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Chapter 2: Welcome to Virginia

Virginia was covered in mist. Trees jumped out as our car passed and water clung to our windshield. The forests looked like they were drowning in water. We passed by a house being swallowed-up by a million vines. I wouldn't have seen it if I hadn't seen the chimney just above the mass of green. It really looked like the local forest monster woke up and decided to take all of its anger out on this poor house.

Another loud commercial interrupted Grandpa's radio station. I turned away from the window and looked at Grandpa. He kept driving like the commercials didn't even exist. I couldn't understand why he didn't play music off of his phone or something. Listening to the radio was the most annoying thing ever.

"How much farther do we have to go?" I called over the announcer's voice.

"We're almost there. In about ten miles or so we'll turn up our road."

I sat back in my seat and pulled out my phone. Not a single bar of service.

"Why do you have to live in the middle of nowhere?" I groaned.

He shrugged. "I like it."

The car escaped the trees and was surrounded by fields. I sat up for a moment and pressed my nose against the window. From what I could see, most of them were brown. Row after row of dirt mounds with water running in little streams between them. I slumped back down in my seat and started playing a game on my phone. What I wanted to do was text Todd or Theresa, but no service means no friends. I wondered if that was why my grandpa didn't talk very much.

A little while later, the car slowed down and I heard the *ping pong* sound of the blinker.

"Are we there?"

Grandpa chuckled. “Almost, just a few miles down this road and we’ll be there.”

“Miles?!”

“Don’t worry, it won’t take long.”

I was so sick of sitting. The plane ride took forever, but I didn’t realize I would have to drive for eternity to get to Grandpa’s house too. And I didn’t realize that he lived so far away from civilization. What if he didn’t have Internet or TV or anything? What was I going to do all summer?

“Are there any kids my age?” I asked as I pulled my feet on the seat and tried to stretch them above my head.

“In the neighborhood?” Grandpa paused for a moment and scrunched up his eyebrows. He kind of reminded me of an owl when he did that. “Well, none that I can think of, but I don’t know a lot of our neighbors.”

That was not what I wanted to hear. I looked out the window as we passed fields and an occasional house. There was another patch of trees that went on for a while. I looked into the trees to see if I could spot another hidden house. Nothing, until right before the trees ended, then I spotted a rusty, old truck outlined in the fog like a skeleton. Even though it was hot and sticky outside, I shivered.

A few minutes later, Grandpa slowed down and turned into the muddy driveway of a muddy house on a muddy field.

“This is it.” Grandpa called. He hopped out of the truck and pulled my suitcase out of the truck bed.

I opened my door and looked down. A giant brown puddle smiled up at me. I looked at my pink ballet flats and then back at the brown puddle and then back at my pink ballet flats.

“C’mon Addy.” Grandpa Ainsley had already hobbled my giant suitcase up the porch steps and to the front door.

I stood on the lip of the car door and then jumped out as far as I could. I missed the puddle, but my shoes squinched into mud anyways. I regretted not packing my rain boots. Every time I stepped, the mud grabbed my shoes, like it was trying to stop me from getting to the house. As if I needed help with that.

I did my best to wipe my shoes on the faded welcome mat. They were brown. I closed my eyes. I hoped that my mom had kept the receipt. I wiped away a tear and opened the door.

The house smelled like hospital. I couldn’t tell if the walls were once white or if they were originally supposed to be yellow. The couches were green, like the carpet, and there were holes in some of the cushions. At least there was a giant flat-screen TV to bring me out of the stone-age, and next to it, a large bookcase with what must have been a million movies. Maybe I wouldn’t die of boredom after all.

Grandpa came out of a hallway and into the main room. “I put your things in your room. I know you’re tired, but your mother would like to see you.”

My stomach dropped. “Now? Do I have to? Can’t I see her tomorrow?”

“It will only take a moment,” he clapped his hand on my shoulder and led me down the hallway like an executioner. “This is your room,” he nodded at an open door, “the bathroom is the next door down, and this,” he gestured at a door, “is your mother’s room.”

