I can’t find anything this week, maybe you can give me some tips on where to look.”

I didn’t make any promises.

Parsley**Indian Biscuitroot***Lomantium piperi***Canby's Desert Parsley***Lomantium Canbyi*

Probably would have never figured out that the scrubby little plants that grow up in the form of tiny trees were *parsleys*, or even that you could call them wildflowers. Mr. Connolly let me look at a guide to all the wildflowers that grow in the Columbia Basin, and I recognized the spreading out branches and white florets of Indian Biscuitroot. I guess the *parsleys* are another plant that you can cook and eat the roots of. I wonder if Jordan knows about the plants that Native Americans used to eat. I wonder if he'd try cooking them with me.

In science class, I spent the whole time looking flowers up in the books or on the computers, or writing notes down in this notebook about what I've already found. Usually I look at the clock twelve times or more during class, and every time I wish the class was closer to over. I try to never think about class when I'm not there and whenever I sit down to do my homework, I feel like I've got loads of rocks in my stomach.

I know a lot of things about sheep. For instance, I can tell you that sheep got 24 molars, which is why they eat grass a lot better than humans do.

And I can tell you that Woodrow Wilson grazed sheep on the front lawn of the White House. Grazing sheep is less expensive than hiring a lawnmower. To be fair, lawnmowers tend to leave a lot less shit around the yard. I know that when you're standing next to a sheep in the winter, you can sure appreciate that a sheep's body is 3.9 degrees hotter than a humans. And I know how to dock a sheep's long tail before it can get dirty.

Learning things about sheep is easy because of how it happens. Dad and me (or Mom and me, when I was younger) would be out in the barn, and then they'd say, watch this, and I would come over by their side and watch them dock a tail, or look at them inspecting a sheep's teeth. We'd be working side by side on the fence when suddenly Dad would say, "Gracie, did you know that there are 900 different kinds of sheep in the world? The Navajo Churro was the first breed on this continent, and it can have up to six horns."

Dad doesn't sit me down in a desk and tell me to read pages 68-73 about sheep and then answer the comprehension questions. He doesn't hand me blank sheets of paper and then spout off questions I never heard before. When I take a test about the sheep, it's something that matters. My hands are on the real live creature, and if I mess up, it means I'm gonna hurt one of my flock.

Everything I learn in school is imaginary. It popped out of somebody's mind and they wanted to feel important so they make everyone learn it. Everything I learn here is something I can touch.

Chapter 8

Friday night Jordan brought a basketball to our stakeout.

“What’s that for?”

He chewed his thumbnail. “I saw you have a hoop on the barn. Nothing happened out here the last couple nights.”

“What’s that got to do with the basketball?”

“I thought we could shoot around, just for fun.”

Why in the hell would we do that? I clambered to the top of the fence and perched there, looking around the farm for any sign of trouble. The sheep were all clustered together under the overhang of the barn. It was a cool night. I wouldn’t be surprised if the morning brought another snow. “This is not a game.”

“What?” He climbed up onto the gate next to me, which made it wobble so much that I nearly lost my balance.

“I’m not coming out here in the middle of the night and trying to sneak around without my Dad noticing to play basketball with you.” I stared at him with my chin jutting out. I probably looked like Dumb Noel did when he was trying to butt his way through a fence or Dad’s leg.

“I just thought you might want to do something normal.”

Well, he was wrong. But there was something about the way he said it. I wasn’t sure what made me want to show him how many shots I could sink in a row, but it suddenly seemed real important.

I took the ball from his hands and walked to the back of the barn. “How are we supposed to see where we’re shooting?”

He set his backpack on the ground and fished around inside. “I brought a lantern this time.”

I stepped up to where the free throw line would be and shot the ball. It sank through the hoop and bounced to the left off the uneven ground underneath. Jordan ran after and slung it back toward me. I sunk it again, then again. Jordan caught the ball just after it dropped through the net and slung it back toward me, which beat chasing up and down hills whenever I wanted to practice shots.

He held the ball from me after I made my eighth free-throw. “Can you shoot from anywhere else?”

I stepped back to the corner of the old well, which I used to measure the free throw line way off the left of the hoop. I missed my first shot, but made the second.

He snatched the ball and his eyes narrowed. “What, you got basketball magic, too? How come you’re not on the team?”

I was, in third grade. But I hadn’t been so good at shooting back then, and if your teammates go out of the way to steal the ball from you, there’s not much use being on the team.

“Shooting’s all I’m good at. I practice shooting a lot, but I don’t work on any of the other stuff.” The stuff you needed people for, and a gym where I could dribble.

“Got it. But doesn’t your dad want you to play? He was basketball king when he was here, right?”

“He lets me do what I want.” I passed the ball between my hands as quick as I could, watching it stretch and blur.

“Horse,” Jordan demanded.

“You ready to lose to a girl?”

He laughed like that was never gonna happen, then took a shot from the three-point zone and it fell way short, swishing only through air. I caught the ball and shot from just outside of the key, which I could identify because Dad spray painted those lines on and I hadn't rubbed them out with my feet yet, like I did with the free-throw line.

Before Mamma died, before I started having quite as much responsibility around the farm, I'd shoot for at least an hour everyday. I used to have dreams about how when I got to high school I'd join the team again and shock everybody with how good I was, how they would all regret not asking me to play with them on the playground because they could have been getting pointers from me all along. Anyhow, I had a flock to take care of now.

Jordan made the shot from where I'd been standing easy, but I still had control. I sank a free-throw. Course he made that one too. I scooted out a bit, and made couple of threes. Jordan missed the first and made the second. I could tell from the way he walked after the ball with sharp steps when he missed how mad he was that he earned the first letter.

The third time I missed and the ball went to Jordan.

He took all his shots from the three or further, and I had a hard time making it from there, but he kept giving up control of the ball by missing the fancy shots. Pretty soon I'd missed three of the shots he made, giving me H-O-R. He managed to rack up H-O-R-S. I shot a free throw and made it, smooth and easy.

The ball dropped from the hoop into his hands, and it took him a moment to walk over to the line.

I figured if I were one of his teammates I could just make a joke about him not screwing up now, but instead I stared at him as he got ready to shoot.

He lined up on the free throw line. He wiped his palms off on his shorts, and tossed the ball from one hand to another. He looked like Jordan-when-the-flashlight-burned-out.

I knew he'd frozen up, scared that he'd lose out to a girl, and it wasn't fair because I practiced out here with these same hills and landmarks all the time, and he played in a gym with lights and smooth floor.

He shot and missed, which was bound to happen with his nerves wiggling around in him like that. A swirl of excitement rose up from the bottoms of my feet all the way through my throat. I'd just out shot one of the starters on the varsity boy's team. I couldn't wipe the goofy grin off my face.

Jordan chased down the ball and looked back and forth from my goofy grin to the orange traitor in his hands. “We should make sure everything's secure.”

If I was Allison, or Beretta, or one of the basketball boys I'd know what to say. If anybody else were living in my skin they'd have figured out early on that they had to lose this game of HORSE. Or they'd know what to say walking from the barn to the fence line so the air wouldn't just be filled with the crackling sound of Jordan's angry breath. But inside of me was just Gracie Corbin, who never knew what to say.

At the edge of my land Jordan hoisted his ball into one arm and left without saying anything. I turned around in time to see an owl dive from the top of the barn and snatch up something small bellow. If Jordan hadn't left, I could've pointed it out to him and told him how I found an owl pellet with a ring in it, once. But now that I thought of something to say, Jordan was gone.

Bonneville Shooting Star

I already knew what Shooting Stars were called before this project. I was shooting at the basketball hoop and making every shot I took when Mom walked by and shouted, “Ladies and gentlemen, here we have the Bonneville Shooting Star, basketball champion of Washington State.” She showed me a Shooting Star after that, and I figured it was the perfect name. It looks like the petals of the flower are blowing back in the wind while the center part, I think it’s called the stamen but I’ll have to ask Mr. Connolly, is streaking for Earth. Mom thought I’d be a basketball player on the high school team one day, and she told me that when that happened, she’d make a lucky shooting-star headband and socks for me, so I’d never get nervous.

Sometimes I wish I practiced something more useful than basketball for an hour every day. I bet Bailey Alders would say I should have practiced personal hygiene. And my teachers would probably say I should’ve spent that time on homework. But I wish I’d got as good at saying the right thing.

See, I’m like sheep in some ways, but I am also really not like sheep in other ways. Because sheep are flock animals. When one sheep starts running, a bunch of the other sheep will start running too. And it’s not cause all of them heard a predator, or the farmer calling them in for dinner, or anything like that. It’s just cause another one of the sheep is running, and everybody else figures there must be some good reason.

Sometimes there are sheep that like to chew grass a little farther away from the others, or they poke their noses through the fences a little more often. Limpy Lady has a not-quite-working leg, and Dumb Noel is aggressive and loud. But none of the sheep are expected to eat from some other manger. They eat with all their heads right next to each other. I’ve never seen one sheep push another sheep against the water trough and tell them that they smelled worse than the others. And I think I would notice if that were going on in my own flock. None of the sheep are dumb enough, I guess, to make all the other sheep trot off and leave them. Maybe the sheep are all like Allison and Jordan, and they know how to be in the middle.

I played in the dirt behind the barn and kept track of how many shots I made in a row, and I never learned how to talk to my classmates. I don’t know how to undo that.

Chapter 8

Saturday morning I woke up at 7:00 am, which is half an hour later than I wake up every morning for school, and it's the time I'd wake up every day if I had half a say about my life. I hopped out of bed in the almost-light of my bedroom and put on a plaid shirt and a skirt that came down to my knees. It was one of the nicest skirts I had, and Dad told me to wear it places when he wanted me to make a good impression on somebody. I put on shorts under it for riding my bike and climbing fences.

I looked at myself in the mirror. The skirt, which was light purple with darker purple spots on it, didn't look quite right with the plaid shirt, even though the shirt also had purple in it. I took off the shirt and dug through my drawers. There was a red t-shirt and my white-button-up shirt, but that was all crumpled at the bottom of my drawer. I put the plaid shirt back on.

Dad was already in the kitchen when I got there. He took a swallow of his coffee and set it back next to the stack papers spread out in front of him, then picked his calculator back up. I knew what kind of math he was doing, and I didn't want to interrupt, so I grabbed a box of cereal off of the shelf and went outside.

I hadn't gotten a lot of sleep, partly because Jordan La-idiot thought that it was a good idea to play HORSE in the middle of the night, but more so because Jordan La-idiot had been so quiet mad at me about winning the game. My brain dribbled that thought back and forth and then I tossed another thought in there: so what did I care if Jordan was mad at me? We barely talked his first whole year of living here, and I figured we'd been sort of mad at each other that whole time. At least, I'd been mad at him. We'd only been sort of not-mad at each other for about a week. Just cause he huffed home after getting beat fair and square in a game of HORSE wasn't anything for me to lose sleep over, especially not on such a sleepy week.

I knocked on the Lafayette's back door. Nobody came to the door at first, so I pounded on it again. I was pretty sure that the Lafayette's doorbell was broken or else that they'd pulled the wires out because Dad said it never rang when he pushed the button. I sat down on their steps and ate a handful of cereal. They still had a set of working steps set the same distance apart from each other, which was probably real nice for navigating late at night.

Nobody came to the door still, and I figured that it would be kinda weird to go around and hit Jordan's window, so I ate another handful of cereal and thought about my options. Course, I could walk back to our house, but I'd woken up with both an idea and the guts to get Jordan back on my side. I didn't want to slink back to my house without talking to him. I stood up and hit the door one last time.

"Shit. Who the hell is at our house at seven in the morning?"

Oops. Figured that not everybody got up at a normal time in the morning. Suddenly it seemed like a very good idea to slink on home, and fast, but my feet felt like they were bolted in place.

The door swung open and Mrs. Lafayette was standing there in her jammies. They were pretty much like what I wore in the summer, big basketball shorts and a green tank top.

She jammed a pair of glasses on her face and stared down at me. "We don't have the rent yet, and if your dad thinks that sending you here to get it is gonna work any faster, you can tell him that it won't."

I yanked on a piece of my hair. I hadn't even taken the time to braid it this morning, so it was twisting out from my head in every direction it could.

"I don't want your rent. Can I talk to Jordan?"

“You’re not here for the rent?”

I shook my head. “Jordan and I were hanging out yesterday, and I wanted to know if he can go into town today.”

She ran a hand through her hair, and I watched it fall, just right, halfway down her back. It made me touch my wiggle-every-way hair again.

“Come on in,” she invited, stepping out of the doorway so I could.

I stepped into the laundry room because I’d come around the back way, and smell of dryer sheets and clean clothes tickled my nose. Past that their house had a wood-smoke scent same as ours, but when I stepped into the family room I could see that they combined that with more clean-house smells, like candles from the store.

Mrs. Lafayette nodded at the box of cereal in my hands. I set it on the couch next to me when I sat down. “You didn’t have to bring your own breakfast.”

I didn’t know what to say about bringing food with me.

She looked at the clock that hung over the couch. “Maybe you shoulda eaten before you came over here, kiddo. Jordan doesn’t usually get up so early on Saturday mornings. I’ll go check on him.”

Our houses were pretty much built the same way because they’re both manufactured homes, which is what they’re called so people don’t feel bad about buying trailer homes. Anhow, they get made one place and then stuck down somewhere else, and all of them are sort of the same. Both our houses got sent over in two different chunks, which means they’re doublewides, so they have rooms and hallways in the same pattern. Their house has a wood stove and a smoky ceiling pattern in the same place as ours.

The long and short of the story is that while I was sitting on their couch with my box of Cheerios, I started in on really missing my own mamma, who didn’t keep the house totally pretty and fancy, but sometimes put candles around and put up curtains that she sewed herself. Dad and I ran a pretty tight ship when it came to making sure the hay bales were stacked and the rodents kept their populations to manageable numbers in the barnyard, but laundry wasn’t such a high priority.

Mrs. Lafayette came out of Jordan’s bedroom and walked down the hallway towards me. “He’ll be up in a little bit. Here, kiddo, why don’t you sit at the table and I’ll get you some milk for that cereal.”

She got a ceramic bowl out of the dishwasher, and I took a seat at their kitchen table. At home, ours is built into the wall and also isn’t very straight. Theirs is a table with four legs, but it leans in, and a handful of pens and pencils collected in the middle.

She got some milk out of the fridge and poured it over my cheerios. She put a lot more milk on than I usually use, but I kept my mouth shut.

I crunched away for a couple minutes before Jordan stumbled out of his bedroom. His hair was still sticking every-which direction, but he put on some real clothes before he came out of his room.

“What are you doing here?”

“You pop up at my house all the time.”

“It’s seven in the morning.”

“It’s almost seven-thirty.” I felt a little guilty I woke him up, but facts are facts. I finished up my bowl by slurping the milk out of the bottom. Maybe I should go and try this some other time. Only, it was Saturday so we had all day and I couldn’t just sit around and wait for him to appear after chores. “You ran off last night.”

His mamma gave him a now-what's-that look, and then turned around and started cleaning some dishes that were sitting in the sink.

"So you decided to invade my house before God's even awake?" He slumped down in the seat across from me and poured a giant bowl of my breakfast.

"That's my cereal."

A grin crossed his face. "You drank my milk."

He might be mad that I woke him up early, but maybe it made him forget that I beat him at basketball. "You wanna go to the library today?"

He nearly choked on my cereal that he was eating. "*You* wanna go to the library today?"

Did he want me to explain the whole thing in front of his mamma? "I thought we could do some research."

He rubbed his eyes, but the gears started to grind together in his head. I figured he knew I didn't want to do anything like reading a book.

"Grace, the library doesn't open until nine."

I shrugged. "We can ride our bikes into town. Or we could go look around the lake for...for flowers." That sounded stupid. I meant that we could look for any new ways that our farm was being messed with, but I didn't want May Lafayette to think I wanted Jordan to come out and pick flowers with me just because. "For the wildflower project. For school."

His mamma interrupted. "Jordan, we were going to go visit your grandma today."

He turned around to look at his mamma, and the way we were sitting I couldn't catch a glimpse of his eyes, but she half-shrugged. "If you make sure you're home before one we can go visit Grandma and your cousins in the afternoon."

He shoveled the rest of his breakfast in his mouth and dumped his bowl into the sink. "Let's go, Grace."

I was out the door on his heels, and right behind me came the ringing of his mamma's voice. "Jordan Lyle, you wear your helmet if you know what's good for you."

"I forgot my cereal in your house."

"We can get it later. Now that Mom can't hear, why don't you explain to me why we're going to the library at the crack of dawn?"

"You were the one who suggested that we had to be a lot smarter than the people who are messing with the land if we want to beat them, right? We need to put the pieces together."

"And you wanna do that at the library?"

"I thought we could use the Internet there."

"What are you gonna ask the Internet? 'Who is trying to hurt my sheep?' Do you even have a library card? Do you know where the library is?"

I frowned at Jordan because he sounded kind of like the kids at school who liked to ask me if I was as dumb as I seemed. Maybe he wasn't over the game of horse. "Jordan Lafayette, I'm sorry I'm a good shot and you're a poor loser, but you're not asking the helpful kind of questions."

He scowled at me. "Fine. You still wanna work on the wildflower project before we go to town?"

"That was a cover story."

He dug his wildflower notebook out his backpack and flipped through the first pages. "We still have to do it."

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Maybe you do."

"You're not gonna do it?"

I shrugged. "I've already started it. I'm not in a hurry."

"And if we get kicked off the land at the end of the month? Homework is good for you, Grace. Come on, let's find some flowers."

"You can call me Gracie."

He stopped walking and stared at me, but I scrambled under the border fence because I didn't want to have a long conversation about it.

The Case of Grace and the Sheep Saboteur: Part 4

Almost a week into the case, Gracie and I were spinning our wheels. I would've thought Gracie made the whole thing up if I hadn't been with her when the dogs attacked. We missed sleep five nights in a row and I had nothing to show for it but a muddy set of tracks, a tarnished basketball record, and the right to call my neighbor Gracie. But she thought we had discovered enough to research what we had at the library. I was less than thrilled to bring Gracie into the place I considered my sanctuary.

Ms. Nighlin, the only librarian and one of my most reliable informants, jumped to her feet to welcome me. "Jordan! What a wonderful surprise! I haven't seen you for two weeks, and I was beginning to think you'd gotten too busy to read. I got a new book in for you, the last in the series that you were reading last month. I haven't put it into the system yet, but I could lend it to you if you promise to be good and bring it back soon."

I glanced at Gracie. She got the glazed look on her face that a lot of people got when they encountered Ms. Nighlin. She looked like any average librarian, but once she started talking, her rush of voice could sweep a person away.

I interrupted. "Anybody on the computers?"

"Not yet. Go ahead and get started! And who's this? Do you have a library card, sweetheart?"

Gracie shook her head. "I thought it was okay to come in with someone who's got one."

"Oh sure! You can come in and visit whenever you want, Sweetheart. But there's just nothing I like better than putting cards in the hands of new patrons."

"I don't need a card."

"How come?"

"I don't read." Gracie didn't sound belligerent about it, but Mrs. Nighlin reacted exactly as I expected.

She pressed her hands over her heart and gasped, "Don't read? Ridiculous. Come over here and let's make step one finding you the perfect book. What do you like?"

"Sheep. And not reading."

Ms. Nighlin's eyes took on an injured expression, and I shrugged helplessly. "Come on, Gracie."

I tried to drag her back to the computers so we could see what the Internet had to see about the dogs and tracks. On the way, we passed the shelves of young adult books, and Gracie stopped walking. She picked up a book and scanned the cover, then opened it, glanced at the card, and put the book back. She picked up another book and repeated the action. A smirk appeared on her face, and I got a feeling that she was learning too much.

"What are you doing?"

"Just looking at some of your favorite books."

"That's not what we came here to do. Come on, I got us a computer." Even though it was just Gracie, it made me antsy that somebody noticed I read all the young adult books in the library, even the ones with girl covers and space heroes.

"How come you don't read at school?"

This kind of talk made me nervous, but I still surprised myself when I snapped, "Some of us like having friends at school."

"So you don't want to get picked on for being too smart. But everybody's always giving me a hard time because I'm too dumb."

She had a point, and I felt bad that I snapped. “Yeah, I know.” The school put me in remedial reading when I moved. I didn’t fight them on it because it was a perfect chance to smuggle in some Orson Scott Card and spend quality time in outer space.

Gracie and I took seats in two spinny chairs in front of one computer. I spun back and forth, but she just looked at me intently “Then why do you act dumb?”

“People are just as mean if you’re too smart. I try and stay in the middle when I can. I don’t make myself a target, and I get through just fine.”

She shifted in her seat, and I stopped spinning. It hit me what that sounded like to her. *I* didn’t make *myself* a target. Like she did. Like she somehow merited Mark’s obsession with making her feel like dirt.

“Sorry. Let’s focus on what we came here for.”

Gracie seemed to think we could pinpoint what kind of truck left the muddy prints in the ground. We probably could figure that out, or at least what kind of tires they were, if we had a forensics lab. Instead, I printed off a few different images of truck prints, and we lined them up next to each other, trying to decide which looked most like our set.

“This is stupid,” Grace growled, “Even if we figure out what kinda tires we’re looking for, are we just gonna walk around sticking our heads under trucks trying to figure out what kind of treads they got?”

“We could wait until we got a suspect figured out, and then look at their truck. Then you don’t have to go around accusing innocent bystanders of trying to kill your dumb sheep.” I thought I’d stopped being angry about that, but I guess not.

“I’m sorry.” She waited for me to respond.

“If the tires aren’t going to help, we could look up the dogs.”

“The ones I tried to tackle?” She got a cocky smile on her face, and I had to grin too when I thought about how she ran after the dogs without thinking twice. “You better figure out if they have some sort of weak spot. I might get myself in trouble next time.”

We discovered that the black dogs Gracie tried to wrestle were Rottweilers. From what I could discover, the breed was popular, but also sort of terrifying. They’re easy to train working dogs, and nothing we found told us how to get them to leave the sheep alone.

When Gracie and I moved toward the door, Ms. Nighlin stopped us and tried to talk Gracie into getting a card and bringing home a book “just to give it a try.” She walked out the door without responding, and when she was gone, Ms. Nighlin gave me the last book in the series. “That girl seems like a tough nut to crack.”

After the library we went to visit Grandma on the Rez. Mom and Dad think it’s important for me to go back there and visit family, but I never feel safe. I remember how people threw eggs at our house before we left.

This time I was happy to go. Grandma was a seventy-eight-year-old font of knowledge, and she knew things I couldn’t anywhere else. I had to wait until Mom and Dad were busy before I started asking her questions, so when Mom got my baby cousin June and Dad was chatting with my aunt, I came up beside my grandma in the kitchen.

“Grandma, have you ever heard about sheep magic?”

She handed me a wet plate. I grabbed a towel because her stories came in return for a little bit of work.

“I haven’t heard anything about that. The Spokane people—we have connections to the salmon. The coyotes.” She paused her story to scrub at a dry splotch of tomato sauce. “The

Dakota people tell stories about people with Elk medicine, who can make anyone fall in love with them. They don't always use their powers wisely. I've known some boys with Elk medicine, I'm sure of that."

"But not sheep magic?"

She laughed. "I wonder what that would be like. What is it that sheep teach us?"

"How to be stupid and smelly."

"That's not all, of course. Sheep have some wisdom for us. That's what sheep medicine would be."

Different than sheep magic, then, because sheep magic didn't give Grace any kind of wisdom.

"Have you heard of a power that lets you heal animals, then?"

"My own grandmother was very good at healing. And sometimes I suppose she helped out with the animals. But I think it was more often used for her human family."

So why did Gracie only fix up four-legged creatures? If Grandma didn't know about it, it couldn't be common.

"There's a lot more to life than I've seen yet. If you've bumped into some part of that, I'd say to just be patient and keep your eyes open. It's nothing to be afraid of." She handed me a casserole dish. "Your mother told me you've made friends with the neighbor."

I thought of stained-glass Grace from that first night in the barnyard. Nothing to be afraid of.

Chapter 9

Mondays always makes me sympathize a little with the lambs we take to be slaughtered. Course I know I'm not gonna die, but I have the whole weekend to dread going back to school.

Dad got me to school plenty early, even though I tried to stall. I leaned against the brick of the school and watched Jordan trying to dribble the ball around Beretta. She had her hair braided down the middle, and she wore basketball shorts and a tank top. Brr. Jordan dodged her and took the ball in for two.

Leo nabbed the ball and tucked it under one arm. "These teams aren't fair. Jordan, if teams aren't even, you should be on the smaller team." I took a few steps closer so I could see Mark react. Leo just said that Jordan was the best player, and at least three other heads on the court were nodding. His eyes narrowed at Jordan and then they settled on me.

"That's an easy fix. Why don't we have Jordan's little stalker play?"

That was what I got for trying to sneak up and gloat at Mark.

Jordan rolled his eyes, and for a minute my throat got small. Jordan and I talked in the halls, but I didn't know if we were tight enough for me to interrupt the basketball game. "If you say so, Mark."

"I don't want to play," I growled. All of the players were blinking at me like a parliament of owls. If I was in anybody else's skin, playing or not wouldn't be a big deal. But because I was me, everybody wanted to watch. To see what I'd screw up. To see what they could use. I took a step back. Humans don't have a lot of the instincts that animals do, but I could tell I was facing predators.

