

# Ada Pierce: Canal Girl

*A Novel*



Emily Pier Ewing

*This is a work of fiction. The characters, names, and events recounted in this tale arise from the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual people and events is coincidental. The general setting for the story is the Carderock area along the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historic Park, on the Maryland side of Mather Gorge, but the details are fictitious.*

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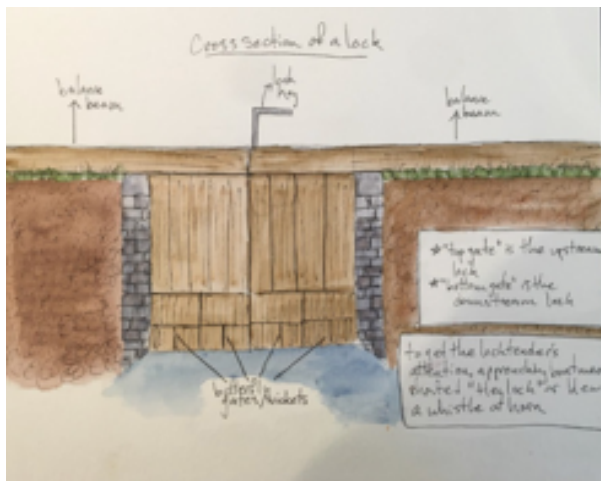
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## *A map of the area around Ada's Lockhouse*



## *A guide to a C&O Canal lock*



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## Chapter 1

### *Whispers on the Canal*

“Hey lock! Oh heyyy lock!”

Voices carried on the breeze as the boat drew near. From her place by her mother’s side in the vegetable patch, Ada Pierce looked up. Men in wide-brimmed hats swarmed over the railing, jumping onto the towpath, and busying themselves with ropes. The words *Flora May* were painted in flowing script on the boat’s prow.

“Willy, help me with the gate,” ordered Ada’s father, striding towards the edge of the canal. John Pierce was a tall man with deep brown eyes that matched his beard and a taste for conversation that ran so deep his very bones shook with the need to talk. “If I didn’t have all you Pierces,” he liked to say in winter when the canal froze over, and the boatmen stopped floating, and the world became very small, “I would just about go mad. You’d find me out in the woods, chatting to the trees, if only for the possibility of a little discussion.”

But it was summer now, sweet and heavy, and the canal was thick with boatmen. And if they didn’t want to talk, Ada was sure that the frogs and birds and crickets on the other side of the

canal would be happy to oblige.

Ada felt Mother tense beside her. “Willy, you be careful now!”

Willy, ever the daredevil, clambered up onto the gate’s balance beam and scampered across, unconcerned with the sixteen foot drop into the water below. At eight years old, he was proud to be the only boy left at the lockhouse now that seventeen-year-old Frederick had gone west with the railroad company. Ada and her older sister Penny let him walk around with his new, puffed-up importance, but it was no real secret where the true power in the family lay. Without Mother, Penny, Ada, and even little Violet, Father would talk himself right into the Potomac and Willy would strut himself right into the canal.

“Ada, darling, you take these up to the captain, see if his stores need replenishing,” said Mother. She pressed the basket they’d been filling with vegetables into Ada’s hands. “And remember, fifty cents for a pound of potatoes—”

“And twenty-five cents for the carrots and turnips, I know,” finished Ada. She hoisted the basket and made her way across the grassy yard to the *Flora*. A shriek of delight burst from where Penny was drying the laundry in the far corner of the yard. Violet, the littlest Pierce, twirled in the dappled shade.

The lock groaned as Willy and Father slowly pushed the balance beams to close the gate.

Willy, face bright red with strain, grimaced as he dug his feet into the dirt.

“Vegetables! We have fresh vegetables!” Ada called out, heaving the basket into the air. The little boy perched on the roof of the boat shrugged and bleated out a few notes on his harmonica. “Well, do you *want* any?” asked Ada, annoyed. The boy just kicked his feet against the cabin wall.

A woman’s head popped out the cabin door. “You got potatoes?”

“Fifty cents a pound.” Ada could feel Mother’s eyes on the back of her head, silently reminding her to be polite, so Ada tacked on a quick “Ma’am” and a smile.

The woman looked doubtful but fished out the coins and plucked her potatoes from the basket. “Hmm,” she said, “No onions. I would have bought onions.”

Ada didn’t know what to say to that, so she smiled again, gave a farewell “Ma’am” and wandered over to where her father stood by the closed top gate.

“Willy,” he called, “you do the honors, this time.”

Ada felt a pang of jealousy. Now that Frederick was gone, all the special jobs went to Willy, skipping right over Ada and Penny. As she was a good three years older than Willy, Ada felt

cheated.

“So how’s the trip been, Ed?” Father called to the captain.

“Good, good, we’re headed down to Georgetown with the coal, been at it all the way from Cumberland.” The captain leaned over the deck of the boat, tipping his hat to shade his face.

From the downstream gate came Willy’s grunts of exertion as he struggled to turn the lock key. Slowly but surely the butterfly valves opened, and the sound of water rushing out of the lock chamber floated up to Ada’s ears.

As the boat began to drop with the receding water, Ed raised his head to look directly at Father. “This might sound odd, but have you—well, have you seen anything in the woods lately? Anything . . . spooky?” His gaze was oddly intense.

“Spooky?” asked Father with a half-smile. “No, I can’t say I have.”

Ed’s eyes darted to the side. “I only ask because—well, last night we were passing by Lock 25 and Charlie here saw something through the trees. Eyes like a fox that one.”

“It had horns!” The little boy on the roof cried. He waved his harmonica around his head, eyes wide. “Horns this tall!”

“I know it sounds ludicrous, Pierce, but when we looked . . . well, we all saw it. Though I



don't know what *it* was. Just a shape in the dark. We heard it following us for miles, but we never saw it again. The sounds stopped after the sun came up." The captain's face looked ashen, even in the bright summer morning. The boat continued to drop down into the shade of the lock chamber as the water slowly leveled.

Father kept his face carefully blank, betraying not even the slightest hint of disbelief. "We haven't seen anything, Ed, but we'll keep a lookout. Though the woods are deep up there by Lock 25. *And* it was night. Your eyes could have been playing tricks on you. Even little Charlie's," Father added at Charlie's burst of indignation.

"I suppose," admitted Ed, his face tipped completely up to see Father above the lock chamber's wall. "Though you keep a look out, alright? Don't want any monsters catching you unawares."

"Of course, Ed."

\* \* \*



“Ada!” called Mother from the vegetable patch, “Stop dallying and bring back the basket!”

With one last look down into the lock chamber, Ada hurried back to Mother’s side. Mother, up to her elbows in dirt, shook her head and held out a hand for the money.

“Just the potatoes?” she asked.

Ada nodded absently, mind still reeling over what she had heard. “She said she would have bought onions if we had any.”

Mother hummed her disappointment and handed Ada a spade. “Get to work on the rows down by the fence, so we can plant the beans tomorrow.”

Down by the lock, the boat's two mules hee-hawed loudly into the air as a boat-hand untied the boat's ropes from the snubbing posts. A cry went up from the boat and the two mules began to move, pulling the boat slowly out of the lock and downstream. Charlie, still balanced on the roof, gave a cheerful wave. And from his place by the rail, the captain nodded solemnly at Father.

As Ada dug the spade into the soft earth, she narrowed her eyes on Father's back. What Ed said couldn't be true, she knew. Father certainly hadn't believed it. If the boat really had come all the way from Cumberland, then Father's explanation couldn't be too far off. Three days on the canal with little sleep would make anyone see things in the dark.

But despite reasoning away the captain's claims, she couldn't stop the slight thrill of adventure that zinged through her at the thought.

~ ~ ~

The day passed slowly. There were enough boats wandering up and down the river to keep the whole family busy until the sun began to sink over the trees that separated them from the mighty Potomac River. Ada sold more vegetables, until the basket was mostly empty. She and Mother also finished raking the garden, preparing it for the next summer seeding. When Willy tired of pushing the balance beams back and forth to open the gates, Penny filled in.

Halfway through the afternoon, enough leaves and twigs had gotten caught in the paddle valve of the bottom gate that Father declared the pole had to be brought out. Twenty feet long, with a wicked hook at one end, the pole required superior balance and precision to wield. That afternoon, Ada received the honor.

The pole wobbled as she strode out onto the balance beam and peered into the water.

“It’s definitely clogged,” she called over her shoulder to where Father and Mother waited on the grass. She tried to sound calm and collected, but her heart stuttered at this new responsibility. Father was usually the one who cleaned the paddle valve, or Mother, if Father was busy elsewhere. Never Ada. So what did it mean, that he handed the pole to her? Something good, Ada thought.

At a quick nod from Father, Penny scampered onto the balance beam herself. “Just in case you fall in,” she said as Ada readied the pole.

Ada harrumphed. Widening her stance, she plunged the pole into the water, guiding it to the dark mass of leaves as she had seen her parents do many times. Leveraging her weight against the pole, Ada pushed down, forcing the hook back up through the water. The bulk of dripping leaves hung from the hook and—a sharp whistle cut the air.

