

# Chapter One

I never told the boys I saw their daddy leave that night.

I was outside getting the mail for Mama. I was supposed to check the mailbox when I got off the bus in the afternoon, but it was the last day of sixth grade, and I was so excited to be free for the summer that I'd completely forgot about the mail. It was always just bills, anyway. There was never anything for me except on my birthday or at Christmas, when Mamaw and Papaw sent me cards in brightly colored envelopes. Mama was insistent that I always check the mailbox, though. She said those bills I thought were so boring were important — that's how we kept the lights on.

But I'd forgotten that day, so when she looked on the coffee table and saw there was nothing there, she asked, "Nola Baby, did you get the mail?"

It was late — already past nine — but since it was the last day of school and all, Mama had agreed to let me stay up until eleven. So I was sitting on the couch eating a big bowl of strawberry ice cream and watching Cartoon Network. "Um . . .," I said. "I think I forgot."

"Well, go check for me now, okay?"

"I'm eating," I whined.

"It takes all of three seconds to go out there, open the box, and come back," she said. "Your ice cream won't melt."

I sighed, all heavy and dramatic — the sigh that always made Mama say things like "Lord help me, I'm about to have a teenager on my hands." She still had eleven months before that happened, though, so I didn't know what she was talking about. What did my sighs have to do with being a teenager? My friend Brian was a teenager, and I never heard him sigh.

I went outside, barefoot, in my T-shirt and shorts. The concrete was warm, even though the sun had set. My teachers in elementary school said that May was still technically spring, but it might as well be summer in

Besser County. It had been in the nineties all week, and even at night the humidity was so bad it made my ponytail frizz into a big brown pouf the second I stepped outside.

Mr. Swift was already in his car with the engine running as I made my way down the driveway. Even though we lived in a duplex — which is basically two houses smushed together into one, but separated by a wall on the inside so two families could live there — we didn't share a driveway. Mama and I had one leading to our side of the house and the Swifts had one leading to theirs. But they were still close enough to each other, only our front walks and some grass between them. Mr. Swift started backing down his driveway just as I opened the mailbox.

There was nothing in it, so it had been a wasted trip. I shut the little door and looked up. Mr. Swift's car — a silver Saturn — was turning onto the road. I figured he was running an errand, like going to the grocery or the hardware store or something. I guess I should have realized that most places were already closed. Our tiny little town shut down at about eight every night. But I didn't think much of it, seeing him leaving.

I waved.

And he waved back.

I found out later that was more of a good-bye than his boys ever got.

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Everything had been fine earlier that day. Canaan and I had been whooping and hollering when we got off the bus. Kevin was behind us, jabbering about something. Kevin was *always* jabbering about something. Brian hadn't ridden the bus home, though. Middle school graduation was earlier that day. Anyway, we'd gotten out of class to watch the ceremony, which didn't involve ugly caps and gowns like the high school graduation did. Afterwards, Brian had gone home with his friend Ty, who was having some party for all the graduating eighth graders at his house.

"Hey," Canaan said to Kevin and me as the bus pulled away. "Did you notice Teddy Ryan wasn't on the bus today?"

All three of us automatically looked down the street toward Teddy Ryan's house. His parents' car wasn't in the driveway.

“Can we?” Kevin asked, bouncing up and down beside me. He was short for a third grader. Even on his tiptoes, the top of his head barely reached my chin. “Please? Can we? Can we?”

“I don’t know,” I said, glancing at Canaan. “What about looking for jobs?”

The boys and I had a lot of saving to do that summer. Mama had said she’d take us to Wheaton Brothers Traveling Circus at the beginning of August, but only if we could earn the money to pay for our own tickets. It was the first time the circus had come anywhere near our town in five years, and we *had* to go. Our parents had taken us the last time, when Canaan and me were seven, and it had been amazing, the best time the boys and I had ever had together. We’d even gotten to ride a real elephant. Kevin was too little to remember it all, which was just more reason to go this year.

Tickets were forty dollars apiece, though. It would take a lot of lawn mowing and dog walking to earn that much over the summer. We needed to start setting up jobs now.

“We can do that tomorrow,” Canaan said, wiping

sweat off his forehead. The ends of his light brown hair were wet and curling around his face. “We got time.”

“Well . . . all right. But we have to start first thing.”

“We will.” Canaan grinned at me. He had a little gap between his two front teeth that always made me want to smile back at him. “Let’s dump our stuff inside. We’ll meet back here in five minutes.”

“Yes, yes, yes!” Kevin cheered as he and Canaan took off running for their front door.

I pulled my house key out of my back pocket. Mama wouldn’t be home for a few hours. It was all right, though. The boys’ mama, Mrs. Swift, always checked in on me. She wasn’t quite a babysitter — I was no baby — but sometimes it was nice knowing there was a grown-up next door if I needed anything while Mama was at work.

I tossed my backpack in my room and grabbed three Popsicles from the freezer. When I went back outside to meet Canaan and Kevin, I gave each of them one.

“Blue!” Kevin said. “That’s my favorite color, you know. All the best things are blue. The ocean. The sky. Luke Skywalker’s lightsaber. Have you seen *Star Wars* yet, Nola? Daddy made me watch all of them. They’re my favorite movies.”

“We know,” Canaan said. “You tell us every day.”

Kevin was eight. Being so much younger than us, I know Canaan wanted to ditch him most of the time. Especially because Kevin had a habit of talking way too much and repeating himself. But I liked him. It was hard not to smile when you were around someone like Kevin. Well, at least for me. I think siblings are excluded from that rule. Not that I'd know. I'm an only child.

After we finished our Popsicles, Canaan led the way through three of our neighbors' backyards, darting around bushes and behind swing sets until we reached the wooden fence around the Ryans' yard.

We didn't like the Ryans too much. They moved into the subdivision three years ago, and the first thing they did was build a fence. No one else had a fence. We all played in each others' backyards. We drew on each others' sidewalks with colored chalk and used each others' jungle gyms. No one seemed to care. But I guess the Ryans cared because they put up a fence, and then a trampoline.

They were the only family in the subdivision with a trampoline. And I think every kid in the neighborhood was jealous.

Canaan and I tried to make friends with their son, Teddy, at first. We figured if we were friends with him, he'd let us in the fence to play on his trampoline. But Teddy was kinda weird. He was only a year younger than Canaan and me, but you'd think he was much younger by the way he acted. We'd caught him picking his nose a few times, and he was always staring at us. A couple months ago he stuck gum in my hair on the bus. I cried when Mama had to cut it out. I'd been wanting to grow my hair long forever, but thanks to Teddy Ryan, it was above my shoulders again.

So the whole idea of being friends with him hadn't worked out so well.

But that was okay because we had another way to play on his trampoline. Couple years ago, we found a loose board in their fence. You had to know exactly where it was, but if you could find it, and you pushed on it, it would swing up. There was just enough space for Canaan, Kevin, and me to crawl through, one at a time. Not Brian, though. He'd gotten too big in the last year or so. His shoulders always got stuck now.

Every time we saw that Teddy and his parents weren't home, we'd sneak over and push the loose board. We

never told none of the other kids in the neighborhood about it. Not even our friend Felicia. It was our little secret, the boys' and mine.

Canaan ran his hand across the fence planks until he found the right one. He pushed and it swung up. He let me crawl through first, then Kevin, before he followed.

“What should we play?” I asked, hoisting myself onto the trampoline, then holding out a hand to help Kevin up.

“Popcorn!” Kevin exclaimed. “Please, please, please Popcorn. I love Popcorn. The food *and* the game, but since we’re on the trampoline, I mean the game. Can we please play Popcorn?”

“All right,” Canaan groaned, climbing onto the trampoline with us. He was tall — the tallest boy in our class — so it was a piece of cake for him. “We get it — Popcorn. But Nola gets to be the kernel first.”

“Why?” Kevin asked.

“Because you always go first,” I said, tapping him playfully on the top of the head. His blond hair was sticking up in every direction. He had too much of it to even bother keeping it neat. It wasn’t that it was long. It was just real thick, like his mama’s.

