

The New/Old

By April Rivera

There were holes everywhere. Some were so small, Plum wondered why anyone had bothered to dig them at all. Others were large and mysterious enough that it made the cogs in her 11 year-old brain start turning: How long did that take to dig? What were they looking for? What did they find?

Her mother, Margaret, informed her that people came from all over searching for buried treasure. Local legend had it that her great Grandfather had buried his fortune somewhere on this land, which was land they had now inherited. Adventure was Plum Elman's favorite word and she was thrilled to discover she had not only inherited a new house, but a new adventure as well.

For the first few days after moving in, in between unpacking boxes, she nagged her parents relentlessly with every question that came across her mind, the way only a child can.

“Why do people think there's treasure out here?”

“Well, no one knows for sure how the rumor got started,” her father, Oliver, said with a shrug.

“Do you think it's true?”

“I sure never heard anyone from the family confirm it. There was a lot of bad blood after he passed, though. No one received much of a monetary inheritance, just the land, and I know some of my uncles weren't too happy about it.”

“What did he bury?”

“Rumor has it, he had all his savings converted to bars of gold and buried them somewhere,” he said flailing his hand around. “But I wouldn't get my hopes up, hun.”

“Can gold go bad? What did he bury them in?”

She kept all the answers in a little green notebook that she slid in to her back pocket anytime it wasn't in use, which wasn't often. She asked so many questions, her mom started referring to her as “Prospector Plum” (which Plum secretly loved, as it sounded very serious and official).

Once she felt that she had enough information, she decided it was time to begin the excavations. The new house on the hill was really nothing new, as it had belonged to her grandma and grandpa before they passed away. They hadn't visited as often as she would have liked, though. She rarely had the opportunity to explore anything beyond the house. But now this was her house, and her land.

She slung her backpack over her shoulder and tossed on one of her dad's old baseball caps. She walked out the door and grabbed her shovel, dragging it behind her as she walked, listening to the steady *tink-tink-tink* it made scraping against the gravel. She already knew that she wasn't much good with directions. North, east, south, west...you might as well be talking gibberish. No, the best way to get around was landmarks, and here's what she knew: You walk down the hill from the new/old house and the path goes three ways. If you go right, walk past the propane tank and the old yellow tractor, and take the shortcut up the hill, you'll end up at Uncle Henry's place. If you take a hard left, you follow the gravel driveway to Uncle Theo's hunting cabin. If you follow the dirt road ahead of you, it will take you to the Camp Ground.

Bethany, Uncle Henry's teenage daughter, was Plum's favorite cousin. She was 15 (an unbelievably cool age in Plum's mind) but she was always happy to hang out and never made Plum feel like a pest. Plum would have loved to see her, but was too eager to get started digging. There was no point in heading left to Uncle Theo's cabin. He only ever used it during deer hunting season, and it was smack in the middle of a hot Midwestern July. She decided to start with the Camp Ground.

Her sneakers scuffed the hard dirt road as she walked. The shovel now only made a dull scrape, but the summer breeze shifted the trees around her, making the path seem to come alive. The branches swayed, as bright green leaves fluttered like the pages of her own trusty little green notebook. The path was not long and within minutes she found herself in the clearing.

It struck her quite suddenly that to her knowledge, no one had ever actually camped here. It was

simply a gathering place during family get-togethers. The Elman family was enormous; Plum's father had seven brothers and three sisters, and they all had children of their own. Plum found it impossible to be very close to any one of her aunts or uncles because there were just too many of them, and it was even harder with the cousins. She had started to lose track of their names and to whom they all belonged. A family this big needed space, and it had always been the Camp Ground. Someone would light up a fire in the pit, usually an uncle. They would roast hot dogs and make s'mores, while the children took turns swinging from an old tire swing near the nape of the hill.

This land was covered in hills and valleys. Plum decided to start digging just off the path, down a little hill where the grass wasn't too high. The area was so dense with trees that she could no longer see the sky, and direct sunlight only poked through in random spots. She pulled out her notebook and dated the first page ("July 15, 2001"), then carefully mapped her route, complete with a little "X" marks the spot where she stood. Her fingers tingled as she gripped the shovel, and her mind reeled at the possibilities. She struck the shovel down, jammed it under with her foot, and pulled up. Over and over again, she struck, jammed, and pulled.