Ada whipped her head towards the sound,

loosening her grip on pole. The hook hurtled back into the water, Ada's balance gone with it. Her braced foot slipped on the damp wood of the balance beam and she toppled forward. A scream lodged in Ada's throat. The canal loomed as she fell . . . and was caught by Penny's arms around her waist.

Penny hauled her back from the edge. "You see why I'm here now?" she asked, breathless.

Father called from the yard, "Everything alright?"

A boat approached from downstream, the source of the distraction.

Penny answered back as Ada shimmied out of her grip.

"The pole!" Ada cried. "Where's the pole?"

Her eyes frantically searched the murky water, looking for anything, a glimpse, a gleam. Where did it go? Had it gotten stuck in the weeds at the canal's bottom? Her heart thundered in her chest.

Another whistle sounded from the approaching boat. "Looking for this?" a voice called.

A man stood on the prow; the soaked pole held aloft. It had floated downstream faster than Ada had realized. It took her another moment to realize who the man was.

"Uncle Nels!"

Though not related by blood, Nelson Lewis was as close to family as a friend could get. He and Father had worked on a boat together in the canal's early days, before even Mother or the rest of the Pierces came along. While Father had opted for a position as lock-tender soon after he met Mother, Nels insisted that the only home he could bear was one on the water. "I could live in a king's palace under the stars, but if the floor doesn't sway beneath my feet, there's nothing to love about it," Nels liked to declare. So he and his family floated bricks down to Georgetown, with the occasional shipment of ice in the summer. In the winter, they holed up in Sharpsburg waiting for the canal to melt again.

On the towpath, Nels's two mules brayed and stamped their feet. Sitting atop the first one was Nelson Jr., his curly red hair gleaming in the sun. Five years ago, Nels had met his wife Sadie, a beautiful red-haired lady from Williamsport. "About time," Mother had said. Nelson Jr. came soon after, and a little girl, Mary, soon after him. But Mary was sickly and spent the canal months with her grandmother in Williamsport. The rigorous days on the water were too much for her frail body.

"What are you doing back so fast?" called Father from the yard. Uncle Nels had come downstream just a few days ago, headed for Georgetown with a boat full of ice.

Ada and Penny hurried across the balance

beam to the towpath. Uncle Nels's boat floated closer. "We made better time than I thought we would. Especially once we dropped off the ice. Nothing like a light boat to fly over the water."

Sadie, her red hair coiled under a straw hat, emerged from the cabin. Her hands rested on the swell of her stomach. "We wanted to be back in Sharpsburg before the little one was born."

"Good idea," Father said as he took his place at the yard-side beam. Penny took her position opposite on the towpath. "You'll want to be as close to family as possible for when, ah, well when it comes." He cleared his throat and nodded to Penny. They began to push.

The gate opened slowly, with a groan. Ada thought it sounded like a tired old man, grumpy at having been disturbed. The boat entered the lock chamber, bumping gently against the slick stone walls. The two mules sauntered forward, ears flicking. Flies swarmed, but Nelson Jr, still perched on the lead mule's back, didn't seem to mind. Ada ruffled his hair as she untied the mules and wrapped the boat's rope around the snubbing posts. Nelson Jr. wrinkled his nose at her and giggled.

Ada breathed in the mules' musky scent. Not very pleasant, but the memories it brought back were wonderful. Like most canal children, she spent her childhood years in close proximity with mules. She and Penny and Frederick would brush

their coats and give them feed if they needed energy. Sometimes, they would even catch rides on the mules for a few miles down the canal, laughing and frolicking with the boatmen's children. That had ended when Frederick and Penny became old enough to help Mother and Father with the lock. Their adventures had gotten closer and closer to home until the three of them never left, stuck with chores and the uselessness of growing up. Ada pressed a hand to the mule's sun-warmed rump and wagged her fingers to Nelson Jr. in a farewell wave.

Migrating over the closed bottom gate to the other side, Ada caught onto her parents' thread of conversation.

"We wanted to see you all again for another reason as well," Sadie was saying. "There has been talk among the canawlers. We met a couple from up by Poolesville, and they told us that there have been strange things in the woods. Sounds, shadows. We know it sounds crazy, but whatever people are seeing, it's coming downstream."

"We just want to make sure you knew, is all," added Uncle Nels. "Just in case."

Ada froze. Excitement bubbled in her stomach. This was what Captain Ed was talking about! Ada hadn't believed him, but if Uncle Nels and Sadie thought it was true, then it must be. A real mystery! Ada hadn't had one of those since last fall, when the family's chicken eggs



disappeared each morning. Mother thought it was a badger, or maybe a fox, but it turned out to be Violet. Little Violet decided she wanted baby chicks, so before Mother went to collect the eggs, she spirited them away to the cellar. But that paled in comparison to this new development. A creature in the woods. Could it be a ghost? Doomed to haunt the woods forever? Or a fairy, sent by the King of the Forest?

Ada's imagination spun wildly the rest of the afternoon, until the sun set, and the moon rose, and she fell into the world of dreams.

## Chapter 2

### *The Search*

The next morning, Ada woke before the sun. Nervous energy coursed through her veins, until she was so antsy that Mother threatened to make her take her breakfast outside.

“If you’re going to forget your manners and act like an animal, then you might as well go eat with them,” she said, brandishing a pewter spoon.

Ada had willed herself to be still until she had eaten as much breakfast as she could bear. Father was already outside, Penny helping him with the gates. Willy went off to join them, leaving Ada, Mother, and Violet in the cramped kitchen. The days at the lockhouse started early before the sun had begun to even think about burning off the night mists and shadows.

“Mother,” said Ada, “I thought I might go look for muskrats this morning. I thought I saw one yesterday, moseying out by the edge of the woods.”

Though it might not have looked it, there was a war raging in the canal between the canawlers and the muskrats. Muskrats burrowed into the soft mud under the water, causing erosion and flooding and other nuisances. Thus, they were deemed a vile enemy. The C&O Canal Company issued an order to the locktenders to trap as many

muskrats as they could. In return they would receive a hearty compensation.

While Mother and Father tried to hide it, Ada knew they could use the extra money. Which was what made muskrat hunting was the perfect excuse for why she really needed to be out in the woods this morning. Ada was going to find the mysterious creature. Mother agreed, busy coaxing Violet to eat her oatmeal.

Ada slipped out the door and into the cool morning. Dew clung to each blade of grass, each green leaf and bright petal. The canal gurgled by, its rushing sound broken only by Father's and Penny's calls as they worked to clear the towpath of debris and mule dung. Ada didn't envy them one bit. Off to the side of the yard, Willy ducked out of the chicken coop, brown hair disheveled. Bits of hay stuck to his clothes, and he held a basket of eggs triumphantly overhead.

Ada crossed over the lock, waving goodbye to Father and Penny.

"I'm off to search for muskrats!" she called. Instead of starting down the towpath, Ada plunged directly into the thick woods. Her plan, she had decided over breakfast, was to head down to the Potomac to get a good view of the woods from the river. If anything looked suspicious, she would poke around.

In the sudden shade of the trees, with the still-tired sun barely above the horizon, Ada shivered.

The worn cotton sleeves of her dress barely kept her warm, and she longed for the woolen cardigan she had left in her room.

The trees loomed tall around her. Their branches rustled, leaves chittering as they slid against one another. Ada understood what her father meant about talking to the trees. Their sounds were another language, and she felt that if she stood still for a second to listen, she would be able to speak it too.

After walking for a few more minutes, silvery patches of water gleamed between the trees. She had taken a diagonal path through the woods, skirting around Mather Gorge and the cliffs that surrounded it. As she picked her way over the rocky underbrush, the river grew closer. Soon she stepped out onto a narrow beach, littered with small white shells. It was a secluded haven, like a pocket of sand, with trees bordering one side, and the beginnings of the rocky cliffs shouldering the other.

This section of the river was calmer than others, wide and flat. It sparkled in the rising light, slate grey. On the other side, dark trees bristled. A few hundred yards down the river's edge, and a short distance offshore was her destination. A tumble of boulders rose out of the shallow water. Ada loved the little island. When the river flooded during rainy weeks the rocks were completely submerged, but in the heat of

summer the island remained bone dry.



Splashing quickly through the shallows, Ada reached the rocks and climbed to the top. A few turtles, startled at the arrival of their new neighbor, slipped into the water with quiet plops.

From her perch, Ada could see a whole wide stretch of the woods she called home. She scanned the coastline methodically, starting with the far left edge, where the river curved out of sight. She tingled in anticipation, but the woods were quiet, still, peaceful. She hadn't expected for the creature to show himself immediately, but she hoped there would have been some sort of

clue.

Sighing, Ada jumped back into the shallows and made her way to shore. “The rock’s all yours,” she informed the turtles.

Soaking wet from the knee down, Ada stepped back into the woods. Birdcalls rang around her as animals woke up to greet the day. She knew of one other place to begin her search.

Widewater was, as the name suggested, the widest part of the canal. The water stretched from the towpath to a rocky cliff face that towered into the sky. Evergreens clung to the moss-covered rock.

Splashing through the canal at Widewater’s narrow northern neck, Ada climbed up the boulders that sloped higher towards the cliffs further down. She used to come here with Frederick and Penny in her younger years. They would lie on their stomachs at the crest of the cliff, at the canal’s widest point, and gaze down at the canawlers below. They would point out any familiar boats and toss down leaves, trying to land them on the tops of the boat cabins.

