

Chapter 1
At Home in Penn's Woods
2011

An unexpected detour left them lost in the dark. Paul had been certain they were heading the right way, but the two-lane country roads they had traveled the last half hour had few markers, and his older brother questioned whether they had missed a junction sign. Paul's grip tightened on the clumsily-folded map as he peered out the window. Maybe Sean should drag his knuckles out of the Stone Age and get a GPS.

Paul had been anxious about this move more than the others, even though it would only be temporary. The claw-like limbs of the barren trees whizzing by his window made the whole ordeal seem even more foreboding. He'd never been through North Central Pennsylvania, but in the daylight, the mountains would probably be beautiful, if a little desolate.

It's only for a few months. By spring, Dad would be home, and things would go back to normal. Normal for them anyway. Besides, maybe he'd like it here.

"We just passed it," Sean said over the acid rock music blaring from the speakers. "I thought you were watching for signs. Some navigator you are." Sean scowled and jerked the wheel to the right, causing the truck to careen onto the berm and Paul to slam into the door.

Paul rubbed his shoulder where it had smacked the door and sat upright. "I'm sorry, okay? I guess my mind wandered." He'd swear "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" had been playing for the last half hour. He hoped to God at least one other radio station had a signal strong enough to carry over the mountain they'd crossed.

"Yeah, you'll be sorry when we run out of gas and have to sleep in this truck." Sean sat hunched over the wheel, his strong arms gripping the ten and two-o'clock positions. His left leg, forever encased in worn denim, bounced erratically in a rhythm out of sync with the booming bass rattling the speakers.

He pulled into a narrow gravel drive and backed the truck out onto the main road, completing his three-point turn. The high beams caught a pair of glowing eyes sinking into the underbrush on the opposite side of the road.

"We'll get there, okay? Maybe if you'd get a GPS or something—"

"You want to pay for it, by all means, do like the commercial says and give a Garmin. Otherwise, maybe you should go back to grade school and learn to read a freakin' map."

Paul suddenly felt ten years younger than Sean instead of the four that separated them.

"There it is, on the right." Paul pointed to a road sign obscured by an overgrown sumac tree.

Sean turned right, and in the space of a mile, the road went from desolate rural to brightly-lit business district.

He swung the truck into the hotel parking lot, rolling over a speed bump with a jolt that made Paul glance out the rear window to see if the pickup had lost any critical parts.

The parking lot islands were filled with mounds of clay and not a living thing grew around the building, which looked as if it had been assembled and dropped into place like a giant LEGO creation.

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“Well, if it’s new, at least the mattresses should be good.” Sean killed the engine and shoved his keys in his pocket.

Apparently Sean had chosen to look for the silver lining, like he had when he first told Paul about this move.

“Hey, it’ll be cool.” Sean had waved a couple of employment and tourism brochures at him. “Just us. A new job for me, and when I’m off work, we can hang out. Maybe do some hiking, hunting, backpacking. Maybe meet some new people.”

What he meant, Paul thought, was that he might meet a girl—*the* girl—something that, despite his good looks, he hadn’t had any luck with at home in Maryland. Paul recognized he didn’t have a choice in the matter and settled for making the best of the situation. Still, he felt uneasy about the whole thing. There was a finality about it. He couldn’t put his finger on it, but he sensed that this move wasn’t going to be what either of them expected.

The frosted grass crunched with each footstep Rachel Mueller took. The November chill in the morning air invigorated her, and she quickened her pace as she strode along the path. She walked this way nearly every morning, and still it seemed new some days. Today, her hood up, head down, she wouldn’t have noticed if there were a gleaming pot of gold at the end of the trail. Rachel held her arms close to her body to insulate it from the breeze. She fixed her eyes on the ground beneath her and scanned for roots, rocks, or anything else that could trip her up.

The blast of cold air that had rolled in overnight seemed to have frozen her brain. When she had gone to bed last night, she couldn’t stop her mind from ticking through an endless list of chores, worries, assignments, and plans for the future. Or at least for the rest of her freshman year of high school. This morning, a blessed peace had settled over her like the blanket of fog that hung low around the tree line at the southernmost point of her family’s land. She concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, making the loop around the property, and getting back to the warm house where she hoped she’d find a steaming bowl of baked oatmeal waiting for her.

As she stepped over the frosted mud at the wood line, she rounded the northern end of her family’s property, the highest elevation on their land. She lifted her gaze from the trail, taking in the spectacular view of her home, the land, and the unsightly fracking equipment and truck path that now dominated the lower, southern end of the property.

What used to be an overgrown meadow of wild grasses that filled an old farm field was now one of many drilling sites around North Central Pennsylvania where gas mining companies had tapped into the rich gases of the Marcellus Shale.

Marcellus Shale. Five years ago, those two words would’ve sounded to her like a foreign language or a dreaded skin condition. Now they rolled off the tongue and into her ear daily. Rachel didn’t get into the science of it the way her eight-year-old brother did. James was fascinated with everything from the types of rock to the drilling process to the heavy equipment. Rachel’s take on it was simple. A gaseous gold mine ran beneath their property. Getting at it involved lots of heavy equipment and noise. It was an intrusion on her family’s quiet life, but it brought a much-needed boost to the income and lifestyle of pretty much everyone in the neighboring counties.

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By this time of morning, the crews already gulped coffee from their big thermoses and smoked their morning cigarettes. Diesel engines sputtered to life, and as morning sunlight melted the frost, the men would take their positions at the rigging and go about extracting natural gas from below the earth's surface.

“Fracking,” they called it. Until a couple of years ago, Rachel thought people used the word “fracking” to swear without actually saying an offensive word. She learned that it could also be shorthand for this mechanical process in which the ground was split up—fractured—to get the gases out.

Rachel's school bombarded her with enough environmental impact education for her to know people disagreed about whether or not fracking was wrecking the planet. She figured the truth lay somewhere between the doomsday cries of the “environmental whackos,” as her dad called them, and the carefully-crafted sound bites of the corporate spin doctors. It would all be figured out eventually, probably when she was an adult, so why invest time trying to figure it out now? The truth was that their drinking water was fine, the planet seemed to be getting along all right, and the fracking brought more cash into the household. And some of those young guys that came to work with the drilling companies—they were cute. Granted, these guys were at least eighteen years old, and Rachel was only fourteen, but they sure improved the view and made up for the ugly fracking equipment and mud-covered roads.

When she turned the bend at the end of the tree line, Rachel spotted an unfamiliar truck in the driveway. A cloud of exhaust billowed from the tailpipe and hung low in the dense morning air. She quickened her pace, eager to see who visited at this hour.

She couldn't imagine her parents inviting anybody over at this time of day when they were trying to drag James out of bed, her mom was packing lunches, stuffing things in backpacks, and barking out orders and spelling words. When she reached the back door, she spotted two people inside with her parents: one of the cute drilling company guys she had seen on the property last week and a boy who looked to be about fifteen or sixteen years old. Their features were similar: broad shoulders, short light brown hair, strong jaw, but somehow the boy was not quite as good looking as the older guy, who leaned against the kitchen counter.

****End of excerpt****