PINE ISLAND HOME
ALSO BY POLLY HORVATH

An Occasional Cow
(Pictures by Gioia Fiammenghi)

No More Cornflakes

The Happy Yellow Car

When the Circus Came to Town

The Trolls

Everything on a Waffle

The Canning Season

The Vacation

The Pepins and Their Problems
(Pictures by Marylin Hafner)

The Corps of the Bare-Boned Plane

My One Hundred Adventures

Northward to the Moon

Mr. and Mrs. Bunny—Detectives Extraordinaire!
(Pictures by Sophie Blackall)

One Year in Coal Harbor

Lord and Lady Bunny—Almost Royalty!
(Pictures by Sophie Blackall)

The Night Garden

Very Rich
To Arnie, Emily, Rebecca, Millie, Laddie, Bo, and Murphy.
And to Keena, Zayda, Andrew, and Bonnie too.
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PINE ISLAND HOME
The McCready sisters, Fiona, fourteen, Marlin, twelve, Natasha, ten, and Charlie, eight, were raised in a missionary family. They had been happily and safely moving from pillar to post all over the world when their parents, taking their first vacation ever, having come into a small sum of money from an aging uncle who “felt it strongly” that they had never had a honeymoon, invited them to Thailand, where he ran a small hotel. The three of them and the hotel were swept away in a tsunami. The four girls were, at the time, living in Borneo, in a small cottage far back in the jungle without benefit of internet or phone service, being seen after by a visiting church volunteer who couldn’t continue to take care of them as she had other plans. So the church had a Mrs. Weatherspoon from Australia come to stay with them until someone in their family could step forward. That took a year.

Mrs. Weatherspoon sent out appeals to all the relatives she and the girls could find except for a great-aunt, Martha McCready, who lived off the coast of British Columbia.
The girls’ mother, when opening Martha’s annual Christmas card, called her “that peculiar woman hiding in the woods.” Mrs. Weatherspoon said they would save her as a last resort. But surely someone more suitable would respond first. There were aunts and uncles in Tampa, Florida; Lansing, Michigan; Shreveport, Louisiana; and Kingsport, Tennessee. That was the lot. It took a while for the responses to Mrs. Weatherspoon’s appeal to trickle in. The mail pickup and delivery in the jungle was unreliable and slow. After receiving the appeal, the relatives then had to think about it. These were their sister’s or brother’s children, it was true. But there were four of them. Fitting four children into an already-established household was no small matter. Some of them wrote to ask Mrs. Weatherspoon to write them if no one else had come forward. When Mrs. Weatherspoon did, they had to think about it all over again. This took time. And none of them had met the McCready children. Mr. and Mrs. McCready had become estranged from their brothers and sisters many years before when they had made what the siblings considered a “very weird choice,” joining a church that none of them had heard of and of which, for some reason never explained to the girls, they all disapproved.

It was a very sad year but one made more interesting for the children by waiting to find out where they were eventually going to end up. Fiona, who felt herself in
charge of keeping up with family practices, remembered her father’s dictum to never shy away from the difficult subjects. Talk about them.

“Where would you most like to go?” Fiona would quiz the others at dinner.

“Tampa, I suppose,” said Natasha. “We could swim in the ocean.”

“Is Tampa on the ocean?” asked Marlin.

“It’s in Florida,” said Natasha.

“Not all of Florida is on the ocean,” replied Marlin.

“Sharks,” said Charlie, who tended to see danger everywhere.

“Not on land,” said Marlin.

“I’m sure they’d make us go swimming,” said Charlie. “Everyone always wants to make you go swimming even if you don’t want to. They will make us take swim classes.”

“Swim classes are in pools and you’ve already learned to swim,” said Marlin. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

“They probably make you take your swim classes in the ocean if you live on the ocean and we will be eaten by sharks,” said Charlie morosely.

Marlin could understand why Charlie would be afraid of the ocean, given their recent tragedy. But Charlie, she thought, was afraid of the wrong thing. She should be afraid of tsunamis, not sharks. She was going to point this
out but decided not to give Charlie any more cause for worry.

Mrs. Weatherspoon was always very quiet during these discussions. It pained her that the children had lost their parents and it pained her that they were left to such an uncertain fate. She would have taken them on permanently herself but she too had other plans and had to get back to Australia eventually.

“Not Lansing, Michigan, that’s for sure,” Natasha went on.

“Why not?” asked Charlie.

“It sounds the most boring,” replied Natasha. “What’s in Lansing? Nothing.”

“It’s the state capital,” pointed out Fiona.

“You just said that to show off,” said Natasha. “You don’t care that it’s the state capital.”

“I’m just stating a fact,” said Fiona. “Because I happen to know it. If you studied your geography as you’re supposed to you would know it too.”

Fiona was the quintessential big sister.

“Kingsport, Tennessee,” said Charlie. “I think that’s the best. It sounds like it’s full of castles.”

“Because it’s got king in the name?” asked Marlin. “You will be disappointed. It will not only be boring, you won’t be able to understand anything anyone says because they’ll all have those thick southern accents where it sounds like
people are trying to talk with a mouth full of marbles. And everyone there will be in love with Elvis Presley and probably wear big sunglasses and white jumpsuits.”

“That’s Graceland,” said Natasha.

“Graceland isn’t a city, it’s the name of Elvis’s house,” said Marlin.

“Where is Graceland?” asked Charlie.

Fiona didn’t know and after her geography comment she decided to change the subject.

“You’ll understand the accents better in Tennessee than you will in Shreveport,” she said. “I am stumping for Shreveport anyway despite the accents. There are bayous in Louisiana. I have always wanted to live on a bayou.”

“What’s a bayou?” asked Charlie.

“I don’t know,” admitted Fiona. “I just like the sound of it.”

“It’s something swampy and pelicans fly over it,” said Natasha, who liked birds and knew where different ones lived. “I wouldn’t mind living somewhere that had pelicans.”

Mrs. Weatherspoon usually started silently weeping at this juncture. Her great fear and the one she knew the girls hadn’t considered was that no one would want them and then what? These little hopeful discussions were like piercing arrows to her heart.

As it turned out none of those four sets of aunts and
uncles in those much-discussed destinations did. They were very sorry and regretful but even after so much consideration, and knowing no one else had stepped forward, they just didn’t think they could do it.

Mrs. Weatherspoon was beside herself with anxiety as each declining letter arrived. As the end of her year with the girls approached she finally sent a letter to Martha McCready. Mrs. Weatherspoon had stayed on in the Borneo jungle, sure that at any second, someone in the girls’ family would agree to take them. But the thing she feared most was now in play. She paced and shredded dinner rolls and generally lost control of herself while trying desperately to appear calm each time a regretful no arrived.

Fiona actually 
was calm. “What is going to happen to us now?” she asked after the fourth letter arrived.

“Social services,” said Mrs. Weatherspoon through tears, “is (gulp, gulp, sob, sob) certainly a possibility.” And she blew her nose into her ever-ready embroidered hankie.

“We still haven’t heard from the peculiar great-aunt,” said Marlin.

“No, dear,” said Mrs. Weatherspoon, sniffing, “that’s true but she’s a bit old to be taking on four children. And I gather she’s always been something of a hermit. I would not hang my hopes there.”

“Then where can we hang our hopes?” asked Natasha.

“Again, social (sob, sob, gulp, gulp) services,” Mrs.
Weatherspoon choked out. “You will not end up on the street but, oh my (attempt to stifle sobbing by putting a handkerchief to her mouth so the next part came out muffled), social services of all things!”

“What’s wrong with social services?” asked Charlie, unable to account for the depth of Mrs. Weatherspoon’s sorrow.

“I guess that means foster care,” said Fiona. “Well, that’s bad but not the end of the world. They’ll find someone to take all four of us, won’t they? They won’t split us up?”

“That’s just it,” cried Mrs. Weatherspoon. “I have seen it too many times. I very much fear that is exactly what will happen. You will be split up. Perhaps placed in homes all over the United States. Hundreds of miles from each other. Scattered to the winds!”

And Mrs. Weatherspoon lost it completely, lying right on the floor and heaving with sorrow. Fiona was disenchanted. She liked Mrs. Weatherspoon. She was grateful to Mrs. Weatherspoon for all she had done for them this year. And for taking a year out of her life and familiar surroundings to care for them. But she found this total loss of self-control unseemly.

Besides, Fiona could see that her sisters were nearly wetting themselves at this grown-up display of despair and the news that they might lose each other. They had hung on to their courage and hope all through that terrible year.
It seemed the height of unfairness that after being so brave they were now being asked to face something even more terrifying. This was especially so for Fiona because she felt strongly her need to care for and keep together what was left of their family. The idea of her younger sisters, especially little Charlie, going to some strange home maybe hundreds of miles from her where she couldn’t even keep an eye on them was too awful for words. She began to plan an escape into the jungle for all four of them if it came to that. Better to take their chances with the snakes and be together than face alone the sorrow and terror of the day-to-day wondering of what had become of the others.

For a week Fiona suffered such worry she couldn’t eat but the following week as they got off the school bus and approached the house they found Mrs. Weatherspoon dancing up and down the porch stairs as if she’d lost her mind, and waving a piece of paper. When they got closer they saw it was a letter.

“What is it?” asked Fiona as Mrs. Weatherspoon waved it merrily in their faces. Fiona did not even dare to hope it might be the fifth anticipated reply.

“My dears, my dears, you are saved!” Mrs. Weatherspoon cried happily.

The children sat down right there on the steps and Mrs. Weatherspoon read their great-aunt’s letter to them a full eighteen times. Fortunately, it was short.
Dear Mrs. Weatherspoon,

Thank you for informing me of my great-nieces’ predicament. I will take them. Of course I will. Here is my address, my email, and phone number for the girls when they reach civilization where such services are available. Send me their flight times and I will pick them up at the airport here on Pine Island, British Columbia. I live outside St. Mary’s By the Sea but they will come in at Pine Island’s only airport on the north side of the island in Shoreline and I will pick them up there. I look forward to it.

Yours,

Martha McCready

“She looks forward to it!” intoned Mrs. Weatherspoon over and over between readings as if she could not believe their luck. This began to make Fiona feel very undesirable indeed. But she saw Mrs. Weatherspoon’s point. They were not just being taken in on sufferance. Someone wanted them.

When Mrs. Weatherspoon got tired of the letter readings she leapt up and went inside to bake a coconut cake. Mrs. Weatherspoon, who weighed two hundred and fifty pounds, thought cake the proper expression of all joy. The girls thought this one of her more admirable traits and encouraged it always.
Later as the sisters lay in their beds in their large shared bedroom, Fiona said, “It was nice of her to be so happy for us.”

“Happy for herself just as much, I bet. She gets to go home now too,” said Marlin.

“That’s not very charitable of you,” said Fiona, using a phrase their mother had used a lot. She found herself talking more and more as their mother had, as if to remember her with a lexicon of idioms. “She’s been here a year. Of course she’s glad to go home.”

“And it’s been such a sad year,” said Natasha. “It must have been difficult to witness. For a while I cried almost every day.”

“I still cry,” said Charlie.

“Yes, but you cried before Mom and Dad died,” said Marlin. “It is just your nature.”

“I’m not a crybaby,” protested Charlie.

“No, dear,” said Fiona, “you are sensitive.”

“Mrs. Weatherspoon cries too,” said Charlie. “She cries all the time. She cried every night when we discussed where we might end up.”

“She’s sensitive too,” said Fiona.

“She won’t cry anymore now,” said Natasha. “We are saved.”

“I hope that’s the end of all the crying,” said Marlin.

“Yes,” said Fiona. “Mom always said you can look at
the world and see all the suffering or you can look at it and see all the joy. Let us be glad for this adventure in Canada. Let us take the view of joy.”

“I want Mommy and Daddy back,” said Charlie.

They were quiet after that. It was not fair to pretend that they didn’t want this too and that Charlie hadn’t only voiced what they all felt. But Fiona vowed privately to try and put a cheery face on things for the sake of the other three whenever possible. She would lead in taking the view of joy. Then they went to sleep.

For the next month when Mrs. Weatherspoon wasn’t baking cakes on a tide of celebratory sugared frenzy, she was taking the Jeep on the long trek to the nearest city and having money transferred to Canada for the girls, getting Fiona a cell phone, making sure papers and passports were in order, and at home, helping Fiona pack. Mrs. Weatherspoon was staying behind to clean and close the jungle cottage before flying home herself. It was a busy time but finally with many instructions and warnings and Saran-wrapped cake slices, the children were put on the plane to begin their journey.

“Will there be pine trees?” asked Charlie. “It’s called Pine Island.”


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“Ancient rain forests,” said Marlin, who had also looked it up.
“I doubt they’ll come into town, Nat,” said Fiona. “I doubt they live in St. Mary’s By the Sea.”
“Aunt Martha said she lives outside town,” said Charlie.
“Great-Aunt Martha,” said Marlin.
“That’s too many words to say,” said Charlie. “I’m going to just call her Aunt Martha.”
“Me too,” said Natasha.
“All right, me too,” said Marlin.
“It will be beautiful, Charlie,” said Fiona. “It will be like no place we have ever been, you wait and see. Remember how you were worried about snakes in Borneo but you were never bitten?”
“Hmmm,” said Charlie, who was never so easily convinced, and opened her comic book.
It was many planes and many jet-lagged hours later that the girls arrived finally at the Shoreline airport. It was a small airport without even Jetways. The girls exited right onto the tarmac and walked inside. They had already gone through customs in Vancouver so they went straight to the baggage carousel, where their great-aunt had said she would meet them. But no one came to claim them. They
looked hopefully at any old lady who walked by but no one recognized them or came forward.

“She must have been held up in traffic,” said Fiona. “We will collect all our bags and sit here and wait. And call Mrs. Weatherspoon to let her know we got in okay.”

“Shouldn’t we wait until Aunt Martha arrives?” asked Marlin.

“No, let’s call now so that when Aunt Martha comes we can just leave,” said Fiona. “I can’t wait to be horizontal. Trying to sleep upright on planes is always so horrible.”

