A woman with long, reddish-brown hair in a braid, wearing a white long-sleeved blouse with a dark vest, stands with her back to the camera, looking into a misty, sun-dappled forest of tall evergreen trees. The scene is ethereal and atmospheric.

Beyond the Woods

HEATHER HAFFER

*Beyond the
Woods*

Preview

By Heather Hafer

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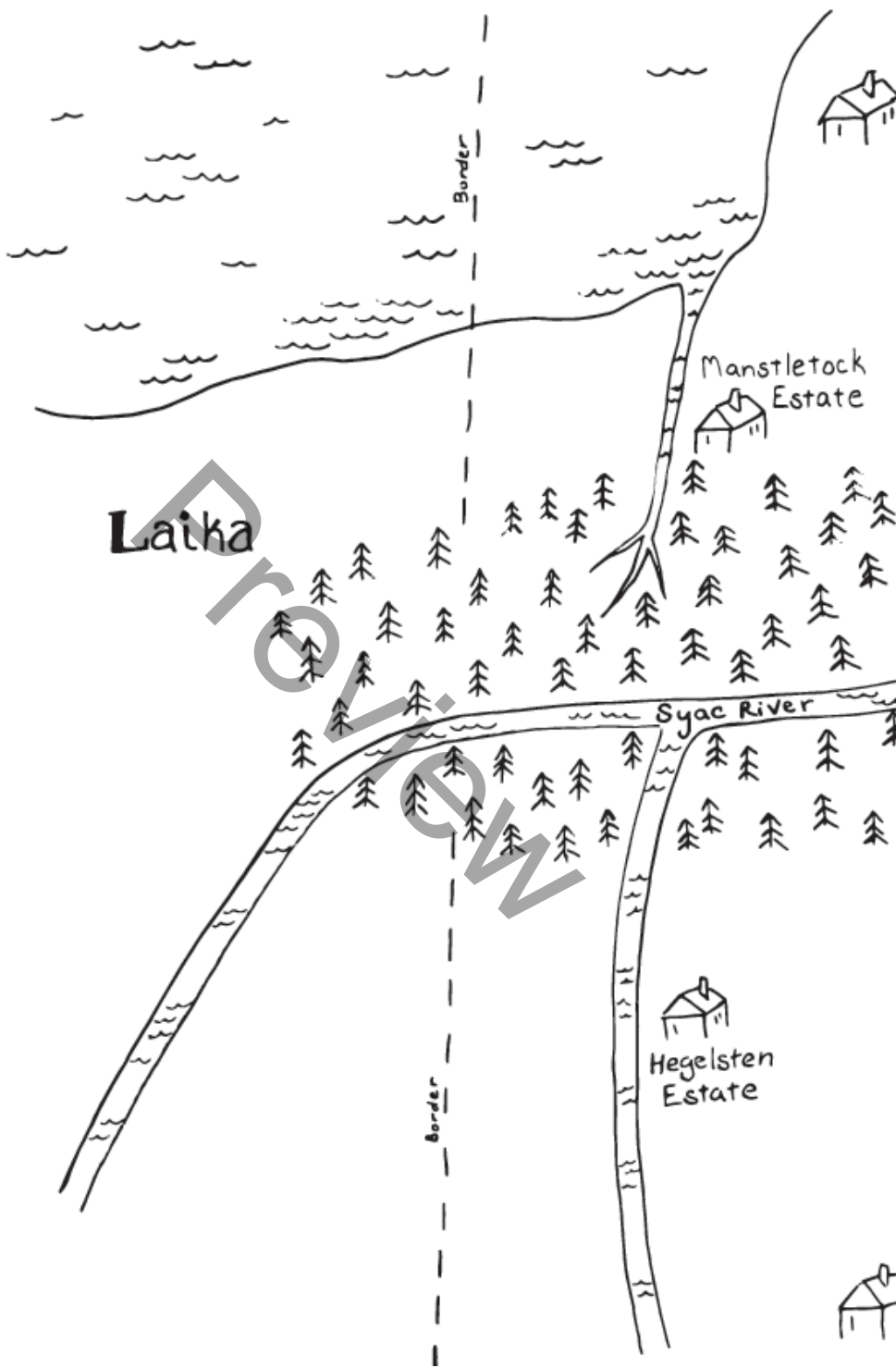
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Preview

Dedication

I want to thank the Lord Jesus Christ for the opportunity and ability to write this book.