He grinned at me. "Okay. But I'm next."

I crawled to the center of the trampoline and sat down, wrapping my arms around my knees as tight as I could, making myself into a little ball.

"Ready?" Canaan asked. He and Kevin were standing on opposite sides of me.

"Ready," I said.

Then the boys started jumping and I started bouncing. I laughed, my hands gripping my elbows. I was determined to last as long as I could. Once I popped, it would be Canaan's or Kevin's turn. I could go again in a few minutes, but I was determined to beat my record.

"One . . . two . . . three . . .," Canaan and Kevin shouted with each bounce.

The longest I'd ever lasted was fifteen bounces. It was pathetic compared to Canaan, who could go all the way up to thirty. But it seemed like Canaan was the best at everything he tried. He'd been the fastest boy in the sixth grade, he was always the last one standing when our gym teacher made us play dodgeball, and when we played basketball with some of the other kids in the neighborhood, he always won, even though there were older kids who played, too.

Not like me. I was short and a little on the chubby side, definitely not too athletic. But Canaan didn't seem to notice. He still picked me first for his team, whatever game we were playing. He didn't mind if I slowed him down.

“. . . ten . . . eleven . . .”

I started laughing with my face pressed against my knees. It was a nervous laugh, though. I was so close to my record, but Canaan and Kevin were jumping higher and higher, tossing me around in the middle of the trampoline.

I ended up popping at thirteen.

“Shoot,” I groaned, throwing myself onto my back as the boys quit jumping.

“You'll get it next time, Nola,” Kevin said. “Now move. It's my turn.”

“Say 'please,' Kevin,” Canaan scolded. “You know Mama doesn't like it when you're bossy.”

This made me snort out loud. “You're one to talk. You're about the bossiest person I know, Canaan Swift.”

“Yeah, but he's eight,” Canaan said. “It's different.”

“Whatever you say.” I sat up and got to my feet, letting Kevin take his place in the middle.

We played for a couple of hours, but I never beat my record. Canaan made it all the way up to forty bounces, though. Then, all too soon, Kevin froze. “Alert! Alert!” he said in a robot voice. The Ryans’ car was pulling into their driveway.

“Uh-oh,” Canaan said, jumping off the trampoline and landing in a crouch. “Come on, y’all. We better hurry.”

Kevin and I scrambled down and ran for the fence. Once we were through, we stayed close to the planks, holding our breath. The Ryans were carrying in groceries, and we had to wait until they were inside before we could move, or else they’d spot us running out of their yard.

When their front door finally shut for good, Canaan whispered, “Go!”

We took off back across our neighbors’ lawns, laughing as we ran. Canaan had to slow down so Kevin and me could keep up.

When we got back to the duplex, Mrs. Swift was sitting in a folding chair in the backyard, drinking sweet tea from a mason jar and reading a magazine. She looked

up at us and smiled as we came to a stop in front of her, panting like thirsty dogs. “Where’ve y’all been?” she asked.

“Down the street,” Canaan said. She didn’t know we snuck into the Ryans’ yard. Whenever we told our parents “down the street,” they just figured we were playing with some of the other kids in the subdivision. There were lots of us, after all.

“Is Brian back?” I asked.

“Yep. Just picked him up from Ty’s. He’s inside.” She held up a hand, stopping us before we could take off for the front door. “Wait, wait. Canaan, you need to clean your room.”

“I will.”

“No, you need to clean it now. I know if I let you wait until this evening, you’ll put it off until it’s time for bed.”

“I won’t.”

“You always do,” Kevin chimed. “Mama told you to clean it yesterday, remember? But you said you’d just act like you had other stuff to do until it was bedtime and then —”

I planted a hand over Kevin's mouth. The look on Canaan's face made me think he might try to kill his brother in a minute.

Mrs. Swift just grinned, though. She had the same red cheeks and giant smile as Kevin. "Clean your room, Canaan," she said. "Nola can stay for an hour. After that, you need to get to work. It's starting to stink in there."