It had been exhilarating and her spirit wasn't dampened in the slightest, but her arms were tired and she felt the burn where blisters were sure to form. She leaned against the shovel, breathing hard. She pulled out her notebook and wrote:

"First dig, no dice. Empty."

Maybe a break would help recharge the batteries, she thought.

She began walking, this time leaving the shovel behind. Her arms hung at her sides as she shuffled through the grass. Something on the ground glittered, illuminated by the light seeping through the trees. She gently picked it up and found herself holding an old glass bottle of 7-Up. No one she knew drank glass bottles anymore. She smiled, wondering how old it could be. Who drank it? What were they like? Why were they here? She imagined a boy who looked like James Dean standing over his Porsche, sipping on the bottle and calling it "soda pop".

She looked back down and dusted the ground with her sneaker. Sure enough, there was a hollow *donk*. She hit another bottle. This one was Pepsi. She pulled out her notebook:

"Found a green, glass bottle of 7-Up and a clear glass bottle of Pepsi. Looks very old. What other treasures await?"

All told, she found three bottles of 7-Up that day, and four bottles of Pepsi. She found a lot of what looked like some sort of discarded machinery, and maybe car parts. She had also marked four more X's on her map. Her digging was less than successful, but the discovery of the odds and ends left her feeling invigorated. What an adventure!

"What's all the stuff down by the Camp Ground?" she asked over dinner. "I started digging just a ways off the road, down in the little valley there. I found a ton of weird stuff. Old bottles, and nuts and bolts of something or another..."

"It's trash," Margaret answered. "People used to dump their trash around here. They liked rolling it down the hills. Sometimes they'd have races and see who's old broken washing machine could tumble down the hill the fastest."

"Really? Grandpa didn't mind?"

"Oh, no." Oliver responded. "This was quite awhile back. Just a way for people to pass time before the TV came along and melted all their brains. No one has dumped their trash around here for quite some time. You have to be careful, poking around that stuff. There's no telling how many ways you could get hurt... tripping on something, cutting yourself on a jagged edge of metal, getting rabies from a rabid squirrel that took up residence in an old dryer..."

Plum giggled.

"I mean it, though. Please be careful. Try another spot. I'd head south, toward your Uncle Henry's."

Plum nodded. Yes, she'd have to be careful. Her father had given her a very thoughtful piece of advice. As Plum set out over the next few days, she did as any 11 year old would do- the exact opposite of what her parents wanted.

Each day that she set out, carefully plotting her route in her notebook, she wandered a little farther. And each time her parents asked her how the dig was going, she assured them that she was staying safe and had not found the treasure. Specifics weren't really important and she wasn't lying, so she figured a little misdirection was forgivable.

Besides, how could she stay away? The trash had yielded some exciting treasures for Plum to display on her bedroom shelf. Lots of old bottles, a few fun pieces of machinery that had funky coils poking out, and the rusty top of an old coin bank that was shaped like a car. She felt like she was discovering something new/old, discarded history and secrets lost in time. But her favorite was *really* special.

On her fourth day of excavations, she had found an old smashed up car, rusted and partially buried. Vines twisted around, almost completely covering it. Plum had carefully stepped around the front passenger side and pulled open the glove compartment. It squeaked, and for a moment she was afraid of what might come out. "Rabid squirrel," her father's voice repeated in her head. But the inside was empty, except for one teal circle. She picked it up and noticed that it had a gold trim around the edges. One side seemed to dip, as though it had melted. That was when she saw the notch and clicked it open. A compact mirror. And in nearly perfect condition! The mirror was unbroken and when she saw her reflection, it was one of pure joy.

The fifth day was a Sunday, so Plum plopped into the back of their car and headed off to church with her parents. Every Sunday was the same. When the service ended, the whole Elman family gathered outside the church for a "quick chat". Plum always hated the chats. Her parents would say "in a minute, in a minute" but it was never just a minute. It felt like an eternity. She stood behind her mother, anxiously tapping her feet. She really did try to keep herself occupied, but it was impossibly boring. Her mother turned around to her and clucked her teeth.

"She's just anxious to get back home," she said loudly to everyone, and no one in particular. "She's been out there searching for the fabled Elman Lost Treasure every day since we moved in. Out digging holes nearly all day long!"

Her aunts smiled and some of her uncles laughed. All of their eyes were fixed on her, and she could feel herself blushing. She absolutely loathed when they did that. Adults had a very frustrating way of making you feel like a dumb kid without even trying- the way they'd crinkle their eyes, flash a condescending smile, wave you off with a flick of their wrist. If there was one thing in this world Plum hated more than spiders and her mother's rhubarb pie, it was not being taken seriously.

