

Prologue

"You'll love the mountains," Mom says.

For one sweet hold-my-breath minute, when Mom said they had a surprise for us, I thought they meant something good, like a puppy, or a horse.

They meant they've bought a house in Jenkins Creek, where Scott grew up. We're moving. Leaving Cottonwood Bluffs and driving right across the country, over the mountains to the other side.

I've never even heard of Jenkins Creek.

"No one's heard of Jenkins Creek," snarls Lily.

Mom and Scott are both talking at once, about every good thing they can possibly think of. An avalanche of words thuds over us: house of our own, camping and hiking, new start for our brand new family.

All I hear is that I'm leaving where I've lived my whole life. I'm leaving Gram, Jess, Amelia and everyone else I know. Leaving the gentle flatlands of Cottonwood Bluffs. Leaving the only place my real dad might ever come back to look for us.

It feels like stepping onto a sidewalk that turns out to be ice. The world is skidding out from under me.

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THURSDAY AFTERNOON

The service station has bear paw prints running up the wall to the roof. I know they're just painted, but they give me the creeps. I can't help looking to see if there really is a bear up there.

But it feels good to get out of the truck and stretch. We've been on the highway for two hours — and really we've been driving for three days because we left Cottonwood Bluffs early Monday morning and only got to Jenkins Creek yesterday afternoon.

The moving van unloaded the beds and boxes and everything, and we slept in our new house last night. So today Lily and I should have started at our brand new schools where we don't know one single person — my first day of being the red-headed new kid.

But Mom said that since we'd already missed the first day of term, another couple wouldn't matter. Partly because Scott's bursting to show off his favourite mountains, and partly because this trip will take three days and we'd have to wait till next summer if we didn't do it now. By the next long weekend it'll be too cold. But mostly because they think

that Lily and I will be happy about moving here once we stand on top of a mountain.

So now we're on the way to the great family adventure. Except that all the way up the highway, Scott's been worrying that his special campsite might have been turned into something so fancy it won't be much of an adventure.

And Mom isn't with us, so we're not actually a family. The Coffee Corner called and asked her to come in today because one of the waitresses was sick, and she said she couldn't say no to her new boss before she'd even started.

Maybe she thought that climbing a mountain would be harder than Scott said.

Scott fills the truck, and buys some gum because our ears are popping. We're still about half an hour from the lake, and the mountains are getting higher.

"Anything else you want, you better get it now," he says. "I don't know what's going to be there."

What I want is to be home with Jess and Amelia. If I had a phone I'd send them a message: *Help! At the end of civilization! About to be eaten by bears!*

I'm not stupid enough to ask Lily to borrow hers — even if she wasn't sending her friends today's one-millionth text: *middle seat sux*. She wants me to see it so I'll feel bad, but it's not my fault we couldn't swap for two hours. I didn't even like the window seat much. People say mountains are pretty, but that's when they're on a postcard. Up close they lean over you like bullies in the playground. After a while I'd taken my glasses off so the shapes were softer and blurred.

The road we've turned onto isn't paved, and it's even steeper and windier than Scott said. It's got a cliff on one side and

nothing on the other. There's a creek a long way down at the bottom of the nothing.

I'm not crazy about the *Beware of Falling Rocks* signs either.

Nor is Lily. "Great! If we don't get smashed falling *off* the rocks, we'll get crushed by rocks falling on top of us."

"It's more about watching out for a heap on the road," says Scott. "You'd be unlucky to get hit by one falling that instant."

"That's supposed to make me feel better?"

"Yup!" says Scott.

The road flattens out and twists away from the creek. Scott gets excited about a faded sign of a galloping pinto at the end of a long driveway. "That was my buddy's grandparents' ranch!"

I can't see any horses now. Scott thinks the ranch was sold to developers after the grandparents died.

And then the road ends. There's still no sign for a resort.

Scott keeps on going, down an almost-disappeared track through the forest. Long grass swishes at the doors and branches tickle the windows. The pick-up jolts and thumps. Lily glares when I bump her.

A raven flaps across the track, so low and close to the windshield it makes us all jump.

"You're thinking that's just an ordinary old raven," Scott whispers, "but that's Raven, the old trickster who created the world . . . and he's thinking, *Here's one of my people!*"

Lily rolls her eyes so hard I think they're going to fall out. I can't see what she's typing this time, but I can guess.

There's no reception; her message won't send.

“Nobody told me we were going into the wilderness!” she snarls.

“That’s the general idea,” says Scott. He’s cheered up now that it doesn’t look like we’re heading toward a resort.

Mom says she named me after a bird because when she was pregnant, I turned and somersaulted so much it felt like wings tickling her insides.

So she called me Raven.

But it was my dad who flew away.

There’s no resort. No campground. Nothing. Not even a washroom. Just a lake with mountains all around it, layers and layers of them, every way you turn. Ours is the biggest. Right up under the clouds there’s a knobby peak with a slit of mouth under a big hooked nose, and snowy eyebrows and hair. If mountains have faces, this isn’t a friendly one.

“Are we really going to climb that?”

“Sure are,” says Scott.

The only thing that’s changed since Scott’s olden days is a giant rock wall sprawling across the grass and up through the forest. It looks like the mountain burst open, popping off trees like buttons and spilling its guts.

“Could be why there’s no resort,” says Scott.

“So it’s not safe to stay here!” Lily says.

“Look at the grass and moss around it — that rockfall happened years ago. The mountain’s not lying in wait for us so it can do it again!”