

They passed a sign on the state highway that said, "Welcome to Vermont: Where magic happens." There hadn't been much to see since in the mid-afternoon.

The steering wheel jerked to the side and white smoke poured out the front wheel well. The smoke filled the sky, and the wind blew just right to block the view of the road.

"Damn it!" Abby said, wrestling the steering. Unable to control the box truck, it kicked back and forth with the last of the family furniture tumbling in the back.

She tensed her arms as she tapped the brakes. A burnt rubber smell filled the cab.

In the passenger seat, Rachel pulled the collar of her t-shirt up to cover her nose.

Abby held the steering wheel as it jerked, fighting the flopping remnant of a tire on the front driver's side.

"I told that damn salesman!" Abby yelled as she brought the truck to a stop on the shoulder of the two-lane highway.

"Well, this is just great," Rachel shouted above the pounding of her ear buds. She propped her legs on the dashboard, leaned back, and rolled her eyes.

Abby rifled through her bag, flipping through unreturned library books from Ohio before pulling out her wallet.

"It better be in here," she said.

Rachel looked over, and plopped one earbud out. "What're you looking for?"

"My triple-A card. I swear I put it in here."

"I told you you were going too fast," Rachel said.

Abby glanced at her daughter, shook her head, and continued searching her

wallet.

"A ha!" she said, holding a white, rectangular card up to her own satisfaction.

After punching numbers on the phone and listening for a moment, Abby's brow furrowed. Holding it at arm's length, she looked at Rachel, who removed the other ear bud.

"What is it?" Rachel said.

Abby pushed a button on the phone, setting it to speakerphone. The voice on the other line was the standard, monotone, nonthreatening, digital female voice that told you a call couldn't be completed. But the message was anything but standard.

We're sorry. Your call can not be completed at this time. You should have thought of that before you moved to Vermont.

The mother and daughter looked at each other as the message repeated, until Abby silenced it with the push of a button. She stared at the phone in disbelief. Was there really no cell phone service, in all of Vermont? Maybe there were some cell towers closer to Rutland. Yes, there must be cell towers closer to the city. She used her cell phone when they were shopping for at houses, right?

"Now what?" Rachel asked.

Abby saw her daughter was more concerned about the lack of a mobile internet than their current predicament.

"We could wait for another car. Maybe someone else will have better luck with a phone."

"I haven't seen any cars since the state line," Rachel said.

"Yeah, nice and quiet. One of my favorite things about Vermont," Abby said.

Rachel bit her bottom lip and turned to look out the window.

Abby watched her teenage daughter, who was soon to be heading to college. She looked ahead at the desolate road, framed on either side by trees, nothing but trees. It was beautiful.

"There was a sign back a bit for a convenience store, wasn't there?"

Rachel shrugged.

"It can't be too far of a walk."

Rachel turned to face her mom, rolling her eyes again. "Oh, I just *love* Vermont already."

"This is a convenience store?" Rachel said as her shoulders dropped. She stared, mouth open, at the old stone building. It resembled more of a medieval castle than a store.

"I bet the workers are super nice," Abby said in her usual way-too-positive tone, but she was starting to feel it: doubt, fear. She had felt it before, when they looked at the house a few months ago. Something seemed, well, different. She couldn't put her finger on it.

The building was rough stone, with pillars on either side of the main entrance.

"It looks more like a castle," Rachel said.

"He's probably at the house already," Abby said, surveying the building. Her smile sank, but she consciously propped it up. "I'm sure they have a tow truck or know

someone who can help with the tire."

"They might have carriage wheels," Rachel mumbled.

Abby shot her a quick disgusted look, then returned to her manufactured smile.

Inside, the man behind the counter greeted them.

"Hello there!" he said, waving his hand in a big circle.

"What the hell is he wearing?" Rachel whispered.

"It's just different. You'll get used to it," Abby whispered back.

"Good day to ya!" the man behind the counter said, his voice echoing through the empty aisles.

Oil lamps anchored to the stone walls lit the store in orange and projected dancing shadows in the warm, subdued glow.

The man stood behind a cash register made of metal, a rusty throwback to the days before Edison and Tesla. He wore a black top hat and brown calf-length frock coat. He propped his right arm on the cash register. Catching his eye, Abby forced a smile, though she knew her puzzled look shone through. The mother and daughter approached the counter, passing through aisles containing several varying sized tin cans of spotted dick and an entire aisle of baked bean products. Rachel pulled a box from the lower rack.