So Fiona called and Mrs. Weatherspoon said, “Well, my dears, I am glad you are having your happy ending. There is no branch of the church on the island but you can always write to me if you are in need of spiritual guidance. I will never consider it an imposition. Tell your aunt.”

“Yes, we will,” said Fiona.

“And call me if you need anything.”

“Thank you for everything, Mrs. Weatherspoon.”

“It’s been a pleasure, dear,” said Mrs. Weatherspoon, and they hung up.

After that the girls sat on chairs in the baggage area and waited an hour. They waited two. They phoned their aunt but got only an answering machine. Fiona left messages each time but none of her calls were returned.

“Fiona,” said Marlin, “what are we going to do?”
“We are going to take a cab to her address,” said Fiona. “I have plenty of cash. We will worry about things when we get there.”

They were all exhausted by the thirty-nine hours of traveling. No one argued except the cabdriver, who said, “That’s a long cab ride all the way to St. Mary’s By the Sea. It’s going to cost you.”

Fiona waved a handful of bills in front of him and he shrugged and threw their suitcases in the back and said no more. It was coming to evening. The road was busy at first and then became much less so as it wound around the island’s cliffside roads, the water stretching out below on one side and the pine forests stretching in a dense green blanket on the other.

“Pine trees,” Fiona pointed out to Charlie, but Charlie had fallen asleep.

“Beautiful,” said Fiona, watching two bald eagles circling, riding the thermals in spirals over the forest. “I knew it would be beautiful. Eagles, Natasha.”

But Natasha had fallen asleep too.

The sun left a rosy peachy trail across the sky as it headed on its own journey to the west to make its way around the corner of the earth, bringing a new day to other people, people the girls had left behind in Borneo and beyond.

“It will be all right, Marlin,” said Fiona to Marlin,
whose eyes were drooping, and then as her mother often said, “All things will be all right.”

But they were not so immediately. The cabdriver finally made his way through one end of the charming little seaside village of St. Mary’s By the Sea, all old clapboard shops leaning against each other, sidewalks trimmed with old-fashioned-looking streetlights and neat little hanging baskets spilling a profusion of greenery, out the other end and past the manicured little houses and lots surrounding it. Then they drove once more into the wilderness of long forested roads until finally they came to Martha McCready’s farm. After Fiona had paid the driver and he had taken off, they knocked on the door of the small two-storied house with its wraparound porch and then rang the bell, but no one answered.

“I don’t think anyone’s here,” said Marlin, stating the obvious and leaning on the door. She, like all of them, was on her last legs and almost crazy with fatigue.

“No,” said Fiona, looking for the first time too stupefied to figure out what to do next.

Marlin searched about the mat and doorway and finally found a key under a flowerpot.

“Good finding,” murmured Fiona tiredly, and opened the door.

The house was spic-and-span and empty. Upstairs there were four cots made up side by side in a large bedroom.
“Those must be for us,” said Marlin. “At least we know we were expected.”

The other bedroom was clearly their aunt’s but was empty.

Downstairs there was food in the fridge and cupboards so they made a quick meal of cereal and fruit, took showers, and got into the four beds. Fiona wrote a note to Aunt Martha and left it on the kitchen table in case she came back later.

“I can’t imagine what happened to her,” said Fiona.

“I don’t even care,” mumbled Marlin. “I’m just so happy to be lying down. I’m just so happy to—” Before she could finish the sentence she had joined Charlie and Natasha, who were fast asleep.

But Fiona stayed awake, tired as she was, and thought furiously. She did not know what to do about this new twist in their fate. She could think of no good reason for their aunt to have disappeared. Fiona thought and thought and thought and then she too gave up and slept.
The next morning when the girls awoke, Fiona held out the hope for a second that her aunt had come home in the night and they would find her bedroom occupied. She looked across the hall, saw the bedroom door still open, and got up to investigate. Her aunt’s bed was untouched, and going about the house Fiona knew she had yet to return.

She put out cereal and milk again, feeling odd about taking her aunt’s food without permission although she was sure she wouldn’t mind, and the girls gathered as they came downstairs and settled on comfortable old chairs on the porch. The air smelled of pine and earth and the sea. It was a place smell like none they had experienced before. It was not jungly. It was not deserty. It was not cityish. It smelled March fresh and brisk and teeming with new suits the way a good blowing wind makes you feel exciting things must be coming your way. That it carries with it the invigorating energy of newness, new ventures, new plans, winds from across the world full of possibility.
“Mom did say she was peculiar,” said Marlin. “Maybe this is one of the peculiar things she does. Disappears without warning.”

“We could ask the neighbors,” said Natasha.

“Does she have any?” asked Charlie, for all they could see was a huge fenced meadow and pine tree woods in all directions with mountains to the back of the property and beyond.

“She must have some neighbors,” said Marlin. “We just can’t see them from here. We should walk over after breakfast and knock on their doors. Maybe she told someone where she was going.”

The girls put the breakfast things away, washed and dried the dishes, made the beds, and dressed. Then they headed down the road, Charlie holding Fiona’s hand and looking into the forest the whole way, anticipating bears. The first thing they came to was a small cleared lot with a trailer parked on it. A screen hung half off a window, the steps to the front door were broken, there were an old refrigerator and bathtub on the front lawn.

“Maybe we should go on to the next house,” said Natasha nervously as a large man with a mop of untidy white hair, wearing a dirty white undershirt and ripped pants, banged open the front screen door and glared down at them.

“WHAT!” he roared. “Who are you?”
“Our great-aunt lives next door,” said Fiona.

“Not anymore she doesn’t,” said the man. “She buried herself two days ago.”

At this Fiona’s stomach dropped. This worst possibility had not occurred to her even though she had spent much of the night imagining so many.

“You can’t bury yourself,” argued Marlin rudely. She was the only one of them who got bristly and wanted to fight when confronted. “How can you?”

“My mother said she was hiding in the woods,” said Natasha.

“She wasn’t hiding in the woods, she just wasn’t putting herself forward for gossip,” said the man. “She didn’t talk to folks. I lived beside her for twelve years and we hardly spoke. She doesn’t—didn’t like people.”

“What do you mean she buried herself?” asked Fiona more politely.

“Just that. Oh, not physically, if that’s what you mean. Her corpse didn’t pick up a shovel or hoist the coffin into the hole before jumping into it.”

The girls flinched at such bare description.

“She had it organized, I mean. She didn’t have anyone doing it for her. Apparently, she trusted no one. She purchased her plot in the St. Mary’s By the Sea cemetery—the stone was up five years before she was dead. Some folks said that was going too far. Morbid. That it would give
them a chill to pass by their waiting gravestone every day on the way to town. But your great-aunt was never one to shirk from reality. She knew folks our age can go just like that.” He snapped his fingers. “And she did. She dropped dead in the hardware store. Massive heart attack. Only sixty years old. But she was all prepared. She left no mess. She had an undertaker lined up, her will made, her affairs in order. She knew not too many folks would come to her funeral so—wait a second—is that what you’re here for? No, you’re not here for the funeral. I bet you didn’t even know she was dead. You’re the four she was expecting.”

“I thought you said you never talked to her,” said Marlin.

“Marlin…” said Fiona warningly.

“Well, you’re too late,” said the man as if Marlin hadn’t spoken. “As I said, she’s dead. She left me some of her old fishing gear and you all the house and everything else. She changed her will two weeks ago. If you hadn’t shown up I would have gotten it all. Not that I give a fig. Hiram Pennypacker, her lame excuse for a lawyer, called yesterday to let me know. I don’t think he knew about the four of you still coming here until I told him. He was trying to figure out how to find you to let you know of your inheritance. I’ll be coming over to get the fishing gear out of your shed one of these days.”

“Why you?” asked Marlin.
“Because the fishing gear is now mine,” he said slowly as if Marlin were dim-witted.

“No, I mean why would she leave it to you?”

“Marlin…” said Fiona again.

“Well, he said he didn’t know her,” said Marlin. “So that’s a reasonable question. Why leave everything to someone you don’t know? Or even just the fishing gear? Why leave anything?”

“No one knew her,” said the man. “No one knows me either. I got no time for it. I told her not to take on four kids but you could never tell her anything. She was…” Suddenly the man seemed choked up and turned around and slammed back into the trailer.

“Well,” said Fiona as they all stood in shock, half expecting the man to come back out and finish his sentence, but he didn’t. “I guess we got what we came for. I guess we found out why she didn’t come to meet the plane.”

They turned around and started to walk back to the house. At the bottom of their driveway, as if it had just occurred to her, Marlin said, “We’re back to square one. Social services.”

Charlie began to cry loudly and hiccup. “They’re going to take us away? We won’t be together anymore?”

“No,” said Fiona. “No, they aren’t. We have a house of our own now. We’re not just renting. Aunt Martha left us everything so that probably means some money on top
of Mommy and Daddy’s. We’ll have to find out how that works. I guess we’ll have to see her lawyer, Mr. Penny-packer. We’ll have to get the money put in an account for us the way we did after Mommy and Daddy died. Mrs. Weatherspoon talked to Aunt Martha about the arrangements. I have it all written down somewhere. Our money from Mommy and Daddy is in the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, a branch in St. Mary’s By the Sea. We may be able to live fine on that for now. Maybe for a long while, until we’re old enough to get jobs.”

“Why don’t we call Mrs. Weatherspoon and tell her what happened?” asked Natasha.

“No,” said Fiona musingly. “I think as badly as she’d feel about it, that would only land us in social services again.”

“Then that means we have no grown-up,” said Marlin. “Aren’t they going to object to that?”

But Fiona was thinking. Who was the they this time? The last time it had been the church but the church wasn’t keeping track of them anymore, was it? They had them safely placed in a new home with a family member. Their part in things was over. If they didn’t tell anyone they were living without a grown-up, who was to know? Who was to care now what became of them?

“Do we send out letters again? To all the aunts and uncles begging one of them to take us? Maybe we could offer to pay them?” Marlin said half jokingly.
Fiona was quiet for a minute. Something that had been said here had sparked an idea but she couldn’t quite grasp it, reeling as she was from this impediment to their safe new life.

“Charlie,” she said, “don’t cry. I think there’s an idea somewhere in my brain. I just have to try to shake it loose.”

“What are we going to do?” asked Charlie, ignoring Fiona’s admonition not to cry.

“Well, we are going to explore our new property. We are going to see what food is in the cupboards and if there’s dry yeast and flour I am going to bake bread. Mom always said that she got her best ideas kneading bread. Don’t you remember that’s the first thing she would do when we got into a new home? Because it made the house smell like all our other homes? She said baking bread smells the same no matter where you end up.”

“All right,” said Charlie.

They spent the next hour walking the property. There was a small orchard in one corner of the large fenced-in meadow and other trees scattered throughout the rest of it. Way at the far end of the fenced meadow were a couple of large shelters.

“Those look like stables. She must have had horses at some point,” said Natasha. “Too bad not anymore.”

“I don’t think we can afford horses,” said Fiona. “We may have to be very careful with money. I haven’t paid
much attention to what we have because Mrs. Weather-
spoon did that and I expected Aunt Martha to when we
got here. But now I need to sort that all out. So no, for
now, no horses.”

They found a rocky path that took them down to a
small beach. The tide was out and the water was shallow
for a long way warming in the sun.

“Is this our own beach?” asked Charlie.

“I guess it is now,” said Fiona.

“Well, we’ve never had one of those before,” said
Charlie, cheering up. “That doesn’t cost anything.”

They waded and put their fingers in sea anemones,
watching their tiny tentacles closing around their fingers.
They spied huge colored starfish with many arms lying
among the rocks. Charlie thought they were octopi at
first and cried out but Natasha explained what they were
and also pointed out that the thing to stay away from was
the translucent hard-to-see jellyfish that floated here and
there. “They sting,” she said.

By noon, feeling salt-encrusted, hair-tossed, and sun-
soaked, they went up to the house, where Fiona made
them lunch from the huge supply of cold cuts their aunt
had clearly bought for them. Then Fiona shooed them
away to read their books or make wildflower chains while
she rummaged in the kitchen and found with delight that
she had all the ingredients for bread. She put the yeast and
water together but nothing happened the way it used to for her mother and she was puzzled. She called Marlin. Marlin looked at it, read the recipe from the internet on Aunt Martha’s MacBook Air, stuck her finger in the water with the yeast, and said, “I think your water was too cold.” She dumped it out. “Let me.”

Fiona watched as Marlin carefully began a new batch and this time the yeast foamed as it should. Marlin then added the other ingredients and kneaded the dough over and over and over on the small wooden kitchen table. By the time Marlin had it in a bowl covered in a dish towel to rise and the kitchen cleaned up again, Fiona had found part of the idea that had been germinating in her brain and she called the others to the porch.

“As I said before, we have money, some anyway,” she began. “And a house. We can go tomorrow and register in the schools. I like it here. I’m sure it’s better than Lansing, Michigan, would be or Kingsport, Tennessee. And we’re still together. Those are all pluses.”

“I like it too,” said Marlin.

“Yeah, me too,” said Natasha.

“I want Mommy and Daddy,” said Charlie.

They ignored this. They knew at some level Charlie still felt that if she repeated this enough she could somehow resurrect her parents with the force of sheer longing. They did not encourage this but they did not discourage
it either. Fiona thought it was a sad thing to witness but it would be worse when Charlie finally stopped.

“We have everything we need. The only thing that other people think we need is a grown-up. But I think I can care for us. I don’t think we need a grown-up.”

“Doesn’t matter what you think,” said Marlin practically. “No one is going to let us live on our own once they find out that’s what we’re doing.”

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about,” said Fiona. “We can go on living here as long as no one knows we’re living on our own. Aunt Martha doesn’t seem to have talked to anyone. Except for that neighbor. And the lawyer, who didn’t even know we were on our way here until the neighbor told him. So maybe, just maybe, nobody else even knows about us.”

“They’ll know about us when we show up at school,” said Natasha.

“We could just not go to school,” said Charlie.

“We have to go to school,” said Fiona firmly. “Mom and Dad wanted us all to get a college education.”

“How are we going to afford that?” asked Marlin.

