

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"My little sister is allergic to Fred."

Eli Slovik told Tree this on the phone. Fred was his parrot.

"She's got some feather allergy and Fred has to be out of the house until they test her and see if there's medication. Can I bring him to your house? Just for a little bit?"

Tree wasn't sure how Bradley would handle a parrot.

He wasn't sure how anybody would.

"He could keep your grandfather company, Tree. Just ask. *Please?*"

"Back off, Buster."

Fred the parrot said it to Grandpa, who said, "Back off yourself. I'm going to teach you some manners."

Bradley looked at the parrot and barked loud.

"I really appreciate this, Mr. Benton." Eli was holding the big cage with Fred inside. "He gets kind of excited sometimes."

Grandpa stared at Fred, who stared back.

"I've got to go, Mr. Benton. Thanks." Eli looked in the cage. "You be good, Fred."

“Back off, Buster.”

Eli looked pained. “My uncle taught him to say that.”

Bradley backed out of the room.

“You’re certainly looking handsome today, Leo.” Grandpa had his walker close to Fred’s cage. “Go ahead, bird, say it.”

Fred looked back.

They were getting used to each other.

Grandpa tried again. “You’re certainly looking handsome today, Leo.”

Nothing from the bird.

“That’ll get you a whole lot farther in the world than ‘Back off, Buster.’ ”

“Back off, Buster,” Fred announced.

Grandpa sighed, headed back to the couch.

The white oak stood like a skeleton covered with snow. It was hard to look at it and remember how full and lush it had been in the spring, how its leaves had turned to wine in the fall. That’s the thing about winter—it’s so easy to forget the other seasons—it never seems like it will end.

Tree stood in front of the leafless white oak. He could see every branch, all the textures of the gray bark.

Tree wanted it to be spring, but dealt with the reality.

He picked up an acorn. It was so small, so compact—the seed of a new tree just waiting to be released in the earth.

With his boot, he dug a little hole in the cold ground, put the acorn in it, covered it with dirt and snow.

He liked the idea of planting a new tree.

He thought about his grandpa's new prosthetic leg, which was going to be coming soon. Mona Arnold said Grandpa was going to have to learn to walk a whole new way and it wasn't going to be easy.

They'd gotten through Christmas.

Curtis and Larry were back at college.

It was January now.

And Tree still hated his mother's house and the teeny rooms, he still hated the frozenness he felt sometimes as the fresh divorce kept coming at him in the strangest ways.

Like at night, when he would suddenly get a bad stomachache and feel scared for no reason.

Like at Eli's house, when he felt so sad when Eli's dad kissed Eli's mother.

Like at school, when Sophie told him she'd call him as soon as she got home. She said *home* like it was permanent condition.

"Where are you this week?" she asked.

The every-other-week color-coded schedule had started again.

"My mom's."

"You've gotta stop saying it that way. You've got two houses. There are worse things." Sophie mentioned living with six cats who all had their own kitty-litter beds.

"I think the stress is getting to Lassie. She's not crawling on her branch as much. She used to go crazy when I'd play 'The Ash Grove' on my flute, but now it's just another song. I'm getting worried."

Bradley was getting slower, too.

Tree tried drawing pictures of happy dogs running and jumping, but Bradley just looked at the pictures, sighed, and took a nap.

He was napping a lot these days.

Then Bradley started pooping on the hall rug.

Tree would clean the mess up as best as he could. But Bradley kept having accidents.

"We're going to have to do something about this, Tree," his dad said. "Bradley's getting old, too old maybe to have a decent, productive life."

Tree's whole body went cold. He remembered when Sully had his dog put down.

"I'm a good guy," Dad added. "I try to give everybody a break, but Grandpa can't get around the way he used to and you're only here every other week."

"I'll teach him to do better, Dad, *I swear.*"

Tree was on his knees, patting the back half of Bradley. Patting as much life into him as he could.

Dad grabbed his pounding head. Went to the basement to do his laundry. He'd been recycling dirty socks all week.

Tree cleaned up the mess.

"Bradley, this is serious."

Tree took paper, drew a rug with dog turds on it, put an X through it, held it up.

"This rug is a no-poop zone."

Bradley listened intently.

"You poop outside." Tree drew a porch with steps and the

big evergreen in the front lawn with a pile of turds under it.
"Got it?"

Bradley cocked his head. He liked being talked to.

Tree wasn't a great artist, but he could get an idea across.

Tree was in his ski jacket, sitting on the front steps with Bradley. He looked at his old dog—half sleeping, breathing deep.

A squirrel scurried by. Not so long ago, Bradley would have chased it.

"It would help if you chased something, especially when Dad's watching." Tree drew a so-so squirrel being chased by a dog. Held it up. "It looks like a mouse, but it's a squirrel."

He had showed Dr. Billings, the veterinarian, his method, but the vet said dogs don't learn that way.

Dr. Billings was a good vet, but not too creative.

The front door opened.

Dad stood on the cold porch. "What I said about Bradley . . . I know that scared you. I'm sorry."

A loud car honk sounded. Bradley didn't move. He used to bark when those things happened.

"We just have to figure out what's best for him."

Tree nodded.

McAllister, Mrs. Clitter's ugly cat, was slinking across the lawn.

Bradley opened one eye.

He didn't like McAllister. No one did, except Mrs. Clitter. McAllister crept closer.

Closer.

Too close.

The old dog barked, rose to his feet.

Tore after McAllister.

Bradley trotted back when McAllister was off the property. Lay back down on the porch.

Tree's father shook his head, laughing.

"*Yes!*" Tree shouted.

There was life in that old dog yet.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Awright, Pit Bulls!" Coach Glummer shouted from the sidelines. *"Let's come alive out there!"* He clapped his hands. *"Let's see some mad-dog hustle!"*

But it's hard to find energy and hustle when the scoreboard reads

VIKINGS 43

PIT BULLS 4

That score stood stark like a tree without leaves.

Halftime. Coach Glummer clinging to hope.

"Forget the first half. Forget that all but two of you played like sheep. The past is gone!"

The Pit Bulls weren't sure what that meant.

"Think of yourselves as blank sheets of paper, and write on that paper a winner's story!"

In the bleachers, Tree's dad leaned forward.

"That huge kid's a joke." A father sitting a row back said it to another father. "All that height, not a clue how to use it."

Furious, Tree's dad stood up, applauding. *"Let's go out there!"*

Back on the court. Tree tried to think of himself as a winner.
Not missing a shot.

Awesome in power.

I am a tree.

He stepped in front of an average-size Viking, held his huge arms out. Snarled briefly.

The Viking looked for a way to pass the ball, but this is hard to do when a tree is in front of you.

The ball dropped.

Tree grabbed it. Felt a sureness as he dribbled down the court.

Tree's dad cheering him on.

Coach Glummer shrieked, "*Give me the slam dunk of a winner!*"

Tree aimed.

Missed.

Jeremy Liggins got the ball on a rebound.

Made the basket.

"Now, that kid's got the moves," the father a row back said.

Just one basket, Dad thought. *Let him get one lousy basket.*

Liggins made six more points before the game was over.

Tree never scored.

But somehow, Tree felt pretty good.

Almost like a winner.

But you know how it is with coaches.

They want the win, not the concept.

"I'm sick of most of you guys not trying," Coach Glummer snarled in the locker room. Looked at Tree when he said it.

Tree got so angry at that.

Jeremy Liggins sauntered up to Tree: "You're a joke out there."

But something in Tree rose up.

"No, I'm not." He squared his shoulders and looked down at Liggins, who looked away first.

February brought bad weather.

The temperature shot up and the rains came with a fury.

February brought more business travel for Tree's mom. She had less time at home, which meant Tree only stayed with her a few days every other week.

He was glad to spend the extra time with Bradley and Grandpa.

He checked heymom.com every day, though.

Clicked on *What We're About* to read reminiscences of him and his brothers growing up.

Clicked on *The Road Ahead* for at-a-glance thoughts on how divorced families heal and grow (*Trust + Time = Tenderness*).

He never clicked on *Just Between Us* or *Hugs*.

The computer can take you just so far with your mother.

But one kid's snack is another kid's dinner.

He showed Sophie the website. She scrolled down the page, amazed.

"Your mother does all this for you? You don't know how good you've got it."

■ ■ ■

"You're a genius."

Bradley cocked his head as Grandpa looked at Fred the parrot, who looked back.

"You're a genius. Say it, Fred. Come on."

Grandpa had given up on Fred ever saying, "You're certainly looking handsome today, Leo." Tree's dad suggested that Grandpa could call Mrs. Clitter, and she'd come over and say he was handsome.

He needed the bird's respect.

"You're a genius," Grandpa tried again. "Say it, Fred. Make me glad you're here."

Fred ruffled his emerald feathers and squawked.

The rain kept coming.

Grandpa was looking toward May and the Memorial Day parade. His new leg was supposed to be delivered any day now, but it got held up because of the weather.

"*Where's my leg?*" he kept asking Mona.

"It's somewhere in Chicago, Leo."

"What's it doing there?"

"The plane it was on had to land because of the snow."

"I've got to be marching strong by May."

"Leo, I can't promise you'll be marching anywhere by May. It takes *time* to get this right."

He held up his hand, didn't want to hear it.

"I want you to push me hard, Mona."

"I'm not going to push you any harder than makes sense."

The next day:

“What’s my leg doing in Miami, Mona?”

Grandpa half shouted it on the phone.

“United Airlines put it on the wrong plane, Leo, and now they’re not sure where it is in the airport.”

“Maybe we should send in the paratroopers to get it back. I’m going to be a genius at this walking business, and my leg is seeing the country.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“Leo,” said Mona Arnold, grinning, “meet your new leg.”

She handed him a flesh-colored leg cut off below the knee.

Grandpa held it. “Look at this miracle, will you?” He felt the weight. “It’s heavier than I expected.”

“Once you get used to it, it takes your weight and gives you a nice fluid movement.”

Grandpa studied it.

“If you just sit down over here, Bill will show you the next part.”

Bill, the leg man, brought out the stump sock, the liner sock, showed Grandpa how to put them on. He fitted the leg on the stump, showed how the mechanism clicked tight.

Tree and his father were there to meet the new member of the family.

Grandpa worked for two hours, practicing.

