June, 2000

Rosie pressed the napkin in my hand as we were walking out of Daughtry's, right as Mr. Hillman stopped my father by the door. Her eyes went wide as they dropped to the note, bursting with quiet meaning. *Don't let your Daddy see!*

I blinked twice—*Got it*—and shuffled behind a stand of Sugar Flakes. Peeled the paper off my hand; opened the napkin just enough to see *Barn tonight?* and *10* in glaze-smudged marker.

That night I stood and waited by the window, Rosie's napkin on my nightstand next to the clock glowing ten to ten. The wood floor creaked beneath my feet and nervous energy thrummed my veins, a summer after seventh grade sparkle of potential.

I wanted answers.

I wasn't waiting another night.

Static pierced the air and I jolted, knocking my head into the window glass. I rubbed the dull ache in my head and lurched across the room for the walkie-talkie I'd forgotten, dang near smashing my finger when I cut the volume off. The house stayed silent—*thank God*—but I crouched down beside my bed just to be safe. Rosie was squawking away, the handset's red LED glowing. I pressed the *talk* button down and hissed at her through the handset. "I can't hear what you're saying, so quit."

Mama had ears like an elephant—super sensitive, but a tenth of the size. One wrong move, and Dora Bell Griffin would march through my door, demanding a complete accounting. My Daddy, Luther Griffin, would be right behind her. *Deebie,* he'd say, because Dora Bell's a mouthful. *Deebie, what's going on?* Then I'd get a lecture about our good family name, and Pinecliff, our home, and how a Griffin simply can't besmirch the image of our centuries-old legacy by sneaking out the window at night.

Whatever. Pinecliff was a dumb name, anyway. Daddy's grandfather built it way back when, a behemoth of a house on a hill above the river, surrounded by Carolina pines and nowhere near a cliff. It was pretty, and I liked it, especially the wavy antique glass in the windows that creaked a little when you pushed them up. I army-crawled across the floor, shouldered my bag, and held my breath while I opened the window. Waited a second, limbs tightening, and in the quiet, scrabbled over the sill.

"Three more steps!" Rosie whisper-yelled, and I might have said "thank you," or "mmmmmpfh." Whatever it was, I meant it when my feet hit the ground and I heard Rosie's voice behind me. "Geez, Dewitt. Took you long enough."

Rosie was blunt, but I liked it. I preferred when people told me the truth. Essentially, the opposite of my dad, who hadn't outright lied when I asked about the page missing from our family Bible but was evasive enough to be suspect. Shaking my hands out from my trek down the trellis, I tugged my hair into its black ponytail. Then I turned to Ro and held out my palms, displaying my hard-won splinters.

"Shoot," she said, her auburn hair shining in the moonlight. "Didn't realize how much it hurts."

I nudged her with my shoulder. *No worries*, the gesture said. Smiling big, Rosie hooked her arm through mine and pulled us toward the forest, a stand of Carolina pine, sweetgum, and live oak thick enough to eat us alive.

"You got the book?" I asked her. We'd lifted *Highways, Byways, and Waterways* from Daddy's office a few weeks back. Books on local lore and family lines squatted the bookshelves there, detailing the Griffin family's long Minnesott history. Far as I knew, he hadn't noticed that title was gone.

Rosie hefted her book bag, the thick volume weighing it down. "It's in here. If this book rips my bag—"

"It will have died in the service of a grand adventure."

She stared at my salute, lips flattened.

I sighed. "I'll get you another one, alright?"

High on mischief and excitement, we burst through the forest's edge. Velvety darkness wrapped the field, humidity still high beneath bright stars and the moonlight. When my father was little, Pinecliff had been a tobacco farm. Daddy was a businessman now, hobby farming the fields we still owned. Remnants of the farm's old life stuck around, like the ancient tobacco barn listing ahead of us. Rosie grabbed my hand and gave a low whistle. "That thing is one gust of wind from falling down."

"You're exaggerating." It *was* a little worn, but it was still standing up, bulky and wide, its four walls tall beneath a triangular roof, a covered porch around the middle like a tutu. Weathered wood slats hung at odd angles near the windows, scattered moonlight shining through.