"Come on, Grace." I cocked my head at Beretta. If I joined, I'd be on her team. "We could show these boys what's up."

Leo threw the ball at me, and I caught it because if I didn't it would just bounce off my chest. I held the ball for a moment and looked at Jordan, hoping he'd have some idea for how I could get out of this. Or that the bell would ring. But you're only allowed to hold the ball for so long, and I couldn't make myself just stand still until time ran out.

I dribbled over to the actual court. Mark was quick to get up in my face and start swatting at the ball. I snatched the ball up, but I had enough sense to grasp it firm with my elbows out to keep Mark at a distance. Beretta maneuvered closer to me, and I bounce-passed to her.

Before the bell rang I managed to turn over the ball twice, both times to Mark, who made a big deal about it. But I also posted up for Beretta and got a couple shots in. I had a lot more chance to show off my not-so-great ball handling than my great shooting. But when the bell rang, no one stopped to remind me that I didn't belong. The boys exchanged hi-fives and jumped on each others backs on their way into the school. Even Mark didn't say anything to me.

Beretta stuck next to me. "You should play with us again sometime. The guys aren't like, always terrible, but sometimes they give me a hard time about being a girl."

"Why are you talking to me?"

Beretta paused for a second, then replied, "You're really direct, aren't you?"

I didn't know what to say to that, so I kept walking toward my locker.

"Hey, I don't have a problem with direct. You should play ball with us tomorrow."

She expected an answer. "Okay."

I found myself face to face with the GC again during Mr. Paul's class. She had a new haircut, so the bottom of her hair flipped in, towards her chin.

“Your teachers say you haven’t been paying attention in class.”

I shrugged. It was hard to pay attention when I was sleeping.

“I’m worried about you, Gracie.”

“Grace.”

“Grace. You fell asleep twice on Friday.”

Four times, but that showed which teachers were paying attention.

“I know it can be a long day. Drifting off ever now and then, that’s normal. You’re growing up, and your body might need more sleep than you’re giving it.” That sounded about right. “But this morning Mr. Paul said he couldn’t wake you up in history class.”

I rubbed my fingers against the bumpy spine of my binder. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep in Mr. Paul’s class.” Mark sat right behind me in that class, and I woke up with his gum in my hair.

“I’m sure you didn’t, Grace, but that means that you’re not getting enough sleep. Is something going on at home?”

“I was reading last night,” I said. “Late.”

Jordan fell asleep, I guess, so he didn’t come out to help me guard. It was the first time I went out so late alone, but I couldn’t feel scared when there were so many stars hanging over my head. When I went past the fire pit I stopped at Jordan’s shelf which he thinks is secret but I have known about since before he moved here. The rock is split just wide enough for one of the fat books to fit, with an overhang so that even when it rains the inside of the book doesn’t get wet, I wiggled the book out of its spot and kept walking.

I thought about what Jordan said in the library about staying in the middle, how he’d looked right at me and said he didn’t make a target of himself. No way I was going to try to suck up to the teachers or spend hours on my homework cause I was afraid of people thinking I was stupid. But I didn’t mind the idea of getting a little less negative attention.

I didn’t know how to do that, though. Jordan knew what to say, how to act, how to be so that he could stay on everybody’s good side. I was too direct.

I found my favorite pond and rock hopped so that I could get to the very middle of it, where a person-sized rock held its head above the water. That was my favorite place to sit. In the day I could stare in the water for hours and watch the minnows swim around leeches, or I could take a nap and wake up with a kestrel circling around me to check if he should peck me on the head. I’d never done it in the dark before, and I almost slipped before I got to the sitting rock.

When I was safe in place I flicked on the flashlight, opened Jordan’s book, and started reading from the page where his bookmark stuck out. After a couple of pages I lowered the book and swirled my fingers around in the water so the tadpoles would swish around in the dark. Why was I reading Jordan’s dumb book from the dumb library? It was the last in a series, and I’d started about halfway through the book, so it wasn’t going to make sense. I sure didn’t care to run in and tell Ms. Loud Librarian that I started reading just for her so we could talk about books in loud voices. And what did I care if Jordan thought I was dumb for not reading when he tore through every book on the shelves?

The flashlight had fresh batteries and I read out there until I felt sure that everything was safe for the night, which happened to be when the stars were drowned out by pre-dawn. Then I went in to the house for a nap.

The GC cleared her throat to get my attention. “Reading for class?”

“Nope. It was a new book from the library.”

“Next time you’re up late, try reading a book for English. Or maybe your history textbook. Turning in homework would go a long way toward proving my theory that you’re ready for the ninth grade.”

My eyes drifted closed again. Fighting with her would be too big of an effort. I just nodded.

Dad and I sat out the new barn, where Dad piled all his tools and fixed things. A truck and a riding lawn mower from town folks waited for his attention, but he couldn’t fix those cause he was trying to fix our own truck so that it would keep on taking me to school, but it spewed black smoke every time he went faster than twenty-five miles an hour.

“Dad?”

“Mm?”

“What happens if I don’t go to high school next year?”

Something clanked in the engine of the car. “You’re going to high school, Gracie Corbin.” Dad’s voice was hail on the tin roof of the barn.

“Right, I am.” I opened my wildflower notebook and looked at the pages I completed. “Just, what if it doesn’t happen next year?”

“You better tell me what you mean, little lady.”

“I just was thinking that I maybe would do eighth grade again next year.”

Dad set his tools down on the concrete next to the car and came over to me. He put his hand on my shoulder. “Gracie Corbin. Are you passing all your classes?”

“Yes.” I didn’t know exactly, but when we got our midterm reports I only had an F in PE, and I’d run every day since then. But I also hadn’t for certain kept my D’s in place.

“You better be. You’re going to the ninth grade next year, young lady, even if it means you attend summer school.”

“Okay. I just wondered. I’m working on my homework now.”

Dad went back to twisting something on the car while he muttered, “I’ve been checking out some apartments in town.”

“Did you tell the Lafayettes yet that you’re going to sell the farm and kick them out?”

“When’d you start concerning yourself with the Lafayettes?”

I shrugged. “If I cashed the bonds that Grandma Polly left for me, wouldn’t we be able to make a few more payments? Definitely enough time to get some money in from Farmer’s Markets, or even the new lambs? And if we can make it that far, we could use that to get us through ‘til August, and then the wheat harvest will pay for September.”

Slam.

Dad shut the hood of the car and spun to look at me. His thunderstorm eyes weren’t directed at me often. The air in my lungs thickened to concrete. I hadn’t meant to make him angry, I was trying to help. Why was he reacting like this?

He threw the wrench on the ground so hard it bounced before landing with a final thud. “I am tired of playing this game. Damn it, Gracie. Why do you make everything more difficult?”

I didn’t get any homework done that afternoon.

Late that evening Dad was still working on fixing things, and I was still staying out of his way. This time it was the sink. It broke a week ago, but we’d been washing our dishes in the bathtub since then. I figured that the drain was just clogged, but Dad seemed to think that there

was more to the problem than that. In fact, if you listened to him swearing under there, he thought it was a helluva problem.

I parked myself in the kitchen because there wasn't any light fixture in my bedroom and it was easier to do homework when you could see what you were doing. Mr. Paul sent us home with a big old map that he wanted labeled with probably a hundred rivers, most of which weren't on the pictures in the book. He expected us to find them on the Internet. I guess I should have worked on that during class time, but I'd been busy labeling the Mississippi River and the Hudson River, which I could find in my book, and the Columbia River, which I knew because it wasn't that far away.

The door thumped, and Dad jumped up from his spot under the sink the way I jumped when I got caught sticking my gum to the bottom of the desk.

"Who the hell is showing up at nine-thirty?" He wasn't asking me. Neither of us broke down the wall of silence building between us since that afternoon.

Who was showing up at our house? Sometimes people drove through and knocked to ask if they could buy some sheep or take pictures of our tumbled over barns, but not this late at night.

"You here with the rent?" Dad's business voice boomed. A pause, then, "Gracie?"

I tore into the entryway and found Jordan standing there.

"Hey, Jordan."

He shifted from foot to foot. "Hey."

"You said you wanted to talk to Gracie?" Dad prompted.

Dad's voice froze the air in my lungs. I wasn't sure what Jordan wanted to talk about, but I sure didn't want to stand here any longer while Dad looked on. "Jordan's here to help me with my homework."

Dad's eyebrows split—one up high on his forehead and the other settled low towards his left eye. "Is that so?"

I second-guessed about bringing Jordan into our house, but figured of anyone, he'd be the least likely to wrinkle his nose or talk mean about it the next day at school. "Come in. I'm working on history."

Dad stepped barely to the side so Jordan could squeeze into the house and come with me to the kitchen.

"I found some of these rivers, but I don't have any idea where the rest are."

Dad went back to grunting under the sink, and Jordan whispered, "Gracie, I can't get out tonight. I have to stay home—my parents are suspicious, I think, cause I've been falling asleep all over the place."

I tapped my pencil on the map in front of me. "Can you actually help me with this, because it's due tomorrow, and I don't know how to find these without a computer." Turning in my homework was gonna be necessary if I wanted to get back in Dad's good graces.

"Gracie, I don't know if I can come out at all this week. Mom set me down and started talking about whether I made good decisions and whether I was drinking or doing drugs or anything."

I wrote RED RIVER in big letters at the bottom of Oregon. I figured that there were probably lots of rivers called that, and one would be in Oregon.

"I know the sheep matter to you, Gracie, but keeping my mom off my back is kinda more important. If we don't guard the sheep for a couple of nights, so what?"

So? I gritted my teeth. This land matters cause it holds us together. It holds me together. In a low voice, I muttered. "Do you ever feel like you got roots coming from every toe, and when

you walk they snap and grow again so you're always drawing out of the ground you're walking on? That's what I feel like out there. And nowhere else. Not in town, and you better believe I never feel this way at school. Dad sells the farm and I won't grow new roots." I wrote Missouri River in Missouri, because I figured that guess stood up to any others.

"You're lucky you even get to worry about that."

"Huh?"

He didn't sound angry when he spoke, but his voice came out heavy. "You think I wanted to move to this dusty little scabland last year? You think I wanted to get out of the truck with you and your mutt sitting there watching me? Nope. But I care about this too, Grace. There's no going back for us, you get me? We lose our old house and we got nowhere to go. Yeah. We could move into town like your dad is talking about doing, and how fun would it be to be the one Indian kid in the whole town?"

I figured that wasn't exactly accurate, but I knew all the other Native kids in our school still lived on the Rez. "Can't you just go back?"

"We can't go back." His head tipped forward and his eyes closed. He didn't explain why, but I could tell it was the truth. And a great big realization appeared in front of me, covering up my list of river names. I wasn't the only one scared. Jordan needed this. I only had this thought before when it headed in the direction that ended up with me making him do things to help me. Jordan needed this, so I could make him help. I could wake him up early, he would search the fields with me.

But that wasn't the whole thing—it went the other way too. Jordan couldn't lose his home, so I had to help him. If one of my sheep was scared like this I'd make sure that whatever was doing the scaring got taken care of. Maybe I couldn't make Jordan's fears disappear so easy, but I had to do something. His mom was on his case? Well, I didn't have that problem. I'd go out there. I'd fix it so we were both safe.

"I can patrol just as good by myself. You're not going anywhere, and neither are we."

His chin jerked up. "You're not mad?"

"You're still gonna help me figure it out, right?"

"Of course. Thanks, Gracie. I..."

He seemed to run out of words, so I tapped my map again with my finger. "Can I copy your rivers?"

He rolled his eyes. "At school, okay? And you better not tell anybody you got the answers from me."

Trumpet Bluebells*Mertensia Longiflora*

Trumpet bluebells grow up in wet warm soil. I think they aren't as tough as some of the other things that grow wild, but the long narrow flowers hanging down next to each other like a cluster of grapes make up for that. Mr. Connolly's science book says that they're also called Long-flowered Lungwort. That name makes my skin crawl. I think I'll stick to calling them Trumpet Bluebells.

When I read about the flowers, there are a lot of words I've never heard before. Not in science class, or in the hallways of the school. Elliptic. Glabrous. Petiolate. I sometimes just read over those words and keep going, but sometimes I write a word down and look it up on the computer, or ask Mr. Connolly if he comes over to check on me. Mr. Connolly tries to describe the words, using his hands and sometimes pictures, and I copy the words in my head, or follow his pencil as he draws elliptic leaves. I want to be able to explain the flowers that I haven't identified in this secret language of grown things. But I don't trust my brain to remember what he says and my mouth to use the words right.

Kids like Mark and Bailey make jokes about how dumb I am. I know they're part right. I got help from Jordan on my map, and it's not so much that I had to get help from him—I can't figure how I'm supposed to have a full map of the United States in my head—it was just that after I finished my map I put our two pieces of paper next to each other and stared at them. His paper was neat. The small rivers were labeled in letters marching like ants one right in front of another. He wrote big river names, like Mississippi, in block letters. I told him his map looked like a girl's and handed it back to him. He looked at my map, which had scratched out places and letters printed by a dull pencil and said, "It's fine. You'll get points for doing it anyway."

Why don't the things I do look clean? When I looked at the smudges on my map I heard Mark and Bailey in my head. Reminding me how I smell and how greasy and muddy I am. It shows up in everything I touch. I didn't want to let Mark upset me when he wasn't anywhere near, so I drowned out the mean things he'd say by thinking *petiolate*, *glabrous*, *elliptic*.

Chapter 10

Mark caught me just outside the cafeteria on Tuesday. “Hey Grassy.”

I’d made it halfway through the day without any problems. It was too good to be true.

“I’m talking to you.” I kept on walking towards the cafeteria. “Gassy Grassy, let me give you a little lesson in manners.”

“Maybe if you used her real name you’d get her attention, Mark.” Jordan’s voice. I spun around. When did Jordan show up?

“Is that how you do it, Jordan? Is that how you get your little girlfriend to spend so much time with you? All you gotta do is call her Grace?” He was talking to Jordan, but walking closer and closer to me. Derek and Neal stood behind him, close enough to take part if they needed to. Behind them a cluster of other eighth graders stopped to watch, and some of the seventh graders even gathered around to see what everybody wanted to see.

“You wish, Mark,” Jordan scoffed. “You’re not that lucky.”

I tried to scoot away, but the lunch line grew over to the place I stood, and I’d run out of options. “Listen, Grassy, I was thinking I’d make you a deal. I heard you’re about to be homeless.”

My head jerked up from fixating on my shoes to staring at Mark’s face. I shot a look to Jordan. If he was going around sharing those kinds of facts with people, I’d cut his head off.

“Aww, relax, Grassy. It’s not your boyfriend telling me. My mom works at the bank, so I know what a heap of money trouble you’re in. I thought I’d make you a little deal.”

That’s when he walked closer and closer to me, so that I couldn’t twist away from his wet-summer breath. “I figure if you end up homeless, you’re going to be out a shower again. And since we can’t have you stinking up the school, you could come over to my house and use the shower.”

My cheeks were glowing, but not the way my hands do when I’m magicking the sheep. This was sunburn glow. Too-close glow.

He kept silent on the subject of how I’d hold up my end of the deal, but it was too many times bringing up me showering, too many times bringing up me being dirty. The feeling pulsing behind my eyeballs wasn’t burning anger, and it wasn’t simmering shame anymore. I shrank away from Mark’s leer, pushing back against the bystanders.

Jordan took a few steps forward, so he stood closer to me than Derek and Neal. “Gracie’s not gonna be homeless.”

Mark looked at Jordan, and it gave me a few inches of space. Air pumped in and out of my lungs again. The lunch line moved while I was panicking about Mark, so I caught up with the end.

“If the new manager gets his way, she will. He says that with your credit you’re not going to be able to rent anyplace in town. And he’s not sorry to see you go.”

Jordan caught my eye and we all shuffled closer to the front of the lunch line. “What’s the new manager’s name?”

Mark frowned. “Huh? What’s your interest in banking all of a sudden?”

Jordan shrugged. “Just curious what big-city bully’s trying to kick us off our land.”

“Our land? Are you two moving in together?”

I moved up and handed the lady my Free-lunch card.

“Green beans?”

I shook my head.

Jordan plunked his tray on the counter. “Mark, are you getting lunch, or can you not take a hint?”

Mark snarled and took a step back. “I don’t know what you’re doing, Jordan, but you keep on sticking your nose into business just between Grassy and me. Seems like you need something to keep you busy.”

I took a fruit cup. It was still mostly frozen, which was my favorite way of eating the school lunch fruit, because I got to pretend I was eating ice cream, or at least a freezie.

Mark cleared out, and the rest of the crowd trailed after him. Jordan leaned over to me and I winced because I didn’t want to talk about Mark. Neither did Jordan, I guess. “We gotta figure out who this new manager is.”

“Do you think he drives a truck?”

Jordan shrugged. “Out here? Maybe.”

That morning Dad couldn’t get the truck started, and the roads weren’t too muddy, so I already had my bike at school. When the teachers finally set us free, Jordan and I went straight for the bike racks. “I’ll carry your backpack and you can run along beside me,” I offered.

“I carry my own books.”

I looked at him and his backpack, which hung low down on the backs of his legs. “It’s no big deal, and you’ll be able to run faster if you don’t have all that weight on your back.”

“Forget it, Gracie. You’re nosy, and I can carry my own backpack.”

I rolled my eyes. “You afraid I’ll find out what book in the princess series you’re reading this week? I’m not going to wait for you.” He took off down the sidewalk with his backpack bumping up and down. Fine. “I’ll meet you at the bank.”

The bank was on the other side of town from the school, which meant it was a grand total of almost half a mile away. I biked there in three minutes flat, and that included crossing the main road. I ditched my bike in a bush so it wouldn’t give me away, but then I couldn’t figure out a way into the bank other than walking straight through the front door. I sure couldn’t sneak through the back—they didn’t build banks for sneaking.

When I walked in, I bumped right in to Irene Thompson, Mark’s mom.

“Sorry.”

She covered her mouth with her hand and let out a kind of hiccup, then turned away from me fast and hurried out the door. I stared after her and tried to figure if I’d seen tears slipping down her cheeks. Her hair was up neat and her nails were clean and even, but I thought I saw dark lines of mascara smeared down her cheeks.

She was gone, so I turned my attention back to the inside of the bank. In front of me stood a man in a full-out suit. It was grey with skinny stripes straight up and down it. I figured it for a rich person’s suit, and since I’d never seen the guy in it before, I decided he must be the new bank manager. He’d slicked his hair, which was black instead of grey like his suit, over and back so it stood up from his head.

Same time as my eyes traveled over him, he took in my holey jeans, flannel shirt, and frizzed out hair. “Hello. Welcome to Inlander Bank. How can we help you?” His words came out fake friendly, like he knew I’d got no cause poking around the bank.

I stood with my legs shoulder-width apart and my arms crossed over my chest. I wanted him to know I wouldn’t run out crying just cause he was mean. “Are you the new manager?”

“That’s right. Are you a patron at the bank?”

“Yeah.”

“And you have business here today?”

“No. But I heard you got business with me...” I checked out his nametag. Holland Dunn. “... Mr. Dunn.”

“Why would I have business with a little girl?”

“Mark Thompson said—”

He sighed. “I’ve dealt with enough junior high rumors for one day. If you don’t have business at the bank, please leave or I will have security escort you.”

My eyes narrowed. I didn’t even think we had security at our bank, but I didn’t want to find out. I backed out the door just in time to run into Jordan Lafayette. I grabbed his sweaty arm and tugged him toward the bushes. Couldn’t have him asking Mr. Dunn more weird questions.

“You shoulda let me take your backpack.”

He caught his breath. “Who’s that?”

“New manager. Mr. Dunn. And I saw Mrs. Thompson run out just when I came in.”

Jordan puffed air at his forehead, like he had bangs there to blow out of the way. “I bet you twenty dollars Mark’s mom just got fired.”

A mean thought wormed into my head. I pushed it out, but not before I saw Mark’s money drying up, and him slinking into the free lunch line behind me. It never happened that fast, and his mom would get a new job plenty soon. But even if I’d never see it in real life, if Mrs. Thompson really got fired, Mark would start to have the same fears I did. That was good enough.

“How do you know?” I asked. I didn’t want to get my hopes up for nothing.

“I got a sense for that. A little like your sheep magic. But less cool. I get this feeling in my stomach every time somebody’s lost their job. I had plenty of chances to hone it cause of all the times Dad got laid off.”

“Why’d she get fired?”

Jordan got an excited look in his eyes. “I bet she knew too much, so the boss wanted to get rid of her.”

“You’re just making stuff up now, Jordan. We should go talk to her about it.”

“Great idea, Gracie. Why don’t we go right over to our buddy Mark’s house and ask if we can come inside for cookies and a conversation about his mom getting fired?”

Jordan was being grouchy about it, and I didn’t know where Mark lived, so I decided to wait and follow him home from school the next day. It couldn’t be too hard. He was a town kid, and there were only so many houses where he could live.

I made it through the lunch line first, sat down, and bit into my hard taco. The shell crumbled and dropped a load of crusted over meat on my lap. That was about what I expected from hard tacos. Beretta and Allison walked in with their twin lunch bags dangled down from their fingers and sat. Only this time, Beretta sat across from me.

I guessed she could tell from the way I looked at her that I was confused.

“I broke up with Derek,” she explained. “So I don’t want to sit with him.”

“And you and Laney had a fight,” Allison added. “About whether you should break up with Derek. So you can’t sit next to her.”

Beretta rolled her eyes. “I could. I just don’t want to.”

I watched Beretta careful for a moment while she unwrapped her peanut butter sandwich. She Talked to me in science, asked me to play basketball, and then sat across from me at the

lunch table. I wondered if some kind of switch had been flipped and now it was okay for people other than Allison to be friends with me.

Mark entered the cafeteria and I dropped that thought so I could watch Mark to see if he gave any hint of what happened with his mom.

Allison waved her cookie in front of my face. “Gracie, what’s wrong with you today? You keep staring at Mark. Do you have a crush on him?”

Only if I could crush his face into the playground blacktop. I shook my head. “Does he look weird today?”

“Nope. He looks normal. You look weird because you’re not taking the cookie.”

I snatched the gingerbread-and-frosting cookie from her hand and bit a big chunk from it.

“Gracie, are you even listening to me? I’m trying to talk to you about my birthday party.”

I turned my head toward Allison, because her birthday was worth my attention.

Allison’s mom always planned her really fancy birthday parties where we got to play games, and make a fancy craft, and sometimes sleep over and eat pizza. And last year had been a massive disaster, which ended when Bailey accidentally sat on Allison’s cake and I got sent home early because it was technically me that put the cake on Bailey’s bench.

“It’s fine if I can’t come,” I muttered. It was no secret her mamma didn’t like me. I offered, “I’ll still give you a present if you don’t invite me.” Jordan brought his tray and sat down across from Allison.

“Don’t be silly. You’re invited, of course. But Bailey expects me to invite her, so I have to do that, and Mom said I can invite boys this year, so I’m going to invite Jordan and Mark and some other guys.” She looked uneasily between Jordan and me. “You guys don’t always get along, and I don’t want a repeat of last year.”

I put the last bite of my cookie down on my tray so I could eat it after I finished the rest of my lunch and it would be the taste in my mouth all through science class. “Jordan and I aren’t going to fight at your party. But do you have to invite Mark and Bailey?”

Her forehead wrinkled. “I have to. Bailey will be so mad at me if I don’t.”

“So?” Beretta slurped her milk and gave Allison a skeptical look. “You don’t have to do everything Bailey wants you to.”

Allison smiled at the tabletop and shook her head. Beretta looked like she had more words to share with Allison, but Laney sat down next to Allison, and Beretta swallowed her words. I said Allison’s name twice, but she was too busy talking with Laney to hear what I had to say.

After school, Jordan skidded his bike to a stop next to me while I wrestled my bike out of the rack. “You’re gonna try to go over to Mark’s today, huh?”

“That why you rode your bike to school?” I swung a leg over my bike and pushed off. Mark had already taken off across Apple Street, and I didn’t want to lose him. “So you can keep up?”

“I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go off to Mark’s by yourself.”

Creepy crawlies worked their way up my spine when I thought about running into Mark outside of school, but I shrugged and swerved my bike around a pothole. Jordan kept quiet for a minute and pumped the pedals extra hard to keep up. “Don’t you think I can handle him?”

“Like you handled him the last couple of times?”

I yanked up on my handlebars so that my front wheel popped up. Stupid. Stupid Mark, cornering me, and stupid, stupid Jordan, thinking I couldn't handle one dumb bully just cause he'd stepped in a couple of times.

"I don't need your help. You can bike home now if you want, or you can come with me. But don't distract me from tailing Mark."

He shut up after that. We followed Mark until we got to the two-story house part of town. The only new houses in town were built across this block. It figured that Mark lived in one of the handful of cookie cutter houses we had in the whole county. He wheeled his bike in the garage, So I swerved my bike across the main street and pulled into the parking lot of a convenience store.

I dragged my feet to stop and leaned my bike against the building.

"What are you doing?"

"Just picking something up real quick. Are you coming in?"

He squinted in through the glass doors, and shook his head quick. "Nah. I'll wait."