“I don’t know,” said Fiona. “We’ll figure that out, I hope. But in the meantime, we’re not becoming a bunch of dropouts.”

“Then the school will know about us,” repeated Natasha.

“Yes, but they won’t know we are on our own. Not if
we don’t tell them,” Fiona went on. “And that’s the tricky part. We have to, and I mean all of us, Charlie, we have to keep our lips zipped about that. And it will be hard. It cannot slip out to anyone, not to any friends we make, not to this lawyer we will have to go see, not to teachers, not to anyone at all. Can we do that?”

“Yeah, sure,” said Natasha.

“Well, I can,” said Marlin. “The one I’m worried about is Charlie.”

“I won’t tell,” said Charlie solemnly. “I can keep secrets.”

“This is the most important secret you will ever have to keep, Charlie,” said Fiona. “Everything and I mean everything depends upon it.”

“What will we do if someone asks about our parents?” asked Natasha.

“I don’t know. I don’t have that part totally figured out. For now, just be vague. Don’t make up any elaborate lies. Just try and change the subject or say something truthful about them without happening to mention that they’re dead,” said Fiona.

“Yeah, like that’s going to work,” scoffed Marlin. “I give this plan a week at most.”

Charlie began to cry again.

“Crying won’t do you any good, Charlie,” said Marlin. “You have to toughen up about this. You have to be fierce.”

“I can be fierce,” said Charlie, drying her eyes.
“Okay then,” said Fiona. “Plan one, enjoy the rest of the day, and tomorrow I will go with the three of you to school to get you registered and see if they want you to begin that morning and then head to my school to do the same. I have looked on Aunt Martha’s computer and you all go to Greenwillow Elementary, grades kindergarten through seven, and I go to St. Mary’s By the Sea Secondary, grades eight through twelve. They’re across the street from each other. We probably saw them driving in but I don’t remember. We were all so tired.”

“How will we get there?” asked Natasha.

“Tomorrow we will have to walk and then I will sign us up for the school bus if they have one and hopefully it will pick us up not too far away from the house. One thing at a time.”

The rest of the day was spent with Marlin finishing baking the bread, Natasha and Charlie exploring the haylofts over the stables, and the four of them taking the fresh bread and butter for supper down to their beach and eating it while sitting on a log watching the tide come in.

“Look,” said Natasha, pointing at some angular white birds.

“Seagulls,” said Charlie.

“No, arctic terns, migrating back up north,” said Natasha, who had already looked up all local bird life but hadn’t
expected to see terns. She knew of them and knew they migrated but hadn’t known they passed over Pine Island.

The birds turned from one side to the next looking like paper airplanes, their sharp lines slicing the air, the light reflecting off their brilliant wings as if they were glass.

“Arctic terns!” exclaimed Natasha, repeating the magic of their name, awed by seeing a bird she had never expected to.

That night they moved two of the cots into Aunt Martha’s room so that Marlin and Fiona, who liked to stay up later reading and chatting, wouldn’t disturb Charlie and Natasha once they fell asleep. As they lay there, Marlin put her book down suddenly and said, “It will never work, you know. Too much to go wrong.”

“It has to work,” said Fiona. “We are out of options.”

“Has to and will are two different things,” said Marlin, ever the practical one.

“I need you to believe it will, Marl,” said Fiona. “I can’t propel us forward on this hope all alone.”

“Okay,” said Marlin. She was touched by the faith her sister put into her to carry part of the weight of their decision to go it alone but privately she was thinking, *I will say I believe it will work but that’s not the same as believing it any more than has to work and will work are the same.*

Fiona was thinking that she could not bear to be parted from her sisters. They each had quirks and qualities that
had melded together as if all of them together were one thing. One entity. She always believed she could save the people she loved through the force of her determination. Charlie always had one eye out for danger like the family watchdog. Natasha floated through life like a poet, seeing birds and the slant of light on things, alive in the moment without any thought to what might happen next. Marlin had her feet planted fully, stubbornly on the ground. It was as if they all shared the parts of each other that were missing in themselves. There were good and bad sides to these qualities that they brought to the table but she would not change any of them from what they were. She dearly loved both the good and inconvenient aspects of their natures, and her sisters’ natures had become somehow part of her own so that she did not even know who she was without the other three. She did not want to be apart from them. She feared aloneness for herself but she feared it even more for her sisters. The pain it would bring to her was terrible to contemplate but pain for them was unthinkable.
BEFORE they set off, Fiona Google-mapped the walk time to school and found it would take them forty-five minutes. She hurried them out the door, figuring if they did arrive a little late it wouldn’t really matter as they might only be registering, not attending classes that day anyway. They’d had lots of experience with new schools around the world and knew that each had its own ways. As they went down the road she worried that the schools would not let her register the four of them but would want a parent with them to sign things but she kept this worry to herself, cheerfully pointing out big old barns and huge trees and other points of interest.

Once at the elementary school, as they made their way through arriving children and found the school office, her hands began unconsciously to knit and unknit themselves. Marlin gave her a sharp jab with her elbow and when Fiona realized the nervous picture she was presenting, she stopped, drew herself up, and entered the school office prepared for battle.

But instead of arguments about their parentless state,
the school secretary came running up to the counter saying, “There you are. I bet you’re the McCready children, aren’t you? Your teachers have been told you’re coming. Your great-aunt registered you last week. We thought actually we’d see you yesterday but, silly me, I forget about jet lag. All the way from Borneo, my! I’ve never been farther than Vancouver. I bet you needed at least a day to get yourselves in the right time zone, now, didn’t you? Dear, if you’re Fiona, I know your great-aunt said you’d be going to St. Mary’s Secondary and that’s across the street. I’ll see to your sisters if you want to hustle over there.”

“We were wondering about a school bus?” said Fiona.

“Well, your great-aunt said she’d be taking you both ways,” said the secretary. “Or, oh gosh, I forget, she passed, didn’t she? I’m so sorry. Did your family get here in time for the funeral?”

“Um, no,” said Fiona, while the other three looked uncomfortable and tried not to express the panic they were feeling at their parentless state being somehow any moment found out and their hopes and plans coming to nothing.

“That’s a shame but it was sudden as I recall. Well, I’ll sort the school bus. No problem. You’ll all be on the same one. Both schools share the two buses. There’s one that goes west and one that goes east. You’ll be on the west-bound, which leaves from the secondary school parking lot. Most kids are on the eastbound, which leaves from
our lot, so don’t forget and get on that one. I’ll make sure you’re on the list and a stop is put in for you. It’ll all be arranged by the time school is out. Just tell the driver you’re the McCreadys and you’ll be his last stop in case he forgets. Imagine you living way out there at Miss McCready’s place on Farhill Road. She’s got a lovely heritage farm. Or did have. Although, I guess she never did much farming. A fisherman, wasn’t she, really? But such a beautiful old farm she bought there. They’re always the loveliest, aren’t they, the old ones? It used to have quite the apple orchard but I guess she doesn’t do much with the apples anymore, does she? Shame.”

“She doesn’t do much with anything anymore,” whispered Marlin to Natasha.

“As far as we know,” whispered Natasha back because she’d been taught everyone went to heaven and she figured you must do something there. You didn’t just sit around and twiddle your thumbs.

Fiona gave them both a hard look for whispering.

“Oh gosh, there I go again. On about the apples. I do love heritage apple trees. And she’s got a bunch of different kinds of old fruit trees, not just apples. That’s really all I know about her. She kept to herself I believe.”

“At least we’ll have free fruit,” said Natasha, and Marlin nudged her with her elbow. The secretary didn’t seem to notice as she went to her desk to put down her papers.
“Now, I’ll take the three of you to your proper classrooms. You can go now too, dear,” she said to Fiona, who thanked her and ran across the street to the secondary school, where she was likewise welcomed and shown to her classroom. She was so relieved at how much easier it had all been than anticipated that she didn’t even mind that she had forgotten to pack lunches. They’d be ravenous by the time school was out but that was certainly not the worst thing that could happen to them and she’d remember to pack lunches tomorrow. There was a learning curve to being in charge.

Many of the schools Fiona had gone to had had her going from classroom to classroom for different subjects. In other schools, often in out-of-the-way places, children of all ages shared a single classroom. In this school, it seemed there were enough students for one grade nine class with one teacher.

Going into the classroom the first time was always the worst moment in a new school but she found this one friendly enough. School wasn’t going to be a problem, she decided. Keeping friends at arm’s length so they couldn’t discover the girls’ situation without the McCreadys appearing unfriendly was going to be the hard part. But they could figure that out as they went along. She was hopeful again that this desperate plan might just work.

After school Fiona looked in the parking lot for her sisters and found instead the secretary from the elementary school waiting for her. She approached smiling and said,
“I think you’d better come with me if you don’t mind, Fiona. We’re in a bit of a quandary over in the office.”

“What kind of quandary?” asked Fiona nervously.

“You’ll see,” said the secretary but not in a mean manner.

When they got to the office she found Charlie, Natasha, and Marlin sitting on chairs looking miserable. The principal was with them. She was younger than most of the principals Fiona had known. She was pretty with short dark hair and a friendly open face. She smiled when Fiona came in.

“Oh, hello, dear,” she said. “I’m Miss Webster. The thing is that we just want to clear up what is happening with your parents. We’ve gotten a different story from each of the girls’ teachers.”

“Oh,” said Fiona.

“Now, Charlie says your parents are dead . . .”

“They are,” said Charlie.

The principal held up her hand while Marlin raised her eyebrows warningly at Fiona.

“Marlin says that they are busy. And Natasha says they are still in Borneo and will be joining you shortly. I know your great-aunt has passed away, dear, so I did want to clear this up. All we want to know is who is taking care of you at present so we know who to call if there is a problem.”

Fiona looked at the principal. Then she looked at the secretary. Then she looked at the wall. She willed herself to come up with a good intricate lie that would tie her sisters’
three stories together so that they made sense but her mind was like a deer in the headlights and refused to cooperate. The secretary had gone to grab her things to leave for the day and called to them cheerily as she closed the door behind her. Now it was just the five of them.

_So soon. No, no, no! This can’t be happening to us so soon_, thought Fiona. It had occurred to her that they might eventually be found out but not on the very first day. Charlie began to cry.

“Oh, don’t cry, dear,” said Miss Webster. “You’re not in any trouble. But someone’s story must be the true one and I’d like to hear it from your sister as she’s the eldest.”

“Well, um, all the stories are true in a way,” said Fiona, wondering if she could double-talk her way through.

“How is that, dear?” asked the principal, sitting down behind her desk and looking gently inquiring.

“Well, they’re, you know how it is when you’re moving and you lose things?”

“Are you saying you lost your parents?”

“No, no, _lose_ is too strong a word—although in a sense, of course, yes, that is it exactly but can we ever really lose anyone, that’s more to the point.”

“All right. Let’s stop talking gibberish,” said the principal but she didn’t look angry, only concerned. “Who is taking care of you at your great-aunt’s house because I know it isn’t your great-aunt. Also, you should know I was
an inveterate liar in my day and am familiar with all the ins and outs of disguising the truth.”

“No one,” said Fiona flatly. “At present.”

Marlin, Natasha, and Charlie looked at Fiona in dismay. Wasn’t this exactly what she had told them not to admit?

“So, someone is coming?”

“Oh, most certainly, you would think, wouldn’t you?”

“As you know, what I think is neither here nor there. But good try. I told you—in­veterate liar. Marksman class,” said Miss Webster. “Now tell me, why would Charlie say your parents were dead if they weren’t? And if they are dead and your great-aunt is dead, who exactly is staying with you? Whom may I contact?”

“Well, me for the moment,” said Fiona.

The principal said nothing. There was a long silence while she stared at the wall as if figuring something out.

“But we can take care of ourselves perfectly well,” said Natasha. “Fiona said so.”

“Natasha,” said Marlin in alarm.

“Well, that’s what she said,” protested Natasha.

“So, there’s no one? No guardian? No church member? I know your great-aunt said your church was sending you out here. She did not tell me your parents had died. Your aunt was never one to use two words when one would do but that seems a pretty big omission even for her.”

“We have each other,” said Natasha.
“Natasha . . .” said Marlin warningly. She did not think they should be improvising. She thought they should leave it to Fiona to be the spokesman. It was clear the trouble they got into when they all started telling different stories.

“No doubt, no doubt,” muttered the principal.

Charlie chose that unfortunate moment to say, “I want to go home. I’m hungry!”

Miss Webster leapt on that immediately. “Have you not been fed?”

“I didn’t have a lunch,” said Charlie.

This time Marlin elbowed her so hard in the ribs that Charlie screamed, “OUCH!”

“I forgot to pack them!” said Fiona. “It was a mistake. It won’t happen again.”

There was another considering silence and then the principal sat up straight suddenly as if deciding something and said, “I’m going to have to call social services and see what they want me to do with you.”

She started to reach for the phone receiver and Fiona was shocked to find her hand, as if by its own volition, clamp down on the principal’s wrist so that she couldn’t lift the receiver. She had never manhandled a stranger let alone an adult before. Natasha gasped. Marlin’s eyes got large and Charlie squealed.

“Don’t do that,” Fiona begged. “Don’t call social services. Please! At least wait and let me tell you the whole story.”
Miss Webster let go of the phone, sat back, and waited. With many pauses and insertions and interruptions in Fiona’s story by Natasha, Charlie, and Marlin, it all came out.

“There could be nothing,” Fiona summed up, “nothing worse than being split up. You can’t imagine. You can’t imagine what it is to suddenly lose your parents and then find that you are to lose your sisters too. I’ll run away before I let it happen. I’ll run away and take them with me. I’ll run into the woods if I have to. I don’t care what happens to us as long as it happens to us together. If you call social services we will be gone before they can get here.”

“Don’t threaten me,” said Miss Webster. “Just sit there and let me think about this for a minute.”

For the third time there was a long silence but this one was even longer than the others had been. Finally Miss Webster said, “You are wrong on one count. I do know what it is like to lose your family. I ran away when I was only a year older than you. I had an… unfortunate living situation. I ran away and I lived on the street for a long time. Then I turned things around and got an education. I was very lucky. I had a lot of help. And now I’m the youngest principal St. Mary’s By the Sea has ever had.” She blushed as if embarrassed by her outburst of pride, then added, “Not that St. Mary’s By the Sea is very big or has had that many principals.”