On the sixth day of digging, she walked down the hill followed by the usual *tink-tink-tink* of her shovel and headed off toward the Camp Ground. She was halfway down the dirt road when she felt an unfamiliar tingle up her spine. She turned around. Was someone here? She pulled the shovel close to her chest. Why had she felt like she was being watched? Had she heard something? She stood completely still. The wind rustled the leaves. Distant branches creaked. Her grandma had once warned her to be careful of bobcats, but her grandpa insisted they were harmless.

"They're more scared of you than you are of them," he had said.

It was nothing, she thought to herself. *A strange sort of nothing.*

Plum continued down the path with the shovel clutched across her chest. She was being silly, she reasoned. After all, this wasn't exactly her first rodeo. She'd been coming out here for days making all kinds of clanging ruckus and she hadn't encountered anything worse than a scurrying rabbit. As she reached the clearing, she once again dragged her shovel behind her, and began her descent down the valley. She reached the bottom and consulted her notebook.

“Okay. I've been digging here, here...” she said, following the map and pointing along with every “X”. “Maybe time to try over... here...” she said, motioning to her left.

The treasure trove of trash had previously led her down past the Camp Ground, heading toward some farmland owned by someone else. Plum figured that buried treasure being so close to their land, which was so frequently dug up and plowed through, seemed unlikely. She decided to head in the opposite direction today, following the valley up toward Uncle Theo's.

She carefully walked on, stopping occasionally to poke at an old bit of rotted metal or push past some itch weed. She had reached down to collect an old door handle when she heard something snap behind her.

She shot up and swung her shovel up at her side like a baseball bat. She had almost been expecting this. From the moment she stepped on to the dirt road, she knew. Something had been there. Her eyes darted from tree to tree, too afraid to move or speak. She tried to steady her breathing, but her heart was beating out of her chest.

It felt like an eternity. She stood there, gripping the shovel, listening, waiting.

Snap. Louder this time.

She turned and ran, dropping the shovel behind her. She could hardly think straight. Whatever had been watching her, it was still following. She could hear it. She could *feel* it. Nerves made her run faster than she had ever ran before, her thin legs moving so quickly she was nearly flying. Almost there. Almost to the road. She could see the clearing through the trees when

“Ooof,” she grunted. Suddenly there was no grass, only dirt and darkness. Her arms scrambled around her as she struggled to make sense of what had just happened. She looked up. She was sitting in... a hole? But there was no time to think. She could still hear it. Something was coming. She scuttled back into the corner and sat completely still, hands over her mouth. It was close. Twigs snapped. High grass and weeds rustled and shook. There was the *clunk* sound of shifting metal.

Then nothing. For a long while, there was nothing. She almost stood up to peek out of the hole when she heard it again. Rustling, snapping, moving above her. At first it sounded close. Too close. But with every moment it seemed to fade farther and father away. Plum sat in the hole, hands still clasped over her mouth, for what felt like hours. She didn't move, not even a little, until she was sure she was alone.

She lowered her hand and tried to steady her breathing. Ok, something had been following her and it sounded like something big. She had ran straight in to a hole, a real deep one. She thought it could have even been at least five foot deep, maybe two foot wide. Plum had a quick flash of thought- *a grave*. She shuddered. She hadn't even seen it coming. It seemed like whatever was chasing her hadn't seen it, either. It was hidden by among all the grass and weeds like a trapdoor to a secret hiding spot. She stood up carefully on to her tip toes and peeked out. Coast was clear.

But what had been chasing her?

It sounded big, she thought. Real big. The footsteps weren't soft and quick, like a bobcat's would probably be. They were heavy and thick like...

She gasped, and her hand flew back over her mouth.

No. It couldn't be. A person? But why would anyone follow me? Hide in the bushes? Chase me? She looked around frantically. That was ridiculous. Unless it was Bethany, playing a prank. No, she wouldn't do that. It must have been an animal. It had to be. Just an animal. Maybe it was hungry or I had wandered in to it's territory. Yeah, that's it.

She took a deep breath and composed herself. *Just an animal, and it's gone now.* She took a running jump and pulled herself up, grasping at weeds and kicking her sneakers into the side of hole. She staggered to the top and shot right up, afraid that something may have been waiting for all along. But nothing appeared, and after awhile she finally accepted that she'd have to start moving.

