



# Seeking Cassandra

**Lutricia Clifton**

**Holiday House / New York**

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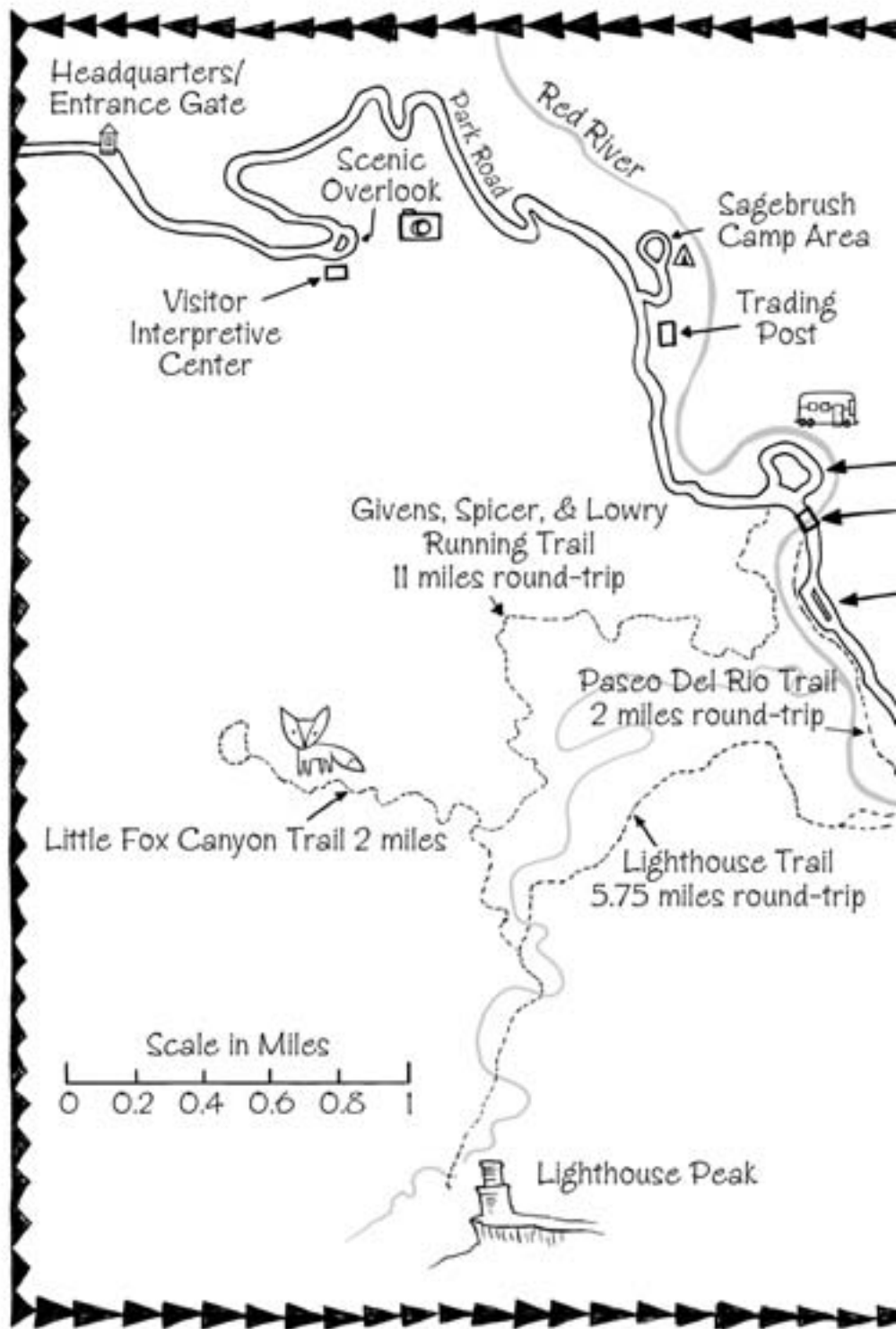
*For my sons, Jeffrey and Christopher*



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# PALO DURO CANYON STATE PARK

— Hackberry Camp Area

— Red River Flash Flood Point

— Chinaberry Day Use Area









## CHAPTER ONE

“Hey, Peaches! When did you get so big? Not too big to give your old man some sugar, I hope.”