After crashing through the underbrush on the steep hill, Ada took up the same position as years before. Sticks poked through her soaked dress, but she willed herself not to fidget. She didn’t want to scare anything away. Uncle Nels and the other boatmen had seen the creature by the woods edging the towpath, and Ada’s post on the

cliff gave her a view directly into those trees. If anything suspicious came by, Ada would know.

The rest of the morning ticked by slowly. Boats passed below; voices wafted up on the wind. As the sun climbed higher in the sky, Ada's stomach began to grumble. There had been no activity in the woods beneath. Nothing suspicious, nothing even remotely interesting. Just birds, squirrels, and the occasional deer. Noises enveloped her from the trees behind, but she kept her eyes trained on the forest and the towpath.

After enduring as much as she could, Ada unpeeled herself from the cliff's edge. Head spinning from hunger and fatigue, Ada started down the steep slope back to the narrow end of the canal. But her feet were unsteady after spending so much time lying on her stomach. Between one step and the next, Ada slipped. She tumbled through the air, slipping and sliding and flipping until she could barely tell which way was up. Trees spun by; the forest reduced to a green blur.

She landed hard on her elbows. Sprawled in the dirt, it took a moment for Ada to raise her head. The smell hit her first. A pile of dung sat a few feet away. It was a miracle she hadn't landed right in it. Ada shuddered.

It was then that she realized she was not alone. The forest around her stilled, the birds

going quiet, the critters disappearing. The snap of a twig cracked through the air.

Ada whipped her head toward the sound. She found nothing save gently swaying branches, as if something had brushed passed them.

Finally. Ada rushed to follow.



## Chapter 3

### *In the Hollow*

The creature was fast, faster than Ada expected. Still disoriented from her fall, Ada could only stumble after, following the swaying branches and the occasional crunch of the underbrush it left in its wake. Still, she pursued.

Trees sped by. Twigs snapped, stinging Ada's arms and face and snagging in her hair.

Up ahead, the sounds of the creature silenced. Ada skidded to a stop. She found herself in an unfamiliar grove.

Around her, the trees were quiet. Oddly motionless. Head spinning, Ada tried to calm her breathing. Grass carpeted the forest floor and moss crept up the tree trunks. There was something ancient about the grove, as if the trees had seen more than Ada could even imagine. Ahead of her rose another rocky slope, more like a stack of boulders than a hill. Shadows gathered in the crevices of the rock, despite the sun high overhead.

Ada took a step forward. There was one crevice larger than the others, its shadows deeper. Almost like a cave. If the creature was still near, Ada realized, it would hide there.

\* \* \*



She took another cautious step forward. A sound reached her ears. Snuffling, like the huffed breathing of an animal. Nerves tingled down to Ada's fingertips. Careful to be as silent as possible, Ada approached the foot of the rocks.

A cool breeze wrapped around her shoulders. She breathed in the musky scent that floated from the cave's opening. Pressing her hands to the damp rock, Ada leaned forward. Rose to the tips of her feet. Peered down. . . .

"Ada!" A shout broke through the grove.

Ada lurched back, falling to the ground. She

scrambled to her feet as her sister Penny burst into the clearing.

“There you are! I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

“No!” Ada cried. She flew to the cave’s opening, but the dim crevice was empty. The musky scent gone. “I was so close,” she murmured. “So close.”

“Close to what?” asked Penny, oblivious. “Were you looking for a muskrat? There’ll be others.”

Ada didn’t try to correct her. She gazed out between the trees, imagining the creature getting away. She hadn’t seen what it was, just a quick glimpse of brown fur. No sighting of the horns that the canawlers had described. But Ada was sure that this creature was the one she had been looking for. There was something solid in her gut that told her so.

Penny was talking, “Mother sent me to fetch you. You’ve been gone too long and she needs your help with the seeding.”

The seeding. Right. Green beans and cucumbers. Ada followed as Penny exited the grove. Together they trudged through the woods in the direction of home.

## Chapter 4

### *A Letter*

Ada decided to go back to the grove that night. If it was even possible, the afternoon crept by slower than the morning had. Boats passed through the lock, seeds were planted, greetings called out over the air mingling with the indignant cries of the mules.

Ada spent most of it in a daze, wrapped up in the infinite possibilities. What had the creature been? She didn't think it was a predator, or else it probably would have confronted her. But the canawlers had described feeling a sense of foreboding, as if the creature were evil. She had felt none of that in her pursuit.

In the early evening, Ada's questions were interrupted by the arrival of ten-year-old Johnny Garrish. He came sailing down the path to town, waving a letter above his head.

"A letter from Frederick! A letter from Frederick, Mrs. Pierce!" he cried, handing it to her breathlessly. Willy beckoned him from where he was assisting mules on the towpath, and Johnny hurried over.

Usually Mother picked up their mail at the post office, but letters from Frederick came by special delivery. The postman, Bud Penner, knew the Pierces well and knew of Frederick's foray into

the wilds of the West. So whenever a letter from him came in, Bud would send his helper Johnny to run it by the lockhouse, "post haste."

Mother tucked the letter into her apron, shaking her head at Ada's pleas to read it now. Even little Violet tugged on her skirt and begged. "We'll read it tonight, with the whole family," was all she said before disappearing into the house to cook dinner.

If waiting to go back to the grove was bad, this was agonizing. It took another round of digging in the garden and helping Penny mend Willy's socks to distract her. At long last, it was dinnertime, the canal was quiet, and the family gathered around the table to listen to Frederick's letter.

Father cleared his throat. "To my dear family," he began. "These days are long and lonely without you all to brighten them." Father chuckled. "That's my boy. Always begin with flattery."

He continued, "To my lovely Mother, I daresay you would faint to witness the slop they feed us each day. I dream about your corn bread, fresh from the oven. And your roast chicken, with herbs from the garden. And your glazed carrots, and meat pie, and—I must stop now, as I'm making myself terribly hungry. We are headed back East for Ohio, so hopefully our proximity to civilization will bode well for our stomachs. Father, you will be pleased to hear me report that

the men in my group are just as rowdy as I described in my last letter. Even now, as I write, they sit around the campfire passing the flasks and swapping stories about—well, I shouldn't say as there might be delicate, young ears listening."

Father looked toward Violet and Willy with twinkling eyes. Indignant, Willy began to protest, but Father hushed him and resumed. "I hope I haven't brought too much shame upon our family. I know how the canawlers hate the railroad men, and I wouldn't want my dear family to resort to disownment to save their friendships. I swear, I am only in it for the money."

Frederick was right; canawlers did despise the railroads. Aside from taking valuable business from the boatmen, at places where the rails ran right up alongside the canal, the railroaders liked to sound their horns, scaring the mules that pulled the canal boats. They would laugh and thunder by, watching as the canawlers tried to calm their terrified transportation. The railroads represented something alarming to the canawlers, the promise of a different future. One where goods were moved only by the steam engine and canals fell into disuse. With every blast of the train horn, the boatmen were reminded of the disappearance of their livelihood.

"He's right, you know," said Father. "We know that Frederick is a good sort, but other canal families might not. Don't go touting Frederick's job around, you hear? Some people

may take offense.”

“What would they do, Father?” asked Violet, eyes wide. “What would they do if they took offense?”

“I’m not sure,” said Father, face solemn. “So keep it quiet.”

Mother gathered Violet onto her lap, snuggling her close. Ada felt a surge of longing, for Mother’s arms around her, to see Frederick again and hug him tight. If Frederick were here, no one would have to worry about anything.

Frederick was, as Ada liked to inform Willy, her favorite brother. He was kind and never got annoyed with Ada and her tagging-along. He seemed content at the lockhouse, helping Father with the boats. Which was why it had been so startling to hear that he took a job with the railroad company. Despite childhood frolics in the woods, Frederick didn’t have a particularly adventurous personality.

Father continued, “I’m sure that Father is reading this letter aloud, so if Penny is listening, I wanted to say that I miss you dearly. I hope you haven’t found a husband yet, as I wanted to get a good look at the boy and warn him of your less-than-desirable qualities before you shackle yourselves together. Don’t worry, sister, I’m only joking. I’m sure whoever you choose will learn to overlook those qualities like we all have.”

Penny blushed scarlet at the mention of

marriage, her rosy cheeks deepening at Frederick's jesting insult. "I'd like to see whoever he tries to marry," muttered Penny. "I'll have her running for the hills in no time." Ada guessed that Father had not mentioned Penny's courtship with Ezekiel Tyndall in any of his letters. The boy was a family friend, and close to Frederick, but Penny was a private person, especially in matters of the heart.

Father smothered a smile, holding the letter aloft. "To Ada, my favorite eleven-year-old sister, every time I look around at this Western landscape, I think of you. You would love it out here. The air is always fresh and crisp, and there is more wildlife than I have ever seen before. While I miss the canal deeply, I fear that when I return home, I'll miss this place just as much. And to Willy, just last week we were laying tracks in near the edge of a forest, and guess what we encountered? A bear. It was huge, with great front paws and bristling fur. Thankfully, it trundled away without so much as a growl, but we were all on our guard the rest of the day. I thought you'd like that story, and I have plenty more for when I return. Finally, someone give little Violet a hug from me and I promise to bring back a bag of sweets from my travels. Mother, if you're going into town, drop in on Margaret and give my love. I must say goodbye now, as the racket outside is making it hard to think. I miss you all. Your loving son, Frederick."