"Instant baked beans and toast?" She showed it to Abby, and the two of them exchanged bewildered looks. Abby shrugged, and they walked to the counter.

The man adjusted his top hat and stroked a long strip of hair that ran ear to ear under his chin. He eyed the family for a moment.

"I get the ideer you aren't locals," he said, with a quick point of his finger. He

leaned forward with a casual smile.

"No, no we aren't," Abby said.

The man behind the counter laughed a hearty, booming laugh. Abby and Rachel snuck glances at each other. Abby shrugged.

"Lemme guess," the man said. "Ohier?" He flicked his pointer finger through the air again.

"Oh, oh, yes. Ohio. Yes, we're from Ohio," Abby said.

"We don't get many out-of-towners here," the man said, still smiling. His eyes shifted back and forth between the two.

"The name's Chadwick, Chadwick Billingsley," the clerk said, extending his hand. Rachel stuck out her hand, and Chadwick shook with vigor.

"Rachel."

Chadwick, still shaking hands, moved his gaze to Abby.

"I'm Abby," she interjected.

He let Rachel's hand go and gave Abby's hand an intense shake.

"Pleased to meet you. What brings you folks out to Vermahn?"

"What?" Abby asked.

"Vermahn. You know you're in Vermahn, don't ya?"

"Oh. *Vermont*."

"Why are ye folks here in our fair state from Ohier?"

"We're moving here," Abby said.

Chadwick yelled to the back of the store.

"Scottrick! Scottrick, where are ye?"

"Aye, aye. I'm coming. Hold yer horses," a voice echoed, bouncing through the building like the dancing shadows.

Another man emerged through one of the aisles wearing a round-top felt hat with a wool coat over a vest and a wide tie. He studied Abby and Rachel as he twisted one end of his handlebar mustache.

"These folks tell me they're moving to Vermahn," Chadwick said.

Scottrick took a step back, and raised his eyebrows.

"Is 'at right?" he said, and he leaned forward, grabbing Abby's hand with both of his and shaking vigorously. He did the same with Rachel's, with a big smile spread across his face. "I can't remember the last time we had anyone immigrate to our good state."

"We have a lot of people pass through," Chadwick said. "And we have a lot of people move away."

Scottrick dropped his smile and shot a glance at Chadwick. Chadwick stepped back, grabbed a rag from next to the cash register, and began wiping the counter.

"Forgive Chadwick. He's a bit bitter when people leave here. You know, the whole grass is greener ideer."

Abby spoke up, "We, um, our tire. It went out on us on the highway."

"A big moving truck, I take it," Chadwick said.

"Aye, that's quite a mess you're in," Scottrick said. "Whereabouts are ye heading?"

"Rutland," Abby said.

"Ah, Rutland. Nice town, if you ask me," Chadwick said, and he looked at

Scottrick. Rachel thought she saw something strange in the look, something suspicious.

She took out her smartphone and tapped on the screen. Holding the phone in the air, she asked, "You don't have WiFi?"

Scottrick's eyes met Chadwick's again. Chadwick shrugged. Rachel let out a long, growling sigh, and slid the phone back in her pocket.

Abby cleared her throat, then said, "About that tire?"

"Aye, rightey-oh," Scottrick said. He took a short skip step and tipped his hat to the two as he walked out the front door. Abby and Rachel followed.

"Why fie?" Chadwick whispered to himself with a chuckle.

Outside, Scottrick was several steps ahead of the pair. Rachel leaned close to Abby as they walked.

"I told you it wasn't just the realtor. It's everyone here," she said.

"Oh, they're nice," Abby said.

"Yeah, nice," Rachel said, shaking her head. "Mom, they don't even have WiFi. No internet!"

"I liked the lamps in there," Abby said, ignoring her daughter.

Rachel shook her head, and followed as Abby picked up her pace.

"Just be quiet, please," she said as Rachel caught up. "These are very nice people, and I'm sure we can get internet once we get to Rutland. This place is just a little out of the way."

After the trek back to truck, Scottrick rubbed his chin, staring when Abby and Rachel approached.

"Quite a carriage ye got here," he said.

"Yeah, except for the tire," Abby said.

Silence.

"You, uh, don't happen to have any tires at your place, do you?" she asked.