“No, but it’s still an achievement!” said Natasha encouragingly as she knew her mother would have.
“Thank you,” said Miss Webster, coughing. “I didn’t mean to bring me into it. All right. You seem like nice girls. You are lucky that I was the first one to discover your secret. And I hope I am the last because here is what I am going to do for you and why. I know social services better and more personally than anyone in St. Mary’s By the Sea might suspect so I have more sympathy for you than many would and I think you are quite right to be alarmed at the prospect of being placed in care. You would, as you fear, most probably be split up because keeping you together, while important, would not be their first priority. Finding homes, any homes, would be. And I agree, staying together should be your priority right now. As long as you can manage it. As long as you’re up for the responsibility, Fiona, because most of it will fall to you as the eldest. I know a desperate fourteen-year-old can do a lot more than people think she can. I did a lot more than anyone gave me credit for but it’s nevertheless very difficult to be on your own, more so than you yet know. I found it so and I didn’t have three others to care for. On the other hand, you have things I didn’t. You have a home and money in the bank. And you have a lot of experience, having lived all over the world. You might just do okay. Still, if I look the other way that makes me culpable. And also responsible for the outcome of this experiment.”

“No, you needn’t feel that way,” said Marlin. “We won’t hold you responsible.”
“It has nothing to do with you. I hold me responsible,” said Miss Webster. “And because of that I plan to come over once a week to inspect and make sure things are running smoothly. Is that understood?”

The four children nodded madly like a line of McCready bobble-head dolls. It almost made Miss Webster, who was feeling punchy with the enormity of what she could be facing in terms of losing her job and criminal prosecution and goodness knows what else, feel like laughing hysterically.

“And in return for keeping your secret you must keep mine. You must never tell anyone that I knew about or approved this arrangement, is that understood? If you are outed and face the worst, there’s no sense people knowing that I knew as well. Do you promise?”

“Yes,” said Fiona solemnly. “You have my word, all our words.”

“We’re so grateful,” said Marlin.

“Thank you,” said Natasha.

“We missed the school bus!” said Charlie, jumping up suddenly as she noticed the almost-empty parking lot.

“Never mind,” said Miss Webster, rising and grabbing her purse and keys. “I’ll give you a lift home. It will give me a chance to see how you’re set up there and reassure myself.”

Miss Webster drove them home and Fiona gave her a tour around the house.
Miss Webster noted the clean kitchen, the beds all tidily made. Then, because it was such a lovely day, they gave her a tour of the meadow, the orchard, and down the private path to their own little beach.

“This is so charming,” said Miss Webster when they were done and standing by the fence looking across the property. “I’ve always wanted a farm like this but this one on the ocean, it’s enchanting. It kind of has everything, doesn’t it? I bet when your great-aunt bought it way back when, she got it for a song. I doubt I’ll ever be able to afford such a place. Lucky girls. Lucky, lucky girls.” Then she caught herself and added, “In some respects. All right!” She clapped her hands together as if a decision had been made. “I’m sure there will be bumps along the way and anticipating what they will be will probably keep me up nights but I guess you’re good for now. The bus will pick you up tomorrow morning at eight-thirty at the end of Farhill Road. I’m going to give you my cell phone number. Phone me if you need something or get in trouble.”

They walked as far as the house with her and went onto the porch, waving and thanking her again.

“Never mind that. Just don’t forget to pack the lunches,” she said over her shoulder, walking back to her car, and the girls heard her muttering to herself, “I’m going to regret this. I know I’m going to regret this. Stupid decision. Stupid, stupid decision.”
“She’s not stupid,” said Charlie as they sat on the porch steps watching Miss Webster’s car drive away.
“No,” said Fiona musingly. “I think she’s very brave.”
“I think she learned to be brave living on her own at our age,” said Marlin. “And now she can be when she has to be.”
“Well, that was a bullet dodged. How shall we celebrate?” asked Fiona.
“Cake,” said Marlin. “Mrs. Weatherspoon has apparently infected me with the need for cake on all occasions.”
“We don’t have any cake,” said Natasha.
“No, but that doesn’t have to be a permanent condition,” said Marlin. “I’m going to see what Aunt Martha has in her cupboards.”
“Our cupboards now,” said Fiona absently.
“Right. Our cupboards. And make a cake from it.”
“We don’t have a cookbook,” Natasha reminded her. She had already explored Aunt Martha’s library the day before when they’d needed a bread recipe and knew that there were shelves and shelves of books but not a single cookbook.
“I’ll check the internet again,” said Marlin. “I can find all the recipes I need there. And that reminds me, Fiona, won’t things like the internet get shut down if we or rather Aunt Martha stops paying her bills?”
“Well, she’s only been dead four days,” said Fiona.
“When we go into town to speak to her lawyer I think we can ask about that as well.”

“Without somehow giving away that we will be paying the bills ourselves,” said Marlin.

“Yes, that will be the tricky part,” said Fiona, grabbing her head. “Never mind, let’s get homework out of the way while Marlin makes the cake. I’d better call the lawyer’s office now before I lose my nerve. I suppose we will need an appointment.”

With a stomach that felt full of rocks, Fiona shut herself in Aunt Martha’s office and phoned the lawyer. When Mr. Pennypacker’s secretary took Fiona’s name she said, “Oh!” as if surprised, as if she had heard Fiona’s name before and was startled to be speaking to her in person, but then efficiently scheduled an appointment for them without further comment.

While Fiona made her call, Marlin scrounged around the kitchen finding, among other things in the cabinets, almond flour, and in the freezer, frozen cherries. So, after perusing the internet, she decided on an almond cherry cake. It was easy to make and she made it in a glass nine-by-eleven-inch pan. By the time they’d finished homework and eaten a supper of canned soup and grilled cheese, the cake was cool enough to eat.

“This is really good,” said Fiona, taking a large bite.

“You’re a natural cake baker,” said Natasha.
“I think I am,” said Marlin, who then sat down to finish her own homework while the others cleaned up the kitchen and Fiona packed lunches for the next day.

Finally, they collapsed in their beds worn out from a day full of adrenaline surges and fell asleep to the loud orchestration of the tree frogs, screaming to the others in their March frenzy to find a mate.

Miss Webster collapsed in bed too, worn out by hard decisions, but she was wrong about being kept awake worrying about things that could go wrong. She slept just fine. It was Fiona who woke up time and again worrying. For something else had occurred to her.

This isn’t going to work, she thought, staring at the Big Dipper, which hung in the right-hand corner of the window, spilling a river of starlight into the inky night. We need a grown-up to pretend to be caring for us. If we’d had that, Miss Webster would never have found out our real situation.

On the face of it this would be a difficult find because the girls as yet knew no one. But Fiona had an idea about that too.
WHEN the girls got up and Natasha headed to the cake pan, deciding to make cherry and almond cake her breakfast, Fiona barked, “Don’t touch that cake!”

“Even Mrs. Weatherspoon let us have cake for breakfast,” protested Natasha. “She said it was no worse than donuts.”

“Mrs. Weatherspoon was the size of a house,” said Marlin. “Is that what you want?”

“Marlin, that’s not nice,” said Fiona. “And anyway, that’s not why I don’t want you to touch the cake. I have other more important plans for it.”

“What plans?” asked Charlie.

“Never mind,” said Fiona. She didn’t want three versions of the plan somehow slipping out of three mouths during recess or lunch and another afternoon in Miss Webster’s office. “I’ll tell you after school when we get home.”

It was a blissfully uneventful day and the girls enjoyed the novelty of once more riding on the bus and being the last four to get off just as that morning they had been the
first four to get on. Charlie thought it conferred on them a certain distinction.

“We’ve never been first on and last off the bus before,” said Charlie.

“Who cares?” said Natasha.

“It makes us special,” said Charlie.

“You’re living without a grown-up,” said Marlin.

“You’re already special.”

“Anyway, it does you no good to be special if no one knows why you're special,” said Natasha.

“Yes, and let’s keep it that way,” said Fiona wryly.

They got a quick after-school snack in the kitchen and Fiona wrapped up the rest of the cake in foil.

“Now,” she announced, “we are taking this next door.”

“What—to that mean man in the trailer?” said Charlie in dismay.

“Yes. A plan has been forming at the back of my mind ever since Marlin joked that we should send letters to the aunts and uncles who wouldn’t take us, offering to pay them to take us. It’s been driving me crazy like an itch you can’t reach but in the middle of the night it finally came to me. Last night I kept imagining situations where we would be found out because we had no grown-up pretending to be our guardian. And I thought of that man next door. He might not do it for free but I think he might if we offered to pay him.”
“Why him?” asked Marlin.

“Well, he looks like he has no scruples and is in need of money. Also, he’s close for emergencies. If we need someone to come over and pretend to be watching us.”

Marlin nodded slowly. She could see the merit in this plan. “And the cake is to sweeten the deal? Good idea,” she said, thinking of his stomach hanging over the belt of his pants. “He looks like he enjoys a good cake.”

“I don’t want to go. He’s scary,” said Charlie.

“You don’t have to,” said Fiona. “You can stay here and Natasha can too. Marlin too for that matter.”

“Oh no,” said Marlin. “I’m not letting you enter the lion’s den alone. Come on.” She hooked her arm through Fiona’s and the two of them marched down the front steps carrying the foil-wrapped cake.

“You stay in the house, though, Charlie and Natasha!” yelled Marlin over her shoulder.

“And do your homework!” shouted Fiona.

When Fiona and Marlin got to the trailer and knocked on the door it took the man a long time to answer and when he did he looked fuzzy-headed.

“WHAT!” he roared just as he had a couple of days before. “Who are you?”

“We are Martha McCready’s great-nieces,” said Fiona patiently. “You met us before. Can we come in?”
“No,” said the man, staggering back and landing on a couch opposite the open door. Fiona entered anyway, carefully stepping around the clutter of empty beer cans and bottles on the floor.

“Don’t you throw away your garbage?” asked Marlin.

“Marlin,” said Fiona warningly.

“What?” said the man, who seemed stunned. “Hey, who said you could come in?”

“We are paying you a friendly call. And speaking of paying,” Fiona went on, “we have a proposition for you.”

“Oh yeah?” said the man, dropping his head forward into his hands, his elbows resting on his knees. He looked mortally ill and smelled like wet wool.

“Yes. You see, we need a guardian,” began Fiona. “We thought of you.”

At this the man looked up and laughed uproariously.

“You want me to be your guardian?”

“Yes,” said Fiona. “In name only. We are living alone on Aunt Martha’s property and we’re going to be in trouble if people find out. We need a grown-up to sign things and generally assure everyone that we aren’t alone. Even though we are.”

“Well, you can forget about me. I hate children,” said the man. “Horrible jam-handed sticky things. I didn’t have any and I don’t plan to. Go HOME.”
“We brought you a cake,” said Marlin, taking the foil package out of Fiona’s hands, where she’d been tensely clutching it. “I made it myself. It’s delicious.”

“Oh…cake,” said the man, sounding slightly mollified. He took it from Marlin’s hands and put it in his lap. “Well, now, I don’t remember the last time I had home-made cake. Can’t say I object to that.”

It took his shaking fingers a minute to open the foil and then he paused, stared down at it, and his face grew thunderous again as he said, “What’s this? Is this a joke? This isn’t cake. This is just mush!”

Fiona looked down. The almond cherry cake had not traveled well. The cherries had made a very wet cake to begin with and the trip over in her tense fingers had not improved matters. It was indeed a kind of pink mush in the foil.

“This is disgusting,” he said. “I don’t want this.”

“Disgusting? Why you!” cried Marlin, leaning forward as if to charge him.

“Marlin, hush,” said Fiona. “It must have gotten squashed coming over but it tastes fantastic. Taste it.”

“No,” said the man.

“Go on, taste it,” encouraged Fiona.

“No, I changed my mind,” said Marlin, taking it back from him. “He doesn’t deserve my cake.”

“You got that right,” said the man.

“All right, listen, we started out wrong here,” said
Fiona. “I think we need to exchange names properly. I’m Fiona, this is Marlin, my little sisters who stayed home are Natasha and Charlie. You met them the other day.”

“Charlie’s the one that cries,” said the man with unexpected perspicacity.

“That’s right!” said Fiona, as if awarding him a gold star. “I remember her,” said the man. “She was earth-shatteringly loud. God, I hate the sound of people crying. Particularly high-pitched little keeners like her.”

“And your name is?” asked Fiona, hoping to move the conversation on from how much he hated children.

“Al,” said the man.

“Al what? We can’t just use Al as your name on forms and such.”

“Al Farber, but you’re not putting my name on anything because I won’t do it.”

“We don’t need you to do anything. That’s why it’s such a sweet deal for you. We’ll hardly bother you at all. We just need your name and phone number and if anyone calls you to check up on us, say you’re the guardian. Or in the even more unlikely event someone comes to our house, you just run over for a very short time and pretend to be taking care of us. That’s it.”

“Forget it,” said Al.

“We’ll pay you,” said Fiona.

“How much?”
“Twenty bucks a week.”

“Twenty bucks a week?” Al started laughing. “I spend more than that on beer.”

“Jeez, how much beer do you drink?” asked Marlin.

“None of your BUSINESS,” barked Al. “You see, this is why I hate children. They’ve always got one nose in your business.”

“Do you know children with more than one nose?” asked Marlin.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, you made it sound like one of their noses was in your business and one was somewhere else.”

“Mother of God,” said Al, dropping his head into his hands. “An editor!”

“Marlin, be quiet,” said Fiona. “All Marlin meant by asking you about your, er, beer-drinking habits was that we can cover your beer costs. If they’re not too exorbitant.”

“Well!” said Al, looking up sharply at Fiona. “Someone with a vocabulary. I’d give you points for that if you weren’t a child and I didn’t hate children so much. But you are and I do so that’s that.”

