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Opening extract from **If You Find Me**

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1

Mama says no matter how poor folks are, whether you're a have, a have-not or break your mama's back on the cracks in between, the world gives away the best stuff on the cheap. Like the way the white-hot mornin' light dances in diamonds across the surface of our creek. Or the creek itself, babblin' music all day long like Nessa when she was a baby. Happiness is free, Mama says, as sure as the blinkin' stars, the withered arms the trees throw down for our fires, the waterproofin' on our skin and the tongues of wind curlin' the walnut leaves before slidin' down our ears.

It might just be the meth pipe talkin'. But I like how *free* sounds all poetic-like.

Beans ain't free, but they're on the cheap, and here in the Obed Wild and Scenic River National Park, dubbed 'the Hundred Acre Wood', I must know close to one hundred ways to fix beans. From the dried, soaked-in-water variety to beans in the can – baked beans, garbanzo beans, kidney beans . . .

It don't sound important. It's just beans, after all, the

cause of square farts, as my sister used to say with a giggle on the end. But when you're livin' in the woods like Jenessa and me, with no runnin' water or electricity, with Mama gone to town for long stretches of time, leavin' you in charge of feedin' a younger sister – nine years younger – with a stomach rumblin' like a California earthquake, inventin' new and interestin' ways to fix beans becomes very important indeed.

That's what I'm thinkin' as I fill the scratchy cookin' pot full of water from the chipped porcelain jug and turn on the dancin' blue flame of the Bunsen burner: how I can make the beans taste new tonight, along with wishin' we had butter for the last of the bread, which we don't, because butter don't keep well without refrigeration.

Sometimes, after a stint away, Mama will appear out of nowhere, clutchin' a greasy brown sack from the diner in town. Then, everythin' we eat is buttered thick as flies on a deer carcass, because it would break my and Jenessa's hearts to waste those little squares of gold.

Mama says stealin' butter is free, as long as you don't get caught.

(She also says gs are free, and I should remember to tack them onto the ends of my *ing* words, and stop using *ain't* and talk proper like a lady and all. Just because she forgets don't mean I should. Just because she's backwoods don't mean me and Jenessa have to be.)

At least we have the bread. I'm glad Ness isn't here to see me scrape the fuzzy, light-green circles off the bottom. If you scrape it carefully, you can't even taste the must,

which, when I sniff it, smells like our forest floor after a wetter month.

Snap-swish!

I freeze, the rusty can-opener one bite into the tin. *Nessa?* The crunch of leaves and twigs beneath careless feet and the unmistakable sound of branches singin' off the shiny material of a winter coat is too much noise for Jenessa to make, with her cloth coat and footsteps quiet as an Injun's. *Mama?* I scan the tree line for the lemon yellow zing of her spiffy store-bought ski jacket. But the only yellow in sight drips from the sun, fuzzyin' up the spaces between hundreds of shimmerin' leaves.

I reckon I know how a deer feels in crosshairs as my heart buh-bumps against my ribs and my eyes open at least as wide as the dinner plates stacked on the flat rock behind me. Movin' just my eyes, I see the shotgun lyin' only a superloooong arm stretch away and breathe a sigh of relief.

We're not expectin' anyone. I think of how I look: the threadbare clothin' hangin' loose as elephant wrinkles, my stringy hair limp as overcooked spaghetti soaked in corn oil overnight. In my defence, I've been stuck on the violin for days, workin' out a piece I've yet to perfect; 'suspended in the zone', as Mama calls it, where I forget all about the outside parts. Although, here in the backwoods of Tennessee, it don't matter much. We've had maybe one or two lost hikers stumble upon our camp in all the years since Mama stowed us away in this broken-down camper in the sticks.

I listen harder. *Nothin'*. Maybe it's just tourists after all. I

run my fingers through my hair, then rub the greasy feelin' off on the legs of my jeans.

The few times I seen myself in the fancy store mirrors, I didn't recognize myself. Who's that scruffy, skinny girl with the grasshopper knees? The only mirror we own is a small shard of glass I found in the leaves. In it, I can see one Cyclops eye at a time or half the button of my nose, the v sittin' pretty in the middle of my top lip or the peach fuzz on the tip of my earlobe.

'Seven years bad luck,' Mama said after she'd seen the shard. And I ain't even the one who busted it. Luck ain't free. Seven years might as well be ten or twenty or forever, with luck bein' rare as butter, for Mama, my sister and me.

Where's Nessa? I sink into a squat, my eyes sweepin' the ground for a broken branch to use as a club, just in case I can't get to the shotgun in time. After last night's storm, there are a few choice limbs to choose from. The crunchin' starts again, and I track the sound in the direction of the camper, prayin' Nessa don't come back early from her fairy hunt. *Better for strangers to move on without seein' either one of us.*

'Carey! Jenessa!'

Huh?

My breath breaks free in marshmeller puffs, and my heart beats heart-attack fast. It's a man, obviously, one whose voice I don't recognize, but how does he know our names? *Is he a friend of Mama's?*

'Girls? Joelle!'

Joelle is Mama, only she's not here to answer back. In

fact, we haven't seen her in over a month, maybe two at this point. It's been a worry, the last few days. While we have enough beans to last a week or so, this is the first time Mama has been gone so long without word. Even Jenessa has started to worry, her face an open book, even if her mouth refuses to voice the words.