I sucked in a quick, sharp breath. I was only four the last time I saw her, right before she left. It wasn’t until I was nine that she even called me. I started thinking about all those years. All those years of asking my dad if my mother had called. All those years of hoping she’d come

back. All those years of crying and throwing fits and wondering why my own mother didn't want me.

Grandpa opened the door.

"Addy!" a frail woman with curly blond hair rasped from a giant hospital bed. "I'm so happy to see you," her voice caught, "I've missed you so much."

I stood there and stared at her as she cried.

She reached a hand out to me like everything was fine, like nothing had happened, like I was four years old again and she was just late picking me up from preschool.

"I need to go unpack."

Her face fell, and I felt satisfaction rush through my body. After all those years, that's all she deserved to hear from me.

I turned around and left.

Chapter 3: Things to do in the Middle of Nowhere

The next morning I got up early and left the house before anyone could notice. The more I could avoid Linda, the better. She could try whatever she wanted, but she could never be my mother. She lost that opportunity a long time ago.

The fog had lifted and the sun was shining, but there were still some clouds in the sky. I had no idea what I was doing or where I was going. I felt like an adventurer. I had my backpack with the book my dad gave me along with a notebook, colored pencils, a sandwich, and a water bottle. Before I left, I wrote a note to Grandpa Ainsley explaining that I would be back before dinner, which meant I had an entire day to explore and figure out how to entertain myself in middle-of-nowhere Virginia.

I pulled out my phone: one bar of service. I tried to text Theresa. It failed. I lifted my phone up higher and tried again. It failed. Again, again, again, and again...it failed each time. I growled and kicked a pine cone over one of the deep ditches that lined the road. I found another one and kicked that one across too. I found another and another, and kept kicking them until I got bored and kept walking.

I passed a field and found the patch of trees with the rusty, old truck in them. It didn't look like a skeleton anymore. Just hollow. Its wheels were either missing or covered in green stuff; it was hard to tell. Parts of it were more rusted than other parts, but there was something about it that drew me in. I gazed at the ditch that separated me and the truck and decided that it was doable. I got a running start and then leaped to the other side of the ditch. When I took a few steps into the trees, I saw a path leading to the truck. I wondered why it was there.

I walked along the path until I reached the truck, then saw that the path continued.

"Where do you lead?" I wondered. I imagined it leading to a hidden world, or a fairy cottage, or something magical and exciting.

I decided to follow it.

The path ended in a little clearing next to a pond. A huge, sturdy tree stood at the center of the clearing. Its trunk was double my size and the tree itself stretched for miles into the sky. It wasn't as exciting as I thought it would be, but it was still cool. I took out my phone and took some pictures. I wanted to send them to Theresa, but, again, there wasn't any service. I wondered how I would be able to talk to Theresa, or anyone, if I couldn't use my phone. How did people survive before phones existed?

Then I remembered the notebook in my backpack and laughed. Letters, of course! I had never had a pen pal before. This could be fun. I sat against the giant tree and wrote a letter to Theresa.

There's only so much adventuring a person can do by themselves before they get bored, so eventually I decided to go knock on neighbors' doors and look for kids my own age.

There was one family, the Greene's, who had a bunch of kids, but they were all a lot younger than me. The mom was really nice. She told me that she would call me when she needed a babysitter. I didn't mention that my parents still called a babysitter for me.

Another family had older kids. The youngest one was a sixteen-year-old girl named Grace who had purple hair. She didn't seem very interested in me. But she let me in and let me watch her play video games.

There was one house that was overgrown and even dirtier than my grandpa's house. They had a beat-up pickup truck with peeling green paint and a big, black dog chained to a tree. I decided not to knock on that door.

All of the other neighbors I met were old people. The lady across the street was named Miss Minnie May. I asked her if that was a nickname. "A nickname? Dear me, no!" she laughed. "That's the name the good Lord gave me." We must have talked for at least three hours. Actually, she talked for at least three hours while I ate cookies and played with her cat.

By the time I got home, it was getting dark. Grandpa Ainsley was sitting on the porch.

"I'm sorry I'm so late, Grandpa, I didn't realize how long I had stayed at Miss Minnie May's."

He smiled. "Did she talk your ear off?"

I smiled back. "Yup."