Preview



Laika

Border

Manstletock Estate

Syaac River

Hegelsten Estate

Border

Terrigold Estate

Cambria

Eagle Lake

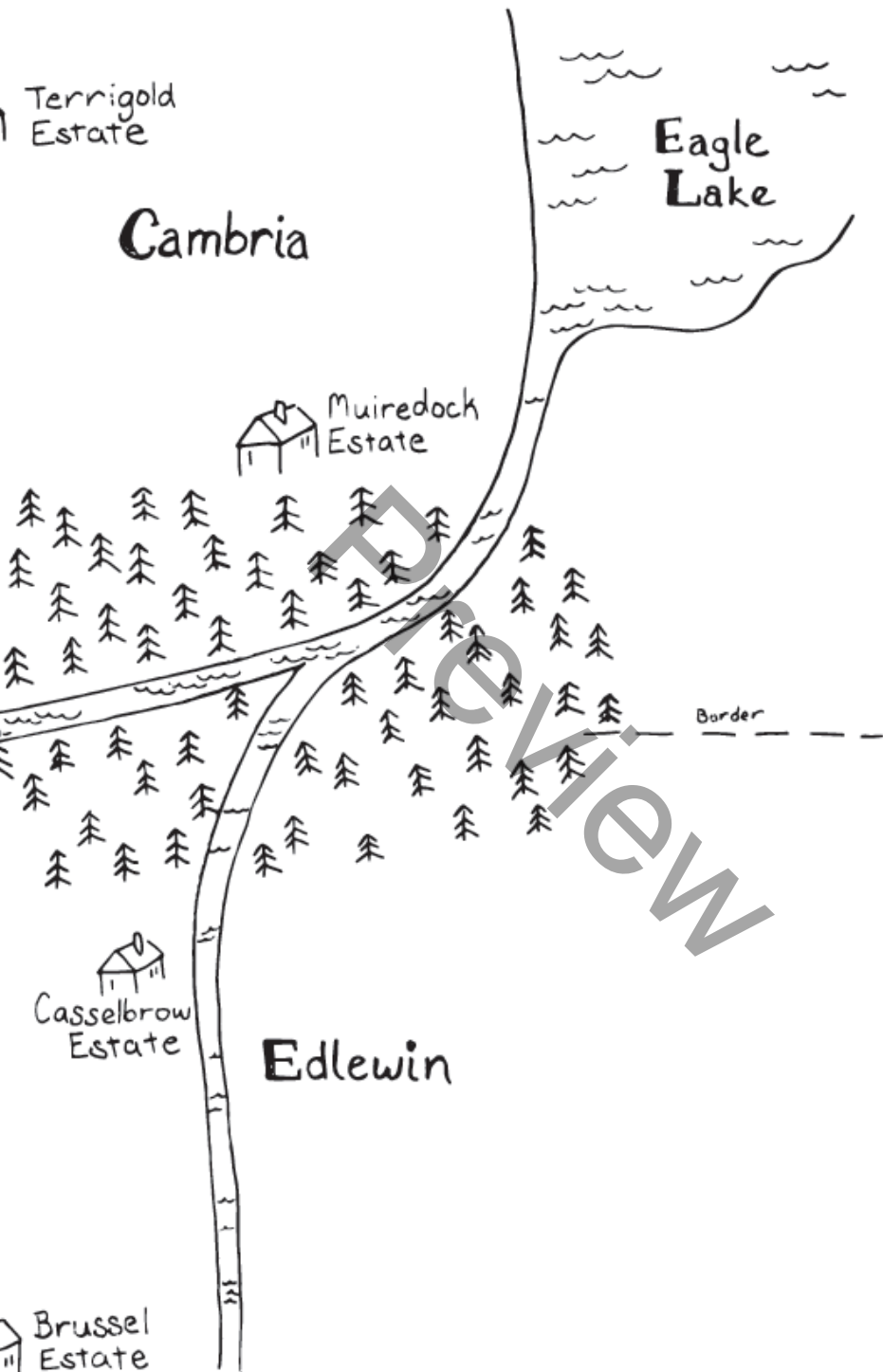
Muiredoch Estate

Border

Casselbrow Estate

Edlewin

Brussel Estate



Preview

Prologue

Eleven-year-old Eden gazed along the dirt road as her horse-drawn wagon brought her closer to the country estate of Cambria. To her right, farmers and hired laborers plowed the soil with the help of their oxen. To her left, creamy-white sego lilies, red coneflowers, and golden-yellow sunflowers added intermittent splashes of color to the long blades of green and brown grasses. Further off, an expansive woodland proudly stretched the entire span of meadow, continuing for miles in either direction. She was on her way to live with her uncle Merik and three cousins. Recently orphaned, she had no other living relatives.

Pulling up to the cottage house, she was met by a tall, robust man with brawny shoulders. His face was weathered by years spent in the sun. She thought she detected kindness there. Eden felt a tentative surge of joy course through her—or was it just her emotions being silly? Her uncle helped her out of the wagon and hugged her. “So, you’ve come at last.” He turned to the fields and called out, “Children, come and greet your cousin.” Like field marmots, three faces popped up from beyond the rows of spindly yellow sunflowers. They ran toward the house, the oldest clearly besting his siblings. Eden felt her chest lurch a bit. Would they like her?

Her uncle introduced them. “Eden, meet Asher, Dain and Aleida.” He motioned them forward, and each one gave her a quick hug before backing off and looking to their father. “Go on, then,” he told them.

“You, too, Eden. Go on and stretch your legs.” They all ran off and she followed. “And Aleida, remember to tell her about the forest,” she heard her uncle’s trailing voice.

Aleida suddenly stopped behind the big house. A grand orchard scoured the backyard terrain. A vast array of fruit trees waved their branches in greeting. The boys ran ahead, forgetting about the girls.