I went inside, dug the dollar fifty in quarters out of my pocket and bought one of the wrapped-up ice cream cones with chocolate in the tip.

"A little chilly out there for ice cream, isn't it?" convenience-store Carl asked me.

I glanced out the window. Clouds pretty well blocked out the sun, and my face still tingled from the wind. "Seemed like an ice cream day to me." I took the bag he handed me and hurried out of the store.

"Ice cream?" Jordan asked, leaning against his bike in a real casual way.

"For Mrs. Thompson." I smiled the whole way back to the Thompson's front porch, because buying the ice cream felt like the kind of thing that Gracie-I-liked would do.

It took a minute of each of us nudging the other one forward before Jordan knocked on the door. A tiny-girl version of Mark opened the door and looked up at us.

"Can we talk to your Mamma?" I asked.

Mrs. Thompson appeared behind her. I figured she proved Jordan's theory right by her looks. She was dressed in a sweatshirt and shorts, which I knew for sure she couldn't wear to the bank. When she saw Jordan and me her eyes got narrow. She wasn't glad to see us, but I chalked that up to her bad week.

"Hi, Mrs. Thompson. We figured you got fired and I thought maybe you'd like some ice cream." I held it out to her, and her face sorted itself into an expression I didn't recognize.

Jordan elbowed me in the side. "We saw you at the bank yesterday. You seemed upset." She looked up at Jordan, maybe confused about who the heck was standing in her house. This time her eyes narrowed again, and there was a lightning flash of a nose wrinkle to go with it.

"This is Jordan. My neighbor," I explained quick.

"I know, Gracie. Would you like to come in? I could serve you some water, if you'd like."

I nodded for the two of us and stepped inside. Of course, I slipped off my shoes even though they were my school sneakers and not my rubber boots. The pile of shoes by the front door told me sure that everyone took off their shoes when they came in so the cream carpet stayed cream.

In the kitchen she got out two tall glasses. She pressed them to the refrigerator dispenser, one by one, and filled them for us. "Is there anything else I can get for you?"

I kept my mouth shut because at that moment Mark had just walked into the room. It took his face a minute to work itself out of confusion and into a scowl.

“What are they doing here?”

“Mark, be polite to your classmates.”

“I didn’t invite them.”

“We’re here to talk to your mom, not you.” I turned to Mrs. Thompson. “Why’d you get fired from the bank?” The words sounded rough on their way out of my mouth, but facts are facts.

Jordan hissed, “Gracie, we don’t even...”

“Holland Dunn is a—” Mrs. Thompson glanced from Mark to us and smoothed out the lines on her face. “We disagreed on some bank policy.”

“So he fired you?” I didn’t know much about bank policy but I couldn’t figure why she lost her job over that.

“Mom, what’s going on?” I could tell the way that Mark looked at his mamma that conversation didn’t make its way to the dinner table the night before. I’d never heard Mark’s voice sound like that.

I bit my lips so they wouldn’t grin and give away how mean-happy that made me feel. “What did you and Mr. Dunn disagree on?”

“Sorry, Mrs. Thompson. We’re real sorry you lost your job,” Jordan muttered, tugging on my arm.

“You two should leave,” she breathed. “I need to talk with Mark.”

“But we need—”

Jordan near dragged me out, apologizing to Mrs. Thompson and Mark while I fumed about not getting my questions answered.

On their front steps I scowled at him. “We didn’t find out anything useful from her.”

“She never told Mark she got fired. They need to talk.”

“It’s not our fault she lost her job.”

“No.” Jordan started walking down the stairs, and I trailed after him. “But you were upsetting her. She didn’t want to talk to us. Especially cause you ask questions like a battering ram.”

I tugged my hair out of the way. Sure, I could tell she wasn’t happy. But that wasn’t my fault. She wasn’t going to be thrilled to talk about losing her job today, or tomorrow, or ever.

“We needed answers. Being polite doesn’t get the job done.”

“Being kind is important just for itself.”

I looked at Jordan hard, wondering if he read that in a book, but before I could ask he hopped on his bike and started pedaling. I shook my head and took off after him. The gravel roads were dotted with puddles. I ran my bike through the middle of a big one, so the water cut out on both sides of me, like I was Moses parting the Red Sea. Jordan wove around me and drifted through another puddle, sending up a wing of water and drenching his pant leg. By the time we got home, we were both out of breath with laughter and muddy up to our knees.

The Case of Grace and the Sheep Saboteur: Part 5

Gracie and I found our first real suspect. Holland Dunn. On my way home after interrogating Mark's mom, said the name over and over to myself. "Dunn. Holland Dunn." He sounded like the perfect villain.

Half my good mood came from seeing the look on Mark's face when we told him his mom got fired. Gracie talks about Mark's mom like she's some kind of angel (she let Mrs. Thompson call her Gracie, and the whole ride home she kept talking about how neat their house was and how Mark's little sister was going to grow up to look just like her mamma) but I know that Mrs. Thompson is worse than her son. She's just quieter about her meanness. It gave me a sense of satisfaction to see them finally lose something.

Nobody mistook Mark and me for real friends, even though we spent a lot of time together at school. I knew that if I wanted to keep myself from ending up as a target, I had to keep the false peace. It's not easy.

I know for a fact that when Mark and I were paired up to be partners for a social studies project, his mom called and complained to the school and got him out of it. I know for a fact that when my mom applied to work at the bank and interviewed with Mrs. Thompson, she got the same look of disdain that Mrs. Thompson gave me when I showed up on her doorstep. When I complained about it to Mom she reminded me that there could be a lot of reasons the Thompsons don't like us: because we're Indian, or because we're poor, or because I (objectively) am better at basketball than Mark. But none of those reasons are fair.

When I got home, Dad was already sitting on the back porch, scraping off his boots. For a moment this scared me, because usually Dad being home from work early didn't spell out good news. He saw the look on my face and had to laugh. "Relax, Jordan. We're ahead of schedule, and they told me to knock off early and spend some time with the family."

Dad hated his job at the steel factory, and I thought his bosses were incapable of kind gestures. But when Dad said things, I took them as true. I sat next to him on the back porch.

"These steps could use some paint."

"Dad, do you know anything about sheep magic?"

His face didn't look the same as mom did. He didn't believe that I read too much, so he never teased me about that. Dad was kind of like Gracie, because he could read, but he didn't.

"Explain it to me."

"Like, if you found a sheep that maybe—was having trouble with a birth or something, and you could touch it and tell it to be okay and it just would?"

"You're wondering if this is possible?"

I shrugged. Seemed to be possible. I was just wondering how.

"I've never heard of anything like that. But that doesn't mean it's not real."

That was all Dad had to say about sheep magic. He didn't fish around in his memory for related stories, just went in the house to get paint for the porch and a brush for both of us.

Chapter 11

I met Dad down at the barn after I dropped my bike at the end of the driveway. My mood was still sky-high, so I forgot that Dad and I were stuck in not-really-talking mode. “Dad, what are you doing?”

“Do you wanna help, Gracie, or are you going to throw a fit?”

I had to dig my nails into my hands so I didn’t snap back at him. Just cause I refused to let him sell the farm didn’t mean I was having a fit. “I’ll help, Dad. What are you doing?”

“I’ve got some folks interested in buying the sheep, so I’m giving them a good look-over to describe the condition.”

My vocal cords wrapped themselves around my lungs so I couldn’t respond. Dad ran his hands down Dwayne’s legs and looked into his nostrils.

There was plenty of air. Plenty of manure scented air, made fresh by the apple orchard trees and the windbreak trees and the far-off willow grove breathing new oxygen my way. Plenty of air. Breathing into me and out of me, not tangling inside my throat.

Dad glanced at me, and maybe he felt bad that he accused me of throwing a fit, because his voice was real soft when he said, “Come here, Gracie, let me show you what I check. You can write things down and help me get the sheep calm when they get antsy.”

I walked across the mud to where he was stood and watched while he took me on a tour of the price stickers on our sheep. While we worked everything we fought about didn’t matter. All that mattered was that we both did our job right. He showed me how to tell from the teeth whether a ewe was three or four years old and then tested me to see if I figured right.

I tried not to question why it mattered to learn anything new when I never would have to take care of a sheep again after Dad sold them. I told myself that everything I learned about my flock could help.

“How long, Dad?”

“How long ‘til what?”

“‘Til the sheep are gone.”

He ran his hands up and down Dwayne’s back. Not looking for anything, just petting. Dwayne was Winifred’s lamb. Three years ago, when Winifred popped into the world, I’d watched Mamma work her gently out into the world. Winifred ended up an orphan lamb, so every morning and evening before dark I used to warm up a bottle of milk and carry it down. She’d suck it nearly out of my hands, which was how I knew she’d grow up too tough and strong to die when she gave birth.

“I don’t know, Grace. They’re on the market, and people are interested. It won’t happen overnight.”

“Can’t it wait until we’re out of time?”

“It’s not gonna do neither of us any good to pretend this isn’t happening. We’ve gotta clear off the farm in what—nine days? It’s not gonna be easy to pack the sheep.”

Dad was trying to make jokes, but my laughing mood was all dried up. I walked over to Dad and put my head against his side like a little ram practicing to be strong. “Dad, please.” I wasn’t even sure what I was asking. Please wait. Please help. Please stop.

He put his farmer hand over my hair and petted my head. I imagined the lanolin that he’d petted out of Dwayne’s fleece soaking into my hair and making it soft.

“Gracie. I don’t know what else I can do.”

Dad stopped looking over the sheep when somebody drove up with a beat-up Subaru for him to fix. I climbed over the fence and started walking. Half of me was looking for any sign of trouble, but another part of me just wanted to shake off the feeling that I betrayed my flock by helping Dad.

Some of the littler ponds had dried up, and where their used to be water now hundreds of wild onions nodded their bulby heads in the breeze. I grabbed the woody end of a tumbleweed, snapped it off, and started digging up onions. Before they were bloomed, they were just right for digging up and eating whole. Sweet and wet and covered in mud. I peeled of the outer layers and popped the onion into my mouth.

I turned around when I heard a sound in the grass. Jordan. I waved at him, then went back to digging. He came up beside me and dug with his own fingers on another patch of ground and pulling out his own onion. "We have some of these on the Rez," he said, "but not whole ponds of like this."

"When it gets later dad and I come and dig up a whole bunch and dry store them for the rest of the year," I told him. "You can come with us, if you want." Dad and I were careful to never dig more than a quarter of any one group of plants, which still gave us plenty. Especially with bulb plants it was real important not to harvest too many, cause they don't come back after you eat the bulb.

"If we're still here."

I pushed another bulb up with my tumbleweed tool. "We'll be here."

He pointed to a stem of a blue flower I liked to call family-flower, even though I knew Dad called it Camas. "You ever eat that?"

I shook my head. He grabbed my digging stick and dug up the bulb. "Me neither. But I read about it. I guess people out here used to. The internet said you had to know the difference between Death Camas and Camas before you try to eat it."

"Do you know the difference?"

He looked at the bulb with a sort of scowl. "You can tell from the colors of the flowers."

"Which colors?"

"I think the blue ones are okay to eat."

I squatted down to look to at the bulb with him. "How poisonous is it?"

"It can kill sheep and cows."

That probably meant it would knock us out in about a second. "You're sure the blue ones are okay?"

He looked thoughtful, then nodded. "It's better if you cook it. I've never tried it, but from what I read, it's good roasted."

"We should dig a bunch of these and take them to the fire pit, and then we'll see if we can get any of them to come out right." All the words rushed out of me fast and I worried for a second that I sounded too excited about something dumb, but when I looked at Jordan to see if he was looking at me like a freak, he was already digging up Camas.

We startled a couple of deer on our way to the fire pit, which made me stop and hold my breath so I could watch them bound away. Jordan and I looked at each other but didn't have to say anything. At the fire pit Jordan pulled a lighter out of his pocket. I had one in the pocket of my jeans, too, cause it was one of the things Dad told me I should I always carry with me. My lighter and my pocket knife and a couple pieces of bailing twine.

I remember one time when I was in the sixth grade the principal came it to talk to all of us, and he told us how very important it was for us to never ever bring weapons of any kind to

school. We all nodded along like good kids until he said that included pocket knives. My head stopped bobbing then, and jerked to look around the class. I could see that there were other kids with the same looks on their face. Some of the kids were from town and didn't carry knives around except for when they were camping. And even sixth grade kids who lived on farms didn't carry knives around all the time, but we wouldn't be any use to anybody if we were out in the barn and couldn't cut bails. It was about being safe and useful. And sometimes I found myself at school with a four-inch blade still tucked in my pocket.

While Jordan gathered up tumbleweed bits, I whittled chips of wood. There wasn't a whole lot of sticks lying around in our way since here weren't many trees. There were the willows out in the grove, and the windbreaks, but our land was scabland. My Washington History teacher in the seventh grade told me a flood as big as Noah's came zipping out of Montana and scratched off the protective layer of dirt and skin most places got.

Jordan lit the fire, and we put some flat rocks in. I figured we'd use those to cook our food. Small, useful types of rocks were hard to come by out here, but I'd spent three or four years stacking them up by the pit. Some of the rocks from where the railroad dynamited through fractured into flat pieces that were good for cooking or building projects.

"Sometimes I try to figure out how long I could survive out here without going back home."

"Have you ever tried?"

I'd never even asked Dad if I could sleep out there alone. I'd stayed out there whole days, but not overnight.

"Have you ever slept out here?"

I shook my head. "In the barn. A couple of times." He was leaned away from me to cook camas and couldn't see my face so I told him, "I don't like sleeping too far away from Dad."

He glanced at me, but the fire popped and he glanced back. "I think I burnt this one."

We kept trying until we got a few bulbs that tasted sweet and potatoey, and while we ate, Jordan kept coming up with theories on why Holland Dunn targeted our farm. None of them made too much sense to me, because no one cared about the sheep as much as I did, so I couldn't figure out why they mattered enough to hurt.

Camas*Camassia quamash*

Camas is tall, with grassy leaves and blue-purple stars of flowers standing on top of one another's shoulders, which is why I like to call it Family Flower. It starts out looking like wheat with the fattest of grains, and they separate into bright spikes, and then unfold into vivid-colored stars.

After Jordan and I tried cooking Camas I read about it online in science class and saw that people used to cook it for up to three days. Jordan and I only kept them on the hot rocks for about twenty minutes because I wanted to try it. It would be sweeter if we cooked it for longer, but I liked it anyway. Maybe just cause I like tasting new things. The Internet also says that gathering the plants isn't a really great idea. But I don't think the ones we ate were poison because my stomach feels fine.

Jordan got out his wildflower book and started writing in it while we were watching the coals burn down. Dad told me that was a rule when I first started building the fire pit: when I built a fire I had to stay out there until it cooled. I left my book in my backpack most of the time so I'd have it whenever the GC or Mr. Connolly wanted to check up on me. Also because I was hoping I could keep it clean. Except pressing flowers in it didn't help with that.

I tried looking over Jordan's shoulder while poking the fire with a piece of tumbleweed that I stripped of all its branches. I wanted to see if he was sketching pictures of the flowers, because I tried doing that but wasn't sure they were turning out any good. If Jordan was good at drawing, that would be one thing too many.

He snapped his notebook shut. And asked me what I was doing, so I told him I just wanted to look. He hadn't been so touchy when I copied off his map. He told me not to look over his shoulder, and my shoulders hunched toward my ears cause his voice when he said it sounded like dad when he asked me if I was going to throw a fit.

It got quiet then, but not peaceful, and Jordan muttered some kind of apology with an excuse tagged on, about how he didn't want me or anyone else to see what he wrote in that notebook.

My stomach churned, and I knew it wasn't the fault of the camas bulbs. Even when it was just Jordan and the pastures around us I managed to be the Gracie that nobody at school wanted to talk to. It made me angry that it mattered.

Jordan poked the ashes. "This isn't for school. It's like—it's a book that I'm writing. I haven't told anybody about it, ever, and I don't want anybody to read it. When it's ready, I'll let you see it first," he promised.

Chapter 12

I don't know how you found out about my Mom, but I got a deal for you. Let's talk after school.
Mark.

I read the note twice after I found it in my locker and shuddered both times at the word “deal” because last time he wanted to make a deal with me it was a bad disguise for being creepy. I walked over to Jordan’s locker and waited for Beretta and Leo to leave before I handed him the note. His eyes skimmed over it, then narrowed.

My insides moved around, and I shifted with them. “Think I should talk with him?”

He hesitated. “Mark might have useful information.” He shifted and slammed his locker shut. I could tell he got his thoughts stuck and was about to tell me I couldn’t take care of myself, so I marched off before he could speak. Mark might have useful information. That’s all that mattered.

I heard Mark’s laugh before I saw him. I turned the corner and saw him parked by the office trying to shove Derek in the trashcan, just for fun. My insides faltered when I thought about talking to Mark on purpose. I hoped my outsides didn’t give that away.

“Look who it is,” Mark grinned.

“You wanna talk with me?”

He smiled with too many teeth, and I couldn’t help but think of grinning coyotes probing the fences for weak places. He let go of Derek’s jacket. “Why don’t you guys give Grassy and me a few moments alone.”

I breathed in and out while Derek and Neal made their way down the hallway, stopping to lock random lockers.

“I don’t like you poking around my family.” His coyote smile hadn’t disappeared.

“You’re not the only one.”

“I don’t know how you found out about my Mom before I did, and I don’t like that you’re messing around in my life, but I’ve got another deal for you.”

Nerves jumped around in my stomach. But if he had information, I needed it.

“If you want to get Holland Dunn, I’ll help.”

“If you know something, tell me. Otherwise, I don’t want your help.”

He clapped his hand on my shoulder, and his fingers squeezed so I couldn’t shrug him off. If I punched him in the nose, somebody would notice, which was the downside to standing right next to the office. “I don’t know much, but if you leave my mom around and focus on getting rid of Dunn, I can help. You might find my skills useful.”

If I wanted to creep someone out, he was the expert. But we weren’t trying to get rid of Dunn. I don’t know what Mark meant by that, but it sounded too dramatic for me. Sure, Jordan surprised me cause he was a good teammate and I was glad he offered to help. But in Mark’s case, I knew I wouldn’t be surprised. “Let go of me.” I tried to rip my shoulder from his grasp, but he let go and shoved me. I stumbled and almost fell.

“For once, Grace, try to do the smart thing.”

I still felt shaky when I found Jordan waiting at my locker. He looked like he wanted to ask what happened with Mark, but I shoved my science folder into my backpack without caring if the pages ripped or wrinkled, and he didn’t ask.

Instead he offered, “Mom brought home some doughnuts from the bakery and she said I should share some with you, so if you want to come over to the house, you could.”

Before I went over to the Lafayette's house I braided my hair in the mirror so that I wouldn't go over there looking like a moor-child again. I hummed a little bit as I tugged on hanks of my hair.

"You look nice," Dad said it like a question instead of a compliment. "Are you headed over to visit your friend next door?"

I blinked at the mirror and almost dropped my brush. "Ew, Dad."

He laughed. "You mean you're not interested in that strapping young boy?"

"No." Talking with Jordan never made snakes coil and uncoil in my stomach, or made me giggle in an up-high voice, or try to reach out and touch him extra. "That's not a thing, Dad."

He smiled. "That's good, sweetheart. Remember what I told you: you gotta marry someone headed for medical school."

I laughed cause we both knew I wouldn't want to marry someone who spent their whole life in school and hospitals. But I had to add, "Jordan's really smart, Dad."

"I'm sure he is. I'm glad the two of you are just friends."

Dad tugged my braid, grinned at me in the mirror, and left. When I looked at the mirror where Dad just left, my stomach went uneasy, but not like the snakes-of-having-a-crush had crawled in there. I figured it was a weirdness that only a doughnut could fix.

When I showed up at the Lafayette's house, Mrs. Lafayette welcomed me in and shoved a doughnut into my hand right off. "Hey, Gracie. Come on in." Mrs. Lafayette had on a blouse and skirt with lots of parts that could blow in different directions. I wondered if that was what she wore to work at the bakery. She decorated cakes and made breads at the bakery inside the store in another town. The grocery store in our town was run by a man who hit his head to many times to be very good at business sense. He scared me, and the store itself was too gross to have a bakery.

"Mrs. Lafayette, how did you learn to bake enough that you could work in a fancy bakery?"

She laughed. "Call me May. Didn't do much cooking or baking when I was your age, but once I got married we both seemed to have it in our head that I should be a cuisine artist."

I crumbled a big bite of crueller into my mouth. Mamma taught me a lot about baking. For instance, how to make cinnamon rolls and Dark Magic Cake. Maybe someday I could walk into the grocery store and say that I was a baker and would like a job. Maybe they would give me a job even if I didn't pass my state tests.

Jordan shoved a notebook at me when I sat down at the table. It was covered in his chicken scratch, but I could tell it was some sort of fact list about the new manager at the bank.

"What's that?" Mrs. Lafayette asked.

Jordan stuffed another bite of food in his mouth so he wouldn't have to answer.

"It's a project for school," I answered for him. "We're researching the bank."

Jordan shot me a look to say that he didn't think his mom would buy that.

"Is it a group project?"

I hope she didn't think that I cheated off of Jordan. Okay, I hope she didn't know that I cheated off Jordan. Was that why she was asking if it was a group project?

"We're partners," Jordan nodded. "Other people are researching other businesses in the area, like somebody's researching the gas station."

This school project was starting to sound like a very strange activity, which I think May Lafayette noticed. She stopped putting dishes away from the sink like she was thinking real hard about what we said.

“Did you know there’s a new manager at the bank, Mom?”

May glanced up. “I heard that. Holland Dunn, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, how’d you know that?”

“I was talking to some of the ladies at church. They said Holland used to live here, as a kid. Graduated from your school.”

“You know anything about him from when he lived here?” I asked.

“I didn’t live here, Gracie. That’d be something to ask your dad.”

I don’t know what he was like. But I heard he fired Mrs. Thompson, and Gladys from church says he’s making things even worse since she left.”

“Like how?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t pump Gladys for information. We were making potato salad so we both had other things on our mind. If you’re dying to know, I suggest you talk to her or another of the bank people about it.”

Gladys was a woman from Jordan’s church who I knew a little bit just from running into her places. I knew exactly what sort of opinion she had of me from the fact that when I was nine, she saw me riding my bike around town and called my parents to tell them exactly what they should be doing with me so I wouldn’t end up as a hooligan.

I poked Jordan in the side. “We gotta talk to Mrs. Thompson again.”

“Again? Are you already missing Mark?”

May stowed a baking sheet below the oven and stood up. “If you two want to know about the bank, though, I’d go talk to Mr. Cramer.”

“The post-office guy?”

“He managed the bank for thirty years before he started working at the post office with his wife. I figure if anyone in town knows the history of the bank, it’s Mr. Cramer.”

“Thanks for the doughnut, May. I should go.”

Jordan stood up. “Wait up, Gracie. Do you wanna go check on the snapping turtles again?”

As soon as we were out the door and away from May’s earshot, I suggested, “Let’s split up. I’ll go talk to Mr. Cramer and you can go ask Mrs. Thompson our questions.”

He shook his head. “Mrs. Thompson doesn’t want me coming.”

“I’m giving you the good job cause I don’t want to deal with Mark again.” I’d way rather talk with Mrs. Thompson than Mr. Cramer, who is so old that he can only hear about half of what you say to him and doesn’t understand any of it. “Besides, you said I was too blunt and Mrs. Thompson wouldn’t answer my questions.”

“Try saying ‘please’ and she’ll like you fine. But stay away from Mark.”

I agreed even though I didn’t know how I’d do that, and Jordan set a plan to meet back by the gate in an hour.

I rode over to Mrs. Thompson’s house and once again, little-girl-Mark let me into the house. “Hi!” I greeted her. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Corie. I’m six.” Just from that much talking I knew I liked her better than Mark. “Is your Mamma home?”

“She’s in the living room. You can come inside, but you have to take your shoes off. Everybody has to take their shoes off at the door.”

I slipped out of my school sneakers in the entryway like she said and padded over the wood floor to the living room.

“Mamma, this girl is back.”

Mrs. Thompson peeked into the entry room and held up a finger to show that I should wait. She had a phone cradled between her shoulder and ear. This time she was dressed in a business skirt and white shirt. I wondered if she’d been out finding a new job.

While I waited, Corie brought a big glass of water. I figured she brought it for me, but then she dumped it in a bowl in the entryway. A lot of the water splashed out of the sides, and some landed in my shoes, but I didn’t complain about it.

“What’re you doing?”

“It’s my month to give the doggies water everyday,” she explained. “We have three and I want to have five, so I always give them water. Mom said if I was responsible we could get another puppy.”

A moment later Mrs. Thompson reappeared without the phone, scrawling notes and taking only a quick glance at me. “I’m sorry I chased you out so quickly the other day,” she said to me, smiling. “It was very sweet of you to bring me ice cream.”

I glowed a little, cause I was glad she noticed that.

“I’m sorry we came in here so abrupt and everything last time. I was real focused on finding out everything we could about the bank and what they’re trying to do to our farm. Dad says they’re taking it.”

“Foreclosing,” she corrected. “They’re foreclosing on the farms.”

I waited for her to explain more.