She'd had enough adventure today. Moving slowly and quietly, she headed straight back up the little valley, which she noted was steeper on this side. She reached the top and stood behind a tree,

taking in everything around her. She was just past the fork in the road at the where the dirt road begins. Her house was so close! If she made a run straight up the hill, she'd be there in no time. Could something still be waiting for her? Watching her right now? The hair on the back of her neck stood on end and without any further thought her feet moved under her, completely of their own volition. She shot right out the trees and flew straight home- straight in to her bedroom where she flopped straight onto her bed.

Plum had never been so frightened in her life. She was sure she was going to end up being dinner for some crazed bobcat and her little bobcat babies. The thought almost made her want to laugh, but her nerves were shot. She put her hand against her back pocket; her trusty little notebook was still there. She pulled it out and recorded the days events, always noting the assailant as a "bobcat". She did not even allow herself to think of the heavy pounding footsteps... the shifting of metal as though someone was deliberately looking for her like it was a deranged game of hide and seek... or the way it had waited around, waiting to find her, waiting to...

She slammed the book shut. She was a professional. She was Prospector Plum, and she had a job to do. Adventure was her favorite word, and what is more adventurous than fending off a ferocious feline attack? Tomorrow she would go back for her shovel, but this time she would bring reinforcements.

"Well, hello there, Plucky Plum!" Bethany said as she sat on her bed, painting her fingernails a violent shade of chartreuse. "What brings you to my humble abode?"

"Actually it's Prospector Plum now," she said, lifting her hand to tilt her imaginary hard hat.

"Ahhh, so I heard! Your mom called my dad and told him to keep an eye out for you. And any holes you forgot to fill back up. I haven't noticed you around though..."

"I've actually been out by the Camp Ground. I found a ton of cool stuff! Did you know they used to dump stuff around here?" Plum asked. She sat cross-legged on the carpet, and started listing off her finds with her fingers. "Old toys, machines, cars, furniture."

"No gold, though." Bethany said, looking up from her nail polish with an eyebrow raised.

"Yeah, yeah. No gold."

"Bummer."

"Well, I thought maybe you could help me look. You know, help me dig."

"Plum," Bethany said with a sigh, "People have been out here looking for that gold for so long. You've seen all the holes! Do you know how many I've had to help my dad fill? Some of them are so big, I'd swear someone snuck in an excavator! And I'm sure some of them have brought out metal detectors, too. No one has ever found anything. Not even *one measly nugget*."

"There's no smoke without fire," Plum said with conviction. "I'll tell you why no one else has found it: this land belongs to our family and it's our treasure to keep. And anyway, I'm having fun! You wouldn't believe the stuff I've found. Come on. Just hang out with me today."

Bethany stared at Plum for a moment, and smiled. She sat her bottle down on the nightstand with great care, as though a single drop could melt through the bed and straight into the floor. From the color of it, Plum thought it really might.

"Fine, fine. Fine." she said, screwing the cap back on the top. "Lead the way, Prospector."

"So, this is my notebook. I keep track of where I dug and how deep, what other kinds of treasures I've found and where, and some family history." Plum explained to Bethany as they reached the clearing. She noticed that Bethany was holding the shovel she had taken from her garage in front of her like the farmer in *American Gothic*. Her expression had about as much excitement, too. "I have some rules that I follow, like always filling the holes back up. And you have to be careful for animals." she added hastily; it was better to skip the details and not stir anything up. The fear from yesterdays run-in had faded a little with a good nights sleep, but she still remembered that tingle in her spine, and

the way the metal had shifted and creaked as if...

“So we head down here?” Bethany asked, mercifully interrupting Plum's train of thought.

“Yeah. Yes! My shovel is just over there, so we can pick up where I left off.”

Together they trudged through the grass and weeds, and Plum realized how relieved she was to have some company. Plum traced her steps, noticing the tree with the funky branch and the wild violets, and knew they were getting close. When she found her shovel, she picked it up with excitement. Everything turned out ok! Plus, Bethany was here.

“Want to see this big hole I found yesterday?”

Plum led Bethany through the valley, taking great care to remember every trinket she had passed the day before. Yes, there was the old dryer she had passed. There was the rusted out engine, and the tall grass, so the hole must be about...

“Here.”