“Let’s play here,” Aleida said. “We can talk and not be disturbed.” She took Eden by the hand and began prancing down the first row. Eden skipped alongside her new friend, looking on in admiration at what looked to be pear trees.

“They are not ripe. Otherwise, I would offer you one. Father says you are to live with us now. We are not allowed to enter the forest, by the way. You have to know that.”

“The big forest? The one in front of your house?”

Aleida nodded. “Yes. We can go as far as the meadow, but no farther.”

“Please, let us go see the meadow,” Eden begged. “From the road, the wildflowers had called out to me to investigate.” She didn’t add that the green and brown grasses had promised a soft bed to lie in and daydream. Aleida gave her consent, secretly amused that her cousin had asked her permission. Holding back a satisfied smile, she raced around the house and sped toward the meadow, Eden on her heels.

They ran until tall grasses rose up to meet them, cheerfully swaying their lithe frames against the girls’ linsey-woolsey skirts. Lovely hues of yellow, white and red graced the wide landscape. Eden bent over a coneflower and counted its petals.

“Frustrating, isn’t it?”

Eden’s head came up. “What is?”

“Boys, of course! They can do whatever they want. They can go into the forest. And just wait until they get older.”

“What’ll happen when they get older?” Eden asked, dividing her interest between the flower and her friend.

“Well, they will go to parties, learn combat, and maybe even go to war. And—”

“I wouldn’t want to go to war.” Eden plucked the flower and began twirling it between her pointer finger and thumb.

“Let me finish. And participate in hunting excursions—”

“That sounds interesting.”

“And become apprentices in all sorts of trades.”

“Do you wish you were a boy?”

“No, nothing so extreme. I just want to experience a little of what they experience. You know, go on an adventure!” When Eden said nothing, Aleida pressed, “What about you? Are you jealous of boys?”