“You don’t know what that means, do you?” she chuckled. “I’d tell you to ask your dad, but he probably doesn’t understand all of it anyway.” I didn’t like the way she said that. It made sense that she knew more about bank things than Dad, just like Dad probably knew more about engines than her. That didn’t mean Dad was dumb. “Foreclosure is what happens when people can’t pay back money when they promised they would. When they borrowed from the bank, they had to make a promise that if they couldn’t pay back the money, they’d give something of value instead. For most farmers, that’s part or all of their land, right?”

I nodded. “But farmers pop in and out of debt all the time.” I knew for a fact that my Grandpa had gone bankrupt at least five times before he died.

Her lips pressed into a thin line. It made her face look much older than when she smiled. “That’s accurate, And most of the bankers out here don’t seem to care. I started working with Mr. Cramer. And then Dylan Rand. Both of them seemed to be pretty flexible about things. They always worked very closely with the farmers who couldn’t make their payments. Of course, from time to time people get tired of living in poverty and worrying about payments, and they gave the land back.”

I think Mrs. Thompson grew up on a farm, but she didn’t understand at all. Except when she says that people get tired, I think of Dad’s voice whenever I try to ask him about the money we owe.

“After Mr. Cramer left, Dylan Rand came in from the city. He talked to folks and figured out the best way to manage the bank, and then he did it. I thought Dylan was going to stick around; he worked well with us. Didn’t micromanage the lives of his employees.”

“And he just left?”

“A couple of months ago. Holland Dunn came from right around here. I think he was a year behind your Dad at school. Some of his family had a farm, but I don’t know if it’s still around. He doesn’t seem to know how anything works in the community, and didn’t want to hear it from me.”

“So he fired you?”

“Simply put, yes.”

“I hate Holland Dunn. I know we could pay off the land if he’d be more patient, but Dad gave up on all of it when Dunn started in on us.”

When Mrs. Thompson spoke again her voice got convincing like she was focusing very hard on making it sound that way. “I know, Gracie. I tried to talk to him. I told him that you’d lost your Mamma—I guess I raised my voice too much, caused too much of a stir. So he fired me for trying to do the right thing and take care of one of my neighbors.”

I wondered why she wanted me to understand this so bad. “He sounds like a rotten boss,” I offered.

She shrugged. “I guess that’s the way business is done, Gracie. That’s just the way of the world. I shouldn’t have stuck my nose places where it didn’t belong. Should have looked out for my own family first. I suggest you do the same. Don’t go poking your nose around in this.” She paused and took a moment to soften her face. “You have school to focus on.”

I wanted to assure her that Jordan and I weren’t scared. We were going to figure out what Mr. Dunn was up to and stop him from hurting anyone. There wasn’t anything more that he could do to us—he was already taking our land and we were just kids. I wanted to promise her we would get her job back and there was nothing to worry about. I just didn’t feel certain enough to say that. It sounded like everything Mr. Dunn was doing was legal and right as anything. I wondered if Dylan Rand and Mr. Cramer even could have gotten in trouble for not following the letter of the law.

She walked over to the entryway and opened the door for me. I slipped my sneakers on, and before I went down the steps, I realized I should say something polite. “Thanks for talking with me, Mrs. Thompson. I’m really sorry about your job, that’s not fair.”

She shook her head. “It’s nice to know someone cares. Goodnight, Gracie.”

The Case of Grace and the Sheep Saboteur: Part 6

The post-office isn't what I'd call the hottest spot in town, but it's steady. People go in every day to check their boxes and look at the bulletin board to see what's happening in the community. The bulletin board is the most reliable spot in town to find a babysitter or look for a missing dog. I leaned against the brick building and watched people stop in and out for a few minutes before I walked into the package room and greeted Mr. Cramer.

"What?"

Mr. Cramer was probably ninety, and he was a living embodiment of the United States Postal Service. Too old and outdated to be useful except for here. "I want to ask you a couple of questions."

"I don't have any Lafayette packages," he apologized.

I could see I'd really have to put the screws on him. "I didn't come for a package. I have a few questions I'd like to ask you." I took out my notepad and pencil because Grace wasn't around to shoot me skeptical looks. I looked more like I knew what I was doing when I at least had a notepad. To save time, I shouted. "It's about the bank."

Mr. Cramer bowed his head and put down the stamps he was stacking. "What about the bank?"

"The new manager is foreclosing on the farm where I live. I thought you might know something..." I wasn't sure exactly what to ask, but Mr. Cramer seemed eager to share.

The postmaster shook his head. "Bad business, that. I don't trust that Holland Dunn. Used to go by Junior when he lived here. Can't trust a boy named Holland. I'd much rather have Dylan Rand back running the bank. It keeps me up at night, knowing that Holland is running things."

"What would you do if you were still in charge?"

"What would I charge?"

"What would you do different?"

He laughed and leaned back on the stepladder behind the counter. It seemed like the Postal Service should be able to buy him an actual chair, but whenever I came in, he sat on the same stepladder he used to grab the higher-up packages. "There's good reasons I left the bank, Mister Lafayette. I dealt with enough farmers in my day. They're a stubborn crew, and the bank has rules. I went old trying to do right by the people who come to the bank and still follow all those rules. I wouldn't blame Holland for making things simple. But that doesn't mean I trust him. Can't trust a man named *Holland*."

I chalked up Mr. Cramer repeating himself to the fact that he was ancient. "Do you think he'd do anything—dangerous to make sure a farmer would give up his farm?"

"Dangerous?" The bell above the door rang and a woman came in to send a package to her daughter at college. Mr. Cramer creaked up from his seat and took the woman's money. I waited for him to count out fifty-eight cents in change before I explained.

"I believe we've experienced sabotage."

"What's that?"

"I think he's sabotaged."

His eyes sparked, and he leaned toward me. "Sabotage?"

"Open gates. Rat poison in food. Dogs getting to sheep."

Mr. Cramer dragged his stepstool forward, and I had the feeling that he was getting into this interview more than I even was. "Sabotage. Now there's an interesting idea. But why would Dunn want to hurt the farm when it belongs to the bank anyway, if the payments aren't getting

made? No, nobody in their right—” he paused. “You hold on right there.” He disappeared behind the counter and I heard him rustling around in stacks of envelopes and cardboard boxes. “I can’t find it. If Elly threw it out, I swear. I always tell her, once you throw something out, you know you’ll need it again.”

An avalanche of paper spilled off the shelf Mr. Cramer pawed at, and he took a few steps back. “What a mess.”

“What are you looking for, Mr. Cramer?”

“My memory’s not perfect these days, but I seem to remember Holland’s name on one of these flyers from some years back. Six years ago or so he wanted to start some eco-friendly tourist trap out near the Corbin farm, and there was a meeting at the community hall about it. If I remember right, there were a few things came up in this meeting that made some folks’ blood boil. If you can find the report on this meeting, you might figure out whether Dunn held a grudge.”

Someone else came in to buy stamps, and I hurried out. I figured Mr. Cramer might spend the rest of the afternoon looking for that old paper, and I needed to be back at the Corbins in fifteen minutes.

Chapter 13

Jordan and I met in my pregnant-sheep pen to compare notes. Missy went into labor at last, and I wanted to watch over the process since this was her first time.

It was a challenge to split my mind to comfort the new mamma and listen while Jordan talked a mile a minute about a memory that Mr. Cramer managed to dig out of his decaying brain. From the way he waved his arms around while he explained, Jordan seemed to think this was a real big deal. I was stuck on what I figured out while I was at the Thompsons, which was that Dunn didn't have to do anything illegal when he had an easy legal way of kicking us off the farm.

Missy bellowed and locked irritated eyes on me like she expected me to pay more attention to the matter at hand. I started the sheep while I knelt next to her, so by the time I touched her side, my fingers sparkled with the raindrops that were just about ready to fall. "You're okay," I ran my fingers over her belly. "You're just fine, Missy. I'm sure it's not pleasant, but look at that. You're dilating just right, and your water bag burst. Good job, Mamma."

"How many sheep have you delivered?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. The sheep deliver their own lambs, I just poke things every now and then."

"How many people know about what you can do?"

I looked up at him. "I never told anyone. I never showed anyone either, except my Dad and you."

"Wow, top tier knowledge for me."

I kept focused on looking for signs of a lamb in Missy's opening. "Only cause you're the nosiest human on Earth, and I got better priorities than keeping secrets from you."

He laughed, and after a second, I laughed too. It seemed pretty strange that only a week and a half ago I'd been telling Allison that Jordan and I weren't friends, we just got stuck at the same table together.

"Do you know if there's anything magical about the sheep you deliver with the magic?"

"Jordan Lafayette, you ask too many questions, got it? I'm dealing with a situation here, and I don't need you babbling."

Missy bellowed again like a real human mamma, and for a moment I thought I better grab my birthing gloves and make sure that things were pointed the right direction. Just before I stood up, I saw nose and toes emerge, and I knew that everything was going to be alright.

I turned the spigot on and washed my hands.

"Is that your favorite thing?"

I looked up at Jordan, balanced on top of a railroad-tie-fencepost. "Get down from there. You'll break every bone in your body."

He sat down again.

"Is what my favorite thing?"

"Birthing the sheep. You look really happy when you do that. Your face doesn't look anything like it does when you're at school."

"That's gross. Being up to my elbows in placenta is not my favorite thing. Although it is better than school" I knew what he meant, though. Taking care of the sheep made me feel right. It was where all my edges and broken off pieces fit, just like a puzzle piece.

“I love checking the fence. But I think my favorite thing is shearing.” I paused as I got the punch in my stomach of realizing Dad was gonna sell the sheep before we got to shear them this spring.

I picked a piece of wool out of the barbed wire of the fence and rubbed it between my palms. We always have a couple extra hands around for shearing. One person flips the sheep over, and then somebody who knows how to give a real quick haircut runs the clippers all over their bodies. Plus there have to be people to make sure the sheep go where they’re supposed to, and don’t just run everywhere. And another person holds each one still so she won’t get cut when she gets her haircut.

My favorite thing, though, is the bushel sack we put the fleece in. Since I turned six it’s been my job to climb down in there. When I was little Mamma used to drop me in there on top of the first few fleeces. I jump up and down on the fleece and keep it all pressed and packed down into the sack. The first time I went in there, I panicked cause there was no way out. The sides are all thick burlap material hanging down from a big frame. And no one could reach all the way down to pull me out. But nobody worried about me, Mamma didn’t even look in to see how I took it. They just threw fleece after fleece over my head, and I scrambled on top of them. After a while the fleeces themselves lifted me right out of the bag.

All these men who knew what they were doing did their exact job and never worried about whether a little girl could contribute. I had my job and I did it right, and that was all.

Jordan and I had both been quiet for a long time. I looked up at him, and he said, “Tomorrow morning. Soon as you get up. Meet me at the chicken house.”

I opened my mouth to tell him that chickens made my fingers twitch and my neck get all nervous and stiff. But in typical Jordan fashion, he was off the fence and halfway home before I got to open my mouth.

Even though I get nervous around the pecking beaks and scrabbly toes of chickens, I put on dusty pants and ran over the fields to meet Jordan by his chicken house before breakfast. He popped out of his house, holding an empty egg container.

“This is my favorite thing.” I wondered if my face looked like his did now when I thought about shearing. Like all the muscles had shaken loose and weren’t trying to pull his eyebrows together or the corners of his lips down. Lit from the inside, even though he wasn’t a morning person. The Lafayettes had thirty chickens now, which was more than they moved here with, even with Homer’s affect on the population.

“Jordan,” morning voice and nerves made my voice sound extra-high. “I don’t really like chickens.”

He stopped and lowed the egg carton to his side.

How would I feel if he just told me he didn’t *like* sheep. “I mean, they make me really nervous.”

“It’s fine. Come over here. Sometimes they’re not even on their eggs. Look up there, there’s three nests with just eggs sitting in them. I’ll go for the ones they’re still sitting on.”

He slipped a hand gently under a brown chicken, then pulled out a fist wrapped around an egg. “You have to be confident and smooth. Long as you act like you know what you’re doing, they won’t get nervous, most of the time. The first times I did this, I got so nervous picking eggs that the whole coop started cackling and flapping around, and I just had to leave and start over. These chickens, though, I’ve seen most of them grow up from little chicks. We got a bunch of them in the mail. Did you know you could mail chickens? I bet you can’t mail sheep.”

I wouldn't suggest trying it. I picked my footsteps carefully through the coop and scooped up eggs that got left behind in nests.

That's probably it. Wanna see something cool?"

I shrugged.

"Did you see the chicken that was out in the yard? I'm gonna go hypnotize it.

"You're gonna hypnotize your chicken?"

He didn't answer right away. He bent over and lunged for the chicken, which transformed into a flapping ball of panic. The wings didn't make him let go and back up the way I would've, though. He wrapped one hand around both of the hen's twig legs and picked it up. "Here, I'm gonna use that barrel."

I stepped aside, and he placed the chicken on her back. She wiggled, but he grabbed her beak and twisted it to face him. Then he drew three circles in the air in front of her nose, and declared, "Hypnotized."

He stepped back and the chicken blinked up at the morning sky like a kid waking up from a nice long nap. No fluttering, no noise—she might as well be a rotisserie chicken for all she was moving around.

"How'd you learn to do that?"

"I don't even remember. I think I was bored."

"So you just flipped a chicken on its back?"

He shrugged. "I guess so. Let's go. Mom will make us omelets before school."

As we chowed down on breakfast of fresh eggs and frozen veggies, I wondered if Jordan got this every day. If May warmed up spinach every morning while he picked eggs and asked him about whether he finished all his homework before he got on the bus.

Half of the time I poured myself a bowl of cereal, and the other half I ate free breakfast at school. That got harder when I got older cause we don't have as much time before class starts, but it's a decent way of getting myself a sausage patty and frozen juice.

May looked about ready to ask if my homework was all done, so I asked first. "Can I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Do you ever wish you could go back to the Rez?"

The way Jordan looked up at her made me wish I kept my mouth shut. "I miss some things about it, like living closer to my mother. But there are other things I don't miss at all. What do you think, Jordan?"

"There are lots of things I miss."

I wondered what things. Trees, maybe, or having places to swim. The Rez had a damned up river, and we just had nasty ponds and a lake that lived and breathed algae. I bet he would say more if I asked, but it was near time to head to school. I held those questions for another day.

Beretta kept sitting across from me at lunch. I guess the breakup with Derek stuck. It was okay with me because Allison talked more to Laney and Bailey. Anyhow, when Beretta sat down across from me I didn't look up, just speared another green bean on each tong of my fork. She and Jordan talked about basketball because Beretta wanted to start a coed team for the three on three tournament in June.

"I'd have to play the whole time if I'm the only girl, but that won't be too bad unless we get a bunch of games right after each other."

"Or Gracie could be on our team."

I looked at Jordan and wondered where he came up with that idea. But Beretta jumped all over it. “Then it would be two and two. You and Leo and then Grace and me. And anybody could tap out if they needed to.”

She paused like she wanted me to match her excitement, but it wasn’t gonna happen.

“What do you think, Gracie?” Jordan asked.

“I’ll think about it.” I did think about it for the rest of lunch, and when Beretta ran interference for me so I could get my science book out of my locker and get to class before Mark pinned me in place. I thought about it through science when Laney refused to work with Beretta. I came up with a whole list of reasons why joining the team was a risk. But at the end of the day, I figured it could be a risk worth taking.

On Saturday we rode to the library to satisfy his curiosity about the community meeting. The loud library lady tried to force a library card on me again, but I pretended to be preoccupied looking at the spines of the books on the romance shelf so she would talk to Jordan instead of me.

“We need to look at newspapers for about six years back.”

She laughed. “What’s this?”

For a second I thought he’d tell the library lady all about our case, but I kicked him in the shin. “A report.”

The library lady didn’t get suspicious the way May did. “What a beautiful thing. The school sending kids to archives. Touches my heart. Things from six years ago will be downstairs.”

She pulled out her desk drawer and poked at the contents. “Here, Jordan. This is the key to the archive room. I trust you two to be gentle with the old things, so don’t prove me wrong.”

I had to follow Jordan down the stairs cause I didn’t know where the archive room was. He seemed to know his way all through the library, though. “Have you been down here before?”

He glanced over his shoulder to check my expression while he weighed whether or not I’d laugh at him. “She puts the discarded books down here,” he explained. “The books she’s gonna sell at book sales or just toss out, so when she has a lot I help her carry them down and pick out the ones I want to keep.”

I wondered if any of Jordan’s basketball friends knew how he spent so much time at the library that he helped out with heavy lifting. From the way he nearly told the librarian about our whole crime-solving situation, I could tell he trusted her a lot. I couldn’t figure out why anybody would want a librarian for a friend unless they were really lonely.

He flipped on a light switch at the bottom of the stairs and swung open the door to reveal a concrete room with a bare bulb dangling from the ceiling.

“Looks like a torture chamber.”

“The papers are over there,” he jerked his head to the left side of the room while he wandered to the newer papers. I could read the labels on the drawers as easy as he could, so I counted back and opened the drawer for papers from six years ago. While I searched, he rifled through papers on the other side of the room. “What are you looking for?”

“Reports of petty crimes on other farms. I just want to see if there’s a pattern.”

“We didn’t report any of the crimes on our land.”

He shrugged. “Somebody else could’ve.”

I stretched to look over his shoulder and see if he found anything.

“Look at the Sheriff’s report.”

On March 3rd, police responded to a call from a resident who said there was a suspicious car parked outside her house. Police discovered two young people in the car and asked them to move their activities somewhere else.

I laughed. "That sounds about right."

"Stupid," he muttered. "There's real things going on in the world, and we have this joke of a paper."

"Real things happen here. It doesn't have to be bad to be real."

"Everything about this town is such a joke. Look at all these papers. There are hundreds here and none of them mention the national budget crisis or federal court cases or anything from another country. It's all students of the week and people making out in cars."

My mamma used to sound like that sometimes. Itchy feet and not enough gratitude.

"You know there's no stars in the cities, right?"

Of course there are. The stars are everywhere."

"Not the way they are here. The constellations are all broken up."

"Gracie, everything isn't better here. If you gave the rest of the world a chance, you might find someplace better."

I thought about that for a moment, but I had to shake my head. "I don't have to check everything else to know what I love."

"You've been brainwashed." For a second he looked like he'd say something to try and prove me wrong, which I would have to argue with, but then he laughed. "I should know better than to try and change your mind. Let's find this paper and get out of the basement."

I waved the paper in front of his face. "Already got it. I figure this is what Mr. Cramer meant."

February 17, dozens of people from the community gathered in Town Hall to discuss the Thompson/Dunn proposal to create an extensive bird sanctuary on the land surrounding Sierra Pond. The conversation got heated when the pair revealed their ultimate desire to develop the surrounding area into an extensive eco-tourism center. Dunn said, "It's simple enough. The future of this town is bleak if we don't go where the money is. Family farms are a beautiful tradition, but they aren't financially stable. The farmers themselves will tell you that. Eco-tourism is a booming industry. We're going to create a place where people from all over the world can pay to experience the history that makes this region unique. It's more practical than clinging to that history which will not continue to support us." In response, local farmer Ron Whole argued. "My father always told me, farming isn't a living, it's a lifestyle. We're here because this is our way of life, and we're not going to step aside to accommodate a museum of the way we live now."

Jordan glanced up at me. "Sounds like fighting words to me."

"Jordan, I don't think Mrs. Thompson got fired cause she disagreed about some bank policy. I bet she knew too much from way back when the proposed this together."

Jordan's eyes sparked to life. "If he fired her, he must be scared that people will find out. He's got a weak spot, and I think we found it."

I got to the basketball court fifteen minutes before the bell rang on Monday morning, and I did it on purpose. Beretta was dribbling, but she caught the ball and waved. Teams were uneven, which made it easy for me to speak up. "I want to play."

I tried to keep a confident look on my face, but when Mark looked up and frowned, it took all my power to not take a step back.

"Yeah. You're on my team again." Beretta didn't wait for Mark to say anything, and she greeted me with a high five. We played for fifteen minutes, and I made two shots, plus a couple of assists to Leo.

Mark managed to hip check me and whisper in my ear "You're going to be sorry you didn't want my help." I landed on the ground and scraped my knee, but Leo grabbed my hand and pulled me to my feet. "Mark hates losing," he explained.

When the game ended I limped off the court and looked at the place where I hit the ground when Mark pushed me. The knee of my jeans had a two-inch tear, and the spot just below that looked dark. I pulled the fabric of the pants to peek at the skin and winced.

Beretta came up beside me. "You okay, Grace?"

The dark spot on my knee happened because my knee was bleeding, but I'd had worse, and that's what I told Beretta. I stood up to head into class, and she slung her arm around my shoulder. Before I could ask her just what she thought she was doing, Bailey Alders appeared on her other side and hissed that exact question.

"I'm headed in to class," she frowned.

"Beretta, I just want to remind you should make choices that set you up for future success. Breaking up with Derek was one thing, but if you decide to hang out with Grace Corbin, you're going to regret it.

Beretta shrugged. "Yeah, I know Laney's mad. And you are too, obviously. Thanks for warning me that you think it's the wrong choice, but I guess I'll find out." She kept her arm around my shoulders until we got into the school, where she released me. "Sorry. I know you're not really touchy-feely. But you might have to get used to a little team camaraderie."

If she asked me, I probably would have said I didn't like her putting her arm around me like that, but she didn't ask, and I went to Mr. Paul's class buoyed.

I hopped into the truck with a grin on my face at 2:50 that afternoon, but when Dad smiled back at me, it looked like a sail with no wind. This was backwards from normal. Most times I dragged out of school feeling like I had a two-ton anchor wrapped around my legs, but today I ran to the truck, all clear skies and bright seas. Beretta still acted friendly to me even after we talked three times, which meant she knew what she was getting into, and the sky was fierce blue and I was done with school for the day. And most important, Jordan and me pretty much pinned the sabotage on Holland Dunn. Nothing could drag me down.

Until Dad and I found Dona Nobis lying on the road. Before Dad even got the truck all the way stopped I swung the door open and jumped off the seat. I ran to her side, and even though it didn't want to look, I couldn't take my eyes off her body. Dona lay on the gravel road with her legs splayed every which way and her neck twisted around too far.

She was already dead.

I sat down on the road next to her but my hands stayed flesh-dull, and I couldn't make them touch her. I already knew what it felt like to look for life where there isn't any, like when you think there's another step at the top of the stairs and there's not. If you expected a step there it unbalanced all of you.

"Dad, Dona is dead." I know sheep dying is just part of life. It's the whole point of why we raise sheep. But Dona—Dona Nobis was the one who I'd figured out my sheep magic with.

"Come on, baby, let's load her in the truck."

"She's dead."

"I know, Gracie. Looks like a car got her." He didn't understand. He didn't care that Dona Nobis, the first one I'd ever saved, got her life stolen away by some fool who couldn't avoid a couple of hundred pounds of mutton in the road.

He could see how it hit me, though, so he put his hand on my back. "I've got gloves in the truck. Let's get her loaded up."

I stood and followed him to the truck. A colony of lost gloves lived under the seat, so I pulled out a couple which happened to both be right hand gloves and put them on. Dona Nobis weighed a lot, Dad had to carry most of her, but I helped support her head because it made my chest ache to see it dangle there without me.

Once we loaded Dona into the truck Dad drove off the road and through the fence, and shifted into a low gear so he could bump over rocks and holes in the ground. He drove out to the silos, where we buried the two sheep we found at the end of March, when it thawed.

"There's a shovel in the truck, Gracie. If you go get it for me, I'll dig out a spot for her."

I watched Dad dig for a while, but he moved like something weighed him down. "I can help."

He stood on the edge of the shovel and cut through another layer of earth. "There's another shovel by the porch. Do you want to drive the truck over to get it?"

Most days I jumped at any chance to drive the truck. I knew how to drive stick shift, and sometimes Dad lets me drive between school and home to practice. I had to stretch my legs out straight to reach the clutch and the pedals, but I liked driving cause it put me in control of all the weight and fire in our truck. But I didn't want to be responsible for that much power just at the moment. "It's okay. I'll walk."

When I returned with the shovel Dad hadn't made much progress, so I fell into rhythm next to him and we shoveled for almost an hour.

"Gracie, that's enough."

"I want it to be deep. I don't want the coyotes to get her."

"That's deep enough. Come help me get her out of the truck."

I held her head in place again while we lowered her into the hole. Dad picked up his shovel and got ready to cover her. I reached into the grave and sparked my hands. I couldn't do anything for her now, but I could send just a little magic back into her before she left. "Goodbye, Dona."

I walked away before Dona's soft fleece got covered over in wet dirt. I didn't cry all the time that we were digging, but as soon as I turned away tears drizzled out of my eyes.

My alarm went off at eleven to remind me I better go check on the sheep and make sure they were safe. But I didn't get out of bed. It didn't matter if I stayed up all night to patrol the farm. I could watch them all night and a blind driver would squish one of them on the road in broad daylight. I might as well sleep. Maybe I could stay awake in all my classes the next day. Maybe I could make the other kids shut up and stop calling me Sleeping Beauty in the hallways.

My bed was warm, and outside it was still cold.

When the GC came to drag me out of science class, I didn't pretend to be happy. I'd been using the computer to find more information about invasive species of wildflowers which wasn't part of the assignment we had to do, but I wanted to know which of the flowers I thought belonged to my land moved in during the last few years.