“Oh, wow!” Bethany gasped. “You weren't kidding!” She walked around it and stopped on the opposite side, facing Plum. “Who in the world dug this?”

“I don't know. But I was thinking: they really seemed sure something was here, right? I mean, why go to all this trouble? Maybe they had a metal detector that went off and they just didn't go deep enough. Or wide enough. Or maybe they knew something, or heard something. I think we should dig here today.”

“You're telling me you want to make this hole bigger?”

“No, I'm saying you can dig where you want. Just... you know... around here.” Plum shrugged wildly. “Just anywhere. Around here.”

“Wow, Prospector. Your methods are so scientific. You're sure to find the treasure! Maybe you'll get the Nobel Prize for your breakthrough procedures.”

“Har, har, har. Get digging,” Plum said.

Bethany walked over to examine an abandoned dresser drawer, while Plum jumped inside the hole.

How deep could I dig before I made it to China? She smirked as she sunk the shovel in to the dirt.

She had been digging nearly twenty minutes, sometimes pushing into the sides to widen it out, sometimes going straight down below her, when she heard the unmistakable *chink* of her shovel colliding with something in the ground. She stopped. Had she heard right? She gently ran the shovel back over the spot, and the tip scraped against something just below the dirt. She got down on her knees and began digging with her hands. It was the treasure! It *had* to be! What else would be buried so deep? She ran her fingers up against something hard and brushed the dirt aside. It was white. White? Could the gold be buried inside something white, maybe a trunk? She called out to Bethany and kept digging, sinking her fingers in and ripping them back out, throwing the dirt behind her like a mad dog. It was still almost completely buried and covered when it came loose quicker than Plum had expected. She yanked it out of the ground, eagerly spinning toward Bethany to show off her prize.

The spin had blown most of the dirt off, and Plum found herself standing in the bottom of the hole holding a human skull. She stared at it for a brief moment, unable to make sense of what had just happened, before dropping it back to the ground. She scrambled backward and turned to claw her way up.

“Get me out!” she screamed. “Get me out!”

Bethany ran around the hole toward Plum and reached down under her arms to pull her up. They both stumbled out and scurried away from the hole, thinking only of putting as much distance between themselves and that horrible discovery as they possible could. They came to a stop next to an old fallen tree and sat there, breathing heavily. There was so much running through Plum's mind she could hardly think straight; her mouth was dry and her tongue felt like lead.

“We have to call the police,” she said suddenly. It came out so quickly she barely even realized

she was saying it. It was the obvious thing, the *only* thing to do.

Bethany turned toward her slowly, eyes wide, mouth gaping. “No,” she said, shaking her head. “We can’t.”

“What?” Plum was stunned.

“I... I mean... we...” Bethany stuttered. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Do you know how long this land has belonged to our family?” When Plum's only reply was an bewildered stare, she went on. “That thing has been here awhile. Our family has owned this land for awhile. Do you understand?”

There was still no reply.

Bethany began to slowly rock back and forth as she sat, thinking through her words as she spoke. “Maybe it's just a long dead family member and they had some weird, old, unofficial burial, right? Maybe it's nothing at all and we'd only be stirring up trouble. But maybe it's something else. It could be something really, really bad. And there's no way we can know who did it. It could be our great grandpa. A great uncle. A random stranger who dug a hole out here. It could be...” Her voice trailed off, and she turned her gaze directly toward Plum. “What if someone we know did this? Buried this person?”

“You think someone we know... killed this person and buried them here?” Plum asked.

“I'm saying I don't know. And that's dangerous, Plum. We could be starting something really bad and we don't even know what we're doing! What are we even doing here? We're just digging holes and hoping to find something. Well, we found it. Now what?”

“We call the police, Beth!” she exclaimed. What was she even *talking* about?

“You don't understand. You're just a kid.” she said, exasperated.

“I'm not a kid!” Plum growled.

“You're not hearing me. We can't. We can't tell anyone about this. Not yet. Plum, what if it was Grandpa Joe, huh? What if he killed someone and buried the body out here? Are you prepared to deal with that? Are we going to drag all this up after he's long gone? What if... what if it was your dad? Or my dad?” She said, terror rising inside of her. “Oh god,” she moaned. “Plum, why was this hole already dug? WHY WAS THIS HOLE ALREADY DUG?” She was nearly screaming now, and Plum jumped to her feet to calm her down.

