

CHAPTER 1

NOSEBLEEDS & MOSQUITOES



There were mosquitoes. There were always mosquitoes at Devlin Creek this time of year. Every time I went inside I had twenty more bites than I had the last time, and Mom made a noise as if it was my fault. As if I created mosquitoes.

There was a bloody nose. It wasn't my first. I didn't have any tissues or napkins and I was in a good T-shirt so I lay on my front with my head out over the bank and let the blood drip into the creek. I wondered if the fish would smell it or taste it or breathe it. I knew by then that nosebleeds only lasted so long. I'd learned not to pinch my nose or tilt my head back six months ago. You just had to let it bleed until it was done.

Most people got nosebleeds because something happened. Like maybe they got hit with a baseball or walked into a door. I got nosebleeds for no reason.

Or there was a reason.

I just didn't like to talk about it.

I reached down and picked out a plastic shopping bag that was floating downstream and put it on the bank next to me. This was my job. This was my creek. It was named after my family. One hundred years ago, the Devlins owned everything around here. Mostly fields, and the old original farmstead—a big red stone house and a barn and a few sheds. Now there were only our small farmhouse and one tiny field left. I couldn't really call it a field. It was more like a wild patch with the creek running through it and a small area of woods. We didn't farm it because we weren't farmers anymore. My dad was a manager of an electronics store. My mom worked in a warehouse putting items in boxes so people didn't have to leave their house to buy things.

One hundred years ago, things were different. World War I was raging. Nobody flew in airplanes for vacation. One hundred years ago, a shark attacked a bunch of people at the New Jersey seashore and there was a polio epidemic. One hundred years ago, somebody invented the light switch.

I bet boys still had turf wars one hundred years ago. I bet people got punched in the nose then too. Territory and violence are pretty much a million years old.

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I grew up in the middle of a cornfield. It wasn't our field anymore, but it was Devlin dirt—worked and cared for by my family's sweat for more than a century. The land was so important to my mother's family that for two generations, daughters

chose to keep the family name — Devlin — and when they had children, they gave it to us, too, instead of our fathers' boring last names. The name and the land belonged together, even though we didn't own the land anymore. I never thought about the new owner. It was Devlin dirt. That's all I knew. The whole cornfield was my turf. I ran in it, bicycled through it, played in it, and sometimes I'd just walk and let the leaves hit me in the face because nothing made me smell more like me than the smell of a walk in the cornfield. Now, my turf ended where the corn used to be, just outside our wild patch. Tommy and his new friends had the woods. I got to keep Devlin Creek.

Mom said we should feel lucky we had anything at all because her grandfather drank 175 acres of Devlin land.

I remember when she said it to me the first time. I said, "How did he drink land?"

She never explained, but my sister, Bernadette, told me later that night.

"Mom's grandfather was a drunk."

"He was *drunk*?" I figured he had to be drunk to drink dirt.

"No. He was a drinker. You know," she said. "He had a *problem*."

She could tell I still didn't understand. I was probably seven. I don't think most seven-year-olds understand how these two things can relate. A drunk great-grandfather still didn't explain how 175 acres of land wasn't ours anymore.

"He lost the land because he spent all his money at the bar, get it?" she said. "Like money he didn't even have — he used it to buy more drinks?" I nodded. She smiled. I liked Bernadette. She

helped me with my homework and with questions I couldn't ask Mom or Dad, and she was nice to me. I didn't think a lot of older sisters were nice. I knew Tommy's wasn't.

My nosebleed slowed down, so I sat up and faced the tree line between our wild patch and the old cornfield. On the other side of the tree line, there were bulldozers, earth diggers, and dump trucks. That's what happened when all your great-grandfather's land is sold and sold again and sold again. Bulldozers. My road, Gilbrand Road, used to have just our house and Tommy's long driveway to his house for a mile stretch. Now there were four housing developments and a gas station. And bulldozers. And traffic. And neighbors. And turf wars.

Mosquitoes don't have turf wars. Mosquitoes just want to drink blood. They don't have a *problem*. It's the way they are. The females are the only ones that drink blood. Did you know that? Males drink nectar and sweet stuff like that. I learned this in science class—my favorite class—from Ms. G, my favorite teacher. She knew everything and made science exciting.

I watched closely as a mosquito landed right on my bony kneecap. I didn't think she could get blood from there, but she stuck her proboscis in and started to fill up with my blood. She got fatter and fatter as I watched. Tommy used to wait until a mosquito got full and then slap it dead so the blood would spatter all over his arm or whatever.

Maybe it wasn't normal for a kid to watch a mosquito drink blood from his own kneecap and not want to slap it. Maybe it wasn't normal to care so much about land that was never really

mine but would have been if my great-grandfather didn't have a *problem*. Maybe I was weird for collecting trash that flowed down from upstream or for owning a guide to animal tracks so I could identify what animals came to drink at the creek. Maybe no one cared about Devlin Creek anymore. But I did. I was part of it as much as it was part of me, because now my blood was running through its veins.

I heard Bernadette's activity bus drop her off at the end of our driveway and realized it was time for dinner. I splashed cold creek water on my face to erase any sign of my nosebleed. The noise of this startled something in the brush between the creek and the tree line. Probably a stray cat or something. It was too early for frogs that big. Turtles were slower. It sounded bigger than a cat, though.

I could see its eyes through the high grass. It was staring at me and I was staring at it. It wasn't a cat. It was taller. But it wasn't a dog either. The eyes were farther apart than any animal that had ever come to the creek before. As we stared at each other, I felt like it was just as curious about me as I was about it.

Then Mom rang the bell for dinner and I stood up and it scurried into the creek and downstream. From the back it looked like an armadillo. We don't have armadillos in Pennsylvania. I figured it was maybe just a wet dog, but I knew deep down it wasn't one.