They were all silent for a moment, awash in Frederick's words. Ada imagined the landscape he described. Towering mountains, birds sailing high in the sky. Oh, how she missed Frederick.

"I do think I should see Margaret soon," said Mother, breaking the quiet. Margaret was the oldest Pierce sister, already out of the house with a family of her own. She had married Henry Fuller of Fuller Mercantile in Offutt's Crossroad three years ago and welcomed son Silas a year later. Occasionally, on Sundays, Mother and a few of the younger children would stop by her house while running errands in town.

Penny looked a little green at the mention of Margaret so close after Frederick's comments about marriage. Margaret had married at seventeen, and at sixteen, Penny's time was running short. She couldn't put it off forever, no matter how hard she wished she could.

A call sounded from an approaching boat and Father and Willy ducked out to help, leaving the women to the washing up. Lively chatter bounced off the walls. Frederick's letters always put them in a good mood.

Once all the dishes had been put away and the kitchen sparkled, Mother announced it was time for bed. She called Willy in from the canal and sent the children upstairs. From then on, she and Father would deal with the lock.

Upstairs, Ada crawled into the bed she shared

with Penny. The light blue quilt had frayed at the edges and the mattress sagged, but the children's small room was home. Across the room was Willy and Violet's bed. Violet's hand-me-down ragdoll that every Pierce girl had once played with sat limp against the pillows. That was the one thing Ada liked about Frederick being gone: she no longer had to share the bed with two sisters. Willy had been upset to learn that he didn't get a bed to himself, but the pouting had been worth the extra leg room. Violet was all elbows and pointy knees, and Penny liked to talk in her sleep. There were only so many annoyances that Ada could take.

Soon, all the children piled into their respective beds and Penny blew out the candle. Darkness descended, the only light coming from the small window overlooking the canal. Mother and Father's voices floated up the stairs. They would go to sleep soon, Ada suspected. If a boat came along Father would go out to open the gates, but there weren't many boats out at night.

Staring at the ceiling, Ada willed herself to stay awake. She recounted the plan: sneak out of the lockhouse, make her way along the edge of the woods to Widewater. From there she would go in deeper. On the way back to the house with Penny that afternoon, Ada discovered that the hollow was not as far away as she had thought. It would be a simple walk, especially with a lantern. She wouldn't even need to cross through the

canal; the hollow was on the same side as the lockhouse. Ada would check the hollow again, and if she found any more clues, she would follow them. Once done, Ada would sneak back into the house. It would be as if she had never left.

Finally, the sounds of her parents' voices stopped. The floorboards creaked as they headed to bed. Ada waited a few more minutes to make double sure they were asleep, and then pulled back the covers. Penny snored quietly. Across the room, Violet and Willy were mere lumps beneath their quilts.

Careful not to press too hard on the squeaky floorboards, Ada crept down the stairs. The furniture of the kitchen and living room cast strange shadows over the floor. Ada suppressed a shiver. She headed for the kitchen, where Mother kept a spare lantern. Picking it up, she slipped a match from the matchbox in the cabinet.

Ada's neck prickled. There was a sound behind her. Almost like breathing.

"What are you doing?" a voice hissed. Ada whirled around. She barely managed to swallow her shriek.

Willy stood before her, eyes wide and gleeful. He had caught her in the act. There was no way for Ada to deny any wrongdoing. She had to fess up.

"I'm going out. To look for that creature

Uncle Nels was talking about.”

Willy grinned. “I’m coming with you.”

Ada shook her head sharply. “No you’re not.” She was about to say ‘because you’re too young’ but realized at the last moment that angering Willy would only get her into more trouble. So she said instead, “You’re more useful here. I need someone to be a distraction, in case Mother or Father comes upstairs to check on us.”

It wasn’t uncommon for Father to need extra help with the lock, and because Penny was such a bother when she was tired, it usually fell to Ada. Father didn’t think Willy should be outside that late at night, what with the dangers of the canal, but hopefully, if it came down to it, Willy could convince him tonight.

Willy looked dubious, so Ada put on a grave face. “You would be saving me a lot of discomfort. It is a very important job, Willy, do you think you can do it?”

At this admission of doubt, Willy drew himself up to his full height. “Of course I can!”

“Hush!” whispered Ada frantically. If Mother and Father woke up now, it would all be for nothing.

“I know I can do it,” said Willy at a lower volume.

“Wonderful. Now you go back upstairs to keep a lookout, alright?”

Ada waited until Willy had scampered up the stairs and out of sight, before approaching the door. She squared her shoulders. Ada knew she could do this. It was only a walk in the woods, wasn't it? She thought back to Frederick's letter. He was doing adventurous things out West and he wasn't even the adventurous sort. If Frederick could do it, so could Ada.

She stepped out the door and into the night.

## Chapter 5

### *An Adventure by Lanternlight*

The woods loomed around Ada. Despite the circle of light her lantern provided, the shadows were thick and gloomy. Ada wondered if the lantern was even a good idea. Was the light it provided more helpful to her or the predators that stalked the woods? It was like a beacon in the trees, and Ada swore she could feel eyes on her as she walked.

She found a stick by the canal, thick and long. If anything tried to hurt her, she would greet it with this. The feel of it, heavy in her hand and surely a dangerous weapon, mollified her. Ada's breathing calmed and she steadied her pace.

\* \* \*



Soon she reached Widewater. The water, pushed along by a gentle current, seemed to breathe. A cool breeze sliced across its dark surface. Above, the moon was shielded by clouds. A storm was headed her way. It had been gathering all evening and now looked ready to burst. With a soft sigh, Ada turned her back on the canal and headed deeper into the woods.

It took a while to find the hollow. Any landmarks that might have looked familiar in the daylight had grown twisted and otherworldly in the darkness. She picked her way through the woods, careful and deliberate. A few times she looked past the circle of light and saw eyes gleaming back at her. But they belonged only to

the occasional squirrel or nocturnal rodent.

Suddenly, without realizing it at all, Ada found herself in the hollow. The trees, mossy like she remembered, looked sharp and menacing. Heart beating loudly in her ears, Ada approached the cave.

Before she could stop herself, Ada swung the lantern forward, throwing light into the crevice. It was empty. Just like before.

Thunder rumbled above. The light pitter-patter of rain fell onto the canopy of trees, landing softly on Ada's shoulders.

Swinging her lantern again, Ada scoured the clearing for any more signs of the creature. But there were none. It was gone, well and truly disappeared.

The rain fell harder, soaking into Ada's nightdress. She grimaced, suddenly longing for the warmth of her bed. At once, the shadows grew darker, the woods taking on a chilling air. Goosebumps erupted over Ada's skin, and she hurried out of the clearing.

Remembering the way back proved to be harder than Ada anticipated. The rain lashed down, despite the cover of trees, and more than once Ada found herself lost. The canal was nowhere to be found. And then, to make everything worse, the lantern blew out, doused by the rain.



Enveloped in darkness, Ada could only crash through the underbrush, hoping she ran in the right direction. Tears stung her face. Where was the lockhouse? Where were Mother and Father?

Trees blurred. Ada lost her footing, slipping down a slight decline. She landed with a splash. The canal! She had found it. Through the rain, she recognized where she was. The lockhouse was just around the bend.

Scrambling to her feet, Ada ran along the canal's edge. She was close, so close. Shouts up ahead. Ada turned the corner and skidded to a stop. Her heart lurched into her throat.

Every candle in the lockhouse was alight, the windows glowing. Ada could make out Mother and Penny huddled outside. They clutched one another, soaked. In the brightness of the house, Ada glimpsed their faces, twisted in fear. A boat sat in the lock chamber. Men and women stalked up and down the towpath. These were the shouts she had heard. They were calling, calling for someone. . . .

“Ada! Ada, where are you?”

Ada burst into action. She ran towards the lockhouse, slipping and sliding over the slick bank. “Mother! Mother! Penny!” she cried.

The women turned. “Ada!”

Ada collided with them, squeezing her arms tight around their waists. Mother clutched her

shoulders, and Penny sobbed into Ada's hair.

“What happened? What happened, Mama?”

Mother pulled back, tears dripping down her cheeks. “It's Willy,” she said.

## Chapter 6

### *The Distraction*

Willy had not anticipated the rain. That night, while Ada was stomping through the woods, a boat had come downstream. The captain had sounded his whistle, and Father had come out from the house, blinking away sleep. And from his attic room, Willy followed. But he had not anticipated the rain.

“Father!” he cried, “Father let me help you!”

Father hadn’t gone up to fetch one of the children that night precisely because he knew of the rain. He knew that the stones lining the canal’s edge would be slick, and slime would accumulate on the mossy wooden gates. The rain, combined with the inky darkness of a stormy night, led to danger. The locking would take longer by himself, but Father knew it was well worth it. He wouldn’t risk his children’s lives.

“No, Willy,” he shouted over the crashing thunder, squinting through the lashing rain. “Go back inside.”

But Willy didn’t listen. Ada had said to distract, so that’s what he did. Willy didn’t want Father to decide the locking would be too hard by himself and tell Willy to go fetch Ada. Willy didn’t know what he would do if Father asked, so

he never gave Father the chance.

“Don’t worry, I’ll help you,” assured Willy. He clambered onto the balance beam and before Father could stop him, he nimbly ran to the other side. Willy’s hair was already plastered to his forehead from the rain, and the brim of Father’s hat was cascading water.

From the prow of the boat, the captain looked on.

The upstream gate opened easily. Willy’s feet slipped a few times in the muck that used to be the towpath, but otherwise all was well. At the captain’s call, the boat entered the lock chamber. Willy gathered the boat’s rope from the captain’s daughter and tied it to the snubbing posts. He didn’t notice, in the dim light of the lock’s lanterns, that the knot was loose. The rope fell slack, no longer holding the boat in place, but Willy was already up and running to the downstream gate.

“I’ll get the key!” he cried. The cold wetness of the night seeped into his bones, and Willy shivered. He shimmied across the top of the gate to its center. His hands shook as he grasped the metal handle of the lock key and turned it. It was a slow process, opening the butterfly wickets at the bottom of the gate. It took all of Willy’s strength, and he ground his teeth as he pushed. At last, the wickets opened fully. The boat in the chamber began to descend.

“I did it!” Willy stood, prepared to scamper back across to the towpath. “I—”

The boat, no longer tied in place by the rope, lurched forward. It smacked into the downstream gate, knocking Willy off balance. Before he could even scream, Willy was thrown into the lock chamber.

Father burst into action. “Get him out!” he cried to the captain. “Get my boy out!”

The captain rushed to the rail, and his daughter hurried over from where she tended the mules. “I see him!” shouted the captain. He hung over the rail, his arms plunged into the water. “Steady the boat!” he cried. His head disappeared into the water as he frantically searched.

It was another agonizing second before the captain surged up, grasping Willy by the waist. “I’ve got him! I’ve got him!”

Willy hung limp in his arms, head lolling. Blood trickled from his forehead.

Father hurried to the boat, and Willy was transferred to his arms. “You!” he cried to the captain’s son, who poked his head out the cabin door, “Go fetch my wife in the house! Now!”

The son managed to clamber up the side of the chamber and sprinted across the yard. The water in the chamber continued to lower.

\* \* \*



Father laid Willy out on the muddy grass. “Come on now, wake up. Wake up, son.”

Willy’s eyelids fluttered. The captain’s son returned with Mother, who took one look at Willy and cried out.

Willy spluttered, coughing up the canal water he had swallowed. His body shuddered. “Mother,” Willy slurred. He tried to shift on the

grass but hissed in pain. His arm had been caught between the stone wall of the lock chamber and the heavy boat.

Mother inspected the cut on his head. “We need to get you to a doctor. John!” she called, “Bring around the wagon. You need to bring him into town.”

So Willy and Father had left, flying through the night in their rickety wagon, huddled against the rain.

Mother shook as she held Ada. “Father brought him to the doctor’s. We can only hope that Willy will be alright.”

She pulled back and looked Ada in the eyes. “It was then that we realized you were missing. I needed help to get the boat out of the lock chamber, but when I went upstairs there was only Penny in your bed. Where were you, Ada? Where did you go?”

Ada blinked back her tears. “I went out—I went out searching for the creature. The one Uncle Nels told us about. I wanted to find it.”

Mother’s brows furrowed. “Why would you do that? Darling, there is no creature. And even if there was, it’s too dangerous for you to be out in the woods alone.”

With one last squeeze of Ada’s shoulders, Mother turned to the captain who waited by the canal. “We’ve found her. Thank you for your

help, you've been indispensable."

The captain inclined his head, "Happy to do my part." He raised his whistle to his lips and let out a piercing note. His family, the ones out searching for Ada along the towpath, turned and headed back for the boat.

Ada also turned, back to the house. Penny swung her arm around Ada's sodden shoulder and together they stumbled back inside.



## Chapter 7

### *Tree Limbs and Devil Horns*

Penny shifted in her sleep, startling Ada from her fitful dreams. Behind her eyelids, Ada saw Willy sinking to the canal's floor. Sinking, sinking. It was her fault. Ada should never have let Willy be a part of her plan. She should have known better. He was only eight years old, after all. Eight years old and too young to cover for Ada's mistakes. Too young to know better than to go out in the rain and open up the lock. Ada curled on her side, burying her head beneath the quilt.

Father had come back home late last night. The doctor had set Willy's arm and bandaged up his head. He would be fine; the doctor had said. Ada had heard her parents talking soon after Father came back. Willy would be fine. Father said Doctor Elgin would keep him until morning and then send him over to Margaret's. Willy would be fine.

Yet Ada couldn't move. The guilt was too much. It pressed her into the mattress and held down her limbs until she could barely lift her head.

The sun was just cresting over the horizon, and Ada's room was still dark. Mother would be up soon to wake them. Despite the terror of last night, the canal waited for no one. The locks

would have to be opened and closed and opened and closed until there were no more boats waiting.

Ada could hear Mother moving about downstairs. Pots and pans rattled as she prepared breakfast. The front door swung shut as Father went out to check the lock. The storm last night had been one of the worst all summer. The trees had swayed, crashing together with each gust of wind. Branches were tossed through the air as if by giants playing a game.

Ada had been worried one might fall on the roof above her head. She had been worried one might fall on Father, rushing back through the woods from town. She had worried and worried until she had fallen asleep, pressed up against Penny.

The front door opened again, and voices floated up the stairs.

“A tree’s fallen over the canal upstream,” said Father. “The Tyndalls are stuck on the other side, trying to get down to Georgetown. The storm last night sure was a wild one.”

Ada froze. She didn’t want to think about last night any longer, or the ridiculous fantasies that caused her to endanger not only herself but Willy as well.

Mother sighed, “Well I guess I’ll go wake the girls. You’ll need as much help as you can get.”

Mother started up the stairs, Ada counting each footstep until she reached the top. Mother woke Penny first with a shake to the shoulder. Ada closed her eyes, pretending to be sound asleep. The quilt covered up to her ears, and she was glad Mother couldn't see her face. She was also glad she couldn't see Mother's.

"Wake up, girls." Penny stirred. Mother went over to Violet and gently woke her too. Muffled protests emerged from under her blanket.

"What happened?" asked Penny, suddenly alert. "Is Willy—"

"Willy's fine." Ada opened her eyes to see Mother look up. "A tree's fallen on the canal. Ezekiel Tyndall is here; his family's boat is stuck on the other side and can't pass."

Penny shot up, pulling the quilt with her. "Ezekiel Tyndall?" she cried.

"Yes," replied Mother with a meaningful look at the open doorway. "He's waiting downstairs."

Penny slapped a hand over her mouth and rushed to get dressed. Ada had forgotten about Penny's crush on the young man. The Tyndalls were a prominent canawler family and had been ferrying lumber since the canal's beginning. Since they had children close in age to the Pierces, the Tyndalls always made a point to stop at the lockhouse and have a chat. Sometimes they would bring things back from Georgetown that Mother or Father needed. Mother would always

pay them back of course. The Pierces accepted no charity.

Mother moved to Ada's side of the bed. "Ada," she murmured, "you must get up now."

Ada searched Mother's deep brown eyes. She felt words lodge in her throat. I'm sorry. It's my fault. I'm sorry. Forgive me. She wanted them out, out in the open so they would stop bouncing around her head. But couldn't say them, not now. Not ever, really. Mother would never forgive her for what she did, for what she made Willy do. So Ada nodded and rose, the cool morning air biting her skin. She went to the wardrobe and pulled on her blue dress. And she didn't turn to look when Mother descended the stairs.

~ ~ ~

Ezekiel Tyndall waited by the vegetable patch. Before Ada could step out the door, Penny pulled her aside.

"How do I look?" she whispered, tugging at her bonnet. Penny's cheeks were flushed, and her brow furrowed in poorly concealed terror.



“You look fine, Penny,” said Ada. She still felt hollowed out from the night before and didn’t really care about Penny’s love affairs. Though it was interesting to see her like this. Penny was never one to get flustered, especially not because of a boy. She preferred the gentle monotony of a quiet life. Watching birds nest or inspecting a trail of ants. Sitting on the grass as the water flowed slowly by.

The canal was her world, one she never wanted to give up. Penny dreamed of being a locktender herself, like Father. It wasn’t unheard of, a woman lockkeeper. Widows, usually, kept on after their husbands’ death. But Penny didn’t want to wait for the death of a man twenty years in the future. She wanted it now. That was why

the prospect of marriage was so unappealing to her. It represented the end of her dream. She would be married, probably to someone in town, like Margaret. She would visit the canal on Sundays perhaps, and once she had a family, or maybe not at all. So it was odd for Penny to be so flustered.

Ada voiced her concern. "What are you doing? Why do you care so much about what Ezekiel Tyndall thinks?"

Mother bustled out the door with a hatchet in hand. Penny leaned in close, "Father has been talking with Mr. Tyndall. About a union."

"A union?"

Penny clucked her tongue, "Marriage, Ada. They've been talking about marriage between Ezekiel and me."

"But why—"

"He's going to be a locktender. The C&O Canal company is looking for more locktenders and his name has been put forward. I could live just down the canal and have the life I've always dreamed."

"But that's not what you've dreamed of! You don't want to be a locktender's wife, you want to run the lock yourself!"

Penny's eyes darkened. From out in the yard, Mother called for them to hurry up.

"Be realistic, Ada," said Penny. "That's never

going to happen. This is the closest I'm going to get, so I might as well take the chance I've been given. You'll understand in a few years."

Penny held out her elbow and Ada slipped her arm around it, locking them together. "And besides," Penny whispered as they stepped into the sunlight, "He's not too bad to look at."

Ada supposed Penny was right. Ezekiel's face didn't make her eyes bleed or anything even close to that really. As she, Penny, Ezekiel, Violet, and Mother set off, Ada contemplated his profile. A mop of black hair fell over his eyes. He had a strong nose and a serious mouth that could smile when he set his mind to it. As they walked, Ezekiel's eyes darted frequently over to Penny and quickly back to his shoes. When their eyes at last made contact, he jerked his head away so fast he almost lost his balance. From beside Ada, Penny ducked her head. They were both as red as beets and wide-eyed. Ada fought the strong urge to snort.

Soon enough, they rounded a bend and the tree came into view. It was a humungous sycamore, its branches spreading for yards up and down the canal. If two grown men circled their arms around the trunk, Ada thought their hands would only barely touch.

"There you are! We've been waiting for hours!" A boy clambered onto the massive trunk, hands on his hips. Jedidiah Tyndall was

everything his brother was not. He was loud and brash, and a good head shorter than Ada. His straw hat sat high on his head, and he grinned.

"It's been an hour at most," chided another voice. Rachel, Jed's older sister and Penny's close friend, came into view. An axe dangled casually from one hand.

As Ada's group approached, more figures appeared. Mr. Samuel Tyndall wiped his brow as he chopped at a thick branch. His wife, Esther, stood off to the side, watching as her youngest son, Malachi, collected fallen branches and twigs, depositing them back into the woods. When she caught sight of Mother, Esther hurried forward.

"There you are! I was worried something might have happened—the storm last night was simply awful."

Malachi hopped up onto the trunk beside his brother. "Where's Willy? I have something to show him!"

Mother clasped Esther's hands. "Something did happen, I'm afraid. Willy fell into the canal. He's at Margaret's now; he hit his head pretty badly and banged up his arm too."

Esther gasped, her face ashen. "My dear Sarah, I will keep you in my prayers. Willy too." She cast her eyes heavenward, murmuring a silent plea to the Holy Father.

The Tyndalls were, as Father called them,



twice-over Baptists. Baptists by blood and longstanding family tradition but with an extra helping of divine expertise whenever God's plan was called into question.

On cue, Esther leaned close to Mother, "Whatever happens my dear, He will take care of Willy. If this is His plan, we must obey. We are but docile sheep, led by His all-knowing spirit. Willy will be safe, Sarah, in His everlasting hands."

Mother smiled graciously, pulling out of Esther's grip. "Willy is alright, Esther. Perfectly healthy. We should really get working on this tree."

Penny hurried over to Rachel's side, and the two of them set to work with Rachel's axe. They chatted about Rachel's travels on the canal, and what she would buy when they reached Georgetown.

"I'm going to buy hair ribbons," whispered Rachel. "I want them to be red, but Mother says red is a scandalous color that belongs only to Satan and ladies of the night." She made a grotesque face, eyes popping out like a demon, and the girls burst into laughter.

"Hair ribbons sound wonderful, but I'd want tea cakes from Miss Gussie's," countered Penny. She sighed dreamily. "Tea cakes, with the lemon icing on top."

Rachel promised to bring her back a few, and

the girls went back to hacking at the thick limbs. Occasionally, Penny's eyes would stray over to where Ezekiel stood by his father, chopping the sycamore's trunk.

Ada wandered over to where Jed was snapping off the smaller branches to make it easier for the trunk to be chopped up.

"I'm sorry about your brother," he said. Jed was a true friend, like Rachel was to Penny.

"Thank you," Ada replied absently. She wasn't in the mood to talk, so Jed filled the silence.

"We're bringing the lumber down to Georgetown, and Father says we might stay a few days longer. We need to pick up more supplies, and Mother wants to buy a few things for Rachel. Apparently, being 'a lady' means you get to have a new dress." Jed chattered on about Georgetown and his excitement to be in the bustling city, and how annoying Malachi is now that he's turned nine.

"And not to mention the fact that the woods are haunted."

Ada jerked her head up. "What did you say?"

"The woods, they're haunted. There've been strange noises coming from them late at night, and other canawlers have heard it too."

"What have you seen?" Ada's heart thumped and she willed it to still. She shouldn't have even

asked the question. Even if there was a creature, she would not be searching for it any longer. She had seen what her actions had caused, and she didn't want anyone else getting hurt.

Jed shrugged. "Nothing much. Just the noises and some strange shadows. Mother thinks its horned devils risen from Hell to bring about the end of the world. She's taken to sleeping with her Bible, just in case. But Father thinks it's just a mountain lion that's lost its way. Sometimes they come up from the Shenandoah region, but it's not very common. Ezekiel says it's the boogeyman, stalking the boat, ready to attack and feast on Malachi's child flesh, but he's just being mean."

"Hmm. That's interesting," said Ada. Her thoughts were buzzing. So the Tyndalls had heard the creature as well. Were there more than one, or was it the same creature that each boatman had detected? What was it? And where was it now?

As the morning passed, more and more boatmen and their families joined the tree-chopping process. Soon enough the sycamore was hacked apart, its parts dragged into the woods to decompose. As the sun crested in the sky, the canal was finally cleared.

A part of Ada itched to return to the woods and continue looking. But she knew she couldn't. Not until, at least, she saw Willy.

The opportunity presented itself on the way back to the lockhouse. The Tyndalls had offered a ride on their boat, as they were headed downstream anyway.

Mother gathered Ada and Violet close by the prow of the boat. "We're going up to Margaret's in two days. Then," she said, "Willy's coming home."

## Chapter 8

### *Offutt's Crossroads*

The wagon swayed gently as they made their way through the rolling fields. The dirt road had been pummeled by the storm two days prior, but the worst of the debris had been cleared off. Dust choked the air while Mother, Ada, and Violet struggled to quell their stomachs, churning from the bumpy ride.

Their mare, whom Ada called Flo, shook her graying snout high in the air. Despite being an old biddy, Flo had an attitude that rivaled even the liveliest foal. As she tugged the wagon closer to Offutt's Crossroads, Ada's stomach clenched again, this time not from motion sickness. What would Willy say? Would he ever forgive her?

Ada just wanted the dread to be over. She wanted to look Willy in the eye and know once and for all if he hated her.

The town drew closer. It was a small community, with a post office and a few stores. Mostly made up of farmers that were scattered around the hills, who came into town only for church and supplies. Margaret lived on the edge of town, in a small house. Her husband's store did alright, but their home was a modest one despite Margaret's attempts to make people believe otherwise. That was why Mother made

Ada and Violet don their church shoes before leaving. If the girls had shown up in their casual canal shoes, Margaret would have near fainted at the sight of them. Mud was not something she abided, not in her house. Mother had decided it was best to preemptively smooth things over.

At last, Margaret's clapboard house came into view. Mother steered Flo to the hitching post outside, and Violet hopped out of the wagon. Ada followed close behind.

The front door swung open and Margaret flew out, her son on her hip. "There you are! I know he's my brother, but that boy is more trying than a donkey in a mud puddle. Mother, you've got to fix him. I've given him soup and he doesn't want it. I've given him extra blankets and he refuses! I've given him books, and games, and I even went down to Mrs. Fisher's to see if she's got any of that pie that he likes, the one with the blueberries. And he *didn't want it!*"

Mother chuckled. "Margaret, in the middle of all your fussing did you stop for a moment to think that maybe all he wanted was some peace?"

"Well, I—" Margaret huffed. "Come inside then. I'll make tea." She flounced back into the house as quickly as she had come out, leaving Mother, Ada, and Violet standing in the yard.

Mother chuckled again and waved them inside. "Come on girls, let's go see your sister."

They stopped to check in on Willy first. He

lay in bed, arms crossed.



“I *told* you I’m fine, Margaret,” he began, and then he caught sight of Mother and a grin split his face. “Mother!” She rushed to hug him, Violet following close behind, leaving Ada to stand awkwardly in the doorway.

Willy’s head was bandaged, and his arm splinted. He had dark circles under his eyes, and his skin was paler than usual. Ada felt a wave of guilt surge over her. This was her fault.

Despite chiding Margaret for the same, Mother fussed over Willy, fluffing his pillow and tucking him in extra tight until steam practically blew out of his ears.

“I told you, I’m *fine!*” he yelled.

Mother pursed her lips, examining him. She gave an affirming nod, “Right you are. Margaret, you said something about tea?”

She guided Violet off the bed from her perch nestled by Willy’s feet and out of the room. As Mother passed Ada in the doorway, she leaned close. “Talk to your brother,” she said. She closed the door behind her.

The room was dark, and suddenly deathly quiet. It reminded Ada of when Grandfather had gotten sick, and all the children had to go into his room to say goodbye. Air caught in Ada’s lungs. The comparison was all too real. Willy stared at his hands, clutching the quilt.

Ada rushed forward, unable to contain herself any longer. “Willy, I’m so sorry. I never meant for this to happen, I never meant for you to get hurt. Please forgive me.” She knelt by the bed and pressed her forehead to the mattress. She couldn’t look him in the eye.

“What do you mean? Why are you apologizing? It’s my fault after all.”

Ada looked up, confused. Willy continued, “I’m the one who was stupid enough to try to open the lock in that storm. I never should have risked it.” He looked away. “Father’s never going to let me anywhere near the lock again.”

Ada grabbed his hand. “Willy, you are the



most capable locktender I know. And if Father can't see that then we should call the doctor because he might as well be going blind."

Willy cracked a smile. "I've missed you, Ada. It's so boring here. All Margaret does is flap around and all Silas does is cry. I want to go home. I want to go on adventures with you and find the creature!"

Ada squeezed his hand, "I'm not looking for that anymore."

Willy sat up straighter, "What do you mean? Did you find it?"

"No," Ada shook her head, "but I've stopped looking. It's too dangerous."

"Dangerous?"

"Look at yourself! If I hadn't gone out last night you wouldn't be stuck here in bed." A part of Ada wilted at what she knew she had to say next. "It's my fault and I'm not going to put anyone in danger anymore." Despite what Jed had told her about the creature, and despite her reignited interest, Ada couldn't keep searching. Unless. . . .

"As I've told everyone over and over: I. Am. Fine," said Willy. "So please, Ada, keep looking. If not for yourself, then for me. It's the least you could do." He added, eyes twinkling.

Ada smiled. "For you then, I'll search for you."

Ada stayed with Willy, planning and scheming, until Mother knocked and announced it was time to head home. Ada helped Willy to the wagon and wrapped him up in an extra quilt to pad him from the bumpy ride ahead. Margaret said goodbye, showering them all with kisses until Silas began crying once more. As they began the journey home, Ada's heart felt light. With Willy beside her, she felt like she could conquer the world.

The house was lit up cheerily when they arrived, the sun just moments from setting. Penny met them in the yard. She twisted her hands in her skirt and looked up at Mother with a timid smile.

"It's done," she said. Mother gasped and enveloped her in a hug. Penny laughed, bright and happy.

"What's done?" asked Violet. She gnawed absently on her thumb.

Penny broke apart from Mother, her smile lighting up the yard. "I'm engaged. I'm going to marry Ezekiel Tyndall."

## Chapter 9

### *Hear the Roar of Mather Gorge*

Ada stomped through the woods, seething. Frustration built with every footfall, until she was so angry the world seemed tinged with red.

Why did Penny have to ruin her life? Last night, when they all stood out on the yard and Penny announced her engagement, Ada's heart had dropped to her feet. She had taken one look at Penny's sweet smile and felt sick.

*Ezekiel Tyndall is not the answer!* She had wanted to shout at her sister. *If you do this, you will regret it for the rest of your life!*

But nobody else had thought the same. Mother made a celebratory dinner and a pie for dessert. "One reason to celebrate is more than enough, but two?" she said. "We must be the luckiest family in the world." She raised her glass. "To my darling Willy, I am ever so grateful to have you back with us, safe and sound. And to my beautiful daughter, Penny, I wish you every happiness as you embark on your new life."

Her new life? The words had iced Ada's chest. What did she mean by that? Penny wouldn't have a new life, she would stay with them, in the family, forever. Sure, Ezekiel Tyndall would join her, but nothing would change drastically. Mother made it seem like Penny was falling off the edge

of the world.

Ada had suffered through her slice of pie, anxious for bedtime. Once they were upstairs, she would talk to Penny and convince her not to do it. Everything would be okay.

By the time they finally crawled into bed, Ada had planned exactly what she would say. But Penny spoke first.

"I can't believe it, Adie," she whispered, so as not to wake Willy or Violet. The moonlight filtering through the window painted her face silver. She looked ethereal, like something magical had cracked the shell of serious old Penny and this new being had emerged. With her own back to the window, Ada's face remained in dark shadow. "I can't believe I'm going to marry him. I'll be Penny Tyndall. Penny Tyndall," she repeated to herself, softly. "And Rachel and I will be sisters, finally. It can't get any better than this, Adie!" The blankets rustled as Penny shifted to grasp Ada's hands. "Zeke was so handsome when he and his father came by. Of course, his asking was no surprise, we had talked about it before. But there was something so romantic in the way he did it."

*Zeke?* Since when did she call him Zeke? Ada didn't know what to say in response. So she blurted out the first thing to come to mind. "You can't marry him." Though that was the central message of what Ada had been planning on saying,

she had wanted to wrap it up in better, more diplomatic, words.

Penny drew back a fraction. “What do you mean?”

Ada scrambled to remember her points, the ones she had perfected over dinner. “I mean, well this isn’t what you wanted. If you marry him, you’ll never become a locktender. Maybe when he dies, but—”

Penny released Ada’s hands, “Why would you say such a thing?”

“I didn’t mean it like that, I swear. I just meant that I don’t want to see you throw your dreams away for—”

*“Throw them away?”*

This was not going as planned. Ada sat up and Penny followed suit. “All I’m saying is that I want you to remember your dream. I don’t want you to settle.”

Penny curled her lip. “My dream? I’m not a child anymore, Ada, and neither are you. The futures we decided on when we were little were fantasies. I’ve let them go, and it’s high time you do, too.” She straightened, glaring. “Know this, Ada Pierce. I did not agree to marry Ezekiel because I thought it would further my ambitions. I’m not that cruel. I am marrying him because I love him. I can’t wait to be rid of this family forever.” She lay back down then, turning her

back to Ada.

It had been a long night, full of fitful sleep. Nothing Ada had wanted to say had come out right. She had made a whole stinking mess of it all. When she awoke that morning, Penny had studiously ignored her. She wouldn't even meet Ada's eyes.

So Ada had set off alone on her hunt, filled with guilt, humiliation, and frustration. Willy was still bedridden and would be for the next few days. But they had decided Ada would look in the woods between the canal and the river, as it was the least populated. Surely, the creature would feel safest there.

Ada continued through the woods, but her mind was still on Penny's news. What would Frederick think of all this? Surely, he would agree with Ada. He had even said himself that he wanted to meet the man Penny would marry before anything was announced. Granted, Frederick knew Ezekiel well, but Ada still thought it was a low blow to ignore Frederick's desires so completely.

She reached the edge of the woods, where the trees met the rocks that descended down to Mather Gorge. Scrambling on her hands and knees, she reached the cliff's spine. And what did Father think? Was Ezekiel even good enough? Yes, he was a fine boatman, but that took little skill when compared to knowing the inner

workings of the lock system. Maybe Father could teach him, but still. Ada didn't think Ezekiel had it in him. And anyways, Father didn't even like the Tyndalls. He found them annoying and dramatic.

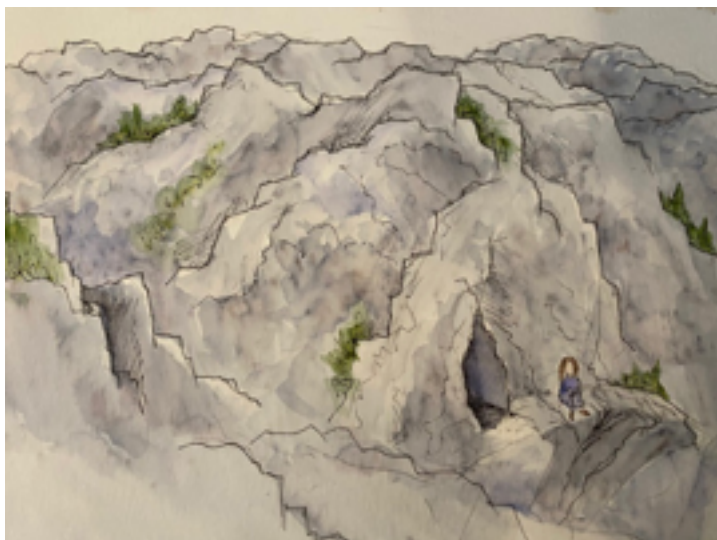
So wrapped up in her family's betrayal, Ada didn't notice where she had placed her foot. Or where, exactly, she had failed to place it. She swung her leg down, but instead of connecting with rock, it met only air. Teetering off balance, Ada fell off the edge of the cliff.

The Potomac swelled in her vision as she careened downward. The wind snatched her scream. But Ada didn't fall far, a jutting rock catching her. She clutched at any handhold she could find, heart thundering.

*No, no, no, no.*

The roar of the river below almost drowned out Ada's swirling thoughts. There was a gash on her elbow, from the sharp rock, and her hands were pockmarked by bits of stone from her hard landing.

\* \* \*



Ada groaned and shuffled backwards, so her back was pressed to the cliff wall. She struggled to calm her breath. Terror squeezed her throat and tears of fear pricked her eyes. To her left, the ledge she sat on gave way to only air. To her right, it widened and looped around to a deep cave in the cliff face. The opening was a narrow one, barely big enough for her to fit through. Inside, Ada could only glimpse inky darkness.

