



“Give me my cap!”

My little sister, Flora, made a wild grab for her cap. But Ned swiped it out of her reach. “Give it back to me, Ned,” Flora said. “I mean it.”

My name is Abe Marcus. Ned and I are identical twins. We look exactly alike. Even Ma and Pa can’t tell us apart. But we don’t act alike. I am the serious twin. Maybe it’s because I am two minutes older.

Ned pulled the floppy cap down on his head and took off, running around the parlor, laughing like a madman. Flora chased after him, grabbing for the bright red cap with both hands.

Ned loves to tease Flora and play jokes on everyone. He is always getting into trouble and making people angry and being noisy and causing a ruckus.

At our old school, Ned poured molasses in all the inkwells in our classroom desks, and no one could write a word for weeks. He was sent home

by the teacher for a talk with Ma and Pa. But they were so busy getting ready for our move to this new house, they didn't have time to punish him.

Ned and I are twelve, and Flora is eight. She is the baby of the family, and Ma says she is as spoiled as four-week-old buttermilk.

Ned told Flora she smelled like sour buttermilk, too. And Flora grabbed him around the waist and started to tickle him in the stomach with both hands. Ned is very ticklish, and Flora wouldn't let him get away. She tickled him until he burped up some of his lunch, and Ma finally made her stop.

Flora is tiny, but she's a terror.

That was at our old house. Now, here we were on our first day at the new house. Flora was chasing after Ned, darting through the moving crates stacked up in the parlor.

Ned started to wave the red cap in the air over his head, shouting, "It's mine now! All mine!"

"I'm warning you, Ned Marcus. I'll tickle you again if you do not give me back my cap!" Flora cried.

That made Ned stop. I told you, he hates being tickled. I think he'd rather have a tooth pulled. He crinkled the cap between his hands, then he tossed it at her.

Flora growled at him and jammed it down over her dark, wavy hair. All three of us have dark, wavy hair. But you never see Flora's hair,

because she wears that floppy, ragged cap day and night, even to the dinner table.

“Keep your smelly hands off my cap,” Flora warned Ned. “You’re just jealous because you don’t have a cap. And because you and Abe have to share a room, and I have a room of my own.”

“Ned and I don’t mind sharing,” I said. “Because we never had a room of our own before. Remember? We had to sleep in Ma’s sewing room.”

“My room is better than yours,” Flora sneered. “I am going to have linen curtains as soon as Ma can go into town and buy the fabric.”

“We don’t want curtains,” I said. “Curtains are for girls.”

Truth is, Ned and I were *thrilled* to move into this new house. It was a hundred times bigger than the little cottage we lived in before. It had stairs that led up to a second floor and an attic above that. We never had stairs before. And we had a large backyard that stretched to a fence at the end of the property.

The backyard had lots to explore. There was a white-shingled garden shed, some kind of falling-down shack, a chicken coop, and an old stone well near the back fence.

We couldn’t wait to celebrate Christmas in the new house. Pa said he would cut down a fresh pine from the woods down the block. I could already picture it decorated with popcorn and cookies and lighted candles.

When we first saw the new house, Ned's eyes went wide. "Are we rich?" he asked.

Pa never laughs. But he actually chuckled when Ned said that. "We're far from rich, son," he said. "But we should be just fine here."

Pa is a stonecutter. He has so much work, he hired two apprentice stonecutters to work for him.

Now, here we were, Ned, Flora, and me, exploring every inch of the new parlor, the clear glass windows, the wide fireplace with its tall mantel.

We heard a loud thud. I turned to see Pa backing into the room. He and Mr. Powell, our new neighbor, were carrying in the couch. Hoisting the couch in both hands, Pa nearly backed into Ned. "If you're not going to help, at least get out of the way," Pa said.

"Can we explore the backyard?" Ned asked.

"Yes, can we?" Flora and I said together.

"Not you," Ned told Flora.

"Why not?" she demanded angrily, hands pressed to her waist.

"Because you're too ugly. You'll scare the birds," Ned said.

"I'm *not* as ugly as you," Flora shot back. "You scare the sun every morning. That's why it hides behind the clouds."

I burst out laughing. Flora is a poet sometimes.

Pa and Mr. Powell set the heavy couch facing the fireplace. Pa adjusted the straps on his denim overalls. "Flora, go help your mother in the kitchen," he said. "There is much to unpack."

Flora made an unhappy face. Then she tugged her cap down lower on her head, turned, and hurried to the kitchen.

Pa squinted at Ned and me. "Okay. Go out back and explore. But wear your coats. I think there's snow on the way." He sniffed the air. "I can smell it coming."

"And better stay away from that well near the fence," Mr. Powell added. He was a big, red-faced man with straight, straw-colored hair. His stomach bulged under the bib of his overalls.

"That well is deep," he said. "And the stone walls are crumbling. It could be very dangerous."

Ned and I didn't wait for any more warnings. We pulled on the sheep's-wool coats Ma had made for us and ran through the kitchen, where Flora and Ma were opening a big moving crate. Then out the back door and down the steps, into the wide yard with its tall grass and weeds swaying from side to side in the gusting wind.

We couldn't hold in our excitement. We let out loud yips and skipped over the grass, cheering for our new freedom, our new life.

We had no way of knowing it was going to be the worst day of our lives.