*Sugar.* My dad’s word for a kiss.

*Old man.* His term for “father.”

*Peaches.* His nickname for me.

“Dad, my name’s Cassie.”

“Actually,” he says, “it’s Cassandra, after a girl in Greek myth. . . .”

Oh, no—that old story that grosses me out.

“You remember . . . snakes licked Cassandra’s ears so clean she could understand the language of animals—”

“I *know*, Dad. But call me Cassie. It’s what *everyone* calls me.”

His shoulders droop a little. “Cassie it is,” he says.

His whiskers scratch when I kiss his cheek. “You grew a beard . . . your clothes . . . you moved here. *Why?*”

I had a window seat on the flight from Austin to Amarillo. When we circled to land, the ground below looked like a big brown pancake. I don’t eat pancakes. They taste

like Play-Doh unless you put a ton of butter and syrup on them. But butter and syrup are on Mom's *verboden* list. *Verboden* is German for "forbidden." In French, it's *tabou*. Mom's studying foreign languages.

"Why'd I move here? Why'd I grow a beard? Or . . ." He looks down at his clothes. "What's wrong with the way I'm dressed?"

"Why . . . *all* of it?"

I haven't seen Dad since Christmas, when he left Austin, but he calls me every weekend. He and Mom divorced two years ago when I was ten, and they share custody of me. I spent every other weekend with him before he moved. Back then, he shaved and cut his hair short. Wore shoes instead of lace-up boots with scuffed toes. A suit and tie, not faded jeans and a shirt with holes at the elbows. He looked nice then—handsome, even.

"Well . . ." His mouth smiles, but his eyes still look shipwrecked. "Your mom wanted to follow her dream, so I decided to do the same."

"*This* is your dream?" As far as I can see, the land is flat—clear to the horizon.

"Just wait," he says. "It gets better."

We walk to the parking lot, my big black suitcase bumping along after my dad, my day pack bumping against my shoulder blades. A bossy wind is blowing, kicking up dust that stings my eyes, twisting my hair into knots. Barely able to see, I crash into Dad when he stops.

I look around for his SUV, a red Mazda with gray leather seats, but Dad lifts my suitcase into the back end of a dirty blue pickup with a long metal box behind the cab.

"You drive a *truck*?"

“Yep. This Chevy suits my needs now. The CXT would tow a lot more weight, but it had a hefty price tag. . . .”

I tune Dad out as he talks about towing capacity, gas mileage and telescoping mirrors. A minute later, I tune him in again.

“ . . . but the International cost more than this carpenter can afford, so I bought this one. It got good ratings, too.”

“*Carpenter?*” The metal box in the back end suddenly makes sense. It’s a toolbox. “Your dream was to become a *carpenter?*”

My dad used to work for a software company in Austin, like my mom still does. She’s on her way to Europe to attend a six-week training course for managers. He was already a manager, working in technical support, but he quit his job when he moved away. And all the times we talked, he never said a word about any of this. Why? Has he totally flipped out?

He pauses, thinking. “More of a construction worker, I guess. I do painting jobs, too. Some plumbing, electrical. Little bit of everything.” Rubbing the back of my head like he did when I was a little girl, he says, “Hop in. Don’t want to ruin the surprise.”

More surprises?

Yay, me.



## CHAPTER TWO

The truck shakes like a blender crushing ice cubes, and sounds like one, too. I cling to the grab handle and look at Dad.

“Diesel runs a bit rougher than regular gas,” he says. “It’ll smooth out once we get going.” As the truck changes from loud rumbling to low grumbling, he looks at me again. “That, uh, that wash out?”

He’s looking at my hair, which is honey brown . . . mostly.

“It’s called dip dying, and no, it doesn’t wash out. That’s why my friends and I only do the ends. It gets cut off when you trim it, but you can have it dyed again. Mandy and Beth do theirs a different color every time. Pink . . . blue . . . green—sometimes more than one.”

“Mandy and Beth?”

“My best friends.”

“You meet them at that private school your mom insisted on?”

Right before Christmas this year, Mom moved us

to a neighborhood on the other side of town. She said it was safer and the new school had better teachers and a college-prep curriculum. Gang violence was becoming a problem where we used to live, and gang members had started harassing kids at the public school I attended. You could always spot them, especially the ones who wore jackets with their gang name on it and had their gang's symbols tattooed on their necks or arms. In Texas, you have to be eighteen to get tattoos, but these kids obviously knew how to get around the law. Nobody had given me any trouble yet, but Mom seemed to think it was only a matter of time.

I really missed my friends after we moved. We talked a lot right at first, but not so much anymore. They got busy with clubs and cheer squad, and I had a lot of catching up to do at my new school.

"Cassie?" Dad was still waiting for me to answer his question.

"Yeah, I met them at school. They're real cool. We do everything together."

That isn't exactly true. It was only a few weeks ago that Mandy and Beth let me be their friend, and that was because we were assigned a group paper. I did most of the work, but I didn't care. After we turned in our paper, they asked me to go to the mall with them. *Me*, the bookworm at the back of the room. Right off, they decided I had to do my hair like theirs. I said no at first, but when they called me a wimp, I caved.

"And your mom is okay with it?"

"Well, sure . . ." I look out the window, watching a flat world rush past. "Totally."

That's not exactly true, either. Mom pitched a fit when

she saw my hair. But when I told her all the kids were doing it, she eased off. “A fad,” she mumbled. “A passing fad.” Her way of saying I was to get my hair back to normal as soon as possible.

But I really wish she’d liked it. . . .

I look at Dad. “Mandy and Beth love it—me, too. Do, uh, do *you* like it?”

“Didn’t see anything wrong with the way it was,” he says.

My chest caves in. “Well, I picked my favorite color. It’s called—”

“Peach,” he says, finishing for me.

“Oh, yeah.”

When I was six, I asked Dad to paint my bedroom a peach color. He mixed and mixed until he got the shade exactly right.

“Becoming a construction worker isn’t the dream I was talking about,” he says, changing the subject.

“Then what is?”

“A picture’s worth a thousand words,” he says.

That’s the big difference between my dad and my mom. She’s a motormouth and he’d rather read words than speak them. Before he left Austin, he went to the library every weekend. I don’t know why. He owned enough books to open a bookstore.

Sighing, I stare at lines in a highway that goes on for miles and miles.

“Guess it’ll grow on me,” he says a few minutes later.

“Thanks, Dad.”



## CHAPTER THREE

Ahead of us, I spy the outlines of tall buildings. A town. A *big* town. My stomach gets jumpy as I think about cool stores and water parks that I can tell Mandy and Beth about. They're stuck in Austin all summer doing the same old things.

I hope they won't be jealous. I hope they still like me when I get back. Maybe I'll get my hair double-dipped—even triple.

The turn signal on the truck begins to tick, a light on the dash blinks and Dad eases onto an asphalt road, taking us in a different direction.

“Wait—” I watch the town in the distance fade. “Where are we going?”

“Almost there.”

Now the land outside the window isn't just flat, it's boring. Dry grass. Skinny cows. Sagebrush piling up along fences. Something in the distance gets my attention. I can't tell if it's real or a mirage, an optical illusion that happens in hot weather.

“Here we go.” He turns onto a dirt track that leads to a pasture. “Hop out and open the gate—and close it behind you. Don’t want the cattle getting out.”

“*Yuck.*” I land in a plop of cow manure that stains my new pink Converse green. The manure swarms with black flies, which tag along after me. Swatting at them, I tug a rusty hinge free and drag a sagging gate across the road. After Dad drives through, I drag the gate shut again.

I’m covered in orange-colored dust and fly bites when I get back to the truck. Slamming the door, I look at Dad and say, “This dream better be good.”

“It’s better than good,” he says, speeding up.

The mirage gets clearer, and a few minutes later, Dad stops in front of it: a paintless house practically buried under a drift of dry sagebrush.

“Here we are,” he says.

“*This* is the surprise?” The wood siding on the house has faded to gray, the color of mildew. A metal roof sags in the middle. Other than spiky grass, sagebrush and knobby trees, there’s not another thing in sight.

“No, this is where the original settler lived,” Dad says. “The rancher who owns the property now built a new house. Nice guy. Gave me permission to come on his property.”

“Dad, I don’t want go in there.” The house is spooky. Warped boards cover windows, and the roof is streaked with rust, like blood. “It’s probably full of spiders and scorpions.”

“Big ones, no doubt. Follow me and watch for rattlesnakes,” he calls over his shoulder.

“Rattlesnakes?”

“Just listen to what they’re telling you and you’ll be



fine. If they rattle their tails, make a wide circle round them.”

Eyes glued to the ground, I inch my way around clumps of yellowed grass, piles of sagebrush and stubby trees. Dad is so tall, he outdistances me easily. When I catch up with him, he pulls me to a stop, pointing at the ground ahead.

“Careful,” he says. “Don’t want to fall off the rim.”

The ground at our feet drops away like a dirt waterfall. We’re standing at the edge of a gorge. A *huge* gorge.

“It’s called Palo Duro Canyon,” he says.

“Palo . . . *what?*”

“Palo Duro,” he repeats. “It literally means ‘hard tree’ in Spanish. Park rangers figure it probably refers to the mesquite trees that grow here. A fork of the Red River carved the canyon over thousands of years . . .”

For once, Dad’s not word-shy. He tells how this is the second-biggest canyon in the continental United States, second only to the Grand Canyon. He says other things, too. About the battles that were fought here, the archaeological finds made and early pioneer places that have been preserved.

“Pretty, isn’t it?” He looks at me, waiting for an answer.

“Yeah, *real* pretty.” Late-afternoon light colors the canyon like a rainbow fallen to earth, changing the walls from turquoise at the top to pumpkin orange near the ground.

“That’s called the Lighthouse.” He points out a tall rock in front of us that looks like a mushroom. “It’s over three hundred feet high from its pedestal to the top. The pedestal’s that flat ledge there at its base.”

“It’s tall, all right.”

“Length of a football field.” He indicates a narrow

opening in the brush. “This animal trail leads down the canyon wall, but . . .” He points downward, toward the canyon floor. “See that trail? Only way to get to it that’s open to the public.”

Far below, a cleared trail ends near the foot of the rock mushroom.

“Hikers aren’t supposed to leave the authorized trails,” he goes on. “The rangers want to keep track of who enters the park.” He looks at me. “It’s against the rules to climb down from the rim. Okay?”

One thing I’ve noticed with grown-ups. Sometimes when they tell you things, they’re really saying the opposite.

“You climbed down from the rim, didn’t you, Dad? So you’re you saying it’s okay to break the rules sometimes?”

“Well . . .” His mouth shows the faintest hint of a smile.

I wonder if the daredevil next to me is really my dad. When he lived in Austin, he didn’t do much of anything, except work and read books.

“But Dad, I don’t get it. If seeing this was your dream, why didn’t you just take off a couple of weeks from work? I mean, why’d you have to *move* here?”

“Because . . .” He sweeps the hair out of his eyes. “I didn’t want to just see *this* place. I wanted to see other places, too. This work lets me do that.”

“Why didn’t you tell me? Why’d you keep it a secret?”

“I just thought it was best. You’ve had enough to adjust to lately. A new home, new school . . . and I needed to get my new business up and running.” He turns to look at me. “And I was concerned that if I told you, you might not want to come.” He indicates the country around us. “Let’s face it. This is not what you’re accustomed to.”

“I see,” I say, wishing I’d stayed with one of my grandparents, even though they live out in the country, miles from civilization. “Can we go now?” A cocoon of insects envelops me. “These bugs won’t go away.”

He leans close, sniffing. “What did you put on your hair?”

“Nothing. I mean, just shampoo and conditioner.”

“Scented?”

“Mango peach. It smells real good.”

“Yeah, well, the flies think so, too. We’ll have to fix that. Come on, let’s head back.”

Fix what?