Standing on the leg.

Taking it off.

Walking so carefully a few steps, a few more.

Tiring, focused work.

Every step counts. Every step teaches something.

"Swing your leg out more, Leo. That gives you an even step."

"Try to put equal weight on both legs now. This'll take some time since the good one has been taking so much of the weight."

"If you go too far too soon, you're going to get redness and swelling. Easy does it. This isn't a race."

He sat down, took the leg off, held it in his lap.

"You can put it on the floor," Mona said.

"No way. We're bonding."

"Vietnam wasn't our war. That's what the bigwigs in Washington told us."

Grandpa had been thinking about that the last few days. Every so often he'd take the war apart to try to make sense of the experience.

He was sticking his leg on, practicing walking in the house with Tree.

A couple of faltering steps.

The first steps of the day are the hardest.

"There we were on the battlefield, getting shot at, dying, but it wasn't our war. That was so confusing." He looked at Tree. "You ever feel like that?"

Tree wasn't sure. "Sometimes I feel I'm in the middle of Mom and Dad's divorce. They're fighting each other—not me—but I'm there."

"You learn to duck. That's what I did."

Tree laughed. "I know about ducking."

Three more steps.

Step, drag the leg. Step . . .

Grandpa gripped a chair for balance. "I ran for cover a lot, too. And I tried to remember the things I had control over so I wouldn't feel like a grunt."

"Like what?"

"Like how I responded to people. How I kept my weapon clean and ready. How I always wore my helmet. I protected my head come hell or high water. Guys would kid me about it." He laughed. "Figures I'd get shot in the leg."

Grandpa stood in front of the full-length mirror in the hall. Looking in mirrors helped him see if he was standing right.

He straightened up a little, smiled at Tree.

"I think you and I have a lot in common. We're both learning to walk a different way, and we're both going to be geniuses at it."

More than anything, Tree wanted to be like his grandpa.

Grandpa shouted to Fred the parrot in the living room, "You're a genius. *Say it, bird.*"

"Back off, Buster."

Grandpa shook his head. "You think I can walk a few blocks in this thing next week? I've got something I need to do."

"Put them down there."

Grandpa handed Tree a new deck of playing cards in a plastic bag. Tree put it near a wreath of flowers and a baby picture that were soaked from the pouring rain.

Grandpa reached up to touch a name on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Private Elmo P. Hothrider.

Grandpa and Tree had driven here with the Trash King.

“Elmo was a fine card player. He got shot up bad outside Da Nang. His eyes were bandaged shut when I went to see him in the hospital. And you know what he wanted? He wanted to play cards. So I played for him and me. Elmo won three hands out of five, and he accused me of cheating.”

Grandpa touched the name again. “Rest well, friend. Don’t take any wild cards up there.”

He limped to another section of the wall that stretched long and black across the mall in Washington, D.C.—an hour’s drive from Ripley.

“That’s the place.”

Tree put a bottle of hot sauce near Sergeant Nick Marconi’s name.

Candles, flowers, family pictures, a big bottle of Hershey’s Syrup. Anything can hold a memory.

He placed a letter in a plastic bag and put it on the wet ground for Corporal Michael Diggins. Grandpa stood by Corporal Diggins’s name for a long time as the cold rain beat down.

“Diggins always said the jungle was crazy. You think you’re going the right way, but you’re really going back the way you came. It changes color with the sun and the clouds. You’re waiting to fight, and you start thinking the shadows are going to come get you. Then you realize that war is as much about your mind as anything else. Is what you’re seeing real, or is it made up?”

The Trash King reached up, touched Calvin Merker's name. Merker dragged six injured people to safety before he was shot himself.

King stood there like he was waiting for something.

Tree had heard enough about the war to know that a big part of it was about waiting. Soldiers waiting for their marching orders, pilots waiting to fly their missions. Everyone waiting for it to be over.

"So many," Grandpa said, limping from end to end as rain poured down.

Tree tried to imagine what some of these soldiers looked like; he never could. He didn't know if they were tall or short, fat or thin. A name on a wall didn't tell you that. But Tree knew that all the names here and the people who came to remember them were connected with a special kind of courage.

Grandpa alongside him now, struggling on that new leg. "Every friend I lost, I still carry in my heart. The paratroopers do it right. They put out an empty boot when one of them dies—no one can fill that shoe.

"We hear about casualties on the news—114 dead. Two murdered. Over three thousand killed. Numbers don't tell the story. You can't measure the loss of a human life. It's all the things a person was, all their dreams, all the people who loved them, all they hoped to be and could give back to the world. A million moments in a life cut short because of war."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Tree wished there was a memorial wall for divorce.

If there was one, he knew what he'd leave in tribute.

The photo of his parents laughing on the beach.

He kept it in his sock drawer, but that didn't cut it as a memorial.

"More rain expected today, folks."

That's what the weatherman said on TV. Tree was at his mom's house.

"Thunderstorms continue throughout the week." Weather laughter. "It's not my fault, I swear." The northeast section of the weather map showed storm clouds, lightning flashes, and blinking raindrops.

"They started sandbagging the levee in Burnstown." Mom said it, sipping coffee. Burnstown was three towns away. "Don't be late for the bus."

Tree got his slicker, bent down so Mom could kiss him on the cheek.

"Stay safe out there, sweetie."

Conan yipped.

And Tree headed out into the cold, wet world.

The bus was late again.

Tree stood waiting for it in his iridescent slicker, pummeled by wetness. He felt like some giant glow-in-the-dark road marker.

Other kids were waiting, too.

No one spoke.

Endless bad weather makes you not care much about anything.

Sully, who'd lost two raincoats last week, showed up completely covered by Hefty bags. He stood morosely next to Tree.

"Can you see?" Tree asked him.

"No."

"You want me to make your eyeholes bigger?"

"No."

The bus pulled up, splashed water on their legs, sloshed it in their shoes. Thunder boomed.

Tree helped Sully onto the bus.

From inside the Hefty bags, Sully spoke.

"Close the school. We're too wet to learn." He raised a bag-wrapped fist.

Students nodded.

The bus lurched through the storm.

Outside the middle school orchestra room, Sophie was unwrapping ten layers of plastic bags from around her flute.

"Aunt Peach says if the flute gets ruined, I don't get another one. I told her it would be a real loss to the music world. I've got this big tryout and I've got to play dry. I want this solo bad, Tree."

Flute sounds came from the orchestra room.

"That's pretty," Tree said.

"*That's* Sarah Kravetz playing." Sarah Kravetz was Amber Melloncroft's best friend. "She wants the solo, too. She can't even hit a high C."

Tree listened some more. "She's not as good as I thought."

The flute music stopped.

"I get mucus in my throat when I'm nervous." Sophie cleared her throat like a truck driver, spat into a tissue.

"You'll do great," Tree offered.

Sarah Kravetz walked out, looked Sophie up and down like she'd fallen off a garbage truck. Didn't even look at Tree.

Flounced off.

"So, okay, I'm next."

Sophie cleared her throat loud as Sarah looked back, amused; Amber joined her, whispering.

Sophie on her knees, searching through her book bag for the music.

"I had it this morning."

Giggles.

Tree wanted to punch a hole through the wall and shove them in.

"Okay. Wait." Sophie held Poldini's "Dancing Doll" high so Amber and Sarah could see.

And with that, Sophie Santack cleared her throat, spat big,

and marched into the orchestra room to show what a tough kid could do with a tender instrument.

I GOT IT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

That's what Sophie's note said on Tree's locker.

He looked for her in school. Walked though the packed halls, towering over the heads of students, but he couldn't find her.

Sully lumbered by on his way to the principal's office, sent there for turning his hearing aid off in social studies.

"Haven't seen her," he said glumly.

I GOT IT!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

She held up a sign when he was at basketball practice.

Tree grinned at her, focused on the net, and actually made a basket.

He tried to act like he did that all the time, but inside he was soaring.

Sophie stomped on the bleachers.

"*I got it!*" she said excitedly when he came out of the locker room. "I got the solo at assembly *and* I got the solo at the Memorial Day concert after the parade. I'm going to be a soldier of yesteryear and play this medley of war songs I've never heard before, but I'm going to know them in my sleep by May. It's going to be a lot of pressure, but I think I'm up to it. Mr. Cloud said I had true feeling for the instrument."

Tree beamed. "That's great."

"And I needed this, Tree, 'cause people don't always get

where I'm coming from. Those eighth-grade girls don't get it."

"I know."

"I'm going to bake brownies and bring them to school tomorrow. We're going to *celebrate*."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

She smelled it before she saw it.

Couldn't figure out what the awful odor was.

She turned the corner, holding the plate of brownies.

She'd fixed her hair extra nice, too, with that purple barrette.

Sophie was feeling as good as she'd ever allow herself to feel.

But then she saw it.

Trash bags with smelly garbage hanging from her school locker, piled around the floor, spilling the stinking mess everywhere.

Tuna cans.

Coffee grinds.

Broken eggshells.

She dropped the brownies.

Tore the barrette out of her hair.

Stood there frozen. Kids walked past her, holding their noses at the smell.

"I didn't do this, okay? I didn't bring this here!"

Then she saw the sign—in pink block letters.

GARBAGE GIRL

She tore it down just as Tree ran up.

"Who did this?" he shouted. But he already knew. "We'll clean it up. Sully, Eli, and me. You won't have to—"

Teachers were coming now.

Students saying it was awful.

The bell rang.

They stood there.

Mr. Cosgrove pushed a Dumpster into place; moved quickly. Took down the bags, threw out the garbage.

"They're going to explode someday from all the garbage inside them," he told Sophie, but it didn't make her feel better.

She grabbed a smelly tuna can and stormed off.

"Sophie," Tree shouted.

She kept walking.

Tree ran after her. "Where are you going?"

"I've got someone to see." She was almost running, holding that can.

Pushed into first-period geometry—her class—stormed right up to Amber Melloncroft and Sarah Kravetz, who looked away, trying not to smile.

Mr. Pelling, the math teacher, said, "You can't walk in here like that."

Sophie slammed the can down on Amber's desk.

"If you and your friends ever do that to me again, you're going to be sorry!"

Amber shouted, "I don't know what you're talking about, and take your lunch off my desk!"

Sophie picked up the can, shoved it under Amber's up-turned nose. "This is a smell you know real well."