A gust of mildew blew out of the cave opening. A snuffling sound reached her ears. Ada scrambled back. There was something in the cave. Her heart, already beating twice as fast, stuttered. Could it be . . . the creature? It had to be. This would be the perfect spot for it to hide in. Secluded, hard to reach. Ada suddenly felt



more alone than ever before. Would anyone hear her screams?

More noises from the cave. It was coming closer. Ada screwed her eyes shut tight. The smell strengthened, musky and foul. She pressed the collar of her dress to her nose, trying desperately to breathe fresh air. Huffs of breath approached. This was it. She would die here, now.

A bleat broke the air. A bleat? Ada cracked open one eye. Standing before her on the ledge, was a goat. A goat. This, Ada realized with sickening horror, was the monster she had been tracking through the woods.

She stared into its dark eyes. Two horns twisted from its head, and its fur was matted with mud and leaves. It loosed another bleat of welcome.

Disappointment crashed through her. This was the creature. Ada felt like a fool. The goat turned and picked its way across the ledge. Finding footholds, it scampered up the rocky cliff face. Its exit jolted Ada into motion.

The cliff was not sheer, thank goodness, or she really would have been stuck. But, watching the goat traverse a path up to the top, Ada realized she could do the same. Skirting around the cave, Ada crawled on her hands and feet, grasping at shallow handholds. If she went across at an angle like the goat, instead of up, she would eventually

reach safety.

To her left, the drop beckoned. But Ada would not lose focus. She continued, pulling herself up through fissures of rock and over jutting boulders, full of sharp angles. Her fingers ached and her muscles screamed in pain. Blood dripped down her elbow. But she ignored those distractions, silencing her mind. All that mattered was climbing up to safety.

The edge of the cliff drew closer. Above her, the goat made a final leap and disappeared over the top. Ada kept climbing. There were only a few feet left. She was so close, so close. Her foot slipped on the edge of her foothold. Pebbles fell down to the water below. Ada's breath caught in her throat, and she pulled herself up to the next ledge. Grabbing the crest of the boulder above her, Ada hauled herself over. She had made it. She was safe.

Collapsing onto her back, Ada sucked in a deep breath. Never again, she vowed, would she walk along the boulders at Mather Gorge.

Another bleat reached her ears. Ada pushed herself to her feet. The goat stood on a rock, about to hop down into the forest. It looked back to her, as if waiting.

"I'm coming," cried Ada, breathless. She caught up to it, and together they headed into the woods. With a steadying hand on one of its horns, Ada led the goat in the direction of home.

When they finally reached the towpath, Ada felt another wave of disappointment. How embarrassing would it be to tell Willy the creature turned out to be a goat? Ada could just imagine his weak smile. He'd tell her it was alright, but it wasn't. He was still cooped up in bed, and for what? So Ada could find a goat? Ada's feet dragged with each step closer to the lockhouse.

As she and the goat rounded the last bend, the sight before her nearly knocked the breath out of her lungs. Her entire family was crowded outside on the yard.

What happened, thought Ada, filling slowly with horror. The memory of Ada coming up the canal to see Mother and Penny huddled outside flashed before her eyes. Who was hurt? Was it Willy?

Ada broke into a run, tugging the goat along with her. Before her, Mother and Father broke apart, revealing. . . .

Ada gasped. "Frederick!"

## Chapter 10

### *Homecoming*

His hair was longer than Ada remembered. His jacket had new holes, and his shoes were worn to the soles. But he smiled and spoke with a new confidence that Ada hadn't seen before, not in him. He held his head high, his feet planted on the ground. Frederick was no longer the scrawny boy he had been when he set off for the railroad. He was an adventurer now, come back from the wilds and better for it.

"I thought I'd come back for a visit," Frederick said, leaning back in his chair. The remains of dinner lay scattered on the table, and the candlelight flickered low. "Ohio's not too far, and it's been an age since I've seen my family." He reached over to ruffle Ada's hair. "I've missed you little heathens."

The whole family sat around the table. Even Willy had ventured from his bed to welcome his only brother home. Violet ducked under Mother's arm, still shy around Frederick. She remembered him, of course, he was only gone a year, but there was something unmistakably different about him now. Violet just had to figure out how to fit this new Frederick back into her picture of life.

"And you!" Frederick looked to Penny, his glasses sparking in the light. "Getting married

already! And I haven't got a chance to talk some sense into the boy."

Ada looked to Frederick, worried, but there was only a wide smile on his face. No sign of betrayal. She looked to Penny. They'd talked after Ada got home, while Mother fretted over Frederick. She had crushed Penny into a hug, despite her sister's protests.

"I'm so sorry," Ada had cried. "I didn't mean it. I just. . . . I'm going to miss you." There was nothing like a near-death-experience to put things in perspective.

At her words, Penny had relaxed into Ada's embrace. "I'm going to miss you too," she had whispered.

Penny met Ada's eyes across the table and smiled. "Yes, well, don't think that wasn't carefully planned. If you'd come back a day earlier, you might have had your chance."

Frederick chuckled. "So what else has been happening? Anything interesting?"

Ada sunk low in her chair. There was no way she was going to tell him about—

"There's a creature in the woods!" said Willy.

"What do you mean, 'a creature'?"

Father shook his head. "It's just nonsense the boatmen conjured up. Probably just squirrels."

"No, no!" protested Willy. "Ada's been

looking for it, haven't you Ada?"

Ada felt all eyes turn to her. Mother's were the heaviest. Only she and Willy knew of Ada's exploration, and only Willy approved. "Yes," she murmured.

"Well, did you find it?" asked Frederick. "Was it really just the squirrels?" His smile was a shade mocking.

Irritation sparked in Ada's chest. "Yes, I found it. Down by Mather Gorge."

"Mather Gorge!" cried Mother just as Willy exclaimed, "You found it!"

"Well," pressed Frederick, "what was it?"

Ada felt her cheeks redden. "It was a goat," she mumbled.

"What was that?"

"A goat! It was a GOAT!" Ada yelled.

The table silenced. No one moved. All eyes were on her.

Frederick cracked first, his snort echoing through the room. "A goat?" His words seemed to break the spell. Everyone started laughing, even Mother and Father, even Willy. "A goat!" Willy hooted. Penny wiped tears from her eyes, and Mother clutched at her stomach. Father seemed to collapse on the table in a fit. Even little Violet found the whole thing hilarious.

It was all too much for Ada. She rose,

slamming her hands down on the table. “I hate you all!” she yelled. Before they could stop her, she fled out the door.

The night was cool. Ada rushed to the canal, across the balance beam, to the towpath. But she stopped before she reached the woods. Breathing hard, Ada hugged herself. Her cheeks burned against the light breeze.

It was so embarrassing. All her hard work, and it turned out to be some stupid goat. Probably escaped from a farmer’s pen. Ada had hidden it in the shed for the time being.

“Ada,” said Frederick. She turned to find him behind her. “I’m sorry we upset you.”

In the darkness he looked more like the brother she remembered. Tears gathered in her eyes. “I just wanted to be like you,” she said. And it all came flooding out. “You went on an adventure—to the West with the railroad. I thought. . . . Well, I thought that I could do it, too. I wanted to solve the mystery.” Frederick pulled her into a hug. “And then Willy got hurt,” she sobbed, “and the creature turned out to be a goat. I’m useless.” She pressed her face into Frederick’s shoulder, tears streaming. All the stress that had built up over the past few days burst out, like a dam breaking.

“You are not useless.” Frederick pulled back, looking into Ada’s puffy eyes. “Just because this mystery didn’t work out doesn’t mean you’re a

failure. It just means you have to try again. And as for me, you are twice the adventurer I am. You have a bravery in yourself that I envy every day. I am lucky to have you as my sister.”

Ada’s face crumpled into a smile. Frederick squeezed her shoulders and stepped back. “Come on back inside. Mother has a pie.”

Ada nodded. “I will. I just . . . I think I’ll just stay out here for a few minutes more.”

Frederick smiled and made his way nimbly across the canal. Once a lockkeeper, always a lockkeeper, Ada remarked to herself. Once the door closed behind him, she turned back to the woods.

The trees swayed gently, and a breeze brushed her face. The moonlight dappled the undergrowth, spreading its silver paint over each delicate leaf. Ada sighed. Such a beautiful---

She froze. Two eyes gazed back at her. Ada’s heart thundered in her ears. Its silhouette stretched upwards, tapering into two curling horns. In the darkness, Ada couldn’t make out what it was. Could it be. . . . Could *this* be the creature the boatmen had seen? If so, their fear was legitimate. Its hulking body was mostly shielded by the trees but from what Ada could make out, the creature was huge.

Its eyes blinked at her, large and luminous. Slowly, ever so slowly, Ada took a step forward. Their connection snapped. The creature turned,



disappearing into the darkness of the woods in the space of a second. It was gone. The woods were empty once again.

But Ada wasn't disappointed. Instead, a solid resolve overtook her. The boatmen had described an evil in the woods, a demon. But Ada had felt none of that wickedness when she looked into its eyes.

As she turned back to the lockhouse, Ada knew what she had to do. Find the creature. And discover, once and for all, what it truly was.