"No, afraid not, but we can probably help, with a bit of trial-and-error."

"Of course," Rachel said, rolling her eyes.

Scottrick looked at her, squinted his eyes, then looked back to the truck.

"Don't mind her," Abby said. "She's just having a hard time with the move."

Scottrick nodded. Rachel pulled her phone out again, held it up, growled and slipped it back in her pocket.

"Are you serious?!" she yelled.

"Pardon," Scottrick said.

"Argh," Rachel growled, and her eyes widened. "This fucking place has no internet, no cell phone signal, I haven't seen any electrical wires or cable lines since we crossed the state line! Are you serious?! I can't believe you people live like this!" She was looking right at Scottrick now. "You and your strange fucking clothes and stone buildings and mechanical cash registers. You're just a bunch of backwoods losers."

Rachel took a deep breath and stomped away.

"Rachel!" Abby yelled, partly because of Rachel's attitude, but also because she felt the same way. The forced smiles were no longer subduing her fear of this new place. She walked toward Rachel as tears welled up in her eyes.

Vermont, really? Abby thought. They were moving here. The decision was made. No return. Ohio seemed an eternity away.

She missed Ohio, the familiarity, the people.

Scottrick wore a look of shock.

Clouds grew darker above them in the late afternoon. It looked to be near dusk, though it was only around three in the afternoon. Abby knew they'd need to get a move on with the tire.

Abby approached Rachel. After some worried silence, they spoke.

"Look," Abby said. "Let's give it a shot, just for a little while. If it doesn't work out, we'll find somewhere else."

"Let's make sure they have WiFi first."

"Okay."

They returned to the truck in time to see Scottrick walking away, back toward the store, with his head down and shoulders slouched.

"It's going to be a long night," Abby said.

Rachel said nothing.

Abby reached into her pocket, pulled out her phone, and for a moment, she thought she saw it: a signal bar. She blinked, and it was gone, like a damp oasis in the middle of a desert. Abby unlocked the door at the rear of the box truck.

"Great! Now we have no phone, no tire, and soon no light," Rachel said.

Abby returned with a tent under her right arm, and a propane camping lamp in her left hand, remnants from their Ohio home.

"It's not that bad," Abby said in her positive attitude, an attitude now beginning to waver. But she held onto her hope.

"Yeah, not *that* bad," Rachel said, examining her mother's armload as she walked past.

"Okay, look, we're not going to be able to do much tonight," Abby said.

"Ugh, you have got to be kidding me," Rachel said, realizing the rolled up nylon was a tent.

They set up camp twenty yards from where the truck sat at the edge of the road. Several times, Rachel checked her phone and scoffed at the lack of a signal, and Abby retorted with positive comments about the beauty of the trees and the many hiking trails.

The pair laid down for the night in silence. Abby thought about the men at the gas station, and the trip overall. Could there really be no electricity in all Vermont? How was that possible? Maybe in some third world country in a remote village, but here? In the United States of America? And she worried about results of this lack of technology, feeling guilty at the triviality of her worries. She was worried about toast. She knew it was a dumb thing to worry about, but she was so used to toasters. Maybe they had propane, but still, she'd have to toast bread in the oven, and that would take forever. Weren't there outlets in the house when the realtor gave them the tour? It's something you take for granted. Every wall has these little holes in them you plug things in and they work. You just don't notice them not being there. They toured the house during the day. Were there lights?

Still unable to sleep, Abby's thoughts danced from one tangent to another. She was the leader in positivity, always glass half full. But was this glass empty? How could

she pretend? No internet? There were so many important things a lack of internet would mean: no quick access to financial information, no way to get world news in an instant, and any sort of academic research would be difficult without having the plethora of information available on the web. But she worried again about something senseless, but important to her: cat memes and all those little funny cartoons that brightened up her day, kept her positive. What would it mean, being without them? Is that what kept her jolly all the time? Would no cat memes mean she would lose her jocular take on life? Would she spiral into a pit of depression, culminating in the hopeless act of suicide? She tried not to think about it.