More than once, I've caught her lips countin' canned goods and propane tanks, and she don't need to say what she's thinkin', because I lug around the same worry: that we'll run out of necessities before Mama comes back – *if* she comes back – which is a dark-enough thought to tumble me into my own pit of silence.

My sister don't talk much. When she does, it's only to me, in moth-winged whispers, and only when we're alone. By the time Ness turned six, Mama grew worried enough to disguise her youngest daughter as 'Robin' for the day and whisk her off to the speech therapist in town, a smart-lookin' woman who diagnosed Jenessa with a condition called 'selective mutism'. Nothin' Mama said, threatened or did could break Ness's resolve.

'Carey? Jenessa!'

I clap my hands over my ears and use my thinkin' to drown out the calls.

It's strange, hearin' a man's voice, when it's mostly been us females. I used to wish I had a father, like the girls in my books, but wishin' don't make things so. I don't remember anythin' about my own father, except for one thing, and Mama laughed when I brought it up. As embarrassed as I was, I guess it *is* funny, how my one memory of my father

is *underarms*. She said the scent of pine and oak moss I remember came from a brand of deodorant called Brut. And then she got annoyed because I didn't know what deodorant was, said I asked far too many questions and her jug of moonshine was empty.

'It's OK, girls! Come on out!'

Why won't he just go away? What the heck is Mama thinkin'? I don't care how much money he promised her – I'm not gonna do those things no more. And I'll kill 'im, I swear, if he lays one finger on Jenessa.

All I have to do is stay hidin' and wait for him to leave. That's the plan, the only plan, until I catch a skip of pink dancin' through the brown and greenery, and the butter yellow head of a little girl lost in a fairy world.

Look up! Hide!

But it's too late – he sees her, too.

Nessa stumbles, her mouth open, and a gasp escapes. Her head whips left, then right. The man probably thinks she's searchin' for an escape route, but I know my little sister better than anyone, even God. Jenessa is tryin' to find *me*.

Makin' my own careless leaf sounds, I rise, my eyes on Nessa, who sees me immediately and flies across the forest into my arms. Our heads crank in the direction of new movement, this time in the form of a woman thin as chicken bones, her gait uneven as her heels sink into the soft forest floor.

Jenessa clings like a leech, her legs wrapped round my waist. The scent of her hair, sunbaked and sweaty, is so

personal, it aches in my belly. Like a dog, I can smell her fear, or maybe it's mine. I shake it off fast as my face smooths into stone and I collect myself, because I'm in charge.

Neither the man nor the woman moves. *Don't they know it's impolite to stare? Bein' city folk and all?* She looks over at him, her face unsure, and he nods at her before goin' back to starin' at us, his gaze unwaverin'.

'Carey and Jenessa, right?' she says.

I nod, then curse myself as my attempt at a 'Yes, ma'am' comes out in a squeak. I stop, clear my throat and try again.

'Yes, ma'am. I'm Carey, and this is my sister, Jenessa. If you're lookin' for Mama, she went into town for supplies. Can I help you with somethin'?'

Nessa squirms in my iron grip, and I command my arms to relax. At least I'm not shakin', which would be a dead giveaway for Nessa but, truth be told, I'm shakin' *inside*.

Maybe the church folk sent them. Maybe they met Mama in town, buskin' for money for her next fix. Maybe they talked some Jesus into her and came out to drop off some food.

'Are you Jehovah's Witnesses or somethin'?' I continue. 'Because we're not interested in savin' by some guy in the sky.'

The man's face breaks into a smile, which he covers with a cough. The woman frowns, swats at a mosquito. She looks mighty uncomfortable standin' in our woods, glancin' from me to Ness and then back again, shakin' her head. I smooth down my hair, releasin' my own aura of dust and sunbaked head. The woman's nutmeg brown hair, unsprung from her bun, makes me think of Nessa's after a

hard play, with tendrils like garter snakes crawlin' down her neck and stickin' there. It's pretty hot for fall.

Even from here, I can tell the woman washed her hair this mornin'. It probably smells like fancy flowers, unlike the heels of soap we use to wash ours.

'There's a table over there, if you want to sit awhile,' I say uninvitin'ly, hopin' she don't. But she nods and I take the lead, cartin' Nessa to the clearin' by the camper, past the fire pit poppin' and smokin' as the kindlin' catches on, past the canned goods locked in a rusty metal cabinet nailed to the trunk of a tree and over to a battered metal foldin' table surrounded by mismatched chairs: two metal, one wicker and two large stumps with cushions that used to cling like puffy skin to our old rockin' chair.

The man and woman sit, him in a metal chair, while she chooses the large stump with the cleanest cushion. I plunk Nessa in the wicker and keep the table between us and them. I stay standin', with plenty of room for a fast getaway if need be. But they both seem normal enough, not like kidnappers or drug dealers or crazy church folk. She looks important in her store-bought tan suit. This fact makes me nervous more than anythin' else.

They watch quietly as I put my violin away in its case and then fill three tin cups with a stream of water from the jug. I want to tell them I boiled the water first and that the creek is clean, but I don't. Dolin' out the cups, I cringe when I catch sight of my nails, ragged and uneven, a ribbon of dirt stretched beneath each.

Twice I step on Nessa's foot and tears spring to her eyes.