Marlin looked around at the filthy trailer with its open cans of baked beans all sporting forks as if he opened one, stuck a fork in, ate a bit, discarded it, and then forgot about it and then opened a new one, stuck a fork in it, and left that one in a new place. The trailer was decorated
in open cans with forks sticking out of them on all the shelves and flat surfaces. In a certain light, she decided, it might look like a modern art installation. Their father was always bringing them to modern art museums when they were stationed near big cities and explaining installations, which no matter how many she saw always seemed silly to her. This, she thought, was as good as any she’d seen. Then she shook herself and got back on point.

“And we’ll bring you dinner every night,” she added with sudden inspiration.

“Dinner?”

“A hot dinner,” said Marlin.

“You can’t cook,” said the man, looking pointedly at the cake.

“THERE’S NOTHING WRONG WITH MY CAKE!” shouted Marlin.

“Nothing a garbage can couldn’t solve,” said Al.

“Besides, Fiona cooks dinner. She makes all kinds of tasty things, roast chicken and mashed potatoes, brisket with vegetables, vegetable soup, pork chops in mushroom sauce.” Marlin rattled off things their mother used to make.

Al got a strange dreamy look in his eye.

“I haven’t had a homemade pork chop in a long time,” he said.

“Well, there you go. And all you have to do is pretend to be our guardian,” said Fiona, leaping on this.
“All right,” said Al. “We’ll try it. But no mushy cakes.”
“There’s nothing WRONG . . .” began Marlin, decibels rising until Fiona hustled her out the door and down the steps.
“And you need to take us to town tomorrow to see our aunt’s lawyer, Hiram Pennypacker,” said Fiona, swiftly over her shoulder, hoping to end matters there.
“NO!” called Al from the top step of the trailer. “I won’t take you to see that idiot.”
“Please? You could just sit in the office and pose as our guardian and say nothing. I would do all the talking,” said Fiona, stopping and turning to face him again. “St. Mary’s By the Sea is a long walk. You could use my aunt’s car. It’s just sitting in the driveway.”
“I’ve got my own truck, thank you very much. I don’t need to borrow a car. But I won’t go see that fool.”
“Well, could you just drive us there and wait for us?”
“No.”
“But I made an appointment,” said Fiona. “And it’s supposed to rain. We can’t go in looking like drowned rats and we will if we have to walk an hour in the rain to get there.”
“Your problem, not mine,” said Al. “Now, does our deal include dinner tonight?”
“Only if you drive us tomorrow,” said Marlin.
The girls stepped back in surprise as Al suddenly
pounded down the trailer steps, stomped across the yard, and went into a small shed. They were afraid they had pushed him too hard but in a minute, they saw what he had gone into the shed for as he wheeled a bike toward them.

“Here, you can buy this from me,” he said. “Give you the bargain price of twenty bucks. It’s a good bike. It’s got a basket and everything.”

“Wow,” said Fiona, getting on it and pedaling around. It was a woman’s bike, light blue with a white wicker basket, and seemed a little too froufrou to belong to Al. “This isn’t yours, is it?”

“Do I look like someone who rides around on pretty bicycles?” he asked.

“Well, it looks in awfully good working order. Tires full of air, no rust on it. Someone has been using it.”

“So?” said Al. “Are you saying if it were mine it wouldn’t be in good working order?”

Fiona said nothing but eyed the refrigerator and tub sitting in the yard.

“You didn’t steal it, did you?” she finally asked.

“STEA L IT!” roared Al. “You want it or not?”

“Yes please,” said Fiona. “I’ll bring you the twenty bucks and the beer money when we bring you dinner tomorrow. You don’t get it tonight because you wouldn’t drive us into town.”
Al turned without a word and headed back to the trailer.

“Then we have a deal?” called Fiona.

“Yeah, yeah,” he muttered.

“I need you to write down your name and address and phone number. No, forget the address, we’ll fudge that for forms, it’s probably better people think you now live with us.”

“Oh, for Pete’s sake,” he said.

“You’ll have to lie. I’m sorry about that,” said Fiona.

“But you will.”

“Ha, I don’t mind the lying,” he said. “I mind the nuisance factor.”

He found a pen and paper by the couch in the trailer and wrote his name and phone number down for Fiona and she and Marlin headed back home, Fiona wheeling the bike and Marlin still clutching the mushed almond cherry cake.

“And no more cakes!” he called out behind them.

“Until you learn to make them properly!”

“I hate him,” muttered Marlin as they walked up their driveway. When they got to the house she dropped the cake in the garbage can by the shed. “I don’t want it after he had his dirty hands on it.”

“Don’t hate him, Marlin, he might be the saving of us,” said Fiona. “But I wish you hadn’t told him I could cook.
I can’t make anything more complicated than grilled cheese or eggs.”

“I know,” said Marlin. “But that only occurred to me after I said you would.”

“I guess now that we have the bike I may as well go see the lawyer alone,” said Fiona. “Especially if it’s supposed to rain. No sense all of us getting wet and only one of us can ride the bike.”

“It’s too bad we don’t have bikes for everyone,” said Marlin.

“Don’t look a gift bike in the mouth,” said Fiona. “It will be handy for errands. Especially with that basket. And twenty bucks seems cheap to me for a bike.”

They stayed a bit in the driveway, taking turns riding it. Marlin appeared to be deep in thought as she rode in circles. Finally, she said, “You know, I think I could tweak that almond cherry cake recipe. It shouldn’t have gotten all mushy like that. Less cherries maybe. Or drain them better.”

“Don’t let him get to you,” advised Fiona.

“I’m not,” said Marlin. “It’s not about that…”

But she wouldn’t say what it was about. She wasn’t even sure herself, so they left it at that and went in to tell the others their good news.
SATURDAY Fiona woke up full of buoyant spring fever and optimism. All the fruit trees were beginning to bloom. Poking up like candles on a birthday cake within the sea of green grass in the meadow were brown trunks topped by round pink puffs both dark and light. They were the kind of trees Charlie might draw, so perfectly round were the tops. The songbirds were calling each other from the meadow. It was the way, thought Fiona, that one might imagine heaven, a spring morning so soft yet lustrous, so bursting with life. Then she had the wish that if her parents were in heaven it was just like this. That perhaps they were all experiencing somehow on different planes the same morning together. The thought of this, her parents perhaps longing for them somewhere far away as they longed for their parents, made a tear run down her cheek but she brushed it off quickly. Anyhow, she decided, she couldn’t really know anything for certain except what was before her and that was that the day was beautiful.

Natasha and Charlie were still asleep but Marlin and
Fiona sat on the front porch in sweaters in the soft March spring air, drinking hot cocoa from a mix that they’d found in Aunt Martha’s cupboard.

“I’ve made an inventory of the freezer,” said Marlin. “Either Aunt Martha thought children ate a great deal or she is one of those children of the depression that Mom used to talk about who have to squirrel away everything in case it happens again. There’s a lot of meat. Lots of chicken. Bread. Frozen pizzas and potpies and that type of thing. There’s frozen and fresh vegetables and cans of vegetables in the cabinets as well as canned baked beans and dry pasta, rice, et cetera. And she must have done some baking because she’s got all the necessary baking supplies like baking powder and soda and even yeast, as you know. Really, all we need are milk and eggs and some butter because we’re running low on those.”

“Eggs we can get along the road,” said Fiona. “I saw several egg stands from the bus. I can pick some up on the way home from town. I don’t know what time I’ll be back or how long it will take with Mr. Pennypacker to go through all of Aunt Martha’s affairs. And then I still have to think of something to make for supper. I mean something that sounds like the stuff you promised Al.”

“Never mind that,” said Marlin. “I have been looking up recipes that use what we already have and I thought I would mess around with it.”
“Really?” said Fiona. “You’ve never made dinner before.”
“Well, neither have you,” said Marlin. “Not anything complicated.”
“True, true,” said Fiona.
“I wish Mom had written down her recipes for us but I thought I could play around with making them from memory. The pork chops…there were mushrooms in it, I know, and there are pork chops in the freezer and mushrooms in the fridge…” Marlin drifted off in thought.
Reluctantly Fiona left the fragrant front porch and went inside to start a load of laundry. Then she sat down and made a detailed list of everything she could remember people doing to keep house. Laundry and vacuuming—Aunt Martha didn’t have a vacuum but she had a broom. That would have to do. Washing the bathroom and kitchen. Really, it didn’t seem too onerous. She figured if the four of them could blitz the house on Saturday they’d have Sunday free. Or blitz on Sunday and have Saturday free when it might be more fun to do things in town. Or at least one of them could go into town on the bike. Maybe they should take turns. Her head was swimming with ideas.
She went upstairs to find her one good outfit. She and her sisters had been around the world, each with the one large suitcase their parents allowed them. It had to contain everything they needed, toys, clothes, books. And
they always had one outfit that was reserved for going to church or other occasions where their parents wanted them to be well-dressed. She decided she would wear hers: a nice pair of black pixie pants, a white silk shirt, and an elaborately embroidered green vest that her parents had bought her during their short sojourn in India. She put on running shoes and placed her good black flats in the bike basket to change into when she got to town. Then she was off for her ten o’clock appointment with Mr. Pennypacker.

Although they’d taken the bus down this road yesterday and walked it once, it was different on a bike. From her higher vantage point on the bike but slower speed than the bus she could see all kinds of things she’d missed, houses hidden in the woods, horses grazing in fields, orchards hidden behind a fringe of pine trees. It took half an hour on the bike to get as far as the school and another ten minutes to be at St. Mary’s By the Sea’s “downtown,” which consisted of two intersecting streets. One street had a series of buildings with false fronts and it was here she found Mr. Pennypacker’s office.

She parked her bike, changed her shoes, putting her running shoes in her backpack, and went inside. The receptionist took her name and pointed to a couch where she could sit and wait and in a few minutes Mr. Pennypacker came out. He was a short, delicate man who Fiona guessed to be about the same age Aunt Martha would have
been. He had sharp features, bushy eyebrows, and a long white pointed beard. He wore a red vest and colorful pants, reminding her of something, but she couldn’t think what.

“Ah!” He looked around. “Is no one with you?” he asked, ushering her into his inner office.

“No, just me,” she said.

“Oh,” he said. “I thought you’d have brought whatever grown-up traveled with you. We have a great deal of paperwork to go through. But your great-aunt made things easier by having everything ready before she died. She was a meticulous and responsible person and I am sorrier than I can say that she is gone. Now, I know she was planning to adopt the four of you but died, of course, before that happened. She didn’t tell me what happened to your parents but I assumed they died together suddenly and that was why she was taking you in.”

“Yes,” said Fiona.

“As I say, your great-aunt had everything prepared for the eventuality of her death except a guardian appointed for the four of you in the case that anything happened to her. Biscuit?”

He held a plate with some rather chalky-looking Peek Freans cookies but Fiona took one politely and nibbled on the corner.

“Actually,” she said, “she did take care of that. We do have a guardian.”
“You don’t say. It would have been nice if your guardian had come with you. It’s highly irregular to be dealing with all the legalities with a fourteen-year-old. It would have been nice if Martha had told me about it too. I suppose she was going to but her unexpected death precluded that. Well, who is it?”

“His name is Al Farber,” said Fiona.

She had expected a name to reassure Mr. Pennypacker but although up until that moment he had been smooth and lawyerly, he now stood up and roared, “WHAT? THAT DRUNKEN WASTREL!”

Fiona was so startled she couldn’t say anything and her cookie fell from her hand into her lap.

“Did he tell you she’d appointed him or did that come from her?” asked Mr. Pennypacker, leaning forward and squinting his eyes suspiciously. “How did you hear that he was your guardian? I cannot see her choosing him! Not him. I could see him lying to you, though, if he was working some kind of an angle.”

“No, no, we had to tell him he was the guardian in point of fact,” said Fiona, thinking this part was at least close to the truth because now there was nothing for it but to elaborate with an outright lie. “We found her request to have him made the guardian in some papers in her underwear drawer when we were clearing out her stuff for the attic and we gave the papers to him.”
She said this automatically because she kept things like chocolate bars or her diary or anything she didn’t want to share with her sisters in her underwear drawer. But now the idea of finding things among her great-aunt’s underwear made her blush and she wished she’d thought of another place to have found the papers.

“Well! She might have told me, her lawyer!” said Mr. Pennypacker, whose face had gone red and sweaty when he’d yelled. He sat back and wiped it with a handkerchief, trying to calm himself. “Well! I must say I don’t know what she was thinking but then I seldom did. She was a wonderful woman but what you might call buttoned-up. Very private. No doubt it was his proximity that she felt made him suitable. Or perhaps he enlisted himself for the job.”

Fiona snorted involuntarily at this.

“Well! All right. There are some things he will need to sign and I’ll need to see paperwork showing he is who your aunt chose to be your legal guardian.”

Fiona hadn’t thought of this.

“All right,” she said finally, wondering how she would get around this one.

“He’s moving onto your property at some point, or has already, I assume?”

“Oh yes, he’s looking into that,” said Fiona vaguely.

The rest was just a lot of talk about the house and the money that had been left to them. It seemed a substantial
amount although she had never dealt with large sums before. She had no idea what kind of bills there would be or how much it would cost the four of them to live. Her parents had always taken care of that. And after their death, the church and Mrs. Weatherspoon. Everything of Aunt Martha’s had gone to Fiona and her sisters including, Mr. Pennypacker explained, the money from the sale of Aunt Martha’s fishing boat if they could find a buyer. Mr. Pennypacker was handling the sale. Only some old fishing gear had gone to Al Farber.

“Why?” asked Fiona.

“Why?” he said. “I suppose because he used to trail your great-aunt around like a sick puppy while she fished, writing about her. She was a professional fisherman, as you know. He came here to do an article about her for the New York Times. That was a while ago when there weren’t so many female professional fishermen going out alone. He ended up staying and writing a whole book about her. It was actually a bestseller for a time. Not that I ever thought it was much good. To capture your great-aunt on paper would not be an easy thing and I don’t think in the end he really managed it, popular though the book might have been. She thought he would just pack up and go back to New York after he finished writing it and he should have but instead he bought the lot next door to her farm and parked that hideous trailer on it and stayed on and on.
There was some rumor he wanted to marry her. But she had more sense than to return his affections. He was more like...a...like a...STALKER!” Mr. Pennypacker spat out venomously.

“That’s not what he told us,” said Fiona. “That is, he didn’t tell us they were, um, romantically involved.”

“Well, I doubt they were, for her part anyhow,” said Mr. Pennypacker smugly.

“He said they never spoke to each other.”

“Well, there you have it. You see,” said Mr. Pennypacker, “shameless liar.”

Fiona began to wonder if St. Mary’s By the Sea attracted liars. Miss Webster, Al Farber, and now the four of them.

“What was the book called?” asked Fiona.

“Oh, I forget. She probably has a copy in her library. He certainly has a copy or two. Wastrel,” he said again, staring off over Fiona’s right shoulder looking grim. “Anyhow, that’s no doubt why she left him the fishing gear. He was on her boat for days at a time writing and she taught him to fish, I believe. Started out Mr. Fancy Pants Big-City Boy from New York, looking down his nose at all of us yokels and ends up wanting to fish like her—with her. I guess she scotched those plans. That woman always did exactly what she liked. And alone. For the most part. Well! That’s all for now. Bring me that paperwork. Here, I’ll walk you out.”

They went outside, where it was clouding up.
“How did you get here?” asked Mr. Pennypacker, looking at the sky.

“Biked,” said Fiona, pointing to the bicycle.

“Ah, Martha’s bike,” said Mr. Pennypacker.

“Martha’s bike?” said Fiona. “This belonged to my aunt?”

“Yes, of course, what did you think?” asked Mr. Pennypacker, looking surprised by the question. “Everything you find on that property was hers. She almost never took her car into town unless she had heavy things to haul back. She loved that old bike. Kept it in fighting trim too. You’d better hurry. Looks like rain to me.”

Fiona thanked him and headed to the grocery store for milk and butter, spluttering to herself, “Martha’s bike! Martha’s!”

Then she headed home, stopping to get eggs at an egg stand.

When she got back she found Marlin in the kitchen busily putting together another cake, flour splattered about and recipes she’d copied from the internet spread everywhere. Natasha and Charlie were sitting at the counter watching her.

Fiona told them everything.

“He wrote for the New York Times?” said Marlin. “Wow. Who would have thought?”

“Yes, and Mr. Pennypacker called him a waste troll,” said Fiona.

“Don’t say that to his face,” warned Fiona. “We need him, remember.”

Natasha leapt up and went to the bookcases in the living room, where she searched the shelves, climbing on the little library ladder going up and down until she shouted, “FOUND IT!” She triumphantly pulled out a volume with Al Farber’s name on the spine. “It’s called Martha’s Boat.” She handed the book to Fiona to look at and while Marlin cooked, Fiona began to read it aloud to them.

At the end of the first chapter Marlin, who was mixing a coating for the pork chops she was baking, said, “Wow, what happened to him after he wrote this? He was a good writer. You’d never expect him to end up in a trailer with baked bean cans everywhere. The person who wrote this doesn’t sound like Al. Maybe it’s a different Al Farber.”

“No,” said Fiona thoughtfully. “It’s the same. Mr. Penny-packer said.” She opened the fridge to look for something for a snack. She had missed lunch and all the biking had made her ravenous. There was a large bowl of some kind of slaw and she stuck a fork in to taste it. “Did you make this?” she asked Marlin in amazement.

“Yep,” said Marlin, beaming happily. “I found this recipe for slaw but I thought it was too bitter and I just started adding things I thought would work.”
“This is fantastic,” said Fiona.

“I like to cook,” said Marlin. “I just never knew it before. Someone was always cooking for us. And I’m also tweaking this pork chop recipe that I found that started out sounding the way Mom used to make them. But I think…I can improve on it,” she murmured, reading the recipe and throwing a shake of this spice and a shake of that into the coating mix.

“Well, if your pork chops are as good as your slaw, at least Al won’t be able to complain about the dinners we bring,” said Fiona.

The girls spent the rest of the day in happy activities. Natasha had found a *Wildlife of British Columbia* book and was engrossed in the bird section while lying on the hammock on the back porch, lazily looking up each new bird as it flew by the porch.

Charlie was climbing all the fruit trees one by one as if introducing herself to them. They still didn’t know what kind they were. Natasha thought they should look them up in Aunt Martha’s *Trees of British Columbia* book but Charlie said it would be more exciting to wait and see what kind of fruit magically materialized in the summer.

Marlin was contentedly engrossed in cooking and baking and Fiona sat down at Martha’s computer and went through her records trying to figure out what bills lay ahead and how the online banking worked.
At suppertime Marlin put pork chops, oven fries, and slaw into a large food container.

“Aren’t you giving him a piece of that cake?” asked Charlie, pointing to the cake Marlin had spent all morning fussing over.

“No, he doesn’t deserve my cake. He’s never getting cake from me again,” said Marlin.

Fiona sighed. When Marlin held a grudge, it could be a long time before the person in question was forgiven. She took the food container from her and biked it down the driveway and next door.

Al answered the door the way he always did, by throwing it open and shouting “WHAT!” But Fiona had decided to do the intimidating herself for a change.

First, she handed him twenty dollars.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“You remember the deal,” she said.

“I remember the deal being for beer money. I haven’t given you my beer bill yet.”

“It’s not something we can leave open-ended. You might decide to drink us into the poorhouse. Twenty bucks,” said Fiona. “Take it or leave it.”

“Hmm,” grumbled Al. “And where’s the money for the bike?”

“You’re not getting any money for the bike,” said Fiona. “I saw Mr. Pennypacker today and he told me that
bike was my aunt’s. My aunt left everything but the fishing gear to us so that bike is ours as you well know. I’m still not convinced how you ended up with it, if you stole it or—"

“STOLE it!” roared Al. “I never stole anything in my life. Listen, you kids have got to stop thinking I go around stealing bikes. Mother of God! I worked on it as a favor for her. It had burst a tire. That twenty dollars was just to cover my costs.”

“How do I know that’s true?” asked Fiona.

“You don’t,” said Al. “But how do I know this little arrangement you’ve dreamt up isn’t going to land me in big trouble? I don’t. I guess we’re just going to have to trust each other. To a certain degree. But hey, if you can’t trust me, no skin off my nose. We can end the deal right here. I didn’t ask for any of this.” He started to close the door but before he could, Fiona swiftly opened the food container to display Marlin’s delicious-looking food. The aroma of pork chops in thick mushroom gravy and potatoes and coleslaw drifted up. Even she wanted to stick a finger in and start tasting things.

“Twenty dollars a week and dinner and you absorb the cost for the bike repair since it still feels to me like you tried to sell me a bike that was already mine,” said Fiona.

Al thought for a minute but the pork chops won out. He took the food container without another word.
Fiona turned on her heel and left before he changed his mind.

She biked home to her own dinner.

When they’d all settled at the kitchen table, Fiona lifted a water glass up and said, “To our first week. So far so good.”

“So far so good,” the others repeated, and then the girls dove into Marlin’s delicious food.

“The thing I’m most proud of,” Marlin said, “is that nothing you’re eating comes from Mom’s recipes. Or Mrs. Weatherspoon’s! Or even the internet. I’m tweaking everything. I’m developing my own cooking style. And I think I fixed the almond cherry cake recipe so it doesn’t end up so goopy! This one has pineapple as well as cherries but I drained the cherries and tossed them in flour before adding them and I added a pineapple-coconut mélange to the bottom of the pan.”

“Oooo, mélange,” teased Natasha. “You even use cooking words.”

“I’m not sure that’s a cooking term,” said Marlin seriously. “I think I may have made that one up but it should be a cooking term if it isn’t.”

“It’s an awfully good cake,” said Fiona, taking a second piece. “It rivals any of Mrs. Weatherspoon’s.”

“Yes, see, the texture is grainier and lighter than the last cake I made and the fruit is more evenly distributed,”
said Marlin wonderingly as she picked her piece apart with her fork to study it.

“I don’t care about any of that,” said Charlie. “Just so long as it tastes good.”

Then Fiona told them everything she had learned at Mr. Pennypacker’s. “I think we’re going to be okay,” she finished cautiously. “Aunt Martha’s boat is up for sale so we’ll get some more money from that as well.”

She didn’t tell them what was worrying her, which was that the money they had, while seeming to be enough, mightn’t be. Not in the long run. She had not counted on so many bills and she knew she’d have to buy everyone clothes and shoes again in the fall. She also suspected there would be many more unanticipated expenses as time went by. Every time she had a budget made up she remembered something else. But for now, she said to herself, they were okay. Don’t borrow trouble, her mother had always said. She sighed. Well, she’d try not to.
ALL went quietly and well that first month. Spring carpeted the meadows in blue wildflowers. Migrating Canada geese coming home passed over the house squawking each morning.

“Just think,” Natasha said in wonder, “we’re seeing Canada geese in Canada!”

Fiona told Miss Webster about Al’s role as the fake guardian one Sunday when she was making her inspection. She didn’t expect Miss Webster to be thrilled with this news and she wasn’t.

“The more people who are privy to this deceit, the more dangerous,” she said.

“I know,” said Fiona. “But we couldn’t help it.”

“Well, let him be the last,” said Miss Webster.

“We’ll try,” said Fiona.

Miss Webster nodded, saying she was otherwise impressed with how well the girls were doing on their own, and left small gifts of school supplies and school hoodies for all of them.
“She’s awfully nice,” said Marlin after she’d gone. “I wonder why she never married.”

“She could still marry,” said Fiona.

“She’s kind of old,” said Charlie.

“At least thirty,” agreed Marlin.

“Maybe she’s like Aunt Martha,” said Natasha. It fascinated them, this great-aunt they had never known but the accoutrements of whose life they seemed to have settled into. Almost as if they had settled into her life like being dragged along in the wake of her boat.

“Well, Aunt Martha could have married,” said Fiona. “Mr. Pennypacker and Al Farber both seem to have wanted her. I think Mr. Pennypacker carried a torch for Aunt Martha and was jealous of Al. That was my impression. And she didn’t seem to have cared for either of them.”

“Maybe that’s what made Al so cranky,” suggested Charlie.

“For years?” said Marlin skeptically. “Because that book was published ten years ago. Maybe he was so cranky to begin with she didn’t want anything to do with him.”

“It would be interesting to know the whole story,” agreed Fiona. “He doesn’t talk about any of that in the book. He just talks about her fishing.”

“I’m not asking him,” said Marlin.

“He does write that Martha said she was married to her boat,” said Natasha. “Maybe that’s a clue. And maybe
Miss Webster is married to her job the way Martha was married to her boat and that’s why she isn’t married.”

“According to the book, Martha loved being alone and she loved being alone at sea,” said Fiona. “I don’t think Miss Webster is like that. She strikes me as more of a people person.”

“I like her best of everyone we’ve met here,” said Charlie. “If I could pick someone to be our guardian for real it would be her. She slipped me and Natasha chocolate bars when she saw us at lunch the other day.”

“Well, we don’t get to pick a guardian from just anyone we want,” said Fiona practically. “We’re lucky to get anyone to even pretend to be one. Even if it is a waste troll like Al.”

“He’s like one of the wild beasts,” said Charlie.

“He certainly is,” said Marlin. “The way he hollers every time I knock on the door to give him his dinner.”

Marlin and Fiona took turns delivering Al’s dinners and despite the fact that he must have known by then that it was them at six o’clock each night at his door, his method of answering never varied.

“Wild beast, wild beast, wild beast troll,” chanted Charlie.

“There are no wild beasts for us to be afraid of,” said Fiona as she did every time Charlie brought them up. “They’re all far back in the woods.”
Fiona worried about Charlie and what seemed her increasing nervous nattering about wild beasts. Charlie still never went out the front door without peering into tree branches for crouching cougars. She even scanned the waters for shark fins when they went to the beach even though all of them had assured her that the local waters didn’t contain sharks. Fiona wondered if everything Charlie had been through in the last year had made her yet more fearful and if there was something she should be doing about it. Maybe Charlie needed some kind of professional help which they couldn’t anyway afford. How could you tell when someone had tipped over the edge from normally fearful to pathologically fearful? Fiona was therefore thrilled when as April sped by, Charlie, after Fiona had taught her how to adjust the seat for her shorter legs, began of her own volition to take the bike up and down the driveway and down the road and back. At first, she wanted Fiona or Marlin to walk alongside her and keep a watch on the surrounding forest for wolves and bears that might be stalking her but now she seemed content to go alone. She was confident enough that one Thursday after school Fiona gave her the job of dragging the wheeled garbage can to the end of their driveway as she had noticed most people on the street did for pickup early the next morning rather than dragging it down at six a.m. when the garbagemen began their route on
Farhill Road. Whenever possible Fiona tried to apportion the many chores fairly but there weren’t a lot of chores she felt Charlie could handle yet and she was happy to give her this one.

“You sure you can do this?” asked Fiona. “It’s got wheels but you have to drag it a long way.”

“Yep,” said Charlie proudly. “And after, I’m taking the bike out.”

“Good for you, Charlie,” said Fiona. She went inside pleased that everyone, even Charlie, seemed to be adjusting to their new life.

Fiona heard the garbage can being dragged and then Charlie pedaling off down the driveway and breathed a sigh of relief.

Charlie biked down the drive and along the road where many other people’s garbage cans were already out. She didn’t tell Fiona but she still kept one eye out for things in the woods but the more she biked without seeing anything fearful, the less she worried about it. So she was happily tooling along when at first she thought she saw an oddly shaped black garbage can a few drives down. Then the black can moved. Charlie held her breath and stopped abruptly, one foot on a pedal and one on the road. After looking for one for so long, she could not believe the thing of nightmares stood before her. Right there in the open.
She looked searchingly at it as if expecting it to turn back into an oddly shaped garbage can but the bear stared back at her instead. Someone who knew bears could have told her it was not a very big black bear but it didn’t feel small to Charlie. She screamed and leapt off her bike, running to the nearest shelter, which was Al’s trailer. She didn’t even bother knocking but charged inside, where Al was lying on the couch listening to a podcast.

“What the HECK!” he roared.

“THERE’S A BEAR!” roared Charlie even louder.

“Where?” asked Al, sitting up calmly and removing his earbuds.

“Outside,” she said. “He has taken the top off someone’s garbage can.”

“Sounds about right,” said Al.

They looked out the window to where they could see a bear ambling along dragging a bag of garbage.

“Oh, that’s just Billy Bear,” Al said, and lay down again.

Charlie stood glued to the window trembling. When she didn’t leave Al sat up again. “I said you don’t have to worry. Billy Bear has been around since he was a cub. He knows when people put their garbage out. Watch. I’ll show you what to do when you meet a bear.”

Al went outside, planted his feet solidly in his driveway, and said in normal tones, “Okay, Billy, you’ve finished your Oreos, now it’s time to go.”
The bear looked up at Al. He was sitting peacefully taking apart his bag of garbage and he seemed disappointed and even a bit sad to have this activity interrupted but he stood up resignedly and slowly ambled off into the woods again.

“There, see,” said Al, coming back inside. “Bears are way more afraid of you than you are of them. Poor Billy had his supper interrupted. Oh well, at least he got to finish his Oreos.”

Al lay down again but when Charlie didn’t leave, he sat up and said, “Now listen,” but at that moment his phone rang.

“Who the HECK,” said Al, going to his shelf where the phone lay and picking it up. “WHAT!” he roared, his phone-answering style apparently the same as his door-answering. “What? What?” he kept repeating. “Well, she did. No, you’re the one she wouldn’t leave in charge of a bunch of kids. That’s right. She didn’t accept your proposal either so I guess that makes us equal. Well, maybe she didn’t want to marry a garden gnome. What is that in reference to? Have you looked in the mirror lately? Oh yeah, well, guess what, I don’t have to prove it. I don’t have to prove anything. And where I live is my own business.” And he hung up.

Al sat muttering to himself and then, when he saw Charlie still standing there staring at him, her eyes huge, he said, “What have the lot of you gotten me into? Now
that garden gnome of a lawyer wants to see proof I’m your guardian. He’s threatening to come over if I don’t go to see him. I’ve told him over the phone numerous times that I am, but oh no, he won’t take my word for it! And he keeps asking when I’m moving onto your property. Well, what a tangled web we weave!”

When Charlie still didn’t say anything, Al said, “What’s the matter, bear got your tongue?”

Before she thought Charlie blurted out, “Does he call you a waste troll because the bear eats your garbage?”

“A what? A waste troll? Who calls me a waste troll?”

“Mr. Pennypacker. That’s what Fiona said.”

“A waste troll?” said Al, clearly flummoxed. “When did he call me a waste troll? What the heck!”

“You called him a garden gnome,” Charlie pointed out.

“My mother said you should never call people names.”

“Out. Go home! I’ve had all I can take for one day. I’m not running a day care center.”

But Charlie, instead of leaving, just sat down in the tiny booth with the kitchen table. “No,” she said quietly. “I’m scared.”

“I told you that bear doesn’t want anything to do with you.”

“He’s still out there,” said Charlie.

“Unlikely,” said Al.

“No,” repeated Charlie.
“Oh, for God’s sake,” said Al. “Come on. I’ll walk you home.”

Charlie followed Al reluctantly out the door and down the broken trailer steps. She hung on to the hem of his T-shirt, which he chose to ignore, and together they walked to the street. Al stopped to pick up the mess the bear had left behind: cartons and Kleenex and cans strewn along the side of the road. He shoved it into his garbage can while Charlie picked up her abandoned bike and then they continued up the road to the children’s long driveway, with Charlie wheeling the bike because she was afraid to mount it and ride. Natasha had told her never to run from wild animals because they would think you were prey and chase you. Charlie had forgotten that the second she saw the bear but now she remembered and vowed not to make that mistake again. She was lucky she hadn’t excited what Natasha had called the prey drive of the wild beast. She wasn’t going to press her luck by riding her bike. The bear was most likely stalking her and Al, waiting his chance. Just hoping they would run or bike swiftly so he could chase them.

When they got to the front steps of the house Marlin said, “Oh hey, I was about to call you in, Charlie. Good timing. I’m putting dinner on the table. You might as well eat here with us, Al, instead of having us pack up your supper.”
“Don’t want to,” said Al with his usual charm.
“We saw a BEAR!” said Charlie.
“Really!” said Marlin, her eyes growing huge.
“Oh, for God’s sake,” said Al. “It was only *Billy* Bear. He lives here. I’ve known him since he was a cub. Let me tell you something, that bear scares me less than the lot of you. Just give me my supper and I’ll get out of here. Poor Billy.”

So Marlin packed up a food container with meatloaf and mashed potatoes and green bean casserole and Al grunted and headed for home.

Charlie told them all about the bear at dinner and Natasha said she had done the right thing going to the nearest house.

“They’re not Disney bears,” she said. “No matter what Al says. A bear might not attack you but it might. That’s the thing about bears.”

“Don’t scare her,” warned Fiona. “She’ll never go outside again.”

“Better to be safe than sorry,” said Natasha.

Then Charlie told them about Al calling Mr. Penny-packer a garden gnome and Fiona, who’d been taking a gulp of her milk, laughed until it came out her nose.

“What’s so funny?” asked Marlin.

“Wait until you see him,” said Fiona. “He actually does look exactly like a garden gnome. He’s short and he has
the same kind of face and white beard. When I saw him, he was even wearing a red vest and I was trying to think what he reminded me of.”

“Al got mad that Mr. Pennypacker called him a waste troll,” said Charlie, who having calmed down was now reveling in being the one who’d had the adventure and a story to relate. She was seldom the one in the family with interesting gossip.

“Oh, Charlie, I told you not to tell him that,” said Fiona.

“I couldn’t help it,” said Charlie. “The bear scared all thoughts out of my head.”

Fiona just sighed and hoped it wouldn’t come back to haunt them later and then they all finished dinner, did their homework, and went to bed.

But Charlie got up every ten minutes for the first hour, looking out the window for bears in the moonlight. She didn’t really expect to see one but the third time she got up there was Billy Bear, knocking over the extra garbage can they kept by the back shed. When he found it empty he first rolled it for a way as if it were a toy and when he’d gotten all the fun out of that that he could, he went across the meadow and for a moment it looked to Charlie like he was dancing. He stood on his hind legs and his front legs swayed back and forth as if to music only he could hear. It was such an unexpected thing to see. Such a wondrous thing that it took Charlie’s breath away. She
didn’t even think to call the others but realized for the first time that things happened when she was sleeping, wondrous things, almost all of which she would never see or know. She was privileged just this once to witness something she would not have suspected took place while all the world but her remained unaware. *I wonder if he dances on the day the garbage goes out because it’s his favorite day,* thought Charlie sleepily, *or if it’s the moonlight making him dance.* Maybe when the moon was full it scattered energy in the form of moonbeams that made all the forest and ocean creatures dance. She had a vision of squirrels and otters and seals, starfish, sea anemones and whales and cougars and wolves, all dropping whatever they were doing to perform an intricate interconnected sequence of steps brought on by moonbeam madness. Or maybe they weren’t controlled by the moon, maybe they chose to dance because they loved the light on such nights. Or maybe it wasn’t all creatures. Maybe it was Billy Bear alone. Not just any bear, any more than she was just any child. But a unique bear. Maybe all bears were unique to themselves. It suddenly occurred to her that bears were creatures of thought too and Billy might well like moonlight. He might like all kinds of things. That a bear’s head might be filled with things besides ways to frighten and kill her, was a new thought. That his mind might be full of all kinds of things just as hers was. The things he loved,
the things he feared, the things he missed, the new things he was puzzling out. That any creature’s life was made up of the wonderful jumble of what they held in their head and their heart. That the things Billy loved were stored away and treasured: garbage, moonlight, other bears in his family, honey, the smell of spring, the warm den when winter came, the feel in summer of a wet cool creek running past his furry legs, that first blissful moment after a long day when sleep snuck in and claimed him. That he was a creature enjoying the life he had somehow miraculously been given, the same as she.

*But our tastes will always be different when it comes to garbage* was her last sleepy thought.

And then it was another morning and all the different things that meant for Charlie. And all the different things that meant for the bear.
Donald Pettinger

ONE of the first rules Fiona made for all of them when they started school was that they could make friends but they could not bring them home.

“Too chancy,” she said. “Someone coming upstairs is bound to see the four of us set up in the only two bedrooms and wonder why there is no evidence of a guardian. And people talk. It’s bad enough we now have two grown-ups who know and Mr. Pennypacker, who is nagging Al about seeing legal proof of guardianship, which we haven’t got. I’m hoping he forgets about it but if he doesn’t, I don’t know what we’re going to do. Frankly, I’m surprised we’ve made it into April without anyone else finding out. I think we are going to have to lay low and as much as possible be invisible.”

Everyone had agreed that this was prudent and that they would meet friends on neutral territory or go to the friends’ homes.

Fiona thought the plan was working well until one day Charlie burst into tears the minute they were off the school bus and headed down their driveway.
Now what? thought Fiona wearily.

“Ashley won’t play with me anymore and it’s all your fault,” yelled Charlie as she slammed into the house.

“What do you mean my fault?” asked Fiona, following her inside.

“She keeps asking to play at my house. We always play at her house. And I keep saying no so now she won’t play with me at all!”

Charlie had taken to going to Ashley’s house on Saturdays. Fiona would take her there on the handlebars of the bike on her way to do the grocery shopping in town and then pick her up with the bike later in the day.

Ashley’s mother said the same thing to Fiona each time she showed up: “Have your mother stop by to say hello next time she’s around,” and Fiona would have to remind her that they didn’t have a mother, they had a guardian. And Ashley’s mother would then say, “Oh yes, dear, well, have him stop by to say hello.”

Fiona always smiled inwardly at the idea of Ashley’s mother saying hello and Al barking “WHAT!” Once she had actually snorted out loud at the thought and had to cover it with a cough. But the important thing was that Ashley’s mother never pursued it beyond that.

Now Charlie was sobbing angrily and stomping around her bedroom so Fiona went back outside and sat down on the front-porch steps, dropping her head into her hands.
Suppose all the girls in Charlie’s class felt the same way Ashley did and Charlie never got invited to the sleepovers or birthday parties? Fiona was beyond such things. All Marlin seemed to care about anymore was inventing recipes, writing them down and then tweaking them, and taking photos of her meals. Fiona was the tiniest bit worried that this was becoming obsessive but worrying about *that* seemed a luxury compared to her other worries. And Natasha cared less about people than the natural world, birds in particular. But she had always been that way. She made friends easily at school and fit in and didn’t care if they couldn’t come to the house. She was just as happy to be alone. It was Charlie’s social life that was the issue. Charlie had always had a close friend, a best friend, wherever she lived. Otherwise she just sat in her room after school and moped. Fiona knew her mother was relieved when Charlie had picked someone upon whom to confer this honor in whatever new place they were living. Once Charlie had this best friend she seemed to relax. Fiona would have liked to tell Charlie to simply pick another friend but she knew it didn’t work this way for Charlie. Charlie spent a long time sussing out the situation and was very particular about who she chose.

Fiona thought and thought of a way to solve the problem but the only solution she could come up with was that Ashley could come home on the bus with them. Then they could drive her home afterward rather than have her
mother get her and possibly twig to the fact that no adult was on-site. It was either that or making Al come over when Ashley’s mother swung by and pretend to be a calm courteous upright citizen who lived with them and she didn’t think she had a tinker’s chance of that. But perhaps she could arrange for the former. She stood up reluctantly. She didn’t see a way to avoid it. She headed down the driveway to ask for help.

Fiona braced herself and knocked on Al’s door.

“What!” he roared before he even got to the door.

“Don’t you ever go outside?” she asked him as the door swung open and he appeared squinting in the sunlight.

“Why would I?” he barked.

She thrust an arm out, palm upward, and gestured in an arc as if to display the lilacs in bloom, the creeping rosy flowers that blanketed all the rocky outcroppings, the forsythia, the fruit trees, the birds calling, and even the gentle buzzing of the bees.

“Is that why you came over? To goad me into some sort of outside recreational program?” he said.

“No, of course not. I’ve got a problem with Charlie only you can solve.” She hoped if she put it to him thus he would be flattered into agreeing.

He nodded to her as if to say, go on.

“She wants to invite a friend, Ashley, over and I don’t want Ashley’s mother picking her up and figuring out that
we are living without benefit of a grown-up, for obvious reasons. So the easiest way to solve that is for us to drive Ashley home so her mother doesn’t come at all.”

“And by us you mean me?”

“Yes.”

“No. Don’t provide taxi service. Not in the contract,” said Al, and prepared to slam the door but Fiona stuck her foot in it.

“Naturally I don’t expect you to do this for free,” she said. “I can pay you or you can tell me what you would like in return.”

“Cookies,” said Al without thinking.

“Really? You’ll do it for cookies?” Fiona asked in surprise. She had expected to have to spend a great deal more time wheedling him with imaginative offers. Cookies were easy.

“That’s what I said.”

“Okay. What kind?”

“Chocolate chip. And they have to be freshly baked.”

“All right.”

“And I want Marlin to make them, not you.”

“Yes, of course.”

“Don’t of course me. Don’t think I haven’t figured out what goes on over there. If Marlin can’t make dinner for some reason, you make it, don’t you? You don’t think I know when that happens? Burnt mac ’n’ cheese? Pot roast with the consistency of shoe leather? Those are the meals
you cook. Or rather you try and fail to cook. When it comes to cooking, you suck.”

Fiona looked at him. What he said was absolutely true. She had had to take over for Marlin on occasion and she did suck at cooking but she was amazed that Al was clear-headed enough to have figured this out. Most of the time he looked as if he couldn’t think his way out of a paper bag. On the other hand, she had to remember that he did once write for the New York Times.

“All right,” she said. “So, can I tell Charlie she can have Ashley over on Thursday? Will you be free to take her home? Say around five-thirty? As if you’d just gotten home from work?”

“Do I look like I have a busy social calendar?” snapped Al, and slammed the door.

When Fiona got home she told Marlin about her conversation with Al.

“Really?” said Marlin in pleased tones as she put popovers in the oven and took out the last of the small roasts they had found in the freezer. “He can tell the difference between your meals and mine?”

“Marlin, a pig could tell the difference between your dinners and mine. And he wants cookies. He didn’t say how many but I say give him two dozen to be on the safe side. I don’t want any last-minute backing out on his part.”

“Sure. Cookies are easy. What kind?”

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“Chocolate chip.”

“So boring,” said Marlin resignedly.

“These aren’t for experimentation, these cookies. These are a bribe so stick to the recipe.”

“Whatever,” said Marlin. “He’d be better off if I didn’t stick to the recipe. The ones I’ve been making for our lunches have been fantastic because I change things up. You know, I’m extremely talented at cooking, and very good at baking, but I think I have a kind of genius when it comes to cookies. Those dried cranberries and orange-peel bits made all the difference to the almond cookies.”

“They were great but make basic ones for Al. We don’t want him reneging on a macadamia nut technicality.”

“Philistine,” said Marlin, and returned to copying notes into the file she kept in Aunt Martha’s MacBook Air, which was now always open on the kitchen counter when she was playing with recipes so she could keep track of what she was adding or changing with exact measurements.

Then Fiona went to tell Charlie, who immediately called Ashley with the good news.

When Natasha, Marlin, and Fiona got to the school bus on Thursday they found a small blond girl standing next to Charlie. Charlie and the girl were yammering away at each other and hardly noticed them. The four sisters usually sat together at the back of the bus. But Charlie steered
Ashley to seats away from her sisters. When Charlie didn’t need to cling to her sisters, Fiona always breathed a sigh of relief.

As soon as they got home, Ashley and Charlie ran into the meadow to play. Fiona took the garbage can to the street for Charlie and was busy with homework and paying bills and so it wasn’t until an hour had passed that she thought to check on them. It was then that her heart went immediately into her throat. Sitting in the middle of the fenced meadow looking perfectly happy was Billy Bear, sorting through a bag of garbage he had dragged there.

“MARLIN!” called Fiona so sharply that Marlin came at a run from where she was baking the chocolate chip cookies.

Fiona pointed at the bear.

Marlin gasped. “Where are the girls? Where are Charlie and Ashley?”

Fiona pointed again. “In that tree. The one not ten feet from where the bear has settled.”

“Oh no!” said Marlin. “Do you think they know the bear is there?”

“How could they not?” said Fiona. “They must be terrified. They must be keeping still hoping the bear doesn’t notice them. I’ve got to go out and scare it away.”

“Here,” said Marlin, running back to the kitchen and grabbing pots and spoons. “We’ll bang on these.”

They ran to the back-porch steps and started banging
away. The bear looked thunderstruck for a second and in a panic left his pile of garbage and began to run around and around the meadow but the wind must have blown the gate to the meadow shut. The bear had no way out.

“We have to open the gate,” said Fiona.

“You can’t, the bear is too close,” said Marlin, for the bear had decided there was no immediate threat, gone back for his garbage, and settled himself right next to the gate.

They stared at him for another moment silently.

“What are we going to do?” whispered Marlin, terrified.

“Call Miss Webster,” said Fiona decisively.

She ran for the phone and dialed Miss Webster’s number. When Miss Webster heard Fiona’s voice squeaking, “Miss Webster?” she barked, “What’s wrong?”

Fiona told her about the bear and Miss Webster, who didn’t seem to feel like Al that bears were more afraid of you than you were of them, said, “I’m calling the conservation officer. Keep an eye on things and if Ashley and Charlie try to get out of the tree, yell to them to stay in it.”

“Yes, we’ve done that,” said Fiona.

Natasha, who had joined them at this point and was listening, said, “Bears can climb trees.”

“Bears can climb trees,” relayed Fiona.

“Well, he’s got garbage,” said Miss Webster. “If the girls don’t threaten him, he has no reason to go after them. Now hang up. I’ll be over as soon as I’ve made the call.”
Fiona ran outside again to tell the girls Miss Webster was calling the conservation officer and then coming over.

Miss Webster arrived minutes later and very shortly after, a tall handsome man in his thirties wearing a khaki uniform showed up. He had a flatbed truck with a crane and a bear cage on it and he carried a rifle.

Miss Webster and the girls stood on the back porch biting their knuckles while the conservation officer introduced himself as Donald Pettinger before walking in a relaxed way to the meadow as if it were a squirrel he was going after.

“Isn’t he afraid?” breathed Natasha.

“He does this all the time,” said Miss Webster, putting her hands on Natasha’s shoulders.

“Girls,” he called from the fence to Ashley and Charlie. “We’ve got a bit of a bear situation here.”

The girls said nothing. Charlie, in the tree, was afraid if she spoke Billy Bear would see her. She figured they were safe as long as they were not spotted.

As soon as the bear saw Donald Pettinger, he panicked again and leapt up, running in a strange lope around the big meadow. Mr. Pettinger opened the gate.

“Is he going to chase him out?” asked Fiona.

“No, that bear knows where to find food now. He can’t let him go,” said Miss Webster.

Mr. Pettinger closed the gate behind himself, walked into
the fenced meadow, put his rifle up, and fired but missed. This terrified the bear, who began slamming himself into the fence, but it was a high solid deer fence and the bear simply bounced off and in his frenzy, ran again in circles.

Charlie, watching him, began to lose her fear in pity for the plight of the trapped and panicked bear. Now instead of fearing for herself she feared for him. The more frantically he ran, the more she pitied him.

“Oh, don’t shoot him!” she cried at last. “Please don’t shoot him.”

But the conservation officer ignored her, lifted his rifle, and this time he aimed true and the bear fell silent in the blue wildflowers.

Charlie began to cry. But now she was crying for the bear. For all the springs he would not see again, all the moonlight shining without him, no more garbage days, no more feeling the tickle of running creeks on his furry legs, no more summer sunsets or wet dawn grasses on his paws. Tears flowed from her eyes in a way they never had before. She didn’t know who she was crying for; it seemed to be for Billy Bear but for herself and for everyone else too.

Ashley looked at her uncomprehendingly. “He got it,” she said. “We can get down now.” And she shinnied down the tree but Charlie stayed there until the conservation officer walked over.

“Need a hand?” he asked.
“I didn’t want you to do that,” sobbed Charlie. “I didn’t want you to kill him.”

“I didn’t,” said Mr. Pettinger in surprise. “I sedated him. That was a tranquilizer dart. He’ll wake up just fine when it wears off. I’m going to drive my truck into the meadow, hook him up to that crane you see there. I’ll haul him into the cage and take him an hour away to a lonelier stretch of forest where he can live.”

“But he won’t be at home,” said Charlie sadly. “He won’t know where he is.”

“No,” said the man, “he won’t. But at least he will be able to live somewhere. Sometimes a fed bear is a dead bear. Because they hurt someone before we can relocate them. At least he was spared that.”

By this point the others had all come walking cautiously across the field toward the downed bear as if they were worried he might come awake at any moment, leap up, and start his frantic scurrying around again.

“Can’t you just leave him here?” asked Charlie. “I mean in the forest down the road?”

“Why, Charlie,” said Miss Webster. “I think you like that bear.”

“He lived his whole life here. Al said he knew him from when he was a cub. He probably has his whole family in the woods here somewhere,” said Charlie. “His mother
and father and sisters and brothers won’t know what has happened to him.”

Fiona had a feeling Charlie was going to forget herself and start talking about sisters scattered to the four winds because no one came forward to care for them and give away their situation to Mr. Pettinger so she interrupted and said to him, “Would you like a cookie? Marlin made them and they just came out of the oven.”

“I’d better get the bear in the truck,” said Mr. Pettinger.

“I want to go home,” whispered Ashley to Charlie.

“Why did Miss Webster come?”

“Oh, I’m an old family friend,” said Miss Webster, overhearing. She and Fiona shot each other a sudden look. “Always happy to help out. Now, Mr. Pettinger, can you tell these girls where the bear is going?”

“Would you like to see where I’m taking the bear?” asked Mr. Pettinger. “Or you? You’re the grade school principal, aren’t you?”

“How did you know?” asked Miss Webster.

“I’ve had you pointed out to me by just about everyone I’ve met in town since taking this job,” said Mr. Pettinger.


“Me? No, I’m not married,” said Mr. Pettinger, turning pink and changing the subject. “I’ve room in the truck for
whoever wants to come. It might make you feel better to see the nice woods this bear’s going to.”

Ashley said she didn’t want to but Miss Webster and Charlie said they would so it was agreed that Mr. Pettinger would drop Ashley off at her house on their way out of town.

“What about Al?” asked Marlin, digging her elbow into Fiona’s ribs. “Do we still give him cookies?”

Fiona thought about it. “I’ll take them over anyway with his dinner and tell him he’s not needed. He never showed up so he probably didn’t even remember that he was supposed to drive her,” she said. “We can tell him it’s credit for a favor in the future.”

In less time than Charlie expected, the bear was safely loaded and then they were off.

Fiona, watching them drive away, felt weak in the knees from the excitement so she ate one of Al’s cookies on the way over to his house. One less cookie wouldn’t make a difference, she decided. Nor would two.

When she told Al about the whole episode he looked upset. He stood staring dully down the road as she handed him his cookies. He didn’t seem to notice them in his hands.

“So Billy’s gone for good, I guess,” he said flatly.

“Yep,” she said, handing him his dinner too. “And since you didn’t have to drive Ashley home we thought the cookies could be credit for something in the future.”
“Conservation officer,” said Al, and spat at the ground. “That bear never did a lick of harm to anyone.”

Before Fiona could reply he had gone back in and slammed his door.

*Well, it’s not my fault*, thought Fiona, stomping angrily home. *Does he want the bear to actually eat someone before we call the conservation officer?*

Charlie didn’t get back until after the girls had had dinner and it was almost dark. Mr. Pettinger dropped Charlie and Miss Webster where she’d left her car at the side of the house. Miss Webster said a quick good-bye and before Fiona could say no, Charlie had grabbed the bike.

“I just want to tell Al where Billy went,” she called over her shoulder. “He’s going to be worried.”

When Charlie came back she looked subdued.

“Did he yell at you?” asked Marlin finally when Charlie had come in but offered no information.

“No. I told him there’s a river where we took Billy with a lot of salmon and Mr. Pettinger said Billy could fish there and would like that. But Al said what Billy really liked were Oreo cookies. He said it’s against the law to put food out for bears but he always put some cookies out for Billy anyway on garbage day.”

“What else did you talk about?” asked Fiona. “I almost
came to get you, you know you shouldn’t be out when it’s getting dark.”

“Mostly we didn’t talk about anything,” said Charlie. “We just sat together and looked at two empty garbage cans still on the road and later I told him I saw Billy dancing one night and he said that he’s seen him do that too but he didn’t know what it was or what Billy was thinking when he did it. That animals may have a whole lot of thoughts and reasons that humans never experience and cannot know. Just as there may be all kinds of colors that no one has ever seen. That the number of things humans don’t know is staggering.”

“Staggering,” corrected Fiona absently.

“He said the animals probably don’t know why we do anything either. Why we put garbage out but they can’t have it. We can’t tell each other because we don’t speak the same language.”

“Science has found out a lot, though,” said Natasha matter-of-factly as she joined them at the kitchen table. “We do know a lot about animal language. Did you know that ravens have syntax?”

“What’s that?” asked Charlie.

“I forget,” said Natasha. “But it’s something to do with language and it’s way more sophisticated than you’d think.”

“I told Al that you can’t know what bears are thinking and he said I was right. Then he said you can’t really know anyone. That most people don’t even know themselves. He
said he thought he knew Martha, though. If there was one person he knew it was her. He moved where he is to be by her and he said she and Billy were the two real friends he’d had in life and now they were both gone.”

“Didn’t he bark at you at all?” asked Marlin, who sat down at the table and passed a plate of the cookies left from the batch she’d made Al.

“No, I think he was too sad to bark.”

“And he wasn’t mad at you for getting Billy relocated?” asked Fiona, thinking Al hadn’t been too sad to bark at her.

“Well, he said I was the only one he could talk to about Billy. I was the only one who understood.”

“Do you want dinner? I can heat some up in the microwave,” said Marlin.

But Charlie said, “Mr. Pettinger treated me and Miss Webster to McDonald’s on the way home. She said thanks and he said it wasn’t much but he had to get back to his office and turn in a report on the bear but to make up for it could he take her out to a good restaurant tomorrow. But he didn’t ask me. Mom always said if you’re inviting someone in front of anyone else you have to invite that person too.” Charlie looked indignant.

“Of course he didn’t invite you, you dingbat,” said Marlin. “He was asking her on a date. Did she say yes?”

“Oh yeah, she seemed to be really happy about it,” said Charlie. “They talked all the way home. I think they forgot
I was there. She seemed to really like him and I like him too. He’d only just met Billy but he was really nice to him and wanted to make sure he’d be happy.”

“Well, conservation officers become conservation officers because they love animals, I guess,” said Natasha. “I’m thinking of becoming one when I grow up if I don’t become an ornithologist only I’m not sure you can do that for a living.”

“And what about Ashley’s mom? Did she seem upset when you dropped off Ashley in a truck with a bear in tow?” asked Fiona.

“No, she just said, goodness, what a lot of excitement. And thank goodness Miss Webster was a family friend and on hand because Miss Webster lied to her too.”

“It’s not a lie, she is a family friend,” said Marlin.

And thank heavens for that, thought Fiona, who had been on tenterhooks about the visit and what disastrous results it might have.

Later that night when Fiona and Marlin were lying in bed doing their usual end-of-the-day postmortem, Marlin said, “Wouldn’t it be cool if Miss Webster and Mr. Pettinger fell in love? He’s really handsome, didn’t you think?”

“Yeah, I guess,” said Fiona, but she wasn’t thinking of how handsome Mr. Pettinger was. She had another handsome face in her mind’s eye those days. For Fiona had met a boy.