"That's enough!" Mr. Pelling shouted.

"She's threatening me!" Amber wailed.

"No." Tree stood tall. "She's telling the truth about what you did. Now everybody knows." He stepped closer. "I want to know *why* you did it."

"Get away from me, you overgrown freak!"

"What made you think you had the *right*?"

"In the hall!" Mr. Pelling pointed at Tree and Sophie.

He marched them to the principal's office.

"Threatening a student," he told Mrs. Pierce, the administrative assistant.

The principal was on the phone with the superintendent.

They had to wait.

"Dr. Terry," Tree said to the principal, "Sophie didn't threaten anybody. Those girls have been mean to her for a long time."

Dr. Terry leaned back in her chair. "Several teachers told me what happened with the locker. It was an awful thing to do. I apologize to you, Sophie, on behalf of this school. That is not what we're about. But you should have come in here to talk to me as soon as it happened."

"I never think about principals when I'm mad."

Dr. Terry smiled. "I understand."

"I don't know if you do, Dr. Terry. You didn't see it."

"Sophie, something like this takes time to fix. I'm going to talk to Amber and her friends. I'm going to talk to their parents and to this school community at large. There is zero tolerance for cruelty at Eleanor Roosevelt. I'll call your parents, too, so we can work this out together."

Sophie looked down. "I don't think I want to come back to this school."

Tree's heart just broke for her.

Dr. Terry leaned forward. "I'm asking you to give me a little time to make this right."

"I'm in eighth grade, Dr. Terry. Unless I flunk, you haven't got much time."

Aunt Peach arrived at the school, folded her considerable arms, and eyed Sophie like a prison guard.

"What are we going to do about your temper?"

"They put garbage on my locker, Aunt Peach!"

"That was a cold, cruel thing to do."

"And I let them know it. Sometimes you've got to shout the truth and wake people up."

"Sophie, I like to think that truth doesn't need to be shoved down people's throats."

"In eighth grade, Aunt Peach, truth needs all the help it can get."

CHAPTER TWENTY

"I told Aunt Peach I'd rather eat dirt for a week than come to ballroom dancing, but she said it's going to help me socially." Sophie folded her arms tight. "Like there's hope."

Sophie stood miserably in a red dress near the wall of the YMCA gym, as far away from Amber Melloncroft and Sarah Kravetz as possible.

Tree stood next to her.

Sully and Eli were out front, hiding in the bushes.

Coach Glummer's cousin Sheila tossed her head; Lazar tossed his.

They stood cheek to cheek, arms extended, knees bent.

"The tango," Sheila said, "is making a comeback, and I want you to experience it."

They rotated dramatically, not smiling. Lazar bent Sheila back.

"The tango is about *passion*."

The boys started laughing, especially Jeremy Liggins. The girls giggled.

"The tango is about despair and emotional power. It was born during a time of great economic hardship. People danced it to express the sadness in their hearts."

Sophie looked at Tree, who knew he wasn't up to this.

"Don't be afraid of passion and despair," Sheila shouted. "We all have deep rivers running through us. This dance will help you find them."

"I'm there." Sophie grabbed Tree's hand and marched onto the dance floor.

After sixty minutes of tango practice, Tree had found despair.

He was too tall for this dance.

To look directly into Sophie's eyes, he had to bend low.

To fully extend his arms with Sophie's, she had to grab his elbow instead of his hand.

He almost dropped Sophie when he had to lean her back.

And the worst part was, Sophie loved it.

"Okay, we're going to connect to our deep rivers of despair, Tree, and get so sad, we can hardly stand it. We're going to let all the garbage that's been thrown at us come out and show these people what's what."

Tree was absolutely certain he couldn't do that.

But Lazar picked Tree and Sophie and Amber and Jeremy to demonstrate.

They walked to the middle of the dance floor.

Amber looked at Sophie, held her nose.

"Mr. Cosgrove should have put *you* in the Dumpster," Sophie snarled.

"You are *so* pathetic!"

"*You think so?*"

Tree stood tall, stared at Amber. "Stop it!"

Amber looked away.

Silence from Jeremy.

"Together with the eyes," Lazar shouted.

Sophie's dark eyes fixated on Tree.

"Okay. From that, young peoples, we find our sadness!"

Hands on hips, Sophie stepped defiantly past Amber, who was having trouble finding anything. Sophie tossed her head, posed with pain.

A big part of the tango is posing.

She did a little twirl around Tree, who almost went in the right direction.

He stood there like a stage prop, trying to keep his deep rivers to himself.

Sophie stomped her foot, her red skirt flared up. She glared at Amber, who looked down.

"You see from that?" Lazar shouted. "The girl, she becomes the dance."

Painful music swelled.

And Sophie Santack owned that dance floor.

She didn't really need a partner, but Tree wasn't giving up his slot. She came close: "We're going to try that cheek-to-cheek thing and pray to God we don't mess up."

Tree prayed.

Bent down to reach her cheek.

"Stand tall," Sophie told him. "Wear it proud."

They danced cheek to chest, which was a whole lot easier.
Tree bent her back for the finish.
The music ended.
But not the pain.
That's the point of the tango.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The only thing the continuous rain was good for was Eli's little sister, Rachel, whose feather allergies got better, and the doctor said Fred could come home.

Grandpa had complicated feelings about this.

He hadn't once gotten the parrot to say he was a genius.

"Back off, Buster" was all he got. That bird was stuck like an old record.

He'd hoped to bring Fred to a new level of communication, but it wasn't meant to be.

"I would like us to begin a new level of communication."

Tree's mother said this on the speakerphone in her kitchen to Tree's father, who was at work.

Tree was in his mother's living room, listening.

Mom scrolled down her computer screen. She'd typed out exactly what she wanted to say.

"I think we're strong enough to do this now, Mark. I know it will be important for the children."

Silence. She geared up for the next line:

"I know that we are forever linked to each other because of the kids. We need to be able to talk together and make decisions together without all the old stuff getting in the way."

Tree's father didn't say anything because his stockperson had just dropped a box of golf balls and the balls were rolling everywhere.

"Are you still there?" she asked.

"Yes." Dad stopped a golf ball with his foot.

"Did you hear me?"

"I heard you."

"It would be nice if you at least acknowledged you heard me."

"I heard you." Dad stopped three balls with a hockey stick. He didn't like talking about important things on the phone.

Mom lived on the phone. *"Well?"*

This, thought Tree, is the old stuff.

Mom and Dad decided to talk about it next week at dinner. At Dad's house, so she could say hello to Grandpa.

They said good-bye in that edgy way.

Tree wondered if they would ever talk to each other easily again.

He walked into the kitchen.

Tree wasn't sure he should confess. But he did.

"I kind of overheard, Mom."

"Your dad and I don't want to let our problems stand in the way of doing the best for you and your brothers."

Tree nodded. That was nice.

"I'm not going to let years of misunderstanding stand in the way of being a forgiving adult."

She wasn't done.

"Your dad and I shared important moments. I'm not going to let them get buried." She said that pretty fast.

"It's good you can talk," Tree offered.

She turned off her computer, sighed. "It's going to be hard for me to go to the old house."

"I know, Mom."

"I haven't seen Grandpa and Bradley for . . ."

"They miss you. We all do."

Her eyes teared up. "I'm crying so much these days. I'm sorry. I see a baby and I cry. I see a kitten and I can hardly stand it. I see a commercial with a happy family eating vegetables and I fall apart."

"Maybe we should stop eating vegetables," Tree offered hopefully, handing her a box of tissues.

She blew her nose. "Should I bake something for next week? Anything you'd like?"

Tree laughed. "You should probably bring the whole dinner, Mom."

Twisting the tissue. "Your dad said he'd take care of dinner. I don't want to insult him."

"Your mother's coming for dinner."

Tree's father said this at six o'clock.

Tree was shocked. "I thought she was coming on Thursday."

"We changed it." Dad checked his watch. "She'll be here in thirty minutes."

Tree looked around—no food on the stove, in the oven.
“What are we eating?”

“I don’t know.” Tree’s father wrung his hands.

“Sophie’s coming over, Dad. Remember? We’re going to watch that TV show on lizards since her TV’s broken. You said it was okay.”

“It’s okay.” Already Dad regretted this whole evening.

“But *Mom’s* coming.”

“That’s okay, too.”

He picked up the phone to order pizza.

For men, there’s always a simple solution to dinner.

“Well . . .”

Mom sat at the dining room table, looked at the empty walls, the shadows of where the hutch had been.

Remembered how they’d fought about who got the hutch.

Studied the clothesline and pulley system on the ceiling.

Felt a tightness in her chest.

“It was an experiment, Mom.”

“I’m sure it was.”

She smiled at Tree, looked kindly to Grandpa, patted Bradley’s old, loyal head. Bradley hadn’t left her side since she’d walked through the door.

“We haven’t sat at this table together for a long time,” Mom said quietly.

Dad moved a can of motor oil off the table to make room for the pizza.

“Sausage or veggie?” he asked too loudly.

Mom’s smile grew thin. “I don’t eat sausage. I never have.”

“Right.” Dad cut into the veggie pizza, slapped a huge piece on a paper plate, looked at his ex-wife. “We’ve got salad.”

“Please.”

Salad plopped on the plate. Too much dressing.

Lightning cracked in the sky; the hanging light over the table flickered just like in a horror movie.

Mom turned sympathetically to Grandpa. “How are you, Leo?”

“Sausage or veggie?” Dad asked Grandpa.

“Whatever’s easy.”

Dad froze. He needed facts.

“Give him one of each, Dad.” Tree said this miserably. “I want sausage. No salad.”

“You should have salad,” Mom said.

“I’m not hungry, Mom.”

“Give him some salad.”

A teaspoon of salad dropped onto Tree’s plate.

Dad made a pizza sandwich—slapped two pieces of sausage pizza together facedown; took a huge bite.

Mom looked away. She hated it when he did that.

Grandpa asked, “How’s it been going for you, Jan?”

She picked at her salad. “I’m traveling a lot. Teaching more seminars. We’ve been streamlining the curriculum. I have to do a three-day workshop in a day and a half now. I’m not sure everyone is learning what they need. It’s frustrating. Not as frustrating as what you’re dealing with, Leo.”