The GC looked at my notebook and commented on how much I wrote.

"I'm only writing about wildflowers," I muttered. "It's not anything important." We both took seats at her desk, and she nudged her glasses into place. I waited for her to say something, but she was took her time, reading about Camas. Her finger traced as she read, and I shifted in my seat. Yeah, it was all about wildflowers, but I didn't like how slow she read, like there was more on the page than I wrote. "I turned in most of my homework this week."

She handed the notebook back to me, and flipped open her own book. I couldn't read too much of it upside down, but I there was a smiley face by one of the lines. "That's what I hear from your teachers." So why was I still here, in her stifley office? She finally looked up from her notes and smiled at me. "I'm really glad you decided to put some effort into your classes."

I didn't do it so she could be glad. "I decided I better get to the ninth grade."

"Right," the smile faded a little. "Grace, Everybody wants you to be in ninth grade next year, but it's important to us that you're ready for it when you get there." She took a folder out from under her notebook and opened it on the table. "These are your test scores, and they show that you're close to proficient in all three areas."

I scowled. She tried to say that like it was good news, and it wasn't.

She pulled out another sheet of paper from the folder. "I'm sending this home for you to talk over with your dad. It's a letter about summer school. Bring it back within the week and let me know what you decide."

I shoved the letter into my backpack so it crumpled into a corner where I could forget about it. I couldn't show this to dad. He had enough weight pulling his shoulders into a slouch with the farm problems, and even now when I tried to talk to him I still had to shout over our big gulf of not-agreeing-about-giving-up.

I slung my backpack over one arm and grabbed my notebook off the table.

"Gracie," the GC started.

"Grace," I snapped. And then I walked out the door before my angry voice could get me in any more trouble.

I didn't want to help pack up Dad's mechanic supplies, so I put all my books in my backpack and walked over to Jordan's house. A storm rolled over the county that afternoon. I didn't like being in the house alone when it was like that cause you could hear the water drip-dropping from our window frames and whenever the wind made the house shudder, I shuddered too. I couldn't work in the barn with Dad because of the rain beating on the tin roof. I had enough trouble with focus. So Jordan's was the next best option.

May greeted me at the door. "Jordan isn't home yet. I thought he might be with you."

I shook my head. I didn't know where Jordan got off to, but he probably better stay there until the storm got over. "I thought that he and me could do our homework together."

"If you want to do your homework over here anyway, you can," she offered. "I have some muffins from work."

I walked into the house and sat down at the table with her. She had a pile of papers out, too, and flipped through them one by one. I dug out my math book and the checklist Mr. Connolly gave me of all the homework that the other kids did in the past two weeks. He said if I wanted my work to count, I had to get it in before the test on Friday.

I flipped through the notebook full of pages where I started doing the homework but stopped when I ran into questions I didn't know. If I couldn't do the problems right after Mr. Connolly taught us, how could I do them a week and a half later?

I tapped my eraser against the page in my math book that explained order of operations. I could understand all the words on the page, but it was beyond me what they meant when it came to problem 18.

"You stuck there, Gracie?"

I nodded, and she scooted her chair around so we could both look at my book. When Dad helped me, he helped with one step and then told me to try again, but May made me write down every step I did in a neat line under the problem and stayed with me through the sticky parts that stopped me before. I finished that assignment and another one about polynomials before my brain pounded on the inside of my head and told me to stop.

May noticed that I was rubbing my forehead and grabbed me another muffin. "Do you feel like you're going to get those all right on your test?"

I laughed through my first bite of muffin. "I never get them all right on the tests. I get nervous because I can't check if I'm doing it right."

"That's what the homework is for, Gracie, practice so that when you get to the test you won't be so nervous."

I took another bite of my muffin, and this time I let it turn to mush on my tongue. I wondered if May would teach me to make muffins. Even if we weren't neighbors anymore. "How come there's nothing like that for actual important things? Like how come there's not a homework for not losing your home?"

She laughed. "Gracie, you're thirteen years old."

"Fourteen."

"You're fourteen. That's not your test to worry about. I imagine your Dad wants to protect you from ever having to worry about it so you can focus on your job, which is the eighth grade."

I opened my other textbook and started answering questions about the pioneers, but I my fingers moved quick and angry over the page. If this was Dad's test, he failed. He didn't protect me, or keep me from worrying. He just gave up.

I left a little before chore time.

Dad met me at the front door. "Gracie, where have you been?"

"I was at the Lafayette's."

"You need to let me know when you're gonna run off like that. It scares me when you disappear in weather like this."

I imagined telling him that I worried about him too and he wouldn't tell me what happened in his mind, but I couldn't say that. "I'm sorry. I finished my homework."

"Gracie, I'm real glad you finished your homework, but I don't know about you spending all that time with the neighbor boy."

I kept my mouth shut about Jordan not even being there. "How come, Dad? I told you Jordan's my friend."

“Why haven’t you gone over to Allison’s house lately?”

Because her mom didn’t want me around anymore than Dad wanted Jordan in our house? Because Allison had better friends? “I’m going to her house tomorrow. It’s her birthday.”

His face relaxed and my stomach got tighter. I knew why he wanted me to hang out with Allison, and why he wanted me to steer clear of Jordan.

I swallowed hard because I wanted to sit with Dad before chores. I’d even help him pack up the kitchen things because I wanted some time between us that wasn’t frozen. But my best strategies failed me. I went to my bedroom and curled up under the red-and-white quilt my grandma made. Tears leaked into my pillowcase and spread out over my cheeks.

Dad. His singing voice, his arms lifting me up and tossing me into the bottom of a wool sack, him guiding my hands while I tried to figure out how to fix fence. Dad was just like Cody Fair. It didn’t matter if Jordan rode bikes with me to Mrs. Thompson’s house, or if he showed me how to hypnotize chickens, or if he stood up to Mark for me. Course, Dad didn’t know about any of that. But that shouldn’t matter. I told him Jordan and me were friends. That should be enough.

The Case of Grace and the Sheep Saboteur: Part 7

It started raining as soon as I got on my bike and started pedaling away from school. By the time I turned onto the gravel roads, they were cut through with streams. I knew I should go home, but I wanted to make a stop by the Audubon Bird Sanctuary first, to see if anything there would back up my theory that Holland Dunn wanted Gracie's land so he could expand the Bird Sanctuary to a full eco-tourism location.

I'd never heard of eco-tourism before I got that flyer in the post office, so instead of working on my homework during English, I got on one of the computers and tried to figure it out. From what I could piece together from the newspaper and the definition of eco-tourism, Dunn wanted city people to be able to come out here as tourists so we could make money off them. Since we had nothing to attract them like a water park or zoo or ocean, he wanted to market the animals and the land. He wanted people to come stay in a hotel next to Sierra Pond and pay money to go on walks through the sanctuary and the Corbin's pastures. So they could know the land for a couple of days and then go back home to their cities.

The sanctuary butted up against the back of Gracie's land, but the part with a restroom and bird-blinds and signs about different species of birds was easier to access by the road, about a mile and a half away from my own driveway.

I parked my bike in the tiny parking lot and pulled my sweatshirt hood up. Every inch of my clothing soaked through ten minutes into my ride, so the hood didn't do much. There was a car parked in the lot. Suspicious not only because the sanctuary didn't draw many visitors, but also because the rain should have scared away anyone else. I walked closer and took a good look at the vehicle. A fancy hybrid car. Two door and front-wheel drive only. In short, it was a city ride, definitely not a farm car.

I poked my head closer to the window when I heard someone shouting. "Hey, get away from my car."

I have less than zero idea how to steal a car, but I imagine that's what the guy thought I was up to. And after more than one conversation with Sheriff Jacobson about Cody Fair's bike, I wanted to avoid accusations of grand theft. I scooted away from the car, but the round figure squelched after me. A big tube on one of his shoulders bobbed up and down. I hoped he wasn't packing heat.

I decided I better ask my questions before he got a chance. "What are you doing here?"

He stopped and tried to catch his breath. "Do I know you? If you're going to steal my car, do it sometime when I'm not in the middle of nowhere and stranded in the rain."

I gave the guy a once over. His suit and black shoes were poorly suited for any serious bird watching. "I'm not here to steal your car." I probably couldn't convince him that I came to bird watch any more than he could convince me.

"Then scam." He shifted

I nodded at the tube over his shoulder. "What's that?"

He didn't answer, just made a move for his car door. I moved quicker, and blocked him from getting in. "I hate this place," he growled. "I've spent too much time out here already."

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm drowning, that's what. I got a call that the Dunn-Thompson site expansion was ready to move ahead. Six years it's just been sitting here, and suddenly everything has to happen right now." He swore and shook one of his shoes like he could get the water out that way. "I

came out here to survey the land. Now why don't you get your butt out of my way and let me go home."

I stepped aside because the man was clearly out of patience. Besides, I had everything I needed. Before the Corbins officially turned the land over to the bank, somebody gave the green light to the eco-tourism expansion. It had to be Dunn.

Dad got the chore of giving me a lecture while Mom scrubbed potatoes too fiercely. Getting talked to by Dad was sure to be less fiery. "You should have told us where you were," Dad told me.

"I know. It was raining, so I tried to wait it out."

He shook his head. "We didn't have any idea where to look for you, Jordan. Just because we live in the middle of nowhere doesn't mean you're invincible. We don't want anything to happen to you."

I nodded because I knew Dad spoke from experience. He lost people he cared about, and he didn't want to lose me, too. It wasn't the first time we had this conversation. But inside, I couldn't feel guilty. Holland Dunn could give up now. We had him.

Jordan met me at the gate after chores that night. The rain had blown over to the west, which made for a grade-A sunset.

"Mom said I missed out on the study party. Sorry. I rode out to see what I could figure out about expanding on the bird sanctuary."

"In the storm? Why'd you do that?"

"You were so out of it today at school. You were walking around like a zombie." He straightened his arms out and made all the life go out of his eyes. I figured it was an effort to make me laugh.

"Dona Nobis died."

"Who?"

"Glinda's mom, Dona Nobis. She got out of the fence and hit by a car. She's dead."

Jordan kept quiet for a while, then muttered, "Do you think it was Dunn?"

I shrugged. It could have been, but it could have been an accident. This wouldn't be the first time a sheep ended up as road kill. "I took care of them best I could. I was out there every night for hours. And it didn't matter." I wanted for everything to be smooth sailing so Dad would regain his courage and decide that we could make it. Another month, another season, another year. But Dona was dead. Even I lost some fight when we found her body.

Jordan waved his hand in front of my face. "Grace? Earth to Grace? There was a man at the Bird Sanctuary today. He said he just got a call that Dunn's expansion was going ahead, and he had to come out to survey the land. I think it's time we paid Dunn a visit."

"And do what?" My voice dropped from my mouth like a dead thing.

Jordan jumped up and started ticking things off on his fingers. "Check out the tread on his truck. See if his dogs are sheep-eating monsters, and if he catches us, we'll confront him about his involvement with the eco-tourism project."

"And then what? We can't stop him."

"We go to Sherriff Jacobson. I bet we can get Mark's mom to come with us so it's not just a couple of kids. The Sherriff can check it out, and we won't get kicked of the land because the bank can't be doing illegal things, right? Your dad would see that it wasn't just impossible, it was impossible cause someone was making it that way."

What if Dad was right? Whether or not Dunn ran us out on purpose, how could we go on like this?

“Gracie,” Jordan whispered. “You can’t give up now. We’re closer than ever, and your flock is depending on you. You’ll see.”

His sureness caught on me. Not enough that I felt sure or safe, but enough that I nodded.

“Tomorrow?” he asked.

I wrinkled my nose. “Tomorrow is Allison’s birthday party.” I didn’t want to drag my feet, cause Dad could sell the sheep at any time. But we had to go to Allison’s party.

“I’ll find out Dunn’s address before the party and we’ll take him down the next day.”

“How are you gonna find Dunn’s address?”

“I have my methods. Leave it to me.” Jordan was so excited about it that I felt a smile sneak onto my face, too.

Wild Onion*Allium canadense*

The day when I find the first wild onion with its bud burst wide open is my favorite day of spring. After that I don't like to dig up the wild onions anymore, cause they tend to bite too much by the time they've bloomed. But one opens up, and then the next day there are hundreds of them. They lift up their heads and transform the cracked-up bottoms of dry ponds into carpets of lavender and white.

Before I came home today I left a handful of wildflowers on Dona Nobis' grave. Wild onions and Camas. Both in the Lily family. And both things that Dona Nobis would love to eat. It's silly to leave flowers on a sheep's grave. They die, the sheep and flowers both. That's just what happens.

Whenever Dad finds a carcass he digs a hole and buries it. Not because of sentimental reasons, or superstitions, but because it smells so bad, and it's better for all of us if it keeps its stink low in the ground. When other kids say I smell like sheep sometimes I imagine that's me. That I'm the smell that blows around and makes all of their clothes smell a little worse. Sometimes when I'm walking out in the pastures I find bones. Sheep skulls, or ribcages, or a whole spine. I don't know if that's from bodies that Dad and I missed or if the coyotes dug those sheep up and carried them away.

Last night I dreamed that I was walking over to my favorite pond, and I had Jordan's book and with a puzzle-piece flower I'd pressed in the pages. My foot kicked something that skittered on the ground and made a hollow sound. I looked down and there was a skeleton, but it wasn't a sheep skeleton. It was larger than that, with thick bones. While I watched, skin grew back over the bones. I started to back up, to run away, but it sprung up into a giant dog and jumped towards me. I woke up screaming, and it took me half an hour of sitting up in bed and breathing before I could try to go back to sleep.

Sometimes putting flowers on a grave reminds me that I'm safe, and that bones stay where they are.

Chapter 14

Allison's mom picked some of the kids up in her minivan, and the rest of us rode over on our bikes. I knew that would happen, so I biked to school so I wouldn't be in such a small space with Bailey Alders and Mrs. Granger. I didn't figure on having to ride over to the party with Mark and his gang. There were five at first. Mark, Jordan, Neal, Derek, and me. Then Beretta volunteered to ride over with us too, even though there was a seat in the car for her. Bailey tipped her head and raised an eyebrow at Beretta when she got out of the van, but Beretta didn't explain herself. Beretta was tough and liked to keep up with the guys, but I figured she didn't just get out of the van to prove that.

For the first block, I rode slow. Everybody else was competing to see who could ride the farthest without touching their handlebars. But after Mark lost the competition, he swung around and started riding right in front of me, swerving back and forth so I couldn't get around him. I focused on avoiding him, which was no picnic without brakes. When his back tire nearly spun into my front one, I planted my feet and snapped, "What do you want, Mark?"

He didn't answer me, just rode ahead like nothing happened. I let him get half a block ahead before I started pedaling. But it didn't take a minute for him to start up again, this time with Neal. Both of them swerved back and forth on the road in front of me and changed up their speed so I had to watch them every second.

I glanced ahead, where Jordan, Beretta, and Derek were all trying to pop wheelies. Come on, I thought. Turn around. I couldn't figure exactly why I was counting on somebody else to help me, only it seemed to work before. Jordan glanced over his shoulder and caught my eye just in time for me to crash into Neal's back tire. My front wheel froze and shot sharp to the right, which sent my left foot off the pedal. It dragged against the ground, but didn't manage to balance me.

From the ground, I could hear Neal laughing. How was it funny that my elbow was bleeding and I had gravel in my knee?

"Gracie, are you okay?" Jordan skidded to a stop by my side.

If it had just been the two of us riding our bikes I would've taken a moment to check on my injuries and let the first wave of pain pass. But Mark's eyes waited to see if he hurt me this time. I got to my feet and stood my bike. The whole time I kept my eyes on Mark's face. "I'm good."

"You're bleeding," Beretta pointed out.

I didn't look at her. "I know. I'll clean up at Allison's house. I hope I didn't break her present."

Mark's eyes narrowed. "You two don't know when to drop it, do you?"

I glanced at Jordan. He looked as confused as me. We'd looked up old articles at the library and Jordan rode to the bird sanctuary. Mark's mother had been mentioned, but we weren't trying to poke our noses in his private business. "What are you talking about?"

"You made a mistake when you turned down my help."

That didn't make any sense, but after he said that, Mark rode to Allison's house and never turned to look back at me.

Before we went inside, Jordan grabbed me by the shoulder. "Grace, try not to cause a fight at Allison's party, okay?"

“I’m not trying to cause anything.” Blood dripped down both my knees now. I already didn’t know how I was going to go in there without getting blood on something cleaned that Mrs. Granger really cared about.

“I know, but Grace. Try to be polite, okay? It’ll be easier to keep Mark in check if Mrs. Granger thinks you’re behaving. Be normal.”

I didn’t try to stare at him. But my eyes when astonished-wide, and I couldn’t think what to say to respond. If I knew how to blend into the middle like him, I would already be invisible. I didn’t want to show up bleeding with a beat-up present at my best friend’s birthday party. “I need to get a band-aid,” I muttered.

Jordan shook Mrs. Granger’s hand and said thank you and how pleased he was to meet her. When Jordan talked to her, Mrs. Granger’s face relaxed, but then she turned to me. Her eyes and lips pinched tight.

“Hello, Mrs. Granger.” My limbs felt stiff. My words sounded the same.

“Grace kind of crashed on the way over,” Jordan explained. “Do you have something we can clean up with?”

“Stay on the porch. I don’t want you bleeding all over the house. I’ll bring you a wet rag and a band-aid.” I sat down on the porch and took my shoes off, because everybody took their shoes off in the Granger house. After a minute I took my socks off too, because they had sopped up some of the blood that made it all the way down my shins. Bailey would say something about my feet, but I couldn’t think of anything else to fix it.

“You can go in,” I muttered to Jordan. Bailey’s voice carried from the kitchen. She shouted at everyone to stack their gifts by Allison’s chair.

He shrugged. “It’s okay.”

Mrs. Granger dropped the first-aid supplies in my hands. I figured she wouldn’t help me clean up but I was glad because she wouldn’t be gentle if she did. Jordan helped me wipe my elbow and unwrap the bandages. The inside of me still simmered cause he couldn’t understand that I hurt and I would trade a lot of things to be normal at Allison’s birthday. But I couldn’t stay all mad at him.

Things went smooth for a while. Allison opened presents. She closed her eyes to make a wish and blew out all but two of her candles with her first breath, which meant she’d have two boyfriends this year. I made sure that I stayed quiet even when Bailey gave me cake last and commented about my stinky feet. Quiet was as close as I could get to blending in. I tried to say some nice things to Allison and Mrs. Granger, and when I complemented the cake, I think it actually pleased Mrs. Granger.

But after she cleared the paper plates, Mrs. Granger melted away so we kids could have fun without an adult around. I felt about as safe without adult supervision as Daniel in the lion’s den. Be normal, I reminded myself. Just blend in.

I tried to stay still when Mark sat next to me and pressed his hand on my knee where I just dug the rocks out. I looked at Jordan. He better appreciate that I being good and blendy, because this was no fun at all.

“What are you doing, Mark?” Beretta glared down at Mark and me.

“I wanted to talk with Gracie. She looked lonely, sitting over here all by herself.”

I took a deep breath. “I just want Allison to have a happy birthday without me ruining it. Can’t you wait until tomorrow to pick on me?”

“I want to make sure you get the point.”

“I get the point that you’re afraid.” It wasn’t a smart thing to say. I couldn’t figure out why he wanted to control me so much. But I could tell his hands were sweating on my knees because I scared him. “Get your hands off of me.”

“Somewhere in that crazy, malfunctioning brain of yours, you know you’re the one who should be scared.”

I glanced at Beretta and hoped she could tell me with her eyes what was the right thing to do to be normal but not stupid. She turned around and walked away. I didn’t guess I blamed her, but that meant I had to take care of things on my own. I made a move to stand up, and Mark moved his hand to my forehead so I lost my balance. Stupid.

Allison spoke up. “Mark, could you stop it, please?”

“Wanna fight me, sheep girl? Get up, let’s go.”

I couldn’t get up because he kept pushing me back into my chair. I closed my eyes and waited for him to go away.

Thud. My eyes popped open only to see Mark and Jordan slamming into the couch. Beretta dragged Mrs. Granger back into the living room in time to see Mark grabbing a handful of Jordan’s hair and yanking on it. When the two of them slammed into the couch, the wall hanging above got knocked out of place and cracked right down on both of them. Glass shattered into a hundred pieces over their heads, and every one of us in the room froze.

“Mark Thompson. Jordan Lafayette. What do you think you’re doing?” I knew Mrs. Granger didn’t like me, but she’d never pulled out this voice before.

“It’s Jordan’s fault. No, it’s Grace’s fault,” Mark spluttered.

“Save it. Jordan, Mark, to the kitchen. Now. Grace Corbin, you too. You’re calling your parents. Explain to them that you cannot act your age at Allison’s party. I thought I was done with this kind of behavior.”

All the other kids vacated the living room so Mrs. Granger could pick up the big pieces of glass before Mark and Jordan stood up. I tugged on my hair because I didn’t like that they’d have to stand up in their sock feet, but Mrs. Granger wouldn’t want me to get their shoes.

“Grace Corbin, go to the kitchen and call your father. Mark and Jordan will be there in a moment.”

When I heard Dad’s voice on the other end of the phone, it almost shattered me like the picture glass. “I ruined Allison’s birthday again. Can you come get me?”

He promised to be there in fifteen minutes, so I waited on the porch until I heard the grumble of our truck. He put my bike in the back and looked at my scratches with his forehead all crinkled up before he walked to the truck with me.

Bitterroot*Lewisia rediviva*

Mom first showed me Bitterroot after the first time at the graveyard. The human graveyard, not the one next to the silos where we bury the sheep. I turned ten a month before my giant of a grandfather got lowered to sleep next to my grandmother in a giant of a coffin. It was Mamma who leaned over and tossed the first handful of dirt into the hole.

My grandpa was seventy years old when he died, and I believe he still could lift a four hundred and fifty pound ram to toss him in a trailer. That's how Grandpa saw himself, too. That's the reason why he got himself into a fight with a ram that knocked him down and trampled over him until the air left his lungs and the blood leaked out of the places it belonged. That's why, when we found him in the evening, all three of us had to help in getting him to the car so Dad could drive him to the hospital.

It startled me that a man who towered and boomed the way Grandpa did could be stilled. I couldn't undo his death, or the spiral of things that came after it. Couldn't erase the letters and calls wanting to collect on the things Grandpa owed when he died. The men who wanted to take pieces away from our land so they could pay taxes Grandpa didn't believe in. For a week, everybody held out hands to comfort us, hands with casseroles and Kleenexes, but after that all those hands grabbed hold and tried to rip us apart.

For a while I wouldn't go out to the barn, or do chores, or sing to the sheep, cause in my mind it was their fault that Mamma was crying and Dad spent all evening on the phone with angry voices. It was Mamma who took my hand and walked me through the fields again. She showed me the flower she called Tough Pink. It grows straight out of the rock but it's this sweet shade of pink with petals like fingers. She said how the flower could be angry because to even see the sun, it had to climb out of so much hard earth, but instead it turns its face towards the sky and waits for summer.

It's funny that the Tough Pink is really called Bitterroot, cause even though their roots are in the rock, they face the sky wide open. If anything, they're the opposite of bitter.

The Case of Grace and the Sheep Saboteur: Part 8

Now that we had all the pieces of the puzzle, I assumed Gracie and I could lay the case to rest the day after Allison's birthday party. Spring rains came earlier that day, but by the time I got to Gracie's, the sky was done threatening. It rested against the sprouting earth and made all the colors look brighter.

I needed my own sky to get brighter. I tangled with enough failure during school, so this confrontation with the bank manager needed to be a win. I even borrowed Dad's camera so I could take some pictures of Holland's dogs and truck, once we found them. That way we'd have some kind of evidence when we went to report Dunn to the police.

Gracie came to the door with her bike helmet on, and I couldn't help but grin. She was a welcome change from the unfriendly faces I dealt with at school.

I dumped the contents of my backpack on her steps. "I brought binoculars, and a flashlight, in case we're out late." Gracie looked over the rest of the pile. I'd packed beef jerky for if we need to distract the dogs and walky-talkies in case we needed to go separate ways. I toyed with the idea of borrowing Mom's cell phone, but she was pretty likely to notice that. Walky-talkies from my eleventh birthday were the best alternative.

"You brought Cheetos," Gracie pointed out.

"Course. Can't leave home without them."

"You wanna come in and get water before we leave?" We figured out that Holland Dunn's house was the really nice house right across from city hall, which was about five and a half miles' ride away.

We grabbed water bottles from the kitchen and Gracie cracked the ice tray over them so they'd be refreshing when we made it to town. Before we walked out the door, Gracie called down the hallway, "Dad, I'm riding bikes with Jordan. We'll be back later, okay?"

Mr. Corbin came around the corner and I saw his face work through the series of micro-movements I memorized on the faces of teachers and convenience store clerks. He didn't want me around, didn't want his daughter riding out with me. He turned back to Grace. "Did you do your homework?"

"I'll do it tonight."

"Be home by four-thirty. I don't want you out late."