"The barn has character." I tried to hide the faint tremor in my voice.

"I'm not scared," Rosie said, "In case you were wondering." She shifted. "You sure it won't collapse?"

"I'm sure."

A two-by-four chose that moment to break loose from the door frame.

Rosie whimpered. "What was he thinking, Dewitt?"

Daddy's obsession with family records meant boxes of files, and the boathouse loft was fit to burst. He'd carted several of those boxes out to the barn, putting them up in the loft inside plastic storage containers. "He was thinking he'd run out of space."

"You think the missing page is up there," she said, gaze pointing at the upper level of the barn.

"I do," I said, nodding.

Rosie shuddered. "I'm still not going in."

That earned an elbow in the side. "This was your idea, you goober. Remember?"

Freckles scrunching, she glared at me. "That was before I knew this was a death trap."

"Don't be dramatic."

"Don't act like it's not falling apart!"

The barn loomed up ahead, rough and ragged. “I’m going,” I said, managing a whole six steps before Rosie scooped in beside me.

“What if the boxes are just…business records? Tax forms. Old bills.”

“I don’t think that’s it.” Not with the way Daddy unloaded the truck, like he was handling something special. “Besides, we made all this effort to come out.”

We shuffled closer, staring up at the double doors and the weathered wood hanging off the hinges. Tiny ants tickled my neck. I brushed the sensation away and shoved my chin up higher. “Standing out here won’t make it less scary.”

“I told you. I’m not scared.”

A stiff wind blew the doors open. The hinges moaned, and metal clanged. “Okay. Maybe I’m a little scared,” Rosie said, and I squeezed her hand for comfort. One hesitant step across the threshold confirmed the barn was super creepy at night.

I opened my mouth to say we could do this later when movement across the barn caught my eye. A girl our age sat in the far corner, liquid moonlight reflecting off her dress. I’d never seen her before, but in my gut I *knew* her. Her dark hair twisted in a braid against the light skin of her shoulder and she held a notebook in her lap.

“Hello?” I asked.

Nothing.

“What are you doing?” I tried again. The air solidified, hot and thick, like I could cut through it with a machete, and a tight pinch gripped the muscles in my back. The girl stayed on the floor, writing, a slight smile on her lips. Whoever she was, she was trespassing. If something happened and she got hurt…

Shoulders straightened, I marched across the room. “You can’t be in here,” I said. My words echoed in the dark, her form wavering before it flickered and in an instant, my arms and legs went slack. This is…you can’t.” I squeezed my eyes shut against the dizziness. “Private property,” I slurred.

My name cut through the darkness. Thick and weighty. Black. The sound rolled inside my head, loose marbles as it scattered. Splinters bit my back, my neck.

“Dewitt!”

Rosie knelt over me, white-knuckled and scarlet-cheeked. *Why am I on the floor?* I tried to say, but my mouth wouldn’t move, jaw frozen shut in silence.

“This isn’t funny,” Rosie said, and her lip quivered. She shook me. “Wake up, Dewitt. *Stop*.”

I’m awake, I tried to tell her. I peeled my tongue loose like a sticker in my mouth. “The girl..” I finally said, my words thick and halting.

Rosie collapsed in a puddle next to me. “Fine. I admit it. I *was* scared.”

*“*I wasn’t…” I wasn’t trying to scare her at all. “There was a girl. She was tresh…trash…*”* My lungs squeezed. “She was trespassing.”

“No one’s here,” Rosie said, her voice a tremor.

The air in the barn went cold.

I sat up. Shivered. Flailed an arm out to the side. “I was talking to her. Over there.” A heavy wind buffeted the barn, and metal screeched, and the barn doors slammed shut, and the hair on my arms stood stood so far up I probably could have braided it.

Rosie shot to her feet. “We’re leaving.”

“The boxes—” I tried to stand.

“Forget the boxes.” Rosie’s arm circled my waist, and she limped us toward the door like a field medic with her patient.

“But—“ I said.

“*No thank you!”*

Rosie kicked the door open and dragged me out.

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