“I handle it. I’m walking in the mall. You know how much I love shopping.”

She laughed. "I didn't think anything could get you in the mall."

"Only raw courage, rehab, and rain, Jan."

She laughed. "Leo, I haven't been by to see you because . . . well—"

He held up his hand. "It's been a tough time. I'm just glad to see you now."

She took his hand.

The doorbell rang.

"I think that's my friend."

Tree went to the door, opened it to Sophie, who stood there, drenched, holding something big and square covered in a plastic bag.

A car horn. Shouting voice: "Two hours, Sophia. That's it."

"Okay, Ma."

Tree waved at the car. Rain poured down.

"I brought Lassie. I wanted her to see this."

"Boy, that's real nice you guys can have dinner together without killing each other."

Sophie stood by the table, holding Lassie's cage. "We've had a lot of divorces at my house. My aunt Peach got a restraining order against her second husband. If he comes closer than thirty feet from her, she'll have him arrested. She carries one of those snap-up rulers to keep things legal. We don't mess around in my family."

Mom stared at the cage, not a lizard lover.

"This is Lassie, my iguana. I named her that 'cause I'm

working up to a dog. I wanted Aunt Peach to get used to the idea. She's pretty upset these days."

"Your aunt Peach is upset?" Mom asked.

"Lassie's upset." Sophie shoved the cage in Mom's face. "See how she's not moving much? She used to have a good personality. Her head would go up and down when I talked to her. I think the weather's got her depressed."

Booming thunder in the distance.

"The weather's doing that to all of us." Mom pushed her chair back, wondering where this young woman came from.

"Your show's probably on," Dad said weakly.

Sophie checked her watch, sat at the table, put Lassie in front of her. "We've got a couple minutes. I just wanted to say that you guys do this divorce thing right. When my parents split up my mother said, 'Your father's a moron. I'm kicking him out.' "

Tree stood fast, grabbed Lassie's cage, and headed for the television.

The doorbell rang.

Tree got the door, holding the cage.

It was Mrs. Clitter holding a basket.

"Now, how is that man—"

She stopped dead, stared at Lassie.

"It's an iguana," Tree said.

"But she's under a lot of stress," Sophie explained from behind. "She's missing other lizards, so I brought her over here."

Mrs. Clitter looked confused. "There are other lizards over here?"

"There's a nature show on lizards starting. I'm going to let her watch it. The vet says iguanas are exotic animals and won't examine her for less than seventy-five dollars. My aunt Peach says hell's gotta freeze solid before she gives a vet that much money to take an iguana's pulse."

"*I baked bread*," Mrs. Clitter half shouted. "Have I come at a bad time?"

Grandpa kept his mouth shut on that one.

Mrs. Clitter sat at the table and joined the party.

The lizard on the screen was creeping up a tree limb, bobbing its head.

"See, Lassie, that could be your sister," Sophie said.

Lassie was sitting on her rock, watching Bradley instead of the TV lizard.

The doorbell rang.

Mom got up, opened the front door.

The Trash King stood there holding a salami. He grinned.

"Are you kids back together?"

"We're *just* having dinner."

Dad closed his eyes.

"Well, you never know what these things can lead to, Jan. Just be open to the world of second chances." He winked. "That's what keeps me in business."

He walked into the dining room. "Leo, I brought a salami."

"And I brought bread," said Mrs. Clitter.

"Okay," Sophie shouted from the next room. "Lassie's doing the dance."

Lassie was bobbing her head like the TV lizard.

"She just needed a role model. She needed to know she wasn't the only lizard in the world."

Sophie's bobbing now, too.

The Trash King got out his Swiss army knife, cut hunks of salami, handed them around.

From the dining room he could see Sophie bobbing. "Do the dance, Lassie. Do it."

"Who's that kid?"

"That's what we're all wondering," said Dad.

Grandpa reached down, took off his prosthetic leg. It was hurting him. He put it on the table. "I like her. She's got her own style."

The Trash King looked at the leg. "Leo, if you ever decide you don't want that leg, I could sell it to a person who has vision."

"You could turn it into a lamp," Mom suggested.

"Or hang it over the fireplace," Dad offered.

Bradley trotted in, took one look at the leg on the table, lowered his tail, and backed out of the room.

Mom and Dad smiled at each other and laughed.

It was a sound Tree hadn't heard from them in the longest time.

He sat on the couch, listening to his parents' laughter.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Seven A.M. Tuesday morning.

Dad's house. Tree's alarm went off.

This always caused Bradley to at least rise to be let out.

But this morning, Bradley just lay there and looked pleadingly at Tree.

"What's the matter, boy?"

Tree jumped out of bed. "Come on, get up."

Bradley didn't move.

Tree tried to lift him to his feet, but Bradley fell back down.

"Dad!"

Tree knelt by Bradley's side. Bradley's head was down, his breathing forced.

"Dad! . . . It's okay, boy." Tree tried to sound soothing, but the lump of fear in his throat was so big, he could hardly speak. Dad was in the doorway with shaving cream on his face.

"What's wrong?"

But as soon as he said it, he knew.

Dad bent down by Bradley's old, tired body and put his

hand over Bradley's stomach, which was heaving hard with every breath. He did what Tree had done, tried to get the dog up.

"Aw, Bradley." Dad wiped the shaving cream from his face onto the T-shirt he was wearing. "We've got to call the vet. I think he had some kind of a stroke."

Tree couldn't move.

"I'll call, Tree. You stay with him."

Tree was trying not to cry. He reached in his drawer, got out a dog treat. He stuck it under Bradley's nose. "You want a biscuit?"

Bradley didn't want one.

Dad was back. Hand on Tree's shoulder. "The vet said we need to bring him in. Tree, you understand how old Bradley is."

Tree croaked out, "*Can I call Mom?*"

"Of course."

"Can she be there? 'Cause she loved him—"

"And he loved her."

Tree carried Bradley to the car, wrapped in a Baltimore Orioles beach towel. Grandpa followed, moving better on his new leg. They drove to Mom's house. She got in the backseat and started to cry.

This helped all the men to be stronger.

They rode to the vet's with Tree saying "Good dog" and Grandpa saying "It's going to be okay, buddy," just like he'd said to so many buddies in the war. Dad forgot the way to the vet's because Mom usually took Bradley, and she had to give

him directions, which seemed like old times with a sad new twist.

Dr. Billings brought them right into the examining room. Tree put Bradley gently on the table. Bradley shivered; Tree covered him with the Orioles towel, even though Bradley was more of a Red Sox fan. Dr. Billings looked in Bradley's cloudy eyes, felt around his stomach, listened to his heart. Did what Tree and his father had tried to do, get him to stand.

"He can't," Tree said.

The doctor sighed. "His heart doesn't sound too bad, but I think the rest of him just gave up. He's old. You need to decide what you want to do. I know how hard this is."

Mom put her hand on Bradley's head and wept.

Tree just let loose all the sobs he'd been holding in. Grandpa bent over sadly; Dad lost it, too.

They tried to discuss what to do.

Would they stay when the doctor gave Bradley the shot?

Yes.

Did they want to bury him or have him cremated?

"It doesn't matter," said Dad.

"Buried," said Mom.

Did they understand that the shot would be given and after a few minutes it would go into Bradley's heart and cause it to stop?

Yes, they understood that.

Did they want a few minutes alone first to say good-bye?

Yes. They really did.

■ ■ ■

Tree didn't know how to say good-bye to a dog he'd known all his life. The sadness of it just washed over him, and because he was big, he had more sadness—at least that's how it seemed. So he stood there with Mom, Dad, and Grandpa and just patted Bradley and said he was a good dog, which is what everyone else was saying. That's when the doctor's cat came into the office. Bradley looked at Tree; their eyes met. And Tree knew Bradley had chased his last cat.

Not even McAllister could save him now.

The doctor came in with his needle, started filling it as the cat walked back and forth, loving the power. Tree wanted to kick the cat out. It wasn't fair to have a cat at Bradley's end. The vet walked over, rubbed Bradley's neck.

Tree stamped his foot at the cat. *"Just go!"* The cat jumped out of the room. Tree looked at Bradley, half dead on the table.

He didn't know he had this many tears inside.

"Well," said the vet, moving closer.

Tree bent over the back half of Bradley, held him tight.

Didn't want him to go through this alone.

"Okay now, Bradley," said the vet. "Okay."

Bradley opened one eye.

Gave half a bark.

Barked for real now.

Shook his head.

Stretched his front paws.

Struggled up like a great old wolf.

Faced the cat, who'd slinked back in.

Tree's mother froze right there.

There are plenty of stories about old dogs who die in their owner's arms, but this isn't one of them.

"Hold on," the vet said, shocked. "Can you put him on the floor, Tree?"

Tree cradled Bradley, lowered him gently down.

"Come on, boy," Grandpa whispered. "Come on."

Bradley walked shakily forward.

The cat scurried into the other room.

Bradley turned slowly, came back.

"I've never seen this happen," the vet said, stunned. "It's your decision, folks. I can't promise how long, but I think this old dog's got some life in him yet."

Tree laughed from sheer relief.

"All right now!" Grandpa shouted.

Dad shook his head, amazed.

Mom couldn't speak.

Bradley looked at Tree, who said, "You want to go home, boy?"

Bradley lay down.

"Home is this way." Tree headed for the door. Bradley got up, walked slowly after him.

The whole town was buzzing with Bradley's near-death experience.

"He probably saw a light going through a tunnel before he turned around," said Mrs. Clitter, who brought over some homemade dog biscuits to celebrate.

She said she'd let McAllister slink by more often to keep Bradley on his toes.

That cat was so irritating, he could keep anything alive.

In the days following Bradley's resurrection, the animals of the neighborhood seemed to come by more to celebrate their friend's return. Tree made sure he always had biscuits in his pocket for any dog who wanted one.

"This is from Bradley," he'd say.

Tree knew it wouldn't last forever, but he decided to focus in full on whatever time was left.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The basketball season was winding down and Coach Glummer had developed irritable bowel syndrome, which seemed to reach heightened intensity whenever the Pit Bulls were losing by more than twenty points, which was close to always. They were moving down the court in a more unified manner since ballroom dancing; Tree had made some okay handoffs, but it wasn't enough.

Coach Glummer was holding his stomach, shouting that *no one* was paying attention out there. *No one* on this team cared.

Tree stepped forward. "I don't think that's right, Coach. I care. I was paying attention. I know that Petey was trying, and Ryan, and all the guys."

The Pit Bulls, emboldened by this declaration of courage, said yeah, that was right.

Coach Glummer stammered, said they could do better.

"Maybe," said Tree. "But the Huskies were state champs three years in a row. And the last two years they beat us by much bigger point spreads."

The Pit Bulls growled in agreement.

“And we all went to ballroom dancing like you said, and we’ve been trying to get better.”

Tree knew from his grandpa that hard things take time. He decided to not mention this.

Coach Glummer stormed off.

There are two kinds of coaches in the world—those that listen and those that don’t. Jeremy Liggins stood back as the Pit Bulls circled Tree, slapped him on the back, and told him, “Way to go, man.”

Way to go.

No team had ever told Tree that before.

Helping Grandpa take a shower wasn’t easy.

Grandpa was embarrassed he needed help getting in and out of a wet tub, but it was so easy to slip, he needed a spotter, at least for now.

Tree was standing by the tub. Grandpa sat on the plastic stool, using the shower hose to spray the soap off.

That’s when they heard the siren.

At first the sound didn’t register.

Then a voice on a loudspeaker blared the news:

“This is an evacuation. Move immediately to the Eleanor Roosevelt Middle School. The Burnstown levee broke. Floodwaters are heading toward us.”

Tree couldn’t believe it. Wasn’t there supposed to be more warning than this?

The siren grew louder.

“Okay,” said Grandpa. “We move quick and smart.”

Tree let Grandpa lean heavily on him to get out of the tub.

“Throw me that towel. Get me my leg.”

Tree’s whole body was shaking. He knew how long it took to get his grandpa dressed.

Dad was working at the store.

It was just them at home. He didn’t know how they’d get to the school.

“Get my pants. Get my shirt.” Grandpa said it strong, but urgent. “No panic.”

Pants on, socks; stump liner; leg clicked into place.

It was going to take forever to walk him down the stairs.

“Call your dad.”

Tree raced to the phone. It was dead. Picked up the cell phone. Dialed. No answer.

Dialed again with shaking hands.

Nothing.

“Mom’s out of town, Grandpa.”

“Call the neighbors. We’ll find somebody.”

Tree’s mind went blank. “I can’t remember—”

“Johnsons on the left, Nagels on the right.”

Another siren.

“I’m going to call the police, Grandpa. Tell them we need a ride.”

He punched 911.

Circuits busy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The front door opened.

"I'm here!" Tree's father shouted.

"We're upstairs, Dad!"

Dad took the stairs three at a time. "We've got to get out fast. Pop, can you move?"

"Slowly. Sorry to be a bother."

"You're no bother. Tree, hold him under the arm." Tree did. Two men trying to carry a third. Too much confusion.

"I've got him, Dad. Grandpa, just hold on."

Tree bent down, slung Grandpa over his shoulder. Felt his muscles sag under the weight.

"I feel like I'm in Vietnam again."

Sirens louder. Dad grabbing food, boots, coats.

"In the car. Come on. We've got to beat it."

Rain lashing outside. Wind railing.

Tree, scared frozen. How could a flood be coming when they hadn't seen it yet?

There wasn't time to go back, to get more clothes, anything

important. Tree thought of his tools and his books and his computer.

In the car Tree remembered Bradley.

"I've got to get Bradley!"

Tree ran back into the house as the sirens grew louder. He found Bradley scared half to death in his room; carried him to the car. Dad trying to drive up the hill. Not easy with the sloshing. Tree looking forward, looking back at the house and wondering what, if anything, would be left. Bradley lay as still as Tree had ever seen him.

The car didn't seem like it could make the hill, started sliding.

Grandpa: "Okay, steady her to the left and crawl it up, that's right, just loose the clutch a bit, ram her forward now."

Inch by inch they slid, slipped, up the muddy hill.

Buses, cars making the trek, packed with scared people. For some reason Tree thought of the photo of his parents laughing. He wished he'd grabbed it. He buried his face in Bradley's fur.

"Good dog," Tree said. "That's a good dog."

It's hard to understand the power of nature when it's unleashed on you like that. Man can walk on the moon, orbit Mars, and cure so many diseases, but no one can stop a raging river once it decides to flood its banks.

At the middle school. A policeman at the door told Tree the impossible.

"No animals in the school, son. I'm sorry. They're being kept at the football field."

"But he'll be scared!"

"They've got some tents. It's the best we can do right now. We've got to get the people inside."

Lightning crashing, rain falling sideways.

Bradley shaking like he's going to explode.

A volunteer fireman asked Tree if he wanted to leave Bradley with him—he'd get him to the shelter.

"No. I'm taking him myself." Tree looked pleadingly at his father, who was helping Grandpa inside.

He gave the fireman Bradley's leash. "Can you hold him just a minute?"

Tree helped Dad get Grandpa into the gym.

They got him settled. Dad took Tree aside. "I don't think I've told you how much help you've been with Grandpa. . . . I don't know what I would have done without you."

"Thanks, Dad. That means a lot."

More people were streaming in.

People shouting if anyone had seen so-and-so as the lightning flashed outside and the thunder sounded like a nightmare. Tree looked up at Eleanor Roosevelt's words carved below the basketball hoop:

No one can make you feel inferior without your consent.

Grandpa was doing his best to help the people around him, like the little girl crying for her mother. Her father kept telling her that Mama was going to be coming through that door any minute, but the little girl kept crying anyway.

"Well, darlin'," said Grandpa. "What color hair does your mother have?"

"Brown." The child sniffed.

"And what's her name, other than Mommy?"

Small voice. "Carol."

"I just happen to know a story about a mother with brown hair named Carol who got stuck in a flood, but she was so smart, she helped a dozen people to safety."

The little girl's eyes were wide.

"You want me to tell you that story?"

"Yes!"

"I've got to take Bradley over to the field, Dad."

"I want you right back."

Tree ran out the door; Bradley was cowering near the fireman's feet.

"Okay, boy, it's okay."

Tree tugged on the leash. Bradley dug his heels in, wouldn't move. Tree bent down to pick him up, saw Mr. Cosgrove walking fast, wearing a big slicker, carrying a flashlight.

That's when Tree got the idea—as clear and clean as taking apart a laser pen.

"Mr. Cosgrove, could we keep some animals in the basement in those storage rooms?"

Mr. Cosgrove stopped, looked at Bradley.

He thought for a moment, then motioned Tree to the back door.

"Thanks." Tree picked up Bradley, carried seventy-four pounds of old, wet dog through the darkened hall.

Mr. Cosgrove unlocked the storage room. "Put those newspapers on the floor and pray we don't get caught."

Tree pictured the vet's office with all those animal cages. If they had cages, they could have more animals in the basement. Tree looked around the big room. It had lots of tall steel file cabinets. He opened some file drawers—they were empty and deep—almost like cages. But he'd need a top so the animals could breathe and not get out.

A loud siren blasted in the distance. Mr. Cosgrove and Tree ran upstairs.

More people were pouring in.

Dad walked over.

"We need to stay together."

Tree told him about Bradley in the basement.

"He'll be all right, Tree, I—"

A little boy let out a huge wail. "But they'll drown! They can't be outside. They can't!"

His father was holding a cage with two white rabbits.

Tree whispered to Mr. Cosgrove, "They've already got a cage."

"Do you know what a pension is?" Mr. Cosgrove snapped.

"Sort of." Tree knew it involved money.

"You know what this could do to my pension?"

The little boy was crying hard.

"*Just* the rabbits and the dog. No more."

Tree carried the rabbits downstairs, told Bradley he had two roommates. Told the rabbits, "This is the greatest guard dog in the universe."

The rabbits looked on, unconvinced, as Bradley slept.

"Tree!" Mr. Cosgrove was holding McAllister, who looked like he'd been drowned nine times. "Some woman said this cat can't stay on the field—it's too sensitive."

McAllister shook, hissed.

Tree: "I can make a cage for him if we have some chicken wire."

"I've got that."

Deep hissing.

Mr. Cosgrove deposited wet, crabby cat in Tree's arms.

Bradley opened one eye.

"No, Bradley."

Bradley rose, barking.

"Bradley, no!"

McAllister arched his back, big meow.

"You guys have to get along."

But certain animal ways are bigger than floods.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"What are you doing?" Sully stood at the storage room door.

"Saving animals." Tree put newspaper in a file drawer, lowered McAllister in, covered the top with wire netting, attached it with screws.

"He's not too happy to be saved," Sully observed as McAllister hissed.

"That's the *last* animal." Mr. Cosgrove put the cat in another room.

But more animals were coming.

Tree was running ragged, making cages. He and Sully tried to keep Mr. Cosgrove calm.

"These are just a couple of kittens, Mr. Cosgrove."

"Look what we've got here . . . a ferret."

And the big challenge . . .

"How do you feel about farm animals?"

Three chickens clucked in a cage. "They have arthritis," Sully explained.

News of the flood came sporadically. Radio signals went in and out. Tree was wondering about everything.

Will the house survive?

Will anyone be hurt?

Where in the world is Sophie?

He'd called her house endless times on Dad's cell phone; no answer.

Over and over they heard the warnings: Never stay in your car during a flood. It only takes two feet of water to carry you off.

Amber Melloncroft and Sarah Kravetz shuddered in a corner, blankets over their shoulders.

Tree remembered Grandpa saying how in Vietnam it didn't matter how much money you had, how good you'd been on the football field, how smart you'd been in school.

War is the great equalizer.

Jeremy Liggins stood in the doorway, holding a cage. A policeman told him to bring it outside. Jeremy wailed, "Hamsters can't be in the rain. They're desert animals. *They'll die.*"

Tree walked over. "I might have a safe place for them."

"Where?"

The policeman helped an old woman inside; Tree led Jeremy downstairs.

Mr. Cosgrove stopped when he saw them. "No."

"Mr. Cosgrove, Liggins's hamsters will die if they have to be out in the rain."

Mr. Cosgrove took a hard look at Jeremy. He'd heard him say plenty of mean things to Tree.

"You can keep them down here, but *only* because Tree asked. I hope you appreciate a friend like him."