“Shhhh... shhh...” she whispered. Everything was moving too quickly and her mind was only starting to catch up. “Give me a minute, Beth. Shhh...”

Plum paced back and forth, thinking to herself. Okay, time to take stock. She grabbed her notebook out of her back pocket and flipped it open. She began to write. First, she considered the facts. There was a body down in that hole, and it was definitely human. That was about the only thing she knew for sure. Who it was or how they got there was impossible to say. She had asked a lot about family history recently, and no one had mentioned a relative being buried on the property. The Elman family may have been big and bizarre, but Plum couldn't see them letting an old family burial site become nothing more than a dumping ground. Besides, there wasn't any sign of a grave marker.

The most likely scenario seemed to be murder. Someone had tried to hide this body. So why was there this hole, already here and so deep? Had it been here all this time, just a wide open tomb for anyone to stumble across? Doubtful. That left with her only two ideas: either someone had dug this in search of treasure and stopped just in the nick of time, or someone knew this body was right exactly here and wanted to... what? Make sure it was still there? Move it? Were they worried someone would get too close?

“Strangers come here all the time to dig holes. They've been coming here since our dads were kids,” she said. Bethany only nodded. “Someone else could have buried that person. No one would even question what they were doing here, or why they were digging the hole. They would have just been shooed away. I mean, they were all so used to people coming here. Dumping things, digging holes, it was the perfect spot, really...”

But it didn't answer the question that was truly gnawing at her: Why had they tried digging it back up? Did they know that Plum was digging here?

Suddenly the answer clicked into place, and the thought struck her like a blow to the stomach. This wasn't done by a stranger. It couldn't be; no one was going to stake out an old kill for years on end on the off chance that someone would dig deep enough to find it. This hole was dug by someone who knew Plum was getting close. The same someone who had followed her and chased her in to the hole. She thought they hadn't seen her- that the hole had camouflaged so perfectly into the surroundings and that she had fallen so quickly, it was like she simply disappeared. Maybe they had seen her... but *why let her go?* It made her skin crawl. And why chase her at all? Were they trying to frighten her away? She didn't know if anywhere was really safe, but she found that she needed to get out of the valley and away from that skull at that very second.

"I won't tell anyone," she told Beth. "But we need to finish this conversation at home."

They didn't say another word on the walk back to Plum's new/Grandpa's old house. They both hesitated at the door, sharing the same thought: "*Who can we trust?*", but they went in anyway and headed straight for Plum's bedroom. They were both deeply relieved not to run into anyone else.

Plum locked the door and launched straight into it. Speaking in a tone just above a whisper, she told Bethany everything about the unpleasant tingle in her spine, the chase, and the revelation she had back at the grave. Bethany never said a word but gasped and nodded at the right moments. Plum half expected her to be angry for being dragged along, especially after that chase (really, Plum should have known it wasn't an animal, and maybe she did all along), but Bethany never said a word about it. She only made Plum promise not to tell a soul, and to stop digging holes and asking questions.

"It's too dangerous now," she said. "I know you're not a kid, Plum. In fact, you are one of the smartest people I know. But I'm older. This is going to take some grace, you know, and a little tact. Let me handle it. I'm going to find out what I can and we'll meet back at the Camp Ground tomorrow at 6:00. Take the back way: go up on the hill where we used to do sledding, and it'll lead down to the tire swing at the bottom on the other side. I don't think anyone will follow you if you're staying away from the valley, so this way we won't seem suspicious, and we'll be able to be alone. Then we'll decide what to do. Don't go back down in the valley, ok? Promise me."

Plum promised, and she did what every 11 year-old does when their cool older cousin tells them to do something- she actually listened.

Time ticked by so slowly the following morning that she began to feel slightly insane with impatience. She woke up early and quietly slipped down to the kitchen for breakfast. If she ran in to her mother, there was a good chance Plum would start asking questions. Curiosity was in her nature, and it was an impossible itch. Ignoring it never made it go away, and scratching only made it itch more. She brought granola bars and juice up to her bedroom and stayed there most of the morning, trying (and mostly failing) to distract herself with busywork.

She would only slip out to use the bathroom or eat, and her mother only knocked on the door a couple times. Plum assured her that she was only feeling a little under the weather and that plenty of rest would cure it. But rest wouldn't come. She would read the same sentences over and over, wondering what Beth was up to. She would scribble the same boring shapes in to her notebook, thinking about the skeleton that had once been a person. She would watch TV and find herself thinking *Why didn't they get me?*

At 5:00, she decided she couldn't take it anymore.