Eden thought for a moment. “I don’t think so,” she said slowly. “I don’t know many boys. I wouldn’t know what to be jealous of. I mean, I want to have fun, of course, but I’m too scared to go on an adventure alone.”

“But you’d get to meet new people. See new worlds.”

Eden nodded demurely. She did not say that she was already meeting new people and seeing new places.

“Oh, you funny girl! I can see there’s no getting through to you. Come on! Let’s have our own adventure.”

Eden watched as Aleida began picking several sego lilies. “Let’s make flower crowns.”

“Oh yes, let’s!” Eden said eagerly, springing into action.

“And we’ll be fairies.”

“Meadow fairies,” added Eden, exuberantly.

“Yes. Now let’s hurry and tie these flowers together so we can begin.”

With much anticipation, the girls quieted and began their task, each in a hurry to finish her crown first.

“Done!” Aleida said, triumphantly. “I am Devona, and you are Melinda.”

Eden didn’t mind being called Melinda. “We are beautiful!”

“Yes, and as meadow fairies, we fly around the meadow. Follow me!” Aleida frolicked and pranced through the grass, reminding Eden more of a horse than a fairy. “Come on, Melinda!”

Eden skipped and bounced, giggling and spreading her arms out wide.

Aleida paused. She put her palms on her cheeks in pretend worry. “Oh dear, the hunter is coming!”

“Who’s that?”

“He hunts fairies. Hurry! We must choose an animal to turn into.”

“Don’t hunters hunt animals?” Eden queried, stopping the game in her confusion.

“I said ‘he hunts fairies!’”

“Why would he do that?”

“To take our magic, of course. Now hurry and pick your animal. I’m turning into a blue heron.” She made a swooshing noise and spun around three times. “There. I’m safe.” She turned to Eden, disapprovingly. “Your turn! Quick!”

“I’ll become a—”

“Oh no, Melinda, he’s got you! Hands behind your back because you’re his prisoner.”

“But I was going to be an owl,” Eden said.

Aleida smiled mischievously. “You can still be an owl.”

“How?”

“When I come to save you. He’ll lock you up somewhere and go away to hunt some more.”

“But doesn’t he want my magic?”

“Shh! Don’t remind him!” Aleida put a finger to her lips.

Eden nodded. “Hurry Devona! Come and rescue me!”

“I’m coming.” Aleida pretended to fly gracefully over to where Eden sat pretending to struggle against her bonds.

“I think he’s coming back, Devona!”

“Yes. Hold on. I have to turn back into my fairy form to save you.” Aleida spun around twice this time. “Done.” She turned her head, a gasp of horror on her face. “Oh no, Eden—I mean, Melinda. The hunter has captured me, too!”

“Aleida! That is not how the story goes.”

“Of course, it is. Why not?”

“Because if we’re both captured, who’s going to rescue us? How do we get free?”

“I don’t know, Melinda,” Aleida said soberly, still in character. “We have to be smart and come up with a plan.”

“Why can’t we use our magic?”

“We can,” Aleida decided, grandly. “What do you propose?”

Eden hunkered down and pretended to think. In truth, she was thinking already, but she exaggerated her posture to impress her cousin with her acting skills. An idea rose to the surface of her mind. “I could sing to him. My voice can put a person into a trance. That is my magic.”

“Well done, Eden!” Aleida praised, clapping her hands. “You, clever mind. Now, sing. Let me hear your song.”

Eden pondered her new dilemma. How would she make up a song?

“Eden—I mean, Melinda, hurry! He could be dangerous. Sing him your song!”

Unsure of any real meaning of what she was about to say, Eden opened her mouth and sang:

*“You big giant fiend, I know you are monstrous.
You want our magic,
But my song will make you as gentle as a mare.”*

She hoped mares were gentle. In truth, she had no idea. She had never ridden one. Waving her arms this way and that, she made swooshing and swishing sounds as Aleida had done.

Aleida clapped her hands. “We are saved! We are saved!”

The girls spent every spare moment together. One afternoon, they decided to spy on the boys. While they were creeping past her uncle’s library, they heard noises within.