Jeremy looked down, nodded.

“Mr. Cosgrove, you’re going to get a medal for being a hero.”

“That won’t mean much on unemployment.”

“This reminds me of Vietnam, Leo.” The Trash King huddled under a Red Cross blanket. “Those tropical storms, we’d never get dry. Everything smelled like jungle rot.”

“I’ll take this over Nam any day.”

“Me, too.” King’s wife, Betty, leaned against his shoulder. “You think there’ll be any junk left when we get home, babe?”

“There’ll be junk in our lives till we’re dead.”

Tree watched Grandpa massage his bad leg. King waved an unlit cigar. “A flood like this makes you think. Maybe I should branch out. Get into something current, like hazardous waste.”

“You’ve always been a trendsetter,” Betty observed.

Tree’s dad came by. “I talked to your Mom in Philadelphia. She’s fine. She can’t get back yet because of the weather. She sends her love.” He smiled. “Her house will probably be okay. It’s on a hill. She’s worried enough for all of us.”

He didn’t sound edgy at all when he said it.

Dad’s house wasn’t on a hill. Tree wondered what that meant.

“I told her how well you’ve been handling all this, how you’re helping out everywhere.” Dad grinned. “I told her I was so proud of you, I could bust.”

Tree beamed. “Thanks, Dad.”

Mayor Diner came in at this point, windblown and wet. She took her slicker off, looked at the horde of people in the gym.

Walked to the free-throw line, smiled sadly.

“Ladies and gentlemen. No one expected to be here tonight.”

The people nodded, that’s for sure.

“The weather bureau says we could get a lot more rain. That could wipe things out by the river. The sandbags haven’t held the way we’d hoped.”

Worried looks.

“It’s going to be a long night, folks. Whatever you’ve learned about getting through hard times, I hope you’ll share it with the people around you. I’ve seen so much today that’s encouraged me. The bravery of the rescue workers, neighbors helping each other get to safety. It’s easy at a time like this to remember all the things we’ve left behind, but what this town has—the most important part of it—is sitting right here in this place.

“I don’t know why these things happen. But I’m asking you to hold on. We’ll keep you updated. We’ll keep praying. We’ll keep looking for it to be over.”

Mayor Diner nodded at Inez, the ministry intern at Ripley Presbyterian Church. “Would you lead us in prayer?”

Inez smiled weakly. This flood had her scared stiff. She’d rather have a braver person pray.

But she took the hands of the little girl and the old man next to her; closed her eyes.

“We feel scared, Lord—give us courage. We feel lost—stand beside us. We feel weak—give us strength.”

■ ■ ■

Mrs. Clitter had just visited McAllister in the basement. She didn't much like the makeshift cage, but she knew her cat was safe. She had thanked Mr. Cosgrove, gave him some of the homemade fudge that she kept frozen in blocks in her freezer. She'd grabbed pounds of it when the sirens first blared.

You just never know when someone might appreciate something homemade.

A squawk in the hall.

Eli Slovik, completely drenched, was holding a large cage with Fred the parrot inside.

"Back off, Buster," Fred shouted to the policeman who was telling Eli he had to take Fred to the shelter.

"He can't get wet!" Eli screamed.

"There are parrots in the jungle," the policeman shouted. "It gets wet in the jungle!"

Fudge extended, Mrs. Clitter stepped forward.

The officer crumbled, took the bribe.

Mr. Cosgrove ran by; Mrs. Clitter grabbed his arm tight. "Could we ask you to help just one more of God's creatures?"

Eli was praying Fred wouldn't say "Back off, Buster."

"We're full up."

"Not even for this beautiful, rare bird?"

"No more."

Mr. Cosgrove looked at Fred, who looked back and said the words that would save him.

"You're a genius."

Mr. Cosgrove's eyes went soft.

"Now, isn't that something?" Mrs. Clitter marveled.

"You're a genius." Fred made sincere eye contact.

Mr. Cosgrove, struck by the parrot's depth, said, "The bird stays. Make sure he's warm and dry."

"You're a genius," Fred repeated.

"Get him some food. Whatever he wants."

Mr. Cosgrove ran down the stairs, feeling smarter than he had in years.

One man sows, another reaps.

They slept on mats brought by the Red Cross.

They slept in corners wrapped in blankets they had brought from home.

They slept and woke and wondered when it would be over.

Sophie hadn't shown up yet, and Tree was so worried about her, he couldn't sleep.

Cell-phone batteries were out.

Phone lines were down.

Grandpa rigged up a generator so they could watch TV news. The TV cameras captured the mostly flooded town.

"A flood is like a war," Grandpa observed sadly, "because it can take so much with it."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The rain stopped Wednesday morning.

The sun, bright and full, announced the new day.

Streets were flooded, cars were overturned.

They'd been in the shelter for two days—living in a time warp.

We just want to get home, the people said.

Home to what?

That was the question.

Grandpa, the Trash King, and Tree were working hard to make sure some of it would be positive.

The sign.

That's the first thing people noticed. It made up for the smell, which was rank and persistent and hung over Ripley like foul gas.

Mildew. Piles of yuck.

It rose from the streets, infiltrated the nostrils.

But the sign.

Grandpa lugged parts of it from his workshop over the

garage; wired it. The Trash King stood on the ladder and balanced it on the roof of Temple Beth Israel—a roof most people could see coming back from the middle school—it overlooked the park, too.

Rabbi Toller turned on the generator.

Tree held the ladder as King fixed the big sign in place.

"Plug her in, Rabbi."

"Let there be light," Rabbi Toller announced.

Pow.

WELCOME HOME, FOLKS WE'RE GOING TO MAKE IT

People were honking their horns in their trucks, cars, and vans when they saw it.

The Trash King, Tree, and Grandpa grinned as the photographer from the *Ripley Herald* took photo after photo of that sign.

"Why'd you do it?" the reporter asked. "What made you think of it?"

The old soldiers smiled. "We wanted to encourage the town," Grandpa said. "Give people something good to come home to."

They didn't mention the most important part.

You've got to welcome people back when they've been through a war.

Nobody understands that more than a Vietnam vet.

The shock of loss was everywhere.

A flooded-out house is a ghastly sight.

Especially when it's yours.

They'd called the insurance company.

Turned off the electricity.

Tree, Dad, and Grandpa stood on the muck-covered hall carpet wearing white masks passed out by the Public Health Department.

No one spoke.

The couch was soaked and dirty, the stereo was turned upside down, lamps lay broken on the floor, tables upended.

Brown watermarks three feet up on the first-floor walls. Lower kitchen cabinets opened, soaked cereal boxes, broken dishes, piles and piles of what could never be used again.

Tree's clothesline invention hung untouched from the ceiling, casting shadows.

Tree stepped across the mushy rug. He could hardly stand the fumes.

He'd lived in this house most of his life. And now this, too, was going to be a memory.

Grandpa said, "We rebuild with what we've got left."

But there wasn't anything left except the second floor.

The basement windows had popped out.

Five feet of murky water sat in the basement with dirty clothes, empty paint cans, basketballs, and footballs floating on the surface.

Grandpa steadied himself, Old Ironsides.

But Tree wasn't built of such strong stuff.

He couldn't take any more.

He leaned against the dining room wall and started to cry.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"I know what you're thinking," Grandpa said.

Tree sniffed. It's hard to cry when you've got a white mask over your face.

"I bet you're thinking this whole house will have to be torn down."

Tree shrugged. He was, sort of.

"I can see why you'd think that, having never built a house before." Grandpa studied the wall. "See, floods leave clues. We can see how high the water went on the first floor. Everything above the waterline is okay. The mirrors, the hanging lights. We've got a whole second floor in mint condition. Now, inside the wall . . ." He put an arm on Tree's shoulder to steady himself and kicked a hole in the wall with his good foot. He stuck his hand in, pushed past insulation. "We can see that the plumbing pipes still look solid. I'll have to rewire where it got wet, but we haven't lost the farm. Not by a long shot."

"We haven't?"

Grandpa handed Tree a hammer. "Ram that there."

Tree hit the wall, made a hole.

"Rip it out."

Tree did.

"Stick your hand in there until you feel the frame."

Tree pushed through the insulation. "I can feel it."

"Knock on it."

Tree rapped strong. It was solid.

"We're going to lug this mess out of here, strip this Sheetrock down to the frame, and build her back up again."

Tree sighed. "You make it sound so easy, Grandpa."

"It's not going to be easy. It's going to be worth it."

They stayed in a hotel that night. Bradley, too.

Tree was so tired and sore from cleaning up.

Dad called Curtis and Larry at school. Both wanted to come home in a few days to help.

They sure could use the extra hands.

Then Tree called Sophie's house and finally got an answer.

He almost shouted for joy when he heard her voice.

"I tried to call you, Tree, for the last three days, but I couldn't get through. Aunt Peach got us a room at a motel. We were all shoved in there with cots and cats. It was torture. But the apartment's fine. The flood didn't touch us. I guess there's something good about a fourth-floor walk-up."

He told her about Dad's house and how hard they were working.

"I'm sorry you lost out. But it's good you're not average."

size, Tree. It's good your dad and grandpa have a really big guy to help take care of business."

Tree squared his shoulders at that one.

Two of Grandpa's friends brought an electric pump to drain water from the basement.

Dad and Tree picked through the kitchen and garage, finding what could be saved.

They worked like machines while they still had daylight, wearing big rubber gloves. Floodwater is infectious.

Lugged trash to the Dumpster in the driveway.

Every house on Tree's street had one.

Tree shoveled out piles of junk from the first floor into the Dumpster, smiling bravely at other neighbors who were doing the same thing.

Tree worked till he couldn't anymore. Then the momentousness took over.

There was too much to do. How could they *ever*—

"The first rule of rebuilding is to find something positive and concentrate on that," Grandpa said.

Tree looked at the flooded, smelly mess. "I haven't thrown up yet."

Grandpa laughed. "That's a start."

The basement water had been drained, leaving rank, thick sediment that covered the floor and walls.

Sophie threw ruined books and sports equipment into garbage bags. She'd come to help Tree with the cleanup.

Tree looked at the broken trophy case lying open on the muddy basement floor—Curtis's and Larry's sports certificates were all ruined. Some of the trophies were cracked.

They'd seemed so important when he was growing up.