Rachel too laid awake. She just wanted to sleep and escape this place, if only briefly. With a bit of luck, a pack of hungry wolves would roll past and take her away from this miserable place. No cell phones? Really? Sure, they were great for emergencies, and there are a ton of reasons for cell phones that are beneficial to the communication of humanity as a whole. But what had Rachel awake was the game, *Words with Friends*. With no WiFi and no cell phone signals, all of her games would float into oblivion, unfinished. You couldn't just go find a public computer and play. It was *only* on the phone. It was a little out of style, but Rachel didn't care. She still played with her friends, even that snotty little Kasey, Miss Prom Queen *and* Miss Homecoming Queen. *Oh yeah? Well, who spelled "adjudge" on Words with Friends. Not Kasey, Rachel* thought. She had over twenty games of *Words with Friends* active. What would become

of them? What would her friends think? Former friends, anyway, after the games went dormant.

Rachel awakened to a rustling sound outside the tent. Footsteps. Then it went quiet. Moments later, more footsteps. A shudder of fear rolled up her spine. The footsteps stopped again. A burst of light shone through the tent, and another. She crept to the zipper of the tent, and pulled it open, one link at a time. With it open just enough to peek through, she saw a man on the other side of the truck. He was fidgeting around with something. Another burst of light, blue and orange sprayed from behind the other side of the truck, illuminating the man's face. It was Chadwick. Rachel unzipped the tent the rest of the way, and Chadwick perked up. He squinted his eyes, smiled, and motioned for her.

Abby awoke to voices and laughing. Had Rachel found a phone signal at last? She felt a rush of relief before fear rolled back when she realized there were two voices.

A burst of yellow light appeared outside. Abby felt around the floor of the tent.

"Rachel," she whispered. She was gone.

Abby crawled to the tent flap, unzipped it, and looked out. In another flash of light, she saw Rachel and Chadwick standing at the side of the truck.

"Oh, well hidey ho there," Chadwick said with a tip of his cap.

Abby walked to the side of the truck. The tire, formerly burnt shards of rubber now looked perfect and inflated.

"This is awesome!" Rachel yelled, boasting a wide smile.

It was the first smile she'd seen from her daughter for hours, days maybe.

Abby matched her smile, then turned back to Chadwick, who said, "Oh yes. It took us a while to find the right combination. But we got you all fixed up. Sorry for the commotion."

"Combination?" Abby asked.

Chadwick bent down and lifted a leather briefcase. He popped open the latches, and lifted the lid. The inside was velvet lined, and separated into hundreds of little squares, each with a small cloth cinch sack.

"The right combination of magic," he said.

He pulled one of the bags from the briefcase, and loosened the tiny rope, showing Abby the contents. The powder inside reflected in the moonlight, and even seemed to produce its own light.

"It's powder. *Magic* powder!" Rachel exclaimed.

"I didn't even think, with you being out-of-staters and all," Chadwick said as he closed the bag and replaced it in the briefcase. "In Vermahn, we use magic for everything. But you have to be careful. Scottrick and I can get you started. It only works within the state borders, though. Had to make it that way."

"Well," Abby started, wondering if she was awake. "That, um, that would be great?" She looked at Rachel, whose smile dropped as she placed a hand on

Chadwick's shoulder.

"Can you tell Scottrick I'm sorry?" she asked.

"He'd probably like it more coming from you," Chadwick said, opening the truck door.

Rachel smiled and nodded. Chadwick squeezed into the truck, scooting to the middle seat, and Abby and Rachel followed.

"What about cell phones?" Rachel asked as Abby turned the key and the engine rumbled up to a smooth idle, but she kept the truck in park.

Chadwick flipped open the briefcase, opened one of the sacks, took a pinch of powder between his fingers, and dropped it onto Rachel's phone. The phone lit up and buzzed with all the Words with Friends moves syncing.

"Cat, really Kasey?"

"What about the internet?" Abby asked. She reached into the backseat, pulled her laptop out, and flipped open the cover.

Chadwick twirled his fingers in the air as his eyes scanned his open case. He pulled one of the bags out, grabbed a pinch, and dropped it onto the keyboard. Abby went to Facebook, and the first post had a picture of a cat on a stack of books with wide eyes and its tail high in the air. There was a talk bubble coming from the cat that said, *They're not overdue, I swear!* Abby laughed hysterically.

"I think I'm going to like *Vermahn*," Rachel said, affecting the local accent picked up from her new friends.

Abby looked up from the computer, and her smile dropped into a worried frown.

"Do you have any of that magic powder to make toast?" Abby asked Chadwick.

Chadwick turned to Rachel with a single raised eyebrow and pointed at Abby with his thumb in a *what's-with-her?* manner.

"We *have* toasters."