She wasn't lying, either. Once we were inside, we headed straight for Kevin and Canaan's room. It smelled like a mix of popcorn and dirty clothes. But they didn't seem bothered by it.

Brian had his own room, but it was tiny, and the Xbox was in his little brothers' room, so he was in there most of the time, anyway. Right then, he was sitting on the floor with a controller in his hand. He looked up when we came in. "Hey," he said, reaching up to adjust his glasses.

"How was the party?" I asked, sitting down on the carpet next to him.

"All right," he said. "Loud, though. I don't see the point in having music so loud you can't hear other people talking to you. It kind of gave me a headache."

“Were there girls?” Canaan asked, plopping down on his bed. Kevin sat next to him.

“Yeah.”

“Did you kiss any of them?” Kevin asked. Lately, he’d been obsessed with kissing. He’d been asking everyone who they’d kissed and where and why. Last week, he asked me if I’d ever kissed Canaan. Of course we hadn’t, but I had to admit, all his kissing questions had me thinking about that kinda stuff, too.

I looked at Brian, really staring at his face. Had he ever kissed a girl? Would I be able to tell if he had? Like, would he look different somehow? Right now, he mostly just looked like Canaan — tall with long arms and legs, light brown hair, and green eyes. Only he had glasses and no gap between his teeth. If he kissed a girl, would he suddenly start looking older? Would he get a mustache like Mr. Swift?

The thing is, I knew he’d tell me if he had. Even if he didn’t tell Canaan and Kevin. At least, he would if I asked. Brian didn’t get embarrassed easily or upset about much. I knew I could always ask him questions about older kids, even about personal stuff. Like kissing.

“No,” he said. “I didn’t kiss anyone.”

“Why not?” Kevin asked. “Did none of them wanna kiss you?”

“Stop being weird,” Canaan said. “Hey, Brian, can you put in another game? Nola can only stay another hour, so let’s play something where we all get a turn.”

Brian passed me the other controller and switched the game. We played for a while, just sitting around laughing and talking. I lost every single game we played, but I didn’t really care. I never did. I was just happy to be with them, even in Canaan’s smelly room.

That’s how I expected the whole summer to be. It’s how every summer before had been. Me and the Swift brothers spent every day together. We were always playing and laughing. Only this summer would be even better because we’d go to the circus before school started, just like we had when we were little. All of our summers were great, but this would be the best we’d ever had.

I had no idea that later that night, when I watched Mr. Swift pull out of the driveway, it meant everything was about to change. Forever.

# Two Summers Ago

*Canaan and me were sitting on my front steps when two boys who lived down the street, Andy and Peter, pulled up on their bikes, hollering at us. Well, just at Canaan.*

*“We’re gonna play kickball at the playground,” Peter yelled. “You wanna come?”*

*“Sure.” Canaan stood up and hopped down the steps. “Come on, Nola.”*

*I was about to stand up when Andy groaned. “Not her. She ain’t no good. And she’s slow. She can stay here.”*

*I bit my lip and tried not to cry. I cried too easy, and it wasn’t like this was anything new. Andy and Peter had always been mean boys. The kind who pushed the littler kids around and knocked over swing sets at night. I sat back down and wrapped my arms around my knees.*

*“I ain’t going if Nola can’t come,” Canaan said, sitting right back down beside me.*

*“Why?” Peter asked. “She your girlfriend?” He and Andy started singing as they rode away. “Canaan and Nola, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G.”*

*“You don’t gotta stay,” I told Canaan. “If you wanna go, you can.”*

*But he shook his head. "I don't go nowhere you can't go. Besides, it wouldn't have been fun without you there. I'd rather stay here."*

*"You're just saying that."*

*"Am not. I mean it. You're way more fun than they are. That's why you're my best friend. And why I ain't going with them if you're not invited."*

*I couldn't help smiling. "Thanks, Canaan."*

*He shrugged, like it was nothing at all. Then he grabbed my hand and stood up, pulling me along with him. "Now come on. Let's go see if Mrs. Santos will let us play with her dog."*

*"All right."*

*We took off running down the street, and even though I couldn't keep up with him, he didn't mind slowing down, just as long as we could stick together.*