Tree knelt down to touch a frame with smashed glass. He remembered his mother framing Curtis's award for basketball. Remembered being in the high school auditorium when Curtis got it. Tree had applauded so hard, his hands hurt.

Tree picked up Larry's brass home run medal and Curtis's athlete of the year trophy, dripping mud.

All that glory covered in sludge.

Tree put them in a box.

"I'm going outside before I puke," Sophie announced, lugging a bag up the stairs.

The Trash King picked through the rubble of what was left in his junkyard—so much of it had been ruined by the flood.

"You look at this red wagon," he said to Tree, who'd come to help him move some of the heavy pieces. "Why did it survive? It should have been sucked up by the wind—carried down the river. But it's here. That tells me it can take the heat. I'm not going to sell it for peanuts. I want some real cash for a tough piece like this."

He walked over piles of rusted metal, lifted an old weather vane from the heap. Stuck it in the ground; the vane pointed north. "Still working," he declared, "after all we've been through. You can look at this yard of mine, think there's nothing left worth saving. But trash is here to remind us all that the old's not so bad—it's got life in it yet."

He looked toward the sun, scratched his chin. "I'm going to put that in the brochure."

The giant oak tree began to bud five days after the flood.

Birds were chirping in its branches.

Not one limb was out of place.

Benches were upended, lesser trees snapped in two.

It makes you appreciate a serious root system; roots planted so deep in the ground, holding steady against the storm.

Tree stood in front of the tree with Sophie. Every day at Dad's they were making progress. A huge dehumidifier was in the basement now, drying things up. They'd ripped up the carpet, lugged it out to the street.

"I know this is a special park for you, Tree. I like nature, but too much of it makes me nervous." A tear rolled down Sophie's cheek.

Tree bent down. "What's wrong?"

"I didn't tell you 'cause you had so much going on, but Lassie . . . she didn't make it."

"Oh, no."

"It happened at the motel. She was crawling so slow. Then she just froze on the branch. I tried to get her to do the dance, but she couldn't do it anymore." Big sniff. "I told her, 'I know what it's like to not have anyone like you around. You feel like giving up sometimes.'"

Tree took her hand.

"I told her that, as a pet, she'd been true. She didn't fetch or do tricks, but she gave back as much as a reptile can. She fell off the branch, hit the floor of the cage." Sophie lowered her

head. "I buried her in the Dumpster in the parking lot. I said, 'Thanks, girl, for everything. You could have been a dog if you'd had better luck.' "

"You were good to her," Tree said. "You gave her a good life."

Sophie nodded. "God knows I tried."

Tree looked across the park to the roof of Temple Beth Israel, where the sign was still welcoming people home.

Just then, Nuts the squirrel showed up, nervous as anything.

"Hey, Nuts. You made it." Tree threw him a peanut; the squirrel grabbed it, studied Sophie.

"You know this squirrel?"

"Kind of." Tree felt stupid.

"He looks like he's got a lot to deal with."

Nuts shook a little, scampered off.

"So are you sleeping in the park or what, with your dad's house all messed up?"

Tree grinned. "Actually, my mom's house made it through fine. She invited us to stay with her until Dad's house gets fixed."

Sophie snorted. "Your dad, too?"

"Even Bradley. She said it was going to take a lot of work to get the house right, that no one should have to sleep in a hotel, and that she and Dad were adults and could handle this. We're going there tonight."

Sophie looked at the white oak. "You've got a strange family, Tree."

Tree didn't say it, but he thought this was a very good sign. Maybe his mother wanted to work things out with his father.

He wondered if something awful, like a flood, could have a good side.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Dad, Tree, Grandpa, and Bradley stood on Mom's front porch.

They had been working hard at the house. They looked and smelled it, too.

Dad rang the bell. "Okay," he said nervously. "This is going to be fine."

Tree bit his lip, hoping like crazy.

Mom answered the door, looking really pretty in a blue sweater and skirt.

Her hands went up. "You're *early*."

Bradley went right to her.

Dad croaked, "You said come before dinner."

"I *said* come *after* dinner."

"We can come back," said Dad.

"No, just come in. Tree, wipe your feet. Leo, how are you?" They came inside. "This is going to be a little complicated, but we're all adults."

I'm twelve, Tree thought. *I just look older.*

The doorbell rang.

Mom smoothed her skirt, announced shrilly, "I have a date."
Her first date in twenty-three years.

"Oh," Dad said strangely.

Doorbell again.

"And that's him. So we're all just going to deal with it."

She smiled too bright, opened the door to Richard Blunt,
an average-size, average-looking person.

"Richard," Mom said.

"Jan, you look lovely."

Grandpa sniffed.

Tree coughed.

Dad shoved his hands into his pockets.

Conan spoke for them all—hurled himself in complete
fury at Richard Blunt's ankle with a clear purpose: tearing it to
shreds.

"Bad dog!" Mom grabbed Conan, handed him to Tree.

Good dog, Tree thought as Conan flailed.

"Are you all right?" Mom asked. "He's never done that be-
fore."

Richard Blunt nodded warily.

"Richard, this is my son Tree."

Hand extended. "You're back from college?"

Tree shook it. "I'm in middle school."

Richard Blunt looked up.

"And due to the flood, I have some houseguests." Mom
glared at Dad, who was dank and damp and looked like he'd
slept in the park. "Richard, this is my ex . . . this is my former . . .
this is the father of my children."

"How's it going?" Dad said.

Richard Blunt nodded.

"And *this*," Mom said, "is my former father . . . I mean . . . in-law . . ."

Grandpa took a lurching step forward, shook hands.

Not to be forgotten, Bradley walked to Mom's side.

"And *this*," Mom shouted, "*is my former dog*."

Bradley's cloudy eyes looked up in undying loyalty.

There is no such thing as a former dog.

It was a toss-up as to which was worse.

The introductions, or when Mom and Richard Blunt tried to leave.

The front door was stuck. And Tree, trying to help, made the mistake of putting Conan down, which caused Conan to go back to his original idea of tearing Richard Blunt's ankle to bloody shreds, which caused Mom to shriek, "*Remove that animal*" as she raced out the door.

Tree, Dad, and Grandpa stood there. No one knew what to say.

Then, finally . . .

Dad: "That guy's a real turkey."

Grandpa: "He has sneaky eyes. I don't trust him."

Tree didn't say what he was thinking.

He couldn't believe his mother would go out with anyone except his father.

He couldn't believe he'd thought that all this togetherness was a good idea.

They cooked pasta in the kitchen and ate it silently.

They waited at the kitchen table until she came home.

She walked into the kitchen, saw the dirty dishes.

"You could have at least cleaned up," she snarled at Dad, who said nothing, which never helped.

Then Dad unfolded the new sleep-away couch too hard and busted the spring, and it sat there, half opened—a huge, broken thing. He lugged the mattress onto the floor.

"I'll leave in the morning, Jan. Get a hotel room."

"Oh, yes," she shouted, "make *me* the unreasonable one."

"You don't need any help with that," he muttered.

Tree was listening from the kitchen, doing the dishes. Grandpa had gone to bed. Don't fight, he thought.

Too late.

"How *typical*," she shouted, "to use sarcasm."

Dad said sarcasm was better than hair-trigger emotion.

"You always need the last word, don't you, Mark?"

"Whatever you say, Jan."

Tree wanted to march in there, tell them they were both wrong.

Stop fighting. He wanted to shout it.

Just for tonight, can't you stop fighting?

Slam. That was her bedroom door.

Dad got the last word.

But Mom got the last sound.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Curtis and Larry showed up the next day and bunked in sleeping bags at Mom's.

Dad was at a motel.

Grandpa stayed at Mom's, too, with Tree and Bradley, but this afternoon he was out with the Trash King getting building supplies.

"How bad is it?" Curtis asked Tree.

Part of Tree wanted to say, "It's awful with Mom and Dad," but he knew Curtis didn't mean that.

Tree tried to find the words, but you've got to see for yourself what a flood can do.

Curtis and Larry walked around the muddy lawn, kicked debris away, looked in the broken basement windows.

They went inside the house, came out gagging.

Larry swore, hit the Dumpster, stormed off to get away from the sight.

Curtis went after him. Motioned Tree over. Put one arm

around Larry, one around Tree, and they stood there looking at the old house.

Tree felt so close to his brothers.

"We've got seventy-two hours," Curtis said. "What do we do first?"

"Give up," Larry suggested.

Curtis shook his head, held on tight.

"Scrub the basement walls and floor with Clorox," Grandpa ordered. "No joke."

Rubber gloves on, face masks tight, the Benton brothers formed a fighting unit to kill all bacteria left by the dirty floodwaters.

They lugged ruined boxes of photos and videos to the street.

Grandpa demonstrated how you pull down Sheetrock walls.

Slammed a sledgehammer into the wall, yanked as much out as he could with a crowbar.

Tree and his brothers stood by the wall, holding sledgehammers, too. No one wanted to go first.

Finally, Curtis said, "I keep thinking how it used to be, how Mom drove us crazy picking out the paint for the walls. It's stupid. I don't want to knock them down."

Larry dropped his hammer. "I don't, either."

Tree wanted a magical wind to dry everything up and put it back in place.

"You've got to take a thing apart before you can fix it," Grandpa explained.

Tree, Curtis, and Larry looked at one another.

"The best thing about a sledgehammer is how it lets you release your frustrations." Grandpa pounded his into the wall. "You fellas should try it."

Three sledges rammed the wall.

Grandpa shouted, "*And watch the plumbing in there!*"

Larry went at this with everything he had.

A clang and a crack.

Larry hit a pipe.

Grandpa limped over, marked the crack with tape. "You got many more frustrations left?"

Larry gulped. "Not too many."

"Good. Watch how your brother does it." Grandpa motioned to Tree. "He hits it just right. Swings easy, keeps up a steady rhythm."

Tree liked hearing that, but he wasn't sure Larry would. He hit the wall with the sledge to demonstrate, ripped off the wallboard. Hit it again.

Larry tried, but wasn't getting it.

"Here." Tree stood behind him, held his arm back, let it go. "Hit it like this."

Larry tried it himself.

"That's it," Tree said.

By night, they'd knocked the wallboard down in the hall and the living room.

They pulled out the insulation.