“What are you going to do about the girl?”

“She doesn’t know anything.” It was Uncle Merek’s voice.

“When she is married, she will inherit everything.”

“We have a few years before that becomes a problem.”

“What happens if she finds out about the will?”

“Who else knows about it? Who will tell her? It’s just you and me, right?”

“And the books. It’s in the books. If she were to seek out the information, she could find it for herself.”

“And why would she question whose property this is?”

“I don’t know. What I do know is that these things have a way of getting out. You could lose everything you have built.”

“Agreed. I will think on it.”

The girls looked at each other, and Aleida beckoned Eden with her hand to follow her outside. They tiptoed to the end of the corridor and out a side door. The warm sun greeted them, and Eden almost wanted to forget what she had just heard. If she could trust her intuition, she almost thought they were talking about *her*. But why would they speak of her? Would she inherit something when she was married?

Aleida pranced to a standing maple that was a couple of yards off from the well. It had become their thinking place. She plopped down under it. Eden followed suit, absentmindedly. She wanted to know which girl her uncle was speaking of.

“Who do you think they were talking about?” Aleida asked excitedly.

Eden wanted to say, “me.” “I don’t know,” she said instead. “Who do you think it is?”

“It could be the daughter of the other man in the room,” Aleida offered.

“I don’t think so. The other man was trying to help your father.”

“I hope my father is not in some kind of trouble.”

Eden raised her head from staring at the patches of weeds. Might her uncle be in trouble? She hadn’t considered that. “I hope he’s not in trouble either.” And just like that Eden shifted her thoughts from herself to her uncle.

“Yes,” Aleida conceded. “But, who is this mystery girl?”

“It might be me,” Eden found herself saying, picking at the grass. She hoped it wasn’t. She didn’t want her uncle to experience trouble because of her.

“You? You only just arrived. You need a family. That is all. What else is there?”

Eden felt unaccountably uncomfortable. “My parents died of some sickness. We lived on another estate far away from this one. It’s just

me now. Your father—my uncle—is my closest living relative. That is all I know. Like you said, I need a family. You are my family and I am grateful. Oh, please, let us forget about what we heard in there.”

“Very well,” Aleida said, always enjoying the feeling of being in charge. “Then I shall tell you what my brothers are planning two days from now.”

Eden eagerly leaned in. “What? Oh, do share!”

“Okay, but it is nothing we are invited to so don’t get too excited.” Even as Aleida said this, her face turned scheming. She clasped her hands together. “They are going to a secret bonfire!”

“A secret bonfire? You mean my uncle doesn’t know?”

“No, nothing like that. I just added the word ‘secret’ to make it sound delicious. It is taking place on the estate that neighbors ours. There will be lots of boys!”

Eden thought about such an event. She wished she could go if nothing more than to see what boys did.

“They are older boys. Mature boys!”

Eden could tell Aleida was working herself up.

“I think we should go!”

“Go? I thought you said we weren’t invited.”

“So? Let’s go anyway and spy on them!”

Eden looked off toward the meadow and the looming, ever present forest beyond it. She couldn’t help but feel that going to this bonfire would be like entering the forest. Perhaps she should follow Aleida’s lead and disobey the rules just this once. Surely this would be the wildest adventure she had ever been on!

That evening when Eden joined her uncle’s table for dinner, she felt a seed of belonging take root. She sat next to Aleida and across from Dain. Aleida sat on her father’s right. Asher sat next to his brother.

As the meal of venison stew was served with thick potatoes and sweet carrots, she watched her uncle carefully. He would begin with what she had come to realize was the family ritual. He would ask every one of his children about their day’s activities, starting with his eldest and ending with her. It made her proud to be a part of the family conversation even though she wasn’t always sure of what to say. She

was still new to everything. What she did know was that her uncle admired competency and roles. Everyone had a role that they were expected to excel in.

Uncle Merek looked solemnly around the table. "Let's bow our heads and thank the Creator for our bounty." Everyone bowed and he thanked God for life, health, labor, and reward. Eden thought it was a serious prayer. Her uncle was a no-nonsense type of person.

Turning to his eldest, he said, "Asher, tell me about your day."

What was funny about this statement was that Uncle Merek knew about most of what occurred on Muiredock estate, and the things he did not know about, he did not care to hear. If the children were learning, working and being productive in some way, he wanted to hear about that. If they spoke to him of games, idleness, and leisure time, he would wave his hand in the air and say, "Save some for yourself. I don't need to hear it all."

Asher sat up straighter. He had a prominent brow inherited from his father. "Dain and I learned our lessons in the morning. Then we went hunting in the forest with you. I really liked fashioning objects out of the wood we brought back with us. I cannot wait to begin making furniture tomorrow, Father." The boys were always doing projects with Uncle Merek, though Eden wasn't sure it was accurate to call Asher a boy. His sixteen years to her eleven made him quite grown up to her.

Uncle Merek nodded. "Is there anything you would like to add, my boy?" The question was directed to his other son, Dain. A mite skinnier than Asher, Dain smiled boyishly, his dimples appearing in full sight. His smooth skin made him appear more boy than man, though at fourteen he was slowly becoming like his brother. "I am looking forward to the bonfire, Father." His father raised a quizzical brow, so Dain continued. "I appreciate the riding lessons you've arranged for us. Now our shame can be taken away from among our friends." His voice turned theatrical, and Eden covered a grin. It hadn't taken her long to realize that Dain was the mischievous, light-hearted personality of the family.

Indeed, what he said was true for she had learned that Uncle Merek had little use for riding a horse, and if he had little use, then that meant his family had *no* use in it. Whenever the horses were out

of pasture, it was to hook them up to the wagon and go to market or pull something heavy. Other than that, Uncle Merek had seen no purpose in them. It had been Dain who had persuaded his father to let him learn to ride a horse. And if Dain were to learn, then Asher would certainly learn. Not Aleida and Eden.

Someday, Eden hoped. Someday she would learn to ride a horse. It sounded thrilling even if her uncle didn't see it that way. Sometimes she thought that his practical thinking was not only skewed but also got in the way of having fun and enjoying life.



A humongous bonfire crackled in the center of a dark meadow. The night air was cool. Eleven youths stood around in a circle. All adolescent boys. Some were roasting meat on skewers while a large wild pig lay roasting on a spit above the fire. Others were engaged in wrestling each other.

Aleida and Eden quietly snuck onto the scene and crouched in the shadows behind some bushes. Three boys walked right in front of them, laughing and talking merrily. Their hair was wet, and they had come from the direction of the river.

Horses neighed to their left, startling Eden, and she almost let out a cry. They neighed again, and she realized that they were the trusted mounts of the young fellows.

She turned her eyes on the four boys wrestling one another. Her eyes widened. Was this how they enjoyed themselves? By hurting one another? Or exhausting their strength until they could not stand up?

As she continued to watch the rough play, she thought she could admire their strength and grit. *They are competitive.*

A few other boys were huddled together while one stood apart and appeared to be reenacting a scene of conquest. He talked exuberantly and puffed out his chest as though he had scaled the highest mountain. His story was actually a tale of when he shot his first bull and gutted it with the help of his father. "I still have the cape," he was saying. Eden listened with intrigue and thought she might like such men when she got older. Maybe she could go hunting someday with one of them...if her uncle ever gave her permission to enter the forest.

A thought entered her mind. Would one of them be interested in her? Would he insist that they wrestle together?

She turned down her nose.

She certainly would not fight a boy. She would surely lose.

“When’s the real party going to start?”

Eden looked to the young man who had asked the question. His face lit in firelight was smooth, and he had the curliest brown hair on top of his head that abruptly straightened as it reached his neck. His brow was prominent. The tone of his voice conveyed impatience and eagerness for something.

What? What party? Eden looked at Aleida who was watching everything with keen interest.

“What are they talking about?” Eden whispered.

“Shhh. More people are arriving!” Aleida whispered back, her eyes wide with excitement.

“They are here!” shouted someone.

Just then a horse-drawn wagon arrived with five young women in tow.

Eden’s eyes widen as she stared at the young maidens. Eyes painted. Hooped earrings. Rouged cheeks. Intricately styled hair. Flowing skirts. They were a sight to behold and gave Eden a tiny premonition. Of what, she couldn’t be sure. Something was about to happen. Girls dressed like that did not meet boys without something in mind. But what would they do? And did Eden have to dress up like that to get a boy’s attention?

She studied the sashes and scarves clung to colorful costumes on the strange girls. They were beautiful with flawless skin and graceful poise. When each one stepped down from the wagon, Eden marveled at their proud heads and swaying hips as they shimmied their way to the center fire and awaiting youths.

Who were these young ladies?

Aleida groaned beside her.

“What?”

“I think we should go now.”

“Why? What’s going on?”

Aleida gritted her teeth. "It's Beatrice, Perla, and their friends. I don't like them. Dain and Asher have had them over to the estate a few times before you arrived. They are up to no good. I wonder who invited them."

"What do you mean?"

Aleida let out a short huff. "Only that they ruined an otherwise fun bonfire." She rumbled her linen dress in her hand.

Eden peered at the older girls, expectantly. They were probably six years older than her. A drumbeat began, and without ceremony, the young women began an upbeat, spirited dance around the fire.

Eden thought it looked lively and harmless enough until each one removed her scarf and tossed it to a boy. Eden stared wide-eyed. Ivory bosoms swelled and glistened in the firelight. Mysterious shadows danced off the girls' bodies and added bedazzlement to their movements. They dipped and twirled, swayed, and shimmied. The lads clapped and whistled in response. The pounding drum got louder. The women pulled up their dresses high and began exposing calves, knees, and thighs.

Eden swallowed hard and turned to Aleida.

"Can we go now?" her cousin asked.

Eden nodded, her face a stone. "Yes," she managed to squeak.

The drums got faster.

Eden didn't care. She stood and ran alongside Aleida, fleeing the scene and the noise behind her. She could still hear cheering and hollering. Once they cleared the bushes, she turned and took one last glance of the painted dancers running up to the boys and darting away back to the fire. Dain and Asher laughed along with the rest of the boys and smacked their lips in delight.

Eden turned and ran for home.

The next day, Aleida and Eden sat together under the maple tree.

"What did you think of last night, Aleida?"

Aleida picked at the grass. "I've seen those girls before. I don't like them." She crossed her arms. "I wish they would just go away and leave my brothers alone!"

"Have you ever seen girls dance like that?" Eden ventured cautiously.

“Of course not! When would I have seen that?”

“Are you done wanting to know what boys do for fun?”

“No!” Aleida’s eyes turned back to scheming. “Guess what I heard Asher tell Dain this morning?”

“What?” Eden leaned in, enjoying when her cousin got excited about something.

Aleida leaned back, suddenly feigning a casual air of indifference. “A secret meeting.”

“A secret meeting?”

“Hmm-hmm. And I plan on going to it. There will be a bonfire in broad daylight. It’s in three days. That is all I know.”

Eden put her hands on her hips. “Aleida, is it really a secret this time?”

“You bet it is! I heard the words ‘secret meeting’. There’s no escaping this one. We have to go.”

“We?”

“Of course, ‘we’! You and I are a team, Eden. A team! You hear me?”

She nodded, knowing there was no bowing out of this one. And funny enough, she wanted to tag along and see if there was more to see than what they saw yesterday.

Hopefully.

For Aleida’s sake.

And her own.

When the day of the secret meeting arrived, Aleida had everything planned out. They would wear capes to disguise their identities and then hide in the bushes while the boys gathered around the big fire. They would arrive early so no one would see them coming. It was a perfect plan, Aleida announced. Then they would get to see what boys did for fun when girls were absent!