"I'm feeling much better," she said to her mother as she walked out the door. "I need some fresh air. I think I'll go out for awhile."

"Off to dig holes, Prospector?" her mother called after her.

Plum stopped. "No... no. Not today. I think I'll head to the Camp Ground and swing a little."

“Have fun, sweetheart. Stay safe.”

Plum felt a sudden urge to run back and hug her mother. She wanted to bury herself in her arms and tell her everything. But something held her back and she couldn't put her finger on it. She took another step and shut the door behind her.

She passed her shovel as she walked down the driveway, laying on the ground where she had dropped it the night before. *I won't need it*, she thought to herself. *I'm not digging*. But she picked it up anyway. She found that her shovel had become something like a security blanket and that she needed to feel its weight in her hands. It felt safer somehow.

Down the hill she went, this time turning right at the bottom. She only walked about 30 feet before turning again and walking up the sledding hill. It was steep and didn't have much of a path to follow, but there weren't many trees and she reached the top easily. The tire swing was easily visible from the top, and Plum headed down using her shovel as a walking stick. In a matter of minutes, she was in the tire, spinning and swinging. She listened to the wind flow by and rattle the leaves. She listened to the birds whistle and the crickets chirp. She heard car tires crunching on gravel as they passed on roads unseen. She waited for Bethany.

When she was sure it had to be 6:00 already, she was feeling impatient. When more time had passed, she started feeling angry and cursed herself for not wearing a watch. When even more time had passed, she felt sheepish, wondering if Beth had simply forgotten or decided it wasn't worth the risk. But the moment passed quickly, and she decided Beth would show and only needed ten more minutes. *And ten minutes more. Okay, maybe another half hour. But that's it. Fine, another 10 minutes...*

As the sun began to set, and her anger and anxiety had started turning to fear, she knew she had to make a move. Heading home seemed like the safest option. She could walk straight there, call Bethany, and figure out what had happened. Once again using her shovel as a walking stick, she trudged up the back of the sledding hill and reached the top just as dusk set in.

It's getting dark. She picked up her pace and started dragging her shovel down the grassy hill. She reached the gravel and picked it up, taking slow, quiet steps as her sneakers sunk in to the gravel. *This gravel is too loud! I'm going to just cut straight up the house and go through the grass, someone might hear*, she thought, looking around and catching something out of the corner of her eye. She stopped dead in the road. The light was on in Uncle Theo's cabin.

Her dad hadn't brought her around a whole lot when she was growing up, that much was true. But she was positive that Theo's cabin was only used when he was hunting and that he only hunted deer. It seemed to Plum that it was all he ever talked about, and it was just about the only thing she knew about him. *Why would he be here?* she wondered. Her gaze shifted from her home, cozy and lit up with lights shining out from every open window, to the cabin, with light creeping out of only one window, cutting through the dark like a lighthouse. She hesitated. *I promised Bethany that I wouldn't ask any questions or go into the valley... which I didn't. And I'm not. I'm just going to take a peek and see what he's up to. Just a peek! Then I'll head straight home and call Beth.*

She tip-toed off the gravel and onto the grass shoulder, carrying her shovel at her side. She moved carefully in the dark, doing her best to avoid low branches and tall weeds that could trip her up. She hadn't ever actually been inside the cabin, and wasn't sure how many rooms there were. She never had much reason to wonder or care. It looked so small from the outside. She couldn't see it having any more than two or three rooms total and there was no garage. Continuing along the shoulder, she found herself winding up the driveway and standing in front of the cabin in minutes. A black truck was parked out front (*When did it get here? Does Theo drive a black truck? I can't remember...*) and the only light from the cabin was coming out of the right side, toward the back. She walked to the truck and peeked in. Empty.

She crept up to the cabin, keeping her shovel close. She peeked in the window on the front door. It was dark and mostly empty, with a couch against the wall and a TV on the coffee table in front of it. *Living room*. The other side had a short counter top and sink, with a few cabinets and a small

refrigerator. *Kitchen.* She moved back and walked down the left side, seeing only one dark window that was covered by a closed blind. *Maybe there's a bathroom here?* She turned the corner around the back. *Nothing here, either. Next turn is the window...* She took a deep breath and slowly turned the corner.

She could see inside instantly. Bethany was on the floor, