

## C H A P T E R   O N E

We quit the city to save our lives.

Mama says, “The city quit us, and that made leaving easy.” But that’s silly. Cities don’t care who goes or who stays. This new town, though, it cares. Here, the very ground we live on cares.

Mama quits many things—coffee, sugar, wheat. Late at night, when she thinks I’m sleeping, her finger tracing a half moon around my ear, her warm toothpaste-breath against my forehead, she says, “I want to be a better person, Elijah. For you.”

I’m only Elijah in the dark. By day, I’m Eli. It’s a nickname I like when she says it to rhyme with sly, but not when she makes it rhyme with belly. *Elly Belly*. That’s a baby name, and Lucy claims I’ve never been a baby. Not really.

“You were born knowing everything, Elly Belly. You came out of that incubator like it was your first year of college.”

Usually, when she and my dad Nicholas mention Elijah (i.e., hardly ever), they’re talking about my great-great-grandfather, who first lived in this old miner’s shack, the one we’re trying to turn into a home. In the daytime, only my friend Mary calls me Elijah, and when she says it, I’m not even sure it’s me she’s talking to. While her mouth moves, her calm brown eyes fix on my face, but they’re full of something else, something both bigger and farther away.

Since we came to Coalton, Mama knits and knits and knits. Purple toques. Blue sweaters. Orange scarves. Green mittens. All for me. Like, if she could just knit a scarf long enough, bright enough, warm enough, she could pull me back into the ordinary world. That's what they did when I was born, actually, pulled me back into their world. I kicked down the door three months before I was invited, Mama says, and then I decided I didn't want to stay anyway. I was their Last Chance Baby. Without me, they'd have no one. Except each other, I guess, and that doesn't seem like enough. So with wires and tubes and oxygen, doctors did the work of staying for me.

"A miracle of modern science" is what Nicholas calls me. But I know what he's thinking—maybe I'm only half a miracle because I'm only half here. "Earth to Eli," he likes to say. "Are you with us?"

I turned ten years old in August, the very week we moved to Coalton. Double digits. *One. Zero.* I like that: a number to hold onto with each hand.

(I do want to stay.)

Nicholas used to say Lucy's name funny, dragging out the vowel sounds—"Looooooooooooeee!"—and slapping her across the butt in a way that made her face turn pink. She'd do that smile that I love, the one that fills my insides with warm honey. Now when Nicholas says "Lucy," he says it plain and stays at a safe distance. Lucy has a cold ring around her here in Coalton, an icy pool that Nicholas is too chicken to step into.

Nicholas likes to talk to me about the natural habitat. *Dad-a-tat and his hab-a-tat*, I used to joke, when I was more of a baby. But jokes get old pretty fast. It actually seems kind of silly now. In the

evenings after work, Nicholas and I walk through the forest west of our house, and he shows me that you can, if you know how to look, see leftovers of the old coal-mining town: house foundations showing through the dirt, old stoves buried in sticks and leaves, some railway ties. Gravestones that have nearly disappeared.

“There was a whole town here,” he says. “Many lives. Then the old mine closed and the people left.” He kicks hard into the dirt to show me the concrete foundation underneath. “People think we’ll kill the natural world. We won’t. We’ll take it to where it can’t sustain us, then it’ll spit us right off and rebuild.” Nicholas leans over to dig out a tea canister. “It’ll carry on without us. That’s what people don’t know.” He waves the rusted can. “Look at this. A whole town. Nearly swallowed by the forest already.”

I only call them Mom and Dad when other kids are around. To stop the kids from thinking I’m even weirder than they already do. “Different,” Lucy would correct. “There’s nothing wrong with different, Eli.”

That’s why kids bully me, though. Because I’m “different,” a word that can mean so many things:

Because I’m small.

Because I’m pale.

Because I’m not good at gym class.

Because I have red hair.

Because I know things other children don’t.

Kids don’t need much reason to be mean.

Sometimes, when I get my sad-for-no-reason feeling, I call Lucy “Mama.” It’s just a joke from our favourite song, but Nicholas

hates when I say Mama (even if we’re not supposed to use the word *hate*). He says it makes me sound like a baby.

I have a feeling neither of them liked the kind of baby I was. Lucy, who never prays, says she stood with one hand pressed against the glass that separated me from the world while she repeated one word: *please, please, please, please*. It might have been even worse than that, actually, because that’s the part she told me about.

“Actually” is my favourite word.

“Actually, my asthma comes from being premature. My lungs were underdeveloped. Lucy says I’m lucky I wasn’t a blue baby. Those ones die.”