We walked out the door and the weight carried around since P.E came back double. I wanted to talk to Gracie. To tell her that Mark had caught me in the locker room earlier and given me an Indian burn because he thought it was funny. When I tried to hit him back Principal Emmons sat me down and told me things might be different at home, but I couldn't settle things with my fists at his school. I wanted to tell Grace that I missed my old school because I wasn't the only Indian kid at this school, but whenever I got in trouble everybody looked at me as a Rez kid. And even though I tried to do everything right all the time, I couldn't match up with what they wanted.

I didn't say those things. And I didn't tell her I was glad that I finally had an actual friend who I could do things with and not pretend around. Instead, as I made my way down her broken front steps, I muttered, "I don't think your dad likes me."

She jumped on her bike and spun the pedals. "He likes you fine."

"How come he doesn't want me coming around your house, then?" She started riding down the driveway. I pedaled after her. How come she wasn't answering? She couldn't just ignore me. "I should be used to it. Everybody in this town is the same."

Gracie jerked her bike to a stop at the end of the driveway, and gravel sprayed in all directions. I almost collided with her.

“What are you saying about my dad?” She wore her most hostile expression.

“Just that he’s as racist as everyone else in this no-horse town.”

“My dad isn’t racist,” she said.

How could she believe that? “Sure. That’s why he tried to break the lease after he figured out that my parents are Native, huh? That’s why he doesn’t want you spending time with me.”

“My dad is a good guy. He works hard and takes care of me and deals with more crap than you ever had to. Where do you get of saying that the whole town is the same? You have lots of friends. I’m right here.”

“And you were ecstatic to team up with me. You’ve been waiting all year with bated breath for the perfect moment to become my best friend, right? Don’t give me that, Grace Corbin. You had nothing for me except accusations until you needed to use me.” I struggled to take a real breath of air that didn’t end up like a sob.

“That’s what I’m doing?” Gracie threw her bike on the ground and stalked over to me. This was the part of the fight where she’d start using her fists. My stomach curled up in fear, but I didn’t back off.

I dropped my bike to and faced her, toe to toe. “Let’s see. For more than a year we were next-door neighbors and you never spoke to me. When you finally did, it was only because you wanted my help protecting your big dumb beasts. And copy my homework, and get doughnuts at my house. It doesn’t matter that I’ve already been here a year. You didn’t need to use me then.”

There was that spark of fire in her eye, just like I expected, but when she spoke to me it was ice. “There are lots of reasons we weren’t friends before, Jordan. You’re not perfect.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. You’re lie. All the time. You’re this dumb version of yourself at school. You lie to everyone just so you can fit in the middle, even though there’s nothing middle about you. Yeah, you call Mark out when he crosses the line, but most of the time you pretend he’s king just like everybody else. How’s anybody supposed to be friends with a fake person?”

“You’ve got a lot of room to talk, Grace Corbin. Do you know why nobody likes you? I’ll give you a hint. It’s got nothing to do with how much money you have. People don’t have to be shallow to get sick of you.”

We stared at each other for about fifteen seconds. Her hands hung open at her sides. She hadn’t hit me. There were more tears in her eyes than fight. My fear was replaced with a sick feeling. Why did I say that?

“No one’s making you stay.” She muttered. “Go home. I told you before. I can do this.” She got on her bike and rode away. She only looked back at me once.

I’m done with bad eco-tourism projects. I’m done with sheep, and sheep magic, and done with Gracie Corbin. I bet she rode over and solved the case on her own, just like she said she could. She went to Holland Dunn’s house without me. If I know anything about her, she probably marched right up to the front door and told him that he better not hurt her sheep. She didn’t pull any punches when it came to her farm,

I didn’t lie to Grace. She said I was a liar, but it’s true that her Dad’s not fair to us. Everything I said was the truth.

Chapter 15

After our fight I figured I better get out of there before Jordan made me cry, so I picked up my bike and rode away. When I looked back from the road, Jordan was still in my driveway, his arms crossed over his chest and bike dumped on the ground.

I pedaled as fast as I could so my feet pumped like pistons in an engine, faster than my heart.

I showed up at Holland Dunn's house in record time. Instead of sneaking around the back to check if his truck matched the prints or using binoculars to see what kind of dog hung around in the backyard, I marched straight up his fancy steps and rung his doorbell. I jammed the button in four times, and while I was smashing it in for the fifth time, the door swung open, and an irritated Mr. Dunn snapped, "Stop that."

"I'll stop ringing your doorbell if you admit that you've been sabotaging our farm."

He wasn't dressed up in a full fancy suit the way he had been at the bank, but he still didn't look like he belonged in our town, not in a turtleneck sweater. His eyes narrowed. "Hold on, I remember you."

I didn't want to get sidetracked by him because I was boiling and wanted to say my bit before I got scared. "You might have the right to take the land back, but you can't destroy our property. We—uh, I figured out that you want get our land to expand the bird sanctuary into a major eco-tourism place. Dad's stubborn, so you thought you'd convince him by destroying our property and hurting our sheep."

"There's one I haven't heard before. Suppose you come in, sit down, and tell me why you think I'm responsible for that kind of vandalism?"

"I'm not going in your house. You know I know too much."

"In that case I assume we'll have to sit on the porch. Would you like some water?"

"Not from you."

"Very well. Take a seat." He indicated a porch chair and sat in one across from it. I still simmered so hot I couldn't see straight, but I forced myself to sit.

"What's your name?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"I don't know anything about your banking situation unless you tell me which one you are."

"I'm Grace Corbin."

He frowned. "The Corbin land. Yes."

"Do you remember what you did to us now?"

"I remember I visited with your father. He's no longer making payments, and you have until this weekend to move out. Correct?"

"We're not moving out, and I'm not letting you change the subject. You killed Dona Nobis."

He'd been annoyed but patient until I said that, but then his face started settling into a real glare. I bit my lip. I figured he didn't actually kill Dona Nobis, but Jordan thought it was connected to the sabotage, and I wanted to blame this man.

"Grace, do you understand how foreclosures work?"

I wanted to punch his patient voice back down his throat. "Yes. Mrs. Thompson explained everything to me."

The glare on his face faltered and curved into confusion. "Irene?"

“That’s right. The one you fired because she tried to defend us.”

“I fired her because she shared confidential bank information with outside sources. If she told you the truth about foreclosure, you know that everything I’ve done is legal. It’s how the bank system works. If you can’t pay what you owe, you lose your land.”

“It’s not right.”

“I understand this town has an obsession with villainizing me for doing things efficiently. All the same, it’s completely legal. Tell me, Grace. If I can do what I’m trying to do by completely legal means, why would I want to do the illegal?”

“Huh?”

“The sabotage you’re suggesting seems complicated. I get what I want whether or not you leave land. If you stay and make payments, the bank gets money. If you leave, the bank will get to sell the land. As you seem to already know, people are interested in buying the land. The bank gets money. I don’t need to put in the extra work of poisoning your sheep.”

I wished Jordan were here to explain if I missed something important, but Mr. Dunn made sense. I pressed forward anyhow. “We have proof. We have an eyewitness that can put your dogs at the scene, and we can prove it’s your truck that trespassed on our land.”

“I understand you’re upset, but I suggest you don’t accuse people with such shaky evidence. You have nothing on me.”

“Prove it.”

He stood up, and I jumped to my feet too, but he didn’t move to hurt me, just walked down the stairs and over to his garage. He unlocked the door and motioned me inside. I figured it wasn’t a great idea to go into the garage with him, but I did tell him to prove it. I stepped into the dim inside of his garage and the scent of dogs washed over me right away.

He flipped on the garage light. “If my pets trespassed on your land, I’m very sorry, of course. But I think we can agree that they were not responsible for hurting any of your animals.”

Dunn was right. In a cozied-up box, six cocker spaniels sucked up their mother’s milk. The mamma looked up at me the way I looked at strangers on our land. I took a step back.

“It’s not my car, either.”

I believed him, but I looked at the car anyway, just to see how wrong we were. I expected Dunn to drive something shiny, parked on the other side of the garage was a 2007 Geo Metro. I didn’t know whether the inside of me wanted to laugh or cry.

“The point, Grace, is that the bank owns your land now. We’re going to sell it next week, or perhaps the week after. Whether or not you’re ready for it. And we’re going to do it all in legal ways.”

“I hope that... I hope you...” I wanted him to die. I wanted him to lose his home the way I was losing mine. I wanted for him to fight with his Dad and his best friend and not get enough sleep.

“Grace Corbin, I see you’re a very dedicated girl. You are loyal to your farm, and I am the same way about my business. You see me as the bad guy, but you’re just as dangerous to my business.” He ushered me out of the garage and locked the door again. “If I stand aside for you, I sacrifice the efficiency and profit of my banking.”

“The problem is not that I am evil, the problem is that your father is no longer making payments.” He paused. “I don’t want to spend the next three hours explaining banking procedures with you, but your father knows that I tried to speak with him about renegotiating. I will not foreclose on a property that is making good-faith payments. He has rejected all offers to

negotiate. I suppose your father doesn't think the situation is temporary." He shrugged. "It seems like something to discuss with him."

Holland Dunn walked into his house and shut the door then sat down on his steps. Maybe half an hour later he poked his head out.

"What are you doing on my step?"

"Sitting," I answered, "And I don't care if you call the sheriff. Go ahead."

He took a couple of steps out onto the porch. "Miss Corbin. Go home."

"You're stealing my home."

"And you're sitting on mine." I looked up at him, surprised he tried a joke with me.

"You still have a few days. Enjoy your land and your sheep."

I spent the last few weeks doing everything I could to take care of my flock. I tried my hardest, and in the end, that wasn't good enough. If I went home now it would feel like I'd really given up. Like Holland Dunn beat me. I couldn't bring myself to stand up and get off his porch. It was probably four-thirty, and Dad expected me home.

I craned my neck to look at the bank manager and asked, "Mr. Dunn, do you get everything you want?"

"Excuse me?"

"When you want something with every part of you, so much you can feel it in your teeth and the bones in your toes, and you stay up all night wishing for it, and you work as hard as you can—do you always get what you want?"

Mr. Dunn hesitated to speak, then settled heavily into the porch chair again. "Only children can say that. Part of growing up is figuring out that working hard and wishing for something doesn't matter. Some things work and others don't. What you want has nothing to do with it."

I left his porch and swung a leg over my bike. I looked back on the porch and saw Mr. Dunn there with his shoulders hunched around his turtleneck and eyes focused on the distance. At the moment, I didn't hate Mr. Dunn so much as I hated the whole world. I hated being out of options. I hated that Dad crumpled and gave up when I was still trying.

I pedaled away from Dunn's house. Dad wanted me home, and like Mr. Dunn said, I only had days left on my land. Maybe I could soak up enough of the muddy ground and tender grass of spring to keep me alive for a while.

Instead of pedaling home, though, I swerved at the bank and parked my bike in the rack. The bank closed at 3:30, so I couldn't solve anything here. I walked around the bank. I picked up a handful of dirt and mulch from the fake garden and threw it at the window. It didn't make me feel any better.

"Grace, what are you doing here?"

I whirled around. There was Mark's mom, idling her car next to me. Her face, like her voice, suspected me of trouble.

Even though I hadn't managed to do anything bad to the bank yet, my heart started pounding double time. "I'm on my way home."

"From where?"

"I talked with Holland Dunn." I hoped she didn't ask too many questions. I couldn't promise to answer without crying.

"I thought you were going to leave it alone."

I looked at her and wished Jordan were with me, so we put our heads together and decide what expression her face had worked itself into.

“I can’t just leave it alone. It’s my home.”

“You shouldn’t mess with Dunn. You know that got me in trouble.”

I didn’t like Dunn, but he hadn’t seemed dangerous, and he said he fired her for other reasons. It was nice that she worried about me, but I think I scared Mr. Dunn more than he scared me.

“What are you doing back at the bank?” I half-hoped they’d changed their minds and given her job back, even though I knew today wasn’t a good things sort of day.

“I had some things I needed to get. I left in a hurry when Dunn fired me.”

I nodded. “I hope he gets fired soon and you get your job back.”

She snorted. “That’s sweet, Gracie. You better get home now. And remember, it’s better if you leave this kind of thing to the adults. Dunn might not have seemed like a threat when you talked to him, but he could take this out on your farm.”

On one level, her warning made sense. If Dunn was guilty, he wouldn’t like it that I was on his trail. But there was nothing guilty about Holland Dunn when I left his house. Her car stayed in place until I untangled my bike from the bike rack and rode away.

One glance at Dad’s face showed he was being swamped with waves of anger and worry. He said something about disobedience and disrespect, and I answered that I’d been taking care of myself and the farm, and I didn’t need him taking care of me. He spit back that he was still my dad, and I better act like it, and that I was acting like a child. I told him that he was being scared and that my dad wouldn’t give up the farm without trying to protect it, and that Holland Dunn told me he just gave up.

After that Dad had to have the whole story of where I heard that and why I was at Holland Dunn’s house. I told him how I snuck out of the house and caught the dogs trying to tear Glinda apart. I told him how Jordan offered to help, and tears started dripping out of me when I explained to Dad how Jordan and I fought before I went to Mr. Dunn’s.

The story got all mixed up and broken into pieces, but in the end Dad nodded, put more wood on the fire, and told me to sit on the couch. I did what he said, and in a couple minutes he brought two mugs of hot cocoa and sat next to me.

“You’re grounded for two weeks.” That was not a good thing to lead with, but I didn’t say anything. I’d run out of emotions for the day. “I’m not blind, Grace. I see bad things happening to the farm, too. I didn’t know—well, you never told me about the dogs. But I knew things were going wrong. I figured it was a sign that after all this trying, it was time to try something new. I thought it would be better for both of us. You worry about the sheep so much and spend so much of your time taking care of them that you’re doing pretty poor in school.”

“No, Dad, that’s not...” I struggled. He had it all backwards. Tears sprung up in my eyes again because I had to make him understand. Maybe I had some emotions left.

“I hear you.” He sighed and took a swig of his cocoa. “You should have told me about the dogs, and—“

“I told you about the poison and you didn’t care.”

“You should have told me, but you did a good job of taking care of your flock.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes, and I could tell Dad needed the time to think.

“Dad, I need the flock. I need the land.”

He started a song I hadn’t heard for two years or more.

“I ain’t gonna marry in the fall. I ain’t gonna marry in the spring.

Cause I’m in love with a pretty little girl who wears a diamond ring.”

I melted into the couch and let myself be nothing but ears and lungs, listening to Dad singing and breathing in and out.

*“I’m just a country boy, money have I none
But I’ve got silver in the stars, and gold in the morning sun.
and gold in the morning sun.”*

Prairie Star*Lithophragma parviflorum*

Dad told me that when the first settlers moved out here from their homes back East, there were women who'd go crazy and shoot their husbands cause they blamed the men for bringing them into the middle of nowhere, so far away from their family and everybody they loved. Their eyes and minds couldn't take the flat land and the colors all shading into one another. I guess most of those stories are about Nebraska, or the Dakotas. I don't get it, though. They must not have been looking close enough.

Prairie Stars only grow in the Northwest. From a tiny chunk of Canada to a tiny chunk of California, and then all over Oregon and Washington. It's one of the native flowers, so it fits right in the balance of the place. It's got thin stems like the straw grass and handfuls of petals on handfuls of flowers at the end of each one.

I don't know if there's anything special that the Prairie Star can do, like make fancy tea to fix headaches or grow roots that are good to eat. But it's important to see bright things and notice the breath-holding perfect way that green and gold switch places in July. That's where the first prairie wives messed up. Soon as you forget where your gold is, you'll lose heart.

Dad and I talked last night, and I think he realized how he'd broken faith with me when he gave up. He didn't make any promises to fix everything, but he did try to explain. He got out some of his financial documents and showed me the difference between what we had and what we needed, and how the money we made in a year wouldn't catch us up.

And he made me promise not go on any other vigilante missions. I told him I liked sleeping out there, so he said I could go out as long as I didn't go past the barn, and I had to come get him if I noticed anything amiss.

I wanted him to say he'd talk to the bank and figure everything out and make it so we wouldn't have to sell the sheep. But at least when we talked last night, I knew he told me the truth.

Chapter 16

“Grace? Can I talk to you for a moment?”

I stopped and felt a stone drop into my stomach for every class I needed to pass. I stepped into the GC’s office and sat on the chair.

“What did your dad say?”

More stones collected in my stomach.

“Did you talk with him about summer school?”

I shook my head. She waited, silent.

“It’s not fair.” I knew the world wasn’t fair. I knew only three year olds complained about the world being fair. My fingernails dug into my palms as I waited for the GC to remind me about this.

“What’s not fair?”

“I tried,” my voice wobbled, so I took a deep breath. “I did everything you told me to, and I still have to go to summer school. I just wanted things to work and everything’s out of my control.” A tear escaped from my eye, and I wiped it away. Tears had no place in this conversation. “And Mr. Dunn said that only kids can say that it actually works when they want something real bad and they’ll give up anything to get it.

The GC looked confused. “Mr. Dunn, the bank manager?”

I nodded. “And if wanting and trying don’t matter... then what?” I didn’t know if my question made any sense, but I thought it was important to work hard. I didn’t have easy school smarts or a pretty face or money. I had pure try.

The GC chewed on her pen cap for a moment. “Is this really about going to summer school?”

Yes. A little. I shook my head no. “Good. Because I know you don’t like the idea, but it’s six weeks in the summer. It’s half days.” I sighed. It could be worse. “And summer school is a tool to make sure you are in control when you get to high school.”

The bell rang, and I stood up.

“Grace, don’t listen to Holland Dunn. He’s an angry man who only got angrier when things went wrong. You’re in charge of what you learn from bad days. Look at the good things that have happened. You’re doing better in your classes than you have been all year. Your teachers are impressed. And when I see you in the halls, you’re more likely to be talking with your classmates and less likely to be fighting with them.”

“Not anymore,”

She shook her head. “That’s in your control.”

I found Jordan in the library. I guessed he skipped class for some reason, went to the library to read instead. Which meant I was skipping class too, when I was supposed to turn my behavior around. Oops.

“Jordan?”

He looked up from his book. Our eyes connected for a second and his turned stone.

“Jordan? Can I talk to you?”

He looked back at the page. “Not if you’re just gonna make fun of me for reading,” he growled.

I clenched my hands. Teasing was different than making fun of. I never made fun of Jordan. “I went to see Mr. Dunn yesterday.”

“Okay.”

“I don’t think it was him.”

His head jerked like he wanted to look up, but he kept his neck bowed. “Okay.”

“What are you reading?”

He didn’t answer. Words bubbled up in my throat. I wanted to say I was sorry, and that I hoped we could be friends again because I want to learn how to not be scared of chickens and how to hypnotize them and even after we both aren’t neighbors anymore, I want to eat lunch with him every school day and ride bikes on the weekends.

I walked over in front of him, but he didn’t look up at me. I couldn’t say what I was thinking, he didn’t want to hear it. I walked through the aisles of the library until I found a book I recognized. It was the first book from the series that I started with the last book when I found it in the secret bookshelf. The librarian had to ask my name before she figured out who to check the book out too, but she didn’t stop me.

Since I was trying to do homework now, I’d done a lot more reading. It took me time, more time than it ever took Jordan, but it wasn’t the worst. It was sort of like basketball. When I practiced basketball by myself, it was rhythmic and constant and nobody watched me. Maybe when I practiced enough, reading would happen like basketball. I’d get better, and eventually I could do it when the rest of the class watched.

I flipped the page.

When the bell rang, Jordan and I both walked out of the library. I tried to build a bridge between us. “Jordan, I’m sorry.”

He didn’t say anything because the two of us walked right into a wall of guys. Mark. And Neal, and Derek, and Cody Fair. I dodged to the left quick and snuck away from the group. They didn’t block my way. I don’t even think they glanced after me.

“Jordan,” Mark greeted. The four guys crowded around Jordan and pushed him back toward the lockers.

Why’d they decide to pick on Jordan? Did this have to do with the birthday party? Or the fact that he kept sticking up for me when Mark had rotten things to say?

“I warned you. You had every chance to back off and mind your own business. But you had to keep playing at your dumb-ass detective game. I got in trouble for your last little stunt.”

“What stunt?”

“Getting me in trouble at Allison’s party. Not cool.”

One of the guys tugged on Jordan’s backpack. Jordan tried to lock his arms around it, but the guys yanked on the backpack until he shrugged out of it just to keep his arms safe.

“So I was thinking. You’ve caused me enough trouble this year, I think you owe me a little compensation. I’ve got a deal for you. I want you to do my English homework. I’ll give you five bucks a week, even.”

“Make it twenty dollars and we got a deal,” Jordan responded.

“You don’t get to make the terms, Jordan. Beggars can’t be choosers, right? I’d say you’re the beggar here.”

“Mark, give me my backpack. I just skipped math, and if I don’t go to English now, they’re going to send Emmons after me.”

One of the boys unzipped Jordan’s backpack and started rooting around inside. He tossed a book to Mark. I could tell from where I stood that it wasn’t a girly book, or a little-kid book, it was one of the fancy old books that the librarian found for Jordan because he was ready for high-level thinking and college-level words.

Jordan tried to keep worry out of his eyes. “Give me that.”

Mark flipped through the pages. “Why do you waste your time reading college books like this? You’re never going to college. My mom says you’re going to end up running the supermarket like Dumb Dom.”

I winced. Mrs. Thompson said that?

“Check it out!” Neal yanked a ragged notebook out of Jordan’s backpack. It was the book he got out the afternoon we roasted Camas and watched the fire pit go cold. The book he was writing, the one he didn’t want anyone to see.

“Give me that,” Jordan ordered.

I took a few steps closer. Except for the guys, everyone had cleared out of the hallway. Maybe a teacher would look down this part of the hallway and see. They’d know something was wrong cause it was so many of them against Jordan. But they’d managed to crowd Jordan back into the half-hallway across from the library. There weren’t any classes down this way, so why would anyone look here? I could run off and grab a teacher from a classroom in the main hall, but that seemed like a good way to get Jordan and myself in even more trouble.

“What’s this, Jordan? Is this your little journal?”

Everybody could see Jordan blush at that just as easy as I could. “It’s not a journal.”

“I guess we better see what it is.” Mark flipped open the pages and started reading. “Ooh, we got a title here. The Case of Grace and the Sheep Saboteur. You wrote a story about you and your girlfriend. And your nosy little game. This is too great.”

For a second I wanted to strangle Jordan. What was he thinking when he brought ammunition like that into hostile territory? Who knew what he had written? It probably included something about sheep magic. I glanced at Jordan, and my anger popped and floated away. He was angry enough at himself.

It was well past time for me to go punch Mark’s smug jaw into three or four pieces.

I ran into the hallway and rammed my head straight into Neal’s chest. He stumbled back and gasped for breath.

“Just in time,” Mark laughed. “The girlfriend is here.”

“Jordan Lafayette is not my boyfriend. He’s not even talking to me. But you’re a rotten loser, Mark, and I’m not going to stand around and let you be an ass to Jordan.” That was accompanied by an uppercut to his chin. I yanked Jordan’s dumb book from Mark’s hands and ran. A couple pages stayed in Mark’s hands, but I couldn’t go back. I didn’t figure I could beat half the basketball team if they all got coordinated, but I could get most of the story away from them.

Neal came after me. His legs covered a lot of distance with each step, but I moved faster anyhow. I ran into my science class and slid into the nearest empty seat, even though I was supposed to sit closer to the teacher’s desk.

“Thanks for joining us, Miss Corbin,” Mr. Connolly greeted. “You’re in an awful hurry for somebody who’s so late for class.” I wasn’t sure if he was angry or not until he grinned and tapped my desk. “Let’s see the project.”

I slipped Jordan’s poor-plan diary into my backpack and pulled out my flower binder. Even though I was still a little nervous for Jordan, I was proud that I managed to escape with the book, and I was almost done with my flower assignment.

Mr. Connolly flipped the pages and before he walked away, he clapped me on the back.

I found Jordan in the hallway between classes and shoved his notebook into his hands. “You might want to hide this.”

“You didn’t read it, right?”

“I didn’t even look at it. Did you get away from the other guys okay?”

He shrugged. “More or less.” He turned around and walked away without saying anything else.

I didn’t know how to say I was sorry better than that, so I let him go.

On Sunday someone drove up our driveway to look at our sheep. When I first saw them stop their truck in a little patch of prairie grass, bile rose up in my throat. A piece of me wanted to hide, but I pulled on my barn boots and went to help Dad show them my flock.

A leathery man and his wife got out of the truck. She looked ages younger than him except for how stiff she walked. Her hair was long and white and braided out behind her. He didn’t have much hair at all, just a baseball hat.

“We want to try something new,” the woman explained. “We’ve done pigs and chickens for years, but I wanted to try sheep.”

I bet they were successful farmers. He didn’t look like anything fancy, but she had pretty jewelry and he drove a Ford Super Duty in real good shape. I guessed our sheep would do well at their house.

“This is Glinda,” I said. I sparked my fingers just enough to run magic through her fleece. She looked up at me and baaed in her sweetest voice.

The farmer rubbed his baseball hat around on his head. “I’ve never seen a sheep quite like her.”

“What do you mean?” Dad looked equal parts nervous and hopeful.

“Look at this fleece.”

The farmer’s wife reached down and touched Glinda’s back. “That’s remarkable. You must get a lot for wool.”

Dad shrugged. “We don’t sell it any way special, I suppose you could get more if you tried to sell it in the farmer’s markets.”

The farmer ran his hands up and down Glinda’s legs and back and found the spot where the dog bit her, a blotch of scar tissue on her neck.

“What happened here?”

“She got bit by a dog,” I whispered. “But I fixed her up, and she’s good as new.”

“I can see that.” He parted her fleece so he could look closer. “Must have happened when she was young.”

“No. Just a couple of weeks ago.”

I should have kept my mouth shut, because he probed at the old wound again and his face washed over with skepticism. “Scar like that doesn’t form in a couple of weeks.”

Dad shot a calculating look from the farmer to me. “With Gracie, it does.” He nodded at me, and I took a deep breath. Seemed like he wanted me to explain the sheep magic, but he wasn’t gonna make me.

Instead of saying anything, I sparked my hands and held them out toward Glinda. She nuzzled against my side and lipped my fingers with her bristly mouth.

And then Glinda marched across the muddy ground toward the farmer’s wife and nuzzled the her hand. For a moment, the light climbed into the woman’s fingers, and I panicked that she had sheep magic too, and there was nothing special about me.

But the second Glinda moved away, the light disappeared. She flexed into a fist with a look of confusion on her face. “Clarence?”

The farmer looked at her.

“Clarence, look.”

She opened and closed her fist again, and Clarence grabbed her hand inside of his. “Your arthritis...”

“I don’t feel anything.”

I held my breath. The magic came from Glinda, and went into the farmer’s wife. And she wasn’t done showing off. Glinda bumped the woman in the right hip and glow radiated right through her skirt.

The woman gasped crumbled almost to the ground before Clarence wrapped his arm around her waist. Her face got blank-page white.

“Clarence.” Her voice barely came out so we could hear it. I couldn’t figure why Glinda would hurt her, but her voice wobbled through layers of pain.

Clarence’s eyes locked on me. “What’s going on?”

I just shook my head because I couldn’t find any words to answer him. Glinda lifted her head and baaed at me real proud. I looked from Glinda to the woman, who still clutched onto her husband’s sleeve.

He shook his head at me guided his wife into the truck, real gentle. And then he hopped into the other side of the truck and drove away.

I looked at Dad and all my worry tumbled out in one breath. “Am I in trouble? Do you think he’s gonna tell the Sheriff that my sheep magic hurt his wife? Is she gonna be okay?”

“They can’t prove anything. There will be other buyers.” He walked back to the house, shoulders drawn towards the ground and head bowed.

Glinda ambled over to me and gave me a fond nose in the side. She didn’t mean to hurt the old lady. I rubbed her head with my hands sparking and her head sparking back. She’d never sent me magic before, but I wasn’t so surprised. She’d been knee deep in this since before she was all the way born. “It’s okay, Glinda. I know you were trying to help.”

Silky Lupine*Lupinus sericeus*

We're supposed to have ten flowers in our book for Mr. Connolly. There are more flowers sprouting now, but the important thing is that I have enough names and facts stacked up next to each other. I couldn't leave out Lupine, which I call lup-in, and Mr. Connolly calls lup-iine. I actually dug up a whole bush of Lupine today and only put one pressed bit of it in this book.

Some Lupine grows real tall, but out here it only gets about as high as Arrowleaf Balsamroot. Just like that flower, it grows in cluster-bushes, but instead of big broad flowers at the top of each stem, it's dotted with little purple and blue flowers on bunches whistle-thin stems. On the silky kind silver hairs shine up every leaf, which is especially pretty after it rains.

The reason I dug up a whole bush today is because Lupine is on the list of things that are very poisonous for sheep stomachs. Some people think the flower got it's name from the word for wolf, because it killed livestock just like wolves.

Lupine has deep roots, which makes it hard to dig up. I've never tried to replant it anywhere else. I don't know how that would work for Lupine, and I don't know how that would work for me. Some plants never put down deep roots, no matter how long they stay in one place, but I'm not like that. Sometimes when I stand still in the pastures my feet tingle, and I imagine it's my roots. They grow and shift and break the earth into bite-sized nutrients. While I dug to the bottom of the Lupine roots, I thought about digging all the pieces of myself out of this land. It's not possible. No matter how careful I am, the shovel always cuts off pieces.

I knew some about Lupine from wrestling it out of the ground before, but one thing I learned from Mr. Connolly's wildflower book is that it can grow in a lot of different homes, like high up on hills, in woods, or in the sagebrush we've got out back. I've never thought of myself as someone who can grow just fine no matter how wet or dry or cold or hot it gets, but I've done a lot of brave things this month, and I'm starting to think that I could survive in another habitat, if I had to.

Chapter 17

Allison found me early at school the next day and shoved her iPhone in my face. “Gracie, this is all over Facebook. Everybody’s been adding to it.”

Figured that I wouldn’t have heard about it. “What is it?”

“It’s a story about you and Jordan.”

My heart collapsed toward my toes. I snatched the phone from her hand and started reading. It started out pretty tame, so I guessed that was the part Jordan wrote. But it got not tame real quick. I shoved Allison’s phone back at her.

Jordan slouched through the halls and tried to dodge classmates. He had his hood pulled up over his head even though we weren’t supposed to wear hoods in the building. Everybody looked at him, but he kept his eyes staring straight at dead space in front of him.

Bailey stepped in front of him and read aloud. *“I hadn’t calculated on losing my cool the moment something actually happened. When we spotted the truck, my teeth clacked against each other no matter how hard I clenched my jaw. I counted on the fact that Grace was so focused on getting to her sheep to keep her from noticing how green I was acting. She couldn’t. She’d cut me from the team if she knew I turned into jelly in the face of danger.”*

He pushed past Bailey and through the crowd and stopped when he was even with me.

“Jordan.”

He didn’t look up. “Sorry.” Then he made a break for the classroom.

I couldn’t turn any of the anger that steamed into my vision on Jordan. I didn’t care what the rest of the class wrote, but I didn’t want Jordan to be broken up about those losers reading his secret project. It didn’t matter what they thought of me.

I walked down the hall to Principal Emmon’s office. I didn’t snitch easy, especially if it came to people picking on me. But the reason everybody picked on Jordan now was cause of me. Right before the last class of the day, I saw Mark waiting outside the office. When he caught my eye, Mark dragged a finger across his throat.

But he didn’t scare me. I already lost my farm and Jordan. He couldn’t do anything to me now.

I helped Dad stack the last boxes in the living room after chores that night. Dad said I could sleep in the barn tonight if I wanted, since it was our last night at home. I snuck out my window and dropped onto the hay bale. I could’ve walked out the front door, but it felt good to do it this way one last time. I wore my basketball shorts and a sweatshirt and brought my blanket down with me. The sky wrapped around me, warm and glittering with stars.

Mom told me the sky at night is what the insides of hearts look like. I think it was just one of the silly things she said, because the sky can’t be like our hearts. It seems like a lot of empty and dark between the sparkles, but on nights like this, nights when I can see not just Pegasus and Orion and Cassiopeia but also the milky way stretched out like a path that could lead somewhere big, her words made more sense.

Dad thinks of the stars differently, he talks about them like his old sailing buddies. This one guided him from Savanna to New York, this one from Port Antonio to Key West. This constellation was the easiest to find between the tropic of Cancer and the Equator. He told me stories about how the stars got there, how Orion was trying to step in between the bull and the beautiful girls, and when he told those stories, it sounded real. He knew Andromeda, and all seven of the Pleiades.

When I reached the barn, I left the stars outside and curled up in a bunk of hay bales. The sheep snuffled under cover of the roof next to me and dreamed about fresh grass and sun.

I woke up cause the inside of my eyelids got red and spotty like I was taking a nap in the sun, only it was still the middle of the night. I blinked my eyes open and saw the illumination came from the sheep. All of them radiated from their wool, bright as day. One by one, they wiggled a bit and woke up. And then all fifty-eight of them got to their feet and walked around to the other side of the barn.

I rolled out of the hay and followed after. When I found them in the barnyard, they all stood with their faces toward Jordan's house and their ears pointed that way too, which tended to happen when they felt curious and a little nervous.

I put my hand on Irwin's head. "What is it?"

Irwin didn't respond, but my own ears perked up when I heard a thud from over the fence. Somewhere on Jordan's end of the land. I looked back at the sheep and saw their ears shifted back and forth with quick flicks. Like I said before, it's hard to read sheep. But I knew something was wrong.

I took off for Jordan's house. My hand touched down on top of a fence and I tried to vault over the top. I slipped, grabbed for the fence again and tumbled from the other side.

Another thud drifted over the field, and then the purr of an engine. The sounds were coming from the chicken coop. I had to be there.

I smelled it before I saw it. Smoke blew toward me and clouded up the night sky. Another few steps and I could see why. At the corner of the henhouse a fire licked at the plywood and tried to reach flaming inferno status.

I tripped over something metal and crashed to the ground. A ladder. Somebody kleft a ladder laying in front of the door. I scrambled to my feet and yanked open the henhouse door even though the metal handle bit hot against my hand. "Get out of here, you dumb birds."

The chickens were sleeping when I waked in, but when I shouted at them, they all ruffled up their feathers. Pretty soon all thirty of them squawked and flapped around in the crowded henhouse. I scooped up a panicked poultry and threw her from the henhouse into the dirt yard outside.

"You stupid chickens, get out of here, your house is on fire!"

I stumbled against the chicken's water trough and tipped it over towards the flames. They spit at me, then blazed over the dry boards again.

As I made my way to the back of the burning shed, still trying to slingshot chickens towards the door, I stubbed my toe on a soft and solid obstacle. I couldn't say right them what it was, but somewhere in me I knew what to do.

I bent down and reached my hand toward the mystery blockade. A hand, a head, a shoulder in between. Buzzed hair on the head. "Jordan?"

Jordan or not, I couldn't let them burn to a crisp. I anchored my hands under the boy's elbows, planted my feet on the ground, and heaved. He didn't budge, and worries flooded out the optimism in my head. Maybe he got pinned under something. Maybe I just couldn't pull him cause he was dead weight. This was not a good time to be small.

The fire flared up bright next to us. I could see Jordan's head hanging between the shoulders I gripped. The light revealed a gash on his head where blood pumped out in synch with his heart.

I grabbed onto a roost to keep from crumpling. The shirt on his left shoulder clung to my hand because of blood.

I felt my hands spark to life before I could think of wanting them too. I let go of his shoulders and stared. My skin danced and morphed with red and orange light, although some blue bloomed at my wrists. What was I doing? I knew the sheep magic was just for sheep. Dad called it sheep magic from the very beginning. Even when Dad smashed his fingers with a hammer, it never crossed my mind that I could heal him.

But Jordan was part of my flock now. I'd fight for him as much as I'd fight for Glinda or Gao. I set my hands on either side of the gash on Jordan's head. For a moment, my hands were two clouds in a storm. Light streaked from one to the other across his injury.

"Jordan, you gotta wake up. You're gonna be just fine." I tried talking to him the way I did to a birthing ewe. "The blood's trying to clot up just like it's supposed to. That's good. Good job. Now all you need to do is wake up. I can't pull you out of here, Jordan, so you need to get up and walk on your own."

Fire crackled loud around us and roof shifted towards us by inches. I couldn't tell how fast Jordan's heart was beating anymore cause the blood slowed down to just trickle out of the wound. My own heartbeat was a panicked sprint. I couldn't leave Jordan here, but the little coop was gonna collapse any second. The plywood structure would hurt much landing on us, but flames would.

"Jordan," I shouted, "Wake up!" I funneled all the oomph I out of my hands and through his thick head. "Wake up, you dummy, or we're both going to die."

His eyes fluttered.

Thank God. "Stay awake, Jordan! Come on." I tugged on his arms and tried to pull him to his feet. "Come on, Jordan. Up. Get up!"

He lowered his eyelids and fought to open them again, but I guess my message got through to him, because he scrambled around til he got on his feet. I grabbed him around the waist so he could lean on me and lugged him out of the henhouse, through the coop gate, and onto the scrubby grass. He faded out again some time during the walk and crumbled to the ground as soon as I stopped.

Outside enough light spilled from the Lafayette's porchlight that I could see Jordan's gash stopped bleeding.

Any chickens left in the henhouse might as well be KFC now, but I ran to the spigot and turned it on. The whole time I shouted, "Fire! May, Mr. Lafayette, there's a fire in the henhouse."

A couple lights flicked on in the Lafayette's house, and it didn't take them long to figure out what the screaming was all about. May Lafayette sprinted down the steps and across the yard so fast her feet stumbled to keep up with how fast she wanted to be.

"Jordan's over there." I pointed. "But I couldn't get the fire out."

She ran for Jordan instead of the fire, so I figured it was up to me. Course, Mr. Lafayette had a better idea. He dialed 911 and shouted his address to them on the front porch while I flung small buckets of water at a flame that roared hungrier and hungrier.

May didn't look away from Jordan's face, but she spoke to me. "Gracie, come on away from there. Why don't you go home and get your dad?"

"Is Jordan okay?"

Her hands probed his neck and searched for a pulse. "The EMTs will be here with the fire truck. Run on home and get your Dad, he'll wake up with the fire trucks and worry if you're not in the house."

I couldn't quite get my legs to move, so May stood up and wrapped me in a hug. "Are you okay, sweetie?"

I nodded against her chest. "I tried to save your chickens, but some of them might have gotten barbecued."

Mr. Lafayette brought out a floodlight and turned it out across the ground. May choked out a laugh when she saw her chickens, coughing and flapping their wings, scattered all across the yard.

After Mr. Lafayette and May both kneeled down by Jordan's side, I figured he didn't need me, so I ran home to get Dad. He already had his head poked out the door when I pounded up. "Dad, the Lafayette's henhouse is on fire."

"I see that. What happened? Are you alright?"

"I was sleeping in the barn, and I heard a scream, and I ran over there and found Jordan in the henhouse, so I got him out."

He might have been at high tide for anxiety when I ran up, but now it started to drain away. "You're a very brave girl, Gracie. Come on." We walked over and he kept his arm around me except when we had to crawl under or over a fence.

The volunteer firefighters ran around the Lafayette's yard with a thick snake of a fire hose. A handful clustered around Jordan. He still laid out flat, and my heart pounded double speed. I wanted the volunteer firefighters to have him sitting up and talking.

I pushed up close to Jordan. They'd covered his face with a mask hooked up to a tank of oxygen. "Gracie came out of the henhouse too," May told one of the EMTs. "Can you check on her?"

"Take a seat, Grace," commanded Mr. James, the firefighter who came to the school to tell us to be careful with our Christmas trees. I sat down, and the EMTs explored the bumps and burns I got during my rescue effort.

"A few burns. Her breathing sounds alright."

"I didn't stick around long. Is Jordan gonna be okay?"

"He's stable. He inhaled a lot more smoke than you did. We've got him on oxygen and he'll be fine. Can you tell me what happened?"

I told them I noticed something weird about the sheep so I decided to check it out, and when I got over here I chucked chickens at an open door and finding Jordan unconscious.

"You did a brave thing for your neighbors," Mr. James told me. And then he reminded me to never ever go into a burning building and that my first thing I should do is call the fire department. I think Jordan wouldn't be alive if I called them first, but I didn't say that to Mr. James.

"Can I see Jordan now?"

They moved aside so I could walk up to his side and take a good look. They had enough lanterns and flashlights around that I could make a wicked-looking gash on his head. Ms. Duncan was cleaning it.

"Looks like he hit his head pretty good. Whatever happened, that's probably what knocked him out."

The Lafayettes ended up going to Urgent Care in the city while Dad and I walked home. A few of the firefighters looked around to find what caused the fire, and I tried to tell them somebody started it on purpose. Mr. James listened with his head tilted down towards me, but most of the firefighters didn't seem to think anyone cared to set a chicken coop on fire.

"Dad, can we go up with the Lafayettes?"

“To the emergency room?”

“I wanna see if Jordan is okay.”

Dad sighed and I held onto my breath until he nodded. “Put on some real clothes and meet me in the truck.”

“I don’t need real clothes,” I shouted. Thank the Lord he got the truck working again.

Chapter 18

Jordan woke up before Dad and I got to the Emergency Room, and they gave him more blood so he'd have enough to fill him up. I guess he lost a lot of blood on the coop floor before I stopped it.

Just before I walked in the door to see him, I got real nervous. Last time I checked, Jordan and I weren't talking. Sure, I'd just saved his life, but he'd been unconscious through that so he couldn't fight me.

"Come on, Grace, we came into the city in the middle of the night, you might as well go say hi to your friend."

I peeked through the curtain and saw May standing by Jordan's bed. Mr. Lafayette was off somewhere, maybe to find coffee.

Jordan's eyes opened, and he saw me standing by the curtain.

"Gracie?"

I froze. Dad stood behind me and he put off even more nervous waves than me. I took a deep breath and forced out my voice. "Are you okay, Jordan?"

He nodded and winced cause of how the motion hurt his head.

May looked like she'd been crying. "The doctors are amazed, after all the blood he lost, that he was able to stand up to get out of the hen house. We're a lucky family."

"That's great," I whispered. Dad echoed what I said.

May shifted so I could stand next to her. "Come on in, Gracie."

I took small steps across the all white hospital room and waited for Jordan to say anything.

He reached over and drank a sip of water from a tray in front of him. "We only lost three of the chickens."

"I hope they're okay. I just picked them up and threw them at the door, so they're probably upset with me."

May put her hand on top of my messy hair. "Thanks for being a little more gentle with Jordan."

That's when the Sheriff Jacobson strode into the room and got right to business. "Lafayettes, Corbins," he greeted. "I talked with the firefighters and I've got a few questions I'd like to ask you all."

May and Mr. Lafayette sat in the green chairs by Jordan's bed. Dad stood just inside the curtain and picked at his fingernails.

"You two, go ahead and tell me what happened, best you can manage it."

I looked at Jordan.

"I couldn't sleep," he started. "So I was out in the living room. And the windows was cracked open, because it's warm. I heard weird sounds coming from out in the yard. It sounded like a motor way too close to be on the road, and the chickens were making a lot more noise than usual. Gracie and I know something weird is going on lately, so I figured I better check it out. I could tell someone was out there sneaking around, but I couldn't tell who."

Mr. Lafayette interrupted. "That's when you should've come in the house and woke me up."

"So you could call me," Sheriff Jacobson added. "The trespasser could have been armed."

Jordan and I looked at each other. This could turn into lecture time for Gracie and Jordan, easy. “He had our ladder from the shed, and he was going up on the roof of the hen house. His arms were full of something—I couldn’t tell what it was, but I knew it was dangerous or poisonous for the chickens. I figured otherwise they wouldn’t be at our house in the middle of the night. So I tried to sneak up on him. He got out a lighter then, and I could see that he had a bunch of fireworks. Roman candles, I think. He tried to light them all together.” Jordan stopped to take another swallow of the water by his bed. “So, I ran at him and grabbed the ladder. I’m not sure...”

I butted in. “I bet the ladder fell on you. When you ran at him he must’ve lost his balance on the ladder, so he fell. But the ladder knocked you on the head.”

Jordan rubbed the scarring wound on his forehead. “I guess that’s what happened. The guy ran off while I was trying to get myself untangled from the ladder. He didn’t get to light the fireworks, but the roof of the henhouse was burning by the time he drove away.” He paused. “He wasn’t in a truck, though. Maybe a four-wheeler?”

“My thoughts felt all wrong, but some of the embers off the roof fell down and caught the wall of the henhouse on fire, and I decided to run in and help the chickens. When I got in there I noticed that my face was all wet, but I couldn’t seem to figure out why cause my head wasn’t working. I tried to get out then, cause I could tell something was wrong. But I must’ve passed out.”

“I found him in the coop when it was on fire and helped him get out.” I didn’t want to explain my sheep magic to the sheriff, especially after what happened with Clarence and his wife. Even without me saying anything, Jordan focused a weird look on me while I explained. “The coop was all on flames by that point.”

“So you dragged him out of the coop, alerted his parents, and they called 911.”

I nodded and rubbed the singed hair on my arm.

“Jordan, can you describe the person who started the fire?”

“He was small, I think. Muscular, but small.”

Jordan and I glanced at each other. It wasn’t Holland Dunn, I knew it after my conversation with him, and I imagine Jordan could tell from his size and shape that somebody else set the fire. Did he have some idea who did it? His eyes didn’t tell me anything clear. It looked like he was chewing over the idea of saying something else.

I decided to tell Sheriff Jacobson our suspicions. “We figure it’s the same person who did the other rotten things to our farm. Somebody mixed rat poison in with our sheep pellets, and dogs killed at least one of our sheep in the past month.”

Sheriff Jacobson wanted to know all about the dogs then, and we told him how we patrolled in the middle of the night and chased off the two Rottweilers. He had a lot of questions about that. He frowned when we finished our story and turned toward our parents. “Why haven’t I heard anything about this?”

May shot both of us a look. “I have the same question for Jordan and Gracie.”

I rubbed my burned forearm again. Maybe if we acted real injured and tired he would go away and we could stop coming up with answers.

But Sheriff Jacobson didn’t show me any mercy. Which could be because I wasn’t all wired up in a hospital bed. “How are you so sure that it’s the same person? You know as well as anybody, sometimes dogs or coyotes get to the sheep. It’s not anyone’s fault. It’s not the same as setting a fire.”

I couldn't figure out how to explain, but Jordan spoke up and explained how he had the idea to figure out who was responsible for sabotaging the farm so we could keep the land. How we'd had enough run-ins to know that somebody wanted to scare Dad into giving up the land, and how it all tied into the plan to expand the bird sanctuary. Sheriff Jacobson's eyes narrowed like some of our story was starting to come together in his head.

I didn't have time for him to puzzle it all out, because when Jordan talked, thoughts started shooting off in my head like Roman Candles. "Sheriff, is anybody watching over our house now?"

He shook his head. "The volunteer firefighters headed home. I took a look around for preliminary evidence and got a few pictures of the scene. I thought I'd better talk to you and see what you remembered. There'll be an arson investigation, of course, but I wanted to hear from you two."

"So there's nobody there now?"

He scrunched his lips together like the question made him uncomfortable, and I figured he knew it was a bad idea to leave the scene of the crime unguarded before he finished investigating. "I was the only one on duty. I'll be back there at first light when I can take a better look."

That wasn't good enough. A cold shiver shot up my spine, and Jordan and I traded looks.

"I'm going to have a chat with your parents," Sheriff Jacobson informed us. "Why don't you two just sit tight?" May and Mr. Lafayette gave us a fierce look as they left. I'd get a lecture from them when they got back even though I wasn't their kid. The sheriff patted my shoulder as he walked out and said, "Don't you worry about the farm right now, Miss Corbin. You've done enough for today."

As soon as he was out the door, I rushed over to Jordan's side and said, "We've got to get home."

"You heard the sheriff. We're supposed to stay."

"Jordan, whoever pulled this stunt panicked when you came out and attacked. I bet they kept some kind of tabs on you to see what happened. Then a bunch of fire trucks come and the sheriff showed up. What if he left evidence when you scared him off?"

"Then Sheriff Jacobson will find it when he goes back."

"I bet they'd want to get rid of any evidence before he got a chance to find it."

"So?"

"So, I think we could figure out who set the fire. They could be lurking around your house right now."

"It's four in the morning, Gracie. Every human being in the world is sleeping right now. And the Sheriff told us to stay put."

"If we wait for him the evidence will all be gone, and so will whoever set the fire. By the time we get home it'll be almost five."

"By the time we—we're already in so much trouble. The sheriff can take care of this."

On the one hand, he was right that we were in trouble. On the other hand, "Sheriff Jacobson doesn't know half the things we do about the case. He'll wait for tomorrow morning, and by then it'll be too late. I'm gonna get the keys from Dad. You meet me in the parking lot."

"Are you kidding? I'm being hydrated here," he gestured at the bag hooked into his arm.

"You don't have to come if you don't want, Jordan, but if we're gonna solve this, it happens now."

He groaned. "It's going to hurt like hell to pull this out of my arm."

“Don’t be a whiner. I walked through flames, I think you can pull a little tube out of your arm. We’re parked in the pineapple section.”

I peeked into the hallway and mouthed, “Good luck,” over my shoulder. Jordan had the plastic tubing in his hand and a horrified look on his face. I never had any question in my mind about whether he’d come.

Chapter 19

I killed the truck at the top of the driveway and coasted behind our house. If anybody looked close, they might notice us, but the dark helped us some. With luck, nobody knew we were home.

I hopped out of the truck, swung the door shut, and waved for Jordan to follow me. I figured that from the barn we could sneak from pallet to pallet along the fence to a spot where we'd be able to see Jordan's coop. He winced as he crouched down to follow me.

Oops. Maybe I should have left him in the hospital with the fluids and painkillers.

He managed to keep up, though. By now he knew the fences and fields at my farm well enough to clamber over the solid fences and squirm under where there were gaps.

"Gracie," he breathed, "You hear that?"

A voice drifted over the barnyard. "It certainly is a mess here."

I peeked over the top of the palate fence. "Yeah, I hear it." And now I could see, too. There was a strange truck parked behind Jordan's house, where you couldn't see it from the road. In front of the truck stood Mrs. Thompson, and next to her, Mark.

For a moment I thought she came to bring the Lafayettes a casserole because he heard their chicken coop burned. She held something ahead of her in her arms. It could be a pie.

But that didn't make any sense. News traveled fast around our little town, but she'd still be hard pressed on time to hear about the fire, make a pie, and bring it to the Lafayette house by now. And if she brought something for them, she'd wait until morning.

"What is Mrs. Thompson doing here?"

"You're the one who figured out that the saboteur would come back."

"But, she's not..." That didn't make any more sense than her bringing over a pie. Why would Mrs. Thompson, with her soft voice and ice cream, want to hurt my sheep? I trusted her. I didn't even fuss over her calling me Gracie.

Mrs. Thompson strode toward the house, and Mark kicked around in the ashes. As far as I could see they were just going to leave more evidence by running around like this.

I believed that Mark hurt the sheep, easy. All I had to do was think of his breath on my forehead and the way he showed too many teeth when he smiled. But I didn't want to believe that Mrs. Thompson had anything to do with this. Clean-carpet, fresh-air-and-ice-cream Mrs. Thompson.

Their voices floated over the fields, and I heard Mrs. Thompson call, "Mark, don't waste your time on fingerprints. They don't have your fingerprints on file."

Jordan slipped something into my hand, and I looked down. An iPhone with a cracked screen. "It's Mom's. I figured we'd need something to capture the evidence. If Dad calls, you probably shouldn't answer unless you want to explain what we just did."

Mrs. Thompson and Mark started walking back toward the car, and I knew we had to act. Before they disappeared. "They're getting away, Jordan."

"The sheriff and our parents have noticed we're gone by now. They'll come look for us."

"They'll know where we went. Cause I asked if anybody was looking over the farm." It took fifty minutes to drive from the hospital to here if you were going the speed limit, but Sheriff Jacobson could go faster. He could be here soon. I just needed for Mrs. Thompson and Mark to still be here when he arrived. I'd get a picture of them in the ash, or something. Sheriff Jacobson could connect the dots. They couldn't slip away now. I scrambled over the fence and started

running for the Thompson's truck. I wasn't being sneaky anymore, cause if they didn't notice me now, they'd drive off without leaving any trace of their presence.

I tried to think of something to say, to shout and make Mrs. Thompson wait, but my throat felt full, like it was holding too much smoke again. My foot sank into a soft patch in the ground, and I stumbled. Jordan grabbed my arm and steadied me, and I felt air rushing back in and out of my lungs again. I hadn't even been sure he was following me because of how much he still hurt. But he was right there.

Mrs. Thompson and Mark slammed the doors on their pickup truck and it purred to life. I vaulted over the fence to Jordan's yard and ran ahead while he climbed slow to be more gentle with his body. Mrs. Thompson locked eyes with me, and her calm expression faltered. She shifted the truck and for a moment I thought she would just drive away. But the truck shifted back to park, and she turned off the engine.

"Jordan, Gracie, we just stopped by to talk with your parents."

I bit my lip to keep from snapping that my name was Grace and she had no place call me Gracie. I looked at Jordan because I figured he'd use his brain about what to say next.

"We didn't know that was your truck," he said. "We thought it might have been the man who started the fire, coming back to the scene of the crime."

Mrs. Thompson climbed down from her truck. "We heard about the fire. I thought I'd bring you all some breakfast and make sure you were okay."

Mark dropped down from the truck, too. He didn't have his mamma's smooth mask to cover how nervous he was.

"Everybody's still at the hospital," I explained.

Both of them paled some when I said that. "The hospital?" Mark's voice came out high.

Mrs. Thompson handed Jordan a glass casserole dish and said, "I certainly everyone's okay. Mark and I have to get home right now, but we'll stop by tomorrow to see if there's anything we can do."

She waved Mark back toward the truck and started her own retreat. I stood on my toes for a second and scanned the road, looking to see if Sheriff Jacobson was on his way, but I couldn't spot a thing. It was pre-dawn twilight, so lights on the road didn't stand out as much. He could be close. He could be just out of sight.

"We know it was you who started the fire," I said.

Jordan shot me a look, which I figured meant something along the lines of *Gracie, we've had enough trouble for one night, can't you just keep your mouth shut?*

"What was that?" I couldn't read Mrs. Thompson's expression.

"I know you didn't start the fire yourself. Mark did. And I guess he's responsible for the other stuff, too. The rat poison in the food, and the dogs that attacked Glinda.

"Those were just pranks," Mark growled.

I could read the look on Mrs. Thompson's face then. She was an ice-storm because her son had opened his mouth.

I burned too angry to revel about catching them. Before I said anything else I slid Jordan's phone back into his hands, because I couldn't bait them and get evidence at the same time. "Pranks? You nearly killed Glinda, and Irwin could've been really sick."

Mark raised his hands in surrender. "Those dogs never hurt a fly before they got lose in your pasture, I just thought they were going to bark and freak you out. And there wasn't that much rat poison in the food, just enough to get them a little sick. Mom said—"

"Mark, shut up," Mrs. Thompson growled.

“Well, it was an accident! The fire wasn’t on purpose, I was just going to set off the fireworks from the top of the henhouse, and then Jordan came out and knocked the ladder over and everything burned. He glared at Jordan. “I told you to mind your own business.”

“Mark, stop.” Mrs. Thompson hadn’t added in anything of her own, but Mark said plenty.

“It wasn’t good enough for you to push me around at school?”

“Mom needed you off the land.”

Mrs. Thompson swore, and Mark stepped away from her. “I drove you out here to try to keep you out of trouble, Mark, and you’re going to try to blame this on me? Get in the truck.”

Jordan took a step forward. He had a rough day of it, but you couldn’t tell from the strength in his voice. “That’s okay. We don’t need any more information from you. I know what happened. You wanted the Corbin land so you could develop an eco-tourism resort to accompany the bird sanctuary. You thought you could make money off city people coming to see rare birds on their migration patterns, maybe milk a cow or pet a sheep or whatever you arrange. The full country experience, minus reality. You knew, from your work at the bank, that the Corbin farm had been on shaky financial footing for years. But you needed Gracie and her Dad to give it up rather than tightening their belts and making do.”

Mrs. Thompson shook her head. “I don’t have time to listen to this.”

“Keep talking,” I whispered to Jordan. I tried not to be obvious, but every minute or so I checked for the sheriff’s car on the horizon.

“You knew, maybe from working with other farmers at the bank, that it took more than just financial hardship to move farmers off their land. Conveniently enough, Holland Dunn was back in town just in time for him to take the heat for your actions. When he fired you for sharing confidential information about the Corbin farm with the developers for the resort, you were happy to let us think he was the villain.”

I don’t know how Jordan figured she got fired for that, but I could see he was close to the truth.

“Get in the truck, Mark.” Mrs. Thompson stomped toward the driver’s seat.

“So you used your own son,” Jordan continued. “You let him bully Gracie and helped him mess with the farm because you wanted the Corbins to get discouraged and leave. You thought if Mark pulled a few harmless pranks, we’d never trace it back to you.”

“If he’d pulled harmless pranks, that might have worked,” I shouted. “But Jordan could have died in that fire.”

Mrs. Thompson hesitated. “Grace, listen. This all—we didn’t mean for things to get this messy. We certainly didn’t mean to hurt Jordan. I told Mark to be careful, but things got out of control.”

Jordan took control again. “You could have stopped him anytime; you’re an adult. Instead, you egged him on to warn us away after we came to your house with questions.”

“We warned you not to snoop. I told you to keep your nose out of grown up business, and you didn’t listen.”

“We had no idea you were worried that we’d catch you. Neither of us could figure out why Mark threatened us more than ever after you lost our job.”

“I told you what would happen.” I shivered. Even now that Mark was scared and cornered, his voice still sounded like a rainforest against my forehead. “But you snitched on me at school and picked a fight with me at Allison’s party.”

Mrs. Thompson tried a pleading voice. “We didn’t mean to start a fire. I know we seem like the bad guys right now, but we never meant to hurt anybody. You don’t understand the kind

of pressure I'm under. I told the developers that the land would be ready, and once they'd invested money in the project, I couldn't go back on my word. I know it seems really bad to you, but it's a complicated matter."

That was when I saw lights on the road. Two sets. Sheriff Jacobson's police car and the Lafayette's Ford.

"I'll make you two a deal. How would you two like a cut of the profits from the new resort?" She forced a smile. "I can make you two very rich."

Mrs. Thompson might offer a better deal than Mark, but it just made me realize how she was a grown up predator and Mark was just cutting his teeth. I wouldn't listen to her bribes.

It like the day before, at school, when I had to tell on Mark. Messing with my flock wasn't okay. No amount of money could undo it if Jordan died in the fire.

"What do you say, Gracie? We can negotiate percentages."

"Too late for that," I told Mrs. Thompson. I waved in the direction of the driveway, and Mrs. Thompson spun around as a police car pulled in right behind her truck.

I saw Dad hop out of the Lafayette's vehicle, and I didn't wait. I ran for him. He didn't start with anger about me taking the truck, although I knew that would come. He bent down and wrapped me in a hug. "You're okay," he whispered. "Gracie, I was so worried."

"It was them, Dad," Now that the adults were here, the adrenaline drained out of me in one quick flood. "They started the fire, they—"

He smoothed my hair. "Calm down. Look, Sheriff Jacobson's got it all under control." I pulled away from him to see. The sheriff had Mrs. Thompson in cuffs and held her in place while Jordan showed the Sheriff how he'd recorded the whole conversation. I let my head melt back against Dad's chest. "Let's go home, Gracie."

Chapter 20

I slept in late the next morning. Dad didn't wake me up to make me go to school, or to make me go to jail for stealing his car and kidnapping someone out of the hospital. I figured I'd gotten myself in enough bits and pieces of trouble to last for the next year or so, but I also put myself in enough danger that Dad would cut me a break.

I got dressed in my dirty jeans and dug my plaid shirt out of the laundry so I could wear it again. Sheep didn't care if I smelled like yesterday. I walked out into the pasture and sat down with my feet hanging over the manger. The sheep were scattered around me, a couple dozing near the shade of the tin roof, more of them munching the gold-green grass just creeping up from the ground.

"I'll miss you, Delores. I'll miss you, Gao. I'll miss you, Glinda."

I couldn't see any ash blowing around in the wind, but I figured it was there. I could feel it in my lungs and clumping in the bottom of my stomach.

Glinda must've heard her name, because she sauntered over and nudged me in the knee. I dropped from my perch and bowed my head against her wooly forehead. "I'm sorry Glinda." I didn't know how to explain. I tried. I even found the person who'd been trying to hurt her. But it wasn't good enough. Mrs. Thompson got fired from the bank, so we couldn't blame the bank that our farm ran out of money. Solving the case didn't undo that Dad and I couldn't keep trying with so little hope.

Gao approached and nudged me in the shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Gao." Warmth spread over my arm, and I glanced down. Gao radiated sunshine yellow in vines that curled down my arm. I watched the burn from last night fade from raw pink to match the rest of my skin.

The first splats of rain hit my nose, and Gao's glow became reflective and sparkling.

"I can't," I whispered. "I can't." Limpy Lady and Missy's new lamb, Melly, trotted up. The other sheep noticed that the flock was on the move and followed, the way sheep do. Before a minute passed, all fifty-eight of the sheep we owned surrounded me. Some fifteen of them sent out their own light, but all of them stared at me with their blank eyes. Sheep are hard to read, but it felt like a goodbye.

I closed my eyes and tried to take the rain and the light inside of me. Rain overflowed back from my eyes and hurried down my cheeks.

"Grace?"

Dad's voice. I opened my eyes and blinked away the wet.

"There are some people here to talk with you."

I stood up and saw the old farmer and his arthritic wife trailing after my father.

"Hello," Dorothy greeted me.

The drizzle-and-goodbye feeling dried right up. I was in enough trouble without trying to fix whatever Glinda did. "I'm real sorry. I have no idea what happened or why Glinda hurt you. I think she was trying to help, but nothing like that's ever happened before."

She shook her head. "Glinda didn't hurt me. Or she did, for a bit—whatever happened startled me and did hurt for a bit. But later that day I realized your sheep did the same for my hip that she did for my hand."

"What'd she do?" I looked at Dad to see if he knew what happened, but I didn't find any help there. I looked back to the woman.

“I have severe arthritis. I pay a lot for my medications. I pay a lot to feel better, and none of that money has helped me near so much as you did in five minutes.”

“It wasn’t me.” I shifted from one foot to another. I guessed I saw why she came back. to get her other hand fixed, or her other hip so she could hop in and out of the truck.

Her husband cleared his throat and took a step towards me. “I figured it might be worth it to invest some of the money we shovel at the doctors in one of your miracle sheep for my wife.”

I blinked at him, then turned back to Dad. His face was hard to read, a little like the sky when it was just past dusk. Wasn’t he happy about the offer? We needed to get rid of the sheep one way or another, and the money wouldn’t hurt us when we tried to find a new house and start Dad’s mechanical shop in town.

“I guess you already knew how much they were gonna cost, then,” I said. “It said so in the paper.”

Her wrinkles got deeper than they usually were, and she looked at her husband.

He cleared his throat. “You asked \$350 for the full-grown ewes. We don’t figure that’s a fair price for a sheep like this, and we suggest you don’t let anybody tell you otherwise. We have a proposition for you.”

I liked the word proposition a lot better than the word deal. Sounded like I had more to say about it.

“I spend \$350 every month on medications for my arthritis, and if I bought your special sheep, I might never have to pay that again at least, not for years. I’ll give you two thousand. Six months worth of my medication. It’s less than a blue ribbon sheep might go for at the fair, and with fleece and legs like that, your ewes are worth it.”

The inside of my throat shrunk and I focused on taking air in and out of my lungs.

“Did you talk with my Dad?”

Clarence nodded. “He said it was up to you whether you were gonna sell, since we’re buying the sheep for it’s extraordinary properties and you’re the one responsible for those.”

“She’s all yours,” I breathed. “I can’t promise that the magic’s gonna last forever, I got no idea how it works, they haven’t done this for anyone else before.” Maybe I shouldn’t tell them that, but I didn’t want them to come back in a month and half complaining that their magic sheep was broken.

“That’s something your dad mentioned. We figure if things go sour, you can come on out to our place to visit her. She might need to spend time with you to--charge. It’s worth it to us, even if the magic doesn’t last. You keep your flock in prime condition. We’ll pay for it.”

Clarence nodded to his wife. “Dorothy, pick out your sheep and I’ll load her up.”

“You’ll want Glinda then. She’s the one who took care of you the first time.”

After the two met each other, Dorothy looked up at me. “There’s something else I have to tell you. See, at church this week I used my left hand to play piano for the first time in a number of years. My friends wanted to know how I got better. I was so startled, so excited, that I told them everything. One of these ladies, she’s got this little boy who’s been having seizures real bad. The doctors can’t figure out why, but it’s getting worse and worse. So she asked where she could find you, and I gave her the newspaper add your dad put in the paper.”

Dad spoke up. “She called me this morning. I told her she could swing by later.”

I brushed Melly’s head with my fingers.

“I’m sorry dear. It was kind of you to share your special talent with us, and I shouldn’t have told anyone, but her little boy— they’d pay a lot for what your sheep have.”

I nodded, and while Clarence got out his checkbook and wrote enough numbers to make dad smile, I said goodbye to Glinda.

“You’re my girl,” I said, “And I’m going to come see you whenever I can, I promise.”

The rest of that day sped by. Like once the sheep saw Glinda go, they did the sheep thing and followed right after her. Missy and Melly went with the woman little boy who had epilepsy. That mamma had told the woman that she cleaned house for whose husband had cancer, so Winifred to him. I told them I was far from sure that my sheep could solve any of their problems. But when Melly and the little boy started walking side by side, with Melly bumping against him ever so often with guiding motions, I figured they were meant to be together. And when the man with cancer touched Winifred, she immediately started nosing his right leg, which he explained was where the cancer started out. I couldn’t convince them that my flock wasn’t magic if I tried, so I took their checks with rows of zeros and patted my sheep goodbye.

Around three, Dad came over to me and wrapped me in a hug. “What would you say to sticking around the farm a couple more years?”

That put a bounce in me, even though selling all my favorites, all the sheep I’d delivered or healed, hurt like a new bruise. I thought of Holland Dunn, and how he said that I couldn’t have what I wanted. He was right. I’d done everything I could, but it wasn’t the strength of my arms or Jordan’s clever brain that saved us. It was something I could barely control and didn’t understand. Something Holland Dunn had no way of guessing at.

I didn’t get everything I wanted. In order to keep Dad and me and the rest of the sheep on the farm, I lost parts of my flock. Instead of getting what I wanted, I had to choose pieces.

But those pieces were so good. And while I worked hard for what I wanted, I stumbled into good things I didn’t even know I could hope for. I got Jordan and me roasting Camas bulbs at the fire pit, and playing basketball with Beretta. I got finally seeing Mark for what he really was and Dad singing about gold in the morning sun,

When all the buyers left, I turned to Dad “What now?”

He smiled at me and walked into the barn. From inside, I heard his voice pipe up, in rhythm with the motion of his arms as he scooped and tossed hay bales down for me to cut.

*“Down on the maindeck working at the pumps
There is the larboard watch ready for their bunks”*

I fished out my pocketknife out and slit the twine. One, then the next. I joined my voice with Dad’s. Scooped, then tossed. One motion, one rhythm.

*Over to windward they see a great swell
They're wishing that the second mate would strike, strike the bell.”*

And after Dad and I finished he walked inside to take care of the stack of checks that people gave us. I climbed to the top of the gate, locked my feet behind the bars, and waited for Jordan.

The Case of Grace and the Sheep Saboteur: Part 9

Mom and Dad grounded me for a month after Gracie and me ran away from the hospital. They told me when I woke up the next morning, and followed with a lot of questions about what the hell happened.

I explained what Gracie and I figured out that night when we'd arrived at the farm and spotted the Thompsons, then added the details I got just after the sheriff arrived. As soon as the action part was over, Gracie ran over to her dad and let him pet her wild hair. But I wasn't off the case until the crooks got justice.

I approached Sheriff Jacobson and showed him the video I took with Mom's phone while Mark and Mrs. Thompson were talking. It was hard to see because of the dark and the cracked screen, but we could both hear well enough. He put the phone in evidence, which meant Mom wouldn't see it for a while. Mom didn't appreciate that.

"So what's the situation?" I asked Sheriff Jacobson.

He glanced at me. "You and your friend are in big trouble."

That sounded about right. "It was her idea to drive out here." Gracie and I were partners in crime, but I might as well be honest about who wanted to commit grand theft.

"You're lucky you two survived. The fire, and the drive, and then confronting Thompson without any backup."

I couldn't argue with him. It had been a long night.

"What's going to happen now?"

He nodded at Mrs. Thompson, loaded in the back of his car. "If you're right about everything in this video, there's some business crimes I can pin on her, as long as the bank cooperates. I thought the sudden interest in the land after so many years was strange, but I didn't see how it fell into place until tonight. I hope your folks will press charges over the fire and nearly killing you. Might be time, but more likely she'll pay her way out of it."

"What about the farm?"

"What about it?"

"Are we going to lose our homes? That's not fair."

Sheriff Jacobson cocked his head. "I imagine we'll work something out. I don't think the bank's done anything illegal, but it might be in their best interest to make sure that a former employee sabotaging patrons doesn't cause any permanent hard feelings."

"You mean we're going to stay?"

"I can't say for sure. You should get some sleep, Lafayette."

Mom steered me toward house with a firm grip on my shoulder. Gracie looked up from her father's arms and saluted me as I walked past, and in return, I touched the scar on my head that only a few hours before had been a bleeding gash. Not everything added up just yet. I still had some questions for Gracie.

Like the generous souls they are, my parents set the boundaries of my grounding to include the Corbin's barnyard. Gracie and I weren't allowed to go out at night or ride off on any long bike adventures, but my parents didn't demand that I cut off all contact. I walked across the fields to her house at the regular time. All the way there I watched my long shadow stretch out beside me across the land I fought for and defended, the land that was my home.

*"For'ad in the fo'c'sle head keeping sharp lookout
There is Johnny standing ready for to shout."*

I held my breath for a minute and listened to Gracie sing, even though she told me that was creepy. I wasn't lying when I said that there were lots of reasons that people didn't want to be friends with Grace. But they were missing out on all the reasons she was irreplaceable. Her songs, sheep magic, the way she ate plants without worrying if they were poisonous. The way she took care of her flock.

*"'Lights' burning bright, sir, and everything is well'
He's wishing that the second mate would strike, strike the bell."*

"Gracie?"

"Get up here."

I climbed onto one of the lower bars on the gate so our heads lined up.

"We're keeping the farm. So I guess you can stay living here."

"That's good news. I brought you some eggs."

She took the carton of eggs and rested it on her lap.

"Mom wanted to thank you for saving my neck last night."

She shrugged. "I couldn't let you grill."

"I'm curious how you managed to get me out. I remember—I think I remember. You woke me up and helped me walk out myself, but the doctors said I lost so much blood and inhaled so much smoke that I had to be out cold. I couldn't just wake up and walk around like that. And you know what else? They couldn't believe the way the cut healed up so quick."

"So?"

"I heard that all those people were coming over to your place and buying sheep cause they're magic, and they can make people feel better."

"That's what they think. I don't know if it'll work out like they hope, but it helped a lady with her arthritis."

"How does it work, Gracie?"

"What?"

"The magic. How do you do it?"

She squinted at me for a moment. "When Moses took the Israelites out in the desert, they were all about to die of thirst, and started complaining that they ever left. So God told Moses to go speak to a rock, and it would give them water. Enough for the people and all their sheep. But instead of going to ask the rock, Moses hit the rock with his staff, and so the rock was named after fighting because Moses didn't just ask."

"Did you..."

"I used sheep magic on you. To wake you up. Okay? Is that what you want to hear?" She kept her eyes locked on the carton of eggs on her lap.

"The glowy hands?"

She nodded

"And the voice?"

"What voice?"

"Do what I say, I'm in charge. That voice."

A smile finally appeared. "Yeah, the voice, too."

"I thought it only worked on sheep."

I expected Gracie to say something sweet, like that I was so important that the magic broke the rules, or something like that. But Gracie jumped off the fence and picked a stem of grass to chew on. “I imagine the magic got confused. You’re starting to smell like a sheep.”

Before I thought of any response to that, she ran off toward her house. I watched her long shadow swing the carton of eggs and disappear.

Clarkia (Puzzle-Piece Flower)*Clarkia pulchella*

I don't even have to do this for school, but Mr. Connolly said I could work on my wildflower journal for summer school credit, and he'll let me go outside in the field by the elementary playground to look for flowers so long as I don't disappear and do better on the practice tests. It's not my favorite way to spend summer, but at least I got a few weeks of freedom between eighth-grade graduation and the start of summer school.

Clarkia is named after Clark from Lewis and Clark, but I've always called it the puzzle-piece flower because of how it looks like the petals of the flower could lock together. Small pieces that come together and fit just right.

This month is like that. Small thing by small thing, my world fit itself back together. Dad and I had a meeting with Holland Dunn, and Dad explained how one of Dunn's former bankers targeted our farm. It wasn't exactly Dunn's problem, but he told us that he fired Mrs. Thompson because she communicated with people outside the bank about our financial situation and maybe he should have notified the police. He said that since we could use the information to call the bank into question, or at least get a lot of other people from the area to give the bank a hard time, he'd cut Dad a deal on the interest rate. The two of them talked for hours about a new payment plan that would work. When Dad and Mr. Dunn shook hands, our eyes met over the desk. I remembered what Mr. Dunn told me, that only kids could say that trying mattered.

He was right. I knew he was right. I knew there were pieces that would never fit, and I didn't need a man like Holland Dunn to tell me that sort of thing. My own mamma taught me that lesson. It's just that this time, I'd had just enough magic in my corner to squeak by.

More pieces came together at eighth-grade graduation. I walked arm in arm with Bailey Alders because of our seats, but I didn't mind. Mark got kicked out of school for the rest of the year after we caught him, and he might not come back next year. Bailey lost interest in me without her partner in crime.

May Lafayette did my hair up with lots of bobby pins, and I wore my good skirt with a new white sweater. None of my teachers gave me awards for being the best student in the class or showing the most effort, but I clapped harder than anybody when Jordan accepted awards from four different teachers. I didn't manage to wriggle out of summer school, but as long as I got to return home every night to weed the garden and feed the sheep, I could live through summer school.

After graduation, the last puzzle piece clicked into place. Dad gave me a big hug and ogled my diploma and then told me how nice my hair looked. I explained that May did it for me and waited for his face to cover over with clouds. When he didn't say anything, I figured this was as good a time as any to press my luck, so I told him I thought I deserved a reward. He offered to take me to get milkshakes, but I had my eye on a bigger prize.

"I want to have the Lafayette's over for dinner."

I couldn't read Dad's face before he turned and walked across the gym to May and Mr. Lafayette. May chatted with another mom, and Mr. Lafayette picked at his cake while they waited for Jordan to get done taking pictures with the basketball team.

"I thought I'd barbecue some of the steaks I got from the Neimans. Interested in coming over and joining us?"

Mr. Lafayette probably planned on making up an excuse, but it was too bad cause May beat him and said that they'd be over as soon as they could.

Dad turned around and found me behind him with a grin on my face the size of the ocean. I wrapped him in a hug and he hugged me back with arms that got strong bucking bails and hauling line. The pieces fit together just right.