Those rooms stood stark like a tree without leaves.

Dad came in, beat—he had to work at the store *and* help at the house.

Stared at the sight. "You guys did all this?"

"I did most of it," Larry said.

Tree and Curtis pounced on him.

Two A.M.

Tree was in his room at Mom's house. It felt good to be clean, felt good to be someplace that didn't smell like sewage.

He'd scrubbed Larry's home run medal and Curtis's athlete of the year trophy in hot, soapy water.

Dried them off.

Poured metal polish on a cloth and began to rub the medal. He went over and over it, let it dry. Did the same thing with Curtis's brass cup.

He rubbed the dried polish off. Still a few scratches, but the metal looked gold again.

Took another cloth, polished both pieces till they shone.

He sprayed Windex on the marble base of Curtis's trophy to make it gleam.

The trophy looked good, but Curtis's name in raised black letters wasn't clear. He filled in the C, the T, the BENTON with a laundry marker.

Turned to the medal. It was in an open leather box. The box had water stains all over. It looked awful. Tree had seen his dad restore a baseball glove left in the rain with saddle soap.

He poured saddle soap onto a damp cloth and cleaned the box.

That made it better, but not good enough.

He opened a can of mink oil—put some on a cloth, rubbed it deep into the grain.

You've got to be patient to fix a thing right.

He felt the leather get softer, rubbed more and more mink oil in. Gradually, the color deepened. The water stains disappeared.

Tree rubbed for an hour until he'd restored it to something you'd be proud to put on a shelf.

He fell into bed at 4:30.

CHAPTER THIRTY

"It's going to be better here now." Curtis surveyed the first floor of Dad's house. They'd gotten all the wallboard off, down to the frame and joints.

A contractor friend of Grandpa's was going to put up new walls next week.

Curtis and Larry were heading back to school.

"One game!" Larry ran outside, got the basketball that survived the flood.

Curtis ran outside as Larry dribbled the ball in the driveway. They'd hosed the driveway down. It was clean now.

"Come on," Larry shouted. Passed the ball to Tree.

Tree bounced, passed to Curtis, who made an easy basket. Larry got the ball under the net. Passed it to Tree again.

"Come on."

Larry got in front of Tree to guard him; all arms.

Tree tried to get around him.

Larry laughed.

Tree tried a basket from too far away.

Missed.

Curtis threw the ball back to him. Larry got out of the way.

"Nice and easy," Curtis said. "Set up the shot, then shoot."

Tree did that. Watched in triumph as the ball popped through the net.

"Awesome, Tree Man," Curtis said.

Larry slapped him on the back.

It was one of those moments you want to cover with plastic to keep safe.

Dad pulled up in the car with Grandpa, honked the horn.

"We've got to go," Curtis said.

"Wait. I have something for you guys." Tree ran to the porch, grabbed the presents wrapped in tissue paper. Handed one to Larry, one to Curtis.

"Open them."

Dad and Grandpa were heading up the walk.

Larry tore his open.

Couldn't believe what he saw.

Curtis unwrapped his carefully, held it solemnly to the light.

"I washed them off and gave them a polish. That's all it took," Tree said.

Larry touched the leather box, ran his finger across his name. "I thought it was gone." He looked up at Tree.

Tree shrugged.

Dad stepped forward to say something, but Grandpa motioned him back.

Larry slapped Tree on the shoulder. The slap turned into a hug.

Curtis put an arm around Tree, an arm around Larry.

"We'll be back on Memorial Day," Curtis promised.

"Try to get the house finished by then," Larry added. "And don't grow anymore, okay?"

Over the next weeks, Tree knew something had changed.

In school, he and Sophie walked down the hall and Amber and her friends moved aside fast when they saw them coming.

At Dad's, Grandpa started rewiring the downstairs. The new walls went up, and what had seemed like a construction site began to feel like a home again.

At Mom's, Tree looked at the picture of his parents laughing at the beach, and for the first time, he didn't get too torn up about it.

Mom sat him down. "How are you doing with the divorce stuff? How are you feeling about it?"

Tree said honestly, "I wish you hadn't done it. I wish you and Dad had tried harder to stay together. But I'm okay, Mom. I'm okay."

Phantom pain does get better.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Rat a tat tat tat.

Rat a tat tat.

Luger hit the snare drum two-handed.

[illegible]

Drumsticks rolled.

"Move it out!" the Trash King shouted.

The Vietnam vets marched in formation as the Ripley Memorial Day Parade began.

The vets were right behind the League of Women Voters float honoring the women's suffrage movement. Mayor Diner, as Susan B. Anthony, was chained to a post, screaming that women need the right to vote.

Rat a tat tat.

Grandpa was marching next to the Trash King, swinging his right leg out as sharp and smooth as he could manage.

People lined the streets four deep, applauding, whistling.

No town needed a parade as badly as Ripley.

And now, Scotty McNerny, decorated twice for courage in

gling through the only known band rendition of “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction.”

Vets from World War II, Korea, the Gulf War.

Kids on Rollerblades.

Realtors in flag shirts.

Riding lawn mowers driven by Ace Hardware employees.

The high school jazz band blowing strong.

Grandpa feeling wobbly, but he didn’t want to stop.

Luger was behind him, watching.

The drummer is always in charge.

Luger slowed the beat.

Grandpa marched slower; his limp was getting worse.

“Grandpa, are you okay?”

Pushing, frustrated. But he was too stubborn to stop.

Tree moved closer. “Grandpa, I’m worried you’re going to hurt yourself.”

Mona Arnold was standing by the halfway mark at the parade route with her husband and son.

She watched the Vietnam vets marching sharp, except for Leo.

He looked at her, looked away.

He tried to walk better, but his leg was hurting.

She was alongside him now.

“Enough of this, Leo. I want you to ride.”

“A half mile more,” he said. Keep pushing. Just like Vietnam.

“This isn’t about making it until the end or you lose. You already went farther than I figured you could.”

“You losing faith in me, Mona?”

"I'm losing patience."

The Trash King and the vets stopped marching.

Tree held the flag high.

Bradley barked.

"We're all just ordinary heroes here, Leo," the Trash King said. "No supermen allowed. Get in the Jeep."

"All right, all right." Grandpa climbed in good leg first, yanked up the other. Bradley crawled in the back.

Wild Man sounded the horn. "You did real good, Leo."

Grandpa took off his fake leg and raised it over his head.

Wild applause from the crowd.

Sophie, dressed like a soldier of yesteryear, was standing with Tree by the big white oak. They were waiting for Mayor Diner to change out of her Susan B. Anthony costume so the rest of the Memorial Day festivities could begin.

"I stand here in this park, Tree, and I see your story."

"What do you mean?"

"Look at these plants. There's a bush that isn't exciting. There's a vine that means nothing. There's a bunch of weeds. And there's this tree that you can't ignore." She hit the bark. "It sticks out like a sore thumb. That's who you are."

Tree liked that thought, except for the sore-thumb comparison.

Mayor Diner was onstage now.

"Aunt Peach wants me to march in place while I'm playing my solo and salute when I'm done."

Tree wasn't sure about that. "Be yourself, you know?"

Sophie cleared her throat and spat big into a tissue.

They walked to the stage.

She played her flute medley of great war hits with true feeling for the instrument, even though the wind blew her cap of yesteryear off during “Yankee Doodle.” Tree could tell she was getting a mouthful of spit toward the end of “Over There,” but he bet he was the only one to notice. She got a great round of applause from everyone except the popular eighth-grade girls, but the unpopular seventh-grade boys and Aunt Peach more than made up for it.

Mrs. Clitter and the Senior Women’s Modern Dance Society formed the Memorial Day teardrop that symbolized the loss and courage of those who had died to make this country free.

Mayor Diner read, “In Flanders fields the poppies blow /
Between the crosses, row on row . . .”

Then Inez, the ministry intern from Ripley Presbyterian Church, walked forward carrying a large candle, followed by the town’s clergy.

She faced the crowd as a strong wind blew, and said the words she’d been practicing over and over.

“We light this candle of hope to help us remember that hope can always be with us. We light this candle to thank God for helping us through the flood. We light this candle of hope now . . .”

She struck a large match, but the wind blew it out.

Tried again.

“We light this candle of hope now . . .”

A flicker on the candle this time, but the wind was too strong.

A few ministers surrounded her.

"We light this candle of hope . . ."

"Lord," shouted Rabbi Toller. "We need a blowtorch."

"We light this candle of hope . . ."

Not today, they didn't.

Inez turned to the crowd, her big moment snuffed out. She was going to have to write this up for her weekly intern report.

"It's a metaphor, okay? We'll just be hopeful—no flame."

"Amen," said the people.

Sophie pushed Tree forward.

"What?"

"You're bigger than those people. Stand in front of the candle. Stop the wind. You can do it!"

No. Tree couldn't.

"Go on!" She shoved him forward.

Sully walked up, slapped him on the back. "That wind is history."

Inez gazed up as Tree, embarrassed, lumbered across the stage. "I can stop the wind, maybe."

He smiled. Not many kids could say that.

Tree stood over the candle, tucked in, felt the wind trying to crash past him.

Inez shouted, "We light this candle of hope to remember that hope can always be with us. . . ." She looked at Tree.

"Light it!" he said.

She lit it.

The flame caught, burned.

Tree guarded the flame until it got serious.

Inez raised the candle, triumphant.

The people applauded.

"I told you!" Sophie screamed from the crowd.

"Yes!" Sully stamped his feet. "Yes!"

Tree felt like he'd just made a winning free throw in the fourth quarter.

Cameras flashed, flags waved.

His mom smiled proudly from one end of the crowd.

His dad smiled proudly from the other.

Curtis and Larry were clapping and shouting.

Tree looked at his grandpa, and he could see the face of war and peace right there, backlit by the sun.

McInerny lifted his bagpipes and played "From the Halls of Montezuma," which was the Marines' song. McInerny himself was in the Army, but he thought the Marines had a better tune.

The purpose of a bagpipe is to reach deep into the heart.

Everything's got a purpose, really—you just have to look for it.

Cats are good at keeping old dogs alive.

Loss helps you reach for gain.

Death helps you celebrate life.

War helps you work for peace.

A flood makes you glad you're still standing.

And a tall boy can stop the wind so a candle of hope can burn bright.