“Actually, redheads are in danger of extinction. Red hair is quite a rare characteristic. Lucy says being rare makes it precious.”

“Actually, I don’t have any brothers or sisters. My mom was forty-two when I was born. That’s quite old, actually. Doctors had to put my dad’s sperm on her egg and then put it back in her uterus. That’s quite expensive. We can’t do that again. Actually.”

“Actually,” I told the woman ringing in our cans at the supermarket, “we moved here because Nicholas’s friend Danic—”

“Thank you, Eli,” Lucy says. “That’s enough ‘actuallies’ for now.”

Lucy often tells Nicholas he’s gone to the dark side. “The world is going to hell in a handbasket, and Nicholas works for the bad guys.” *Helena Handbasket* is what I heard the first time she said that, and I invented a superhero with that name. Helena Handbasket to the rescue! “Raping the Earth, that’s the business Nicholas is in now,” Lucy says in her laughing way, like she’s trying to sound sar-

castic but then underneath that like she's really not.

"But," Nicholas reminds Lucy, "I myself am still one of the good guys."

"Enviro guys can get work anywhere these days. It's easy." Lucy says this as if it's bad news, which I don't get. She must be happy Nicholas got work right away at the coal mine closest to Coalton. Nicholas says it's the best place to work because it pays the most money. Kids with miner dads get trampolines and hockey camps and snowmobiles.

Not that I can imagine wanting any of those things, actually.

That's one thing people have a lot of in the city we came from: Money.

"Oil money," Lucy says, scrunching up her nose the way she does when she has to scoop dog poo off the front lawn.

"Oil money that funded the university where you worked, oil money that supported those grants you applied for," Nicholas says. "You seemed happy enough to take your share."

So, Lucy and Nicholas are actually like every other mom and dad: Money makes them happy.

"Miners take the mountain down," Nicholas explained, "and I put it back together."

I thought he must be exaggerating until he took me to his work for a tour. He was being so nice to me. He gave me my own hard hat. He let me sit in the front of his truck (even though I weigh barely sixty-five pounds and Lucy always makes me sit in the back). I wanted so bad to be what Nicholas wanted. Me and him: buddies. Father and son. Me high-fiving his work friends. "Who's this

big boy? A real helper you've got today! I hope you're paying him. Watch your old man, Eli, don't let him make you work for nuthin.''" (People always talk to me like that. It's because of my size. They think I'm six or seven. Not ten. *One. Zero.* Actually.)

*A sickly boy.* I heard Nicholas call me that, late at night when he thought I was asleep. I'm not the kind of son Nicholas had in mind. He never even tried to put me on skis. Not once. He knew better. Anyone with eyes in their head would know better. Walking from the house to the car in the winter is hard enough for me, the cold air raking its way down my throat and chest and then sitting in my lungs, heavy as an amputated arm.

I tried hard to be his little big man helper in the green hard hat. But when I saw those trucks—each one bigger than our entire house—and the size of the pit they'd dug in the mountain—you could fit all of Coalton in there—it did something funny to my insides. Solid-turned-to-liquid funny. Something-not-right-and-hurting funny.

Layer by layer, they were taking everything they could sell out of the mountain, hauling it off, and leaving the rest. Deer used to live there. Deer, cougar, moose, bear. Where were the animals supposed to go? What the miners had done—it'd be like if someone burned down our homes. Or flooded the whole Coalton valley. You can't just take away the place people live. What they had done, it felt so wrong—in my insides.

Nicholas said, "Put your head between your knees, Eli. We'll get you out of here." He kept his voice strong and even. He didn't seem mad, even when I could no longer hold my stomach down, and

the half-chewed dried apricots and pickle-cheese sandwiches landed in stinking clumps between my feet.

“That’s okay, son. It’s a bumpy road.”

Nicholas never calls me “son,” but I couldn’t thank him, my mouth full of thick spit.

“We’ll get you out of here, son.” Nicholas kept saying that, the whole winding way down to the highway, as the sour smell of my vomit filled the cab of his new truck. “We’ll get you out of here, son.”

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The official story is we came to Coalton for my asthma, but I’ve learned a lot about official stories versus real truths since we moved. One official story is Danica was Nicholas’s intern, a girl he sometimes played racquetball with. I wonder about a different story to do with the way Lucy never says Danica’s name. Instead, it’s always *her* and *she* or, worse yet, *that woman*. Danica won’t be visiting our new home. For one, we don’t even have a guestroom, actually. There’s only a bedroom, a kitchen, and a bathroom. (The smallest bathroom Lucy has ever seen. She says it’s a good thing she’s only four-eleven or she wouldn’t even be able to stand in the shower.) We squished my bed into the tiny alcove off the kitchen.