Eden felt unsure and excited at the same time. If it weren’t for her friend, she wouldn’t dare venture onto the neighbor’s estate to spy on the boys. Boys who were several years beyond her tender eleven years and, in her opinion, qualified to be young men. But she did want to know what all the fuss was about. What did boys do aside from hunt,

learn a trade, and ride horses? What was their secret source of fun that she and her cousin were not privy to?

They sat waiting for an hour in their hiding place, offending branches clawing at her, making her constantly adjust her position.

“Quit that squirming. They’re coming!” Aleida hissed excitedly.

Sure enough, like moths attracted to firelight, six adolescent males met where Eden assumed was supposed to be the bonfire. Except there was no fire! Travel packs on their backs and bedding, they stood chatting while shuffling their feet, clearly anxious to begin something. But why were they dressed as though they were going to spend the night outdoors? While Eden wondered this, she took the opportunity to scrutinize the youths’ appearances. The beginnings of stubble were sketched across their faces. All of the six were lean and lanky. Full heads of hair and eyes that spoke of upcoming adventure, Eden felt her heart flutter as she soaked in their confident, free-spirited natures. Unbound. Unabated. Strong. Capable.

“When the others arrive, we can begin this tradition. Let’s see if we can get three this time.”

“Just remember, Connor, we cannot be detected. We must be ghosts.”

“Ghost’ is my second name, Micah. Whereas yours is ‘worrisome woman’.”

Some of the boys laughed at this.

“In all seriousness, fellas,” spoke the tallest male, his voice deeper than the others, “we must not deviate from the plan. Everyone knows their role. For most of you, this is your first test of manhood. Be smart about it.”

Dain and Asher arrived with two other boys and, without ceremony, all ten of them proceeded in the direction of the woods.

“Come on! We have to follow them!” Aleida whispered loudly, getting up to follow.

Eden grabbed her cousin’s wrist. “No! We are not allowed into the woods. Your father forbade it.”

“And shall we miss this opportunity? I think not! I’m going!”

“You do not have a pack, Aleida. Or bedding. It looks as though they are going in there to spend the night.”

“I’m going,” Aleida stared excitedly after the boys. “If you are so scared, go home. Just don’t tell my father where I am.” Upon saying that, she ran into the woods.

Eden spent the rest of the afternoon wondering what she would tell her uncle at dinner about the whereabouts of her cousin. She imagined her confession. *I’m sorry, Uncle, but Aleida ran into the woods because she wanted to know what boys do.* Even as she thought the words, she kept imagining what the boys could have meant by getting “three this time.” Were they really that exuberant about hunting? Was it really so wonderful? What did they like to hunt? Squirrels? Foxes? Deer?

She lay in the meadow staring up at the flawless blue sky, even as her mind took her into the woods, and she imagined all sorts of animals living within. Her eyes drifted closed, and she began to dream. She was in the woods. It was a magical place with sunshine pouring forth upon the forest floor like glittering ribbons of gold. Flowers, much like the ones in her meadow, grew tall and proud beside large trees that climbed up so very high to the sky. She looked up and saw glimpses of blue sky through the trees. Sighing contentedly, she walked among the heads of purple, orange and violet flowers, feeling swept away by the beauty of such a place.

A bird tweeted nearby, and Eden opened her eyes. Turning her head to the right and left she saw long blades of grass at eye level. Oh yes, it was just a dream.

Aleida returned to the house just before dinner and found Eden setting the table in the dining hall. “I followed them for hours! They never paused in their trajectory. Not even for a scampering rabbit in their path. They are going north. Other than that, I don’t know what they are doing. I do know that I am tired. I shall eat something and retire to bed immediately.”

“What of your clothes? You are filthy, Aleida.”

“And hurting, too.” She rubbed her calves. “Look. Look here.” She pulled up her frock, and Eden gasped. Aleida’s legs were marred with scratches everywhere. “My arms, too.” She pulled back her sleeves. “I feel so miserable I could cry.”

Eden put her arms around her. “I’m sorry.”

Aleida sniffed. “Oh, never mind. Let them have their adventure. I am done with them. Let us be merry as though we had never given boys a second thought.”

So it was. Aleida never again expressed interest in finding out what boys did.

Preview