Another official story is that this move was Nicholas’s idea: he wanted to retire from the rat race, get back to his family’s small-town roots, and “spend more time with his son.” But I heard Lucy late at night, saying, “Either way, Elijah and I are leaving.” Lucy

spoke with that strangled sound she gets when she's trying not to scream or cry, like she's wearing a too-tight turtleneck. "You make your decision, Nicholas—come or stay. But if you come, things will be different."

He came. Things are different.

When we left our big-city house, I cried a little bit. Not the noisy kind of crying, just the kind that makes my cheeks wet. I kept so quiet Lucy didn't even hand me a Kleenex. I don't know why I cried. The kids weren't nice to me there. There was nobody I'd miss. Still, I'd never lived anywhere else. I guess that's what people mean by home: a place that's hard to leave even if it's just as crappy as everywhere else.

That last time, in front of our old house, Nicholas put his hand on my shoulder while I cried. We didn't look at each other, just leaned against the warm car (sheets and pillows and stacks of dishes piled high against the windows) and stared at that big house, an exact copy of each of its neighbours. "This new life will be better, Eli. You'll see."

Parents do that, pretend they're doing something because of the kids, when actually they have their own grown-up reasons. I don't think Lucy and Nicholas are lying, exactly. I think they actually believe the strange stories they tell. That's different than lying, right?

Mary gives me a funny look when I tell her this theory. "I guess you're right," I admit. "Lying is lying. No matter what tricks people play on their minds."

"You've come a long way for a little white boy from the city," Mary says. I get that warm-honey feeling. If she keeps looking at me

with those kind of eyes, little bumps poke up on my arms, and the back of my neck breaks into a cool sweat, and that's when I know I can never tell Nicholas and Lucy a single thing about this Mary who talks, a Mary who's different than the one they all see. Different in a way that feels a little bit dangerous. The shivery feeling Mary gives me all over my back, the heat growing up my neck and face, make me glad we never got rid of this mountain shack.

Nicholas planned to keep the house just as a ski retreat after Grandpa died, but that was before I came into the picture. If we stay, Lucy and Nicholas will hire someone to tear down our house and build one like we had in the city. Then Sam's will be the only miner's shack left—the only house that still remembers the olden times. I wonder if houses get lonely. Imagining his little house surrounded by nothing but big ones makes me sad. It's not fun, being small and different.

Sam can almost make me see the beauty of Coalton. "I wish I knew my people's word for that kind of beauty," he says. "The Creator told us, 'You need to know your language. You need to speak your language. When I shake the earth, you will need it to survive.' But not many people know my language. Less than seventy in the whole world. And even then, not all the words. So you and I, Eli, we'll have to take in this beauty with no words."

Without Sam, the mountains on every side feel like a cage. When the clouds settle down below the mountains' peaks, it's as if God has closed the lid on our town. I hear myself breathing in short, quick gasps like I'm afraid whoever closed the lid might have forgotten to cut air holes. On those days, the sun sleeps, and the valley

stays dark enough to match Lucy's mood.

In Coalton, even the land feels angry. The sharp rock faces, the towering pines. I miss our old home where we had wide-open skies full of sun, and the mountains were only a pretty ornament in the background, the place where the sky kissed the land. I liked the mountains as somewhere we might go for a holiday but never stay long enough to feel the weight of them. I hope I can learn to love them like Sam does.

I wonder how my great-great-grandfather Elijah felt about these mountains. Since we moved here to Coalton, I remember a lot more about him: the dark coal underneath his fingernails; the way he bathed from a bowl on the kitchen table, wiping the back of his neck and his underarms with a sponge he kept beneath the kitchen sink. I remember the way his heavy hands smelled of whiskey and tobacco. If I close my eyes and think back, I can hear that deep, rolling laugh that made it nearly impossible for anyone to hold a grudge against him. Even if times were hard, and Elijah gave people plenty of reason to grudge.

"How can you remember him?" Lucy puts her hands on my arms, on that bony part between my shoulder and my elbow. She's strong for someone so tiny. She pushes down hard, as if she is the only thing holding me to this earth. "You do not remember him, Eli. You didn't know him. He died before you were born. Before I was born."

I like that about Mary. *How can you remember him?* Mary never asks such silly questions. She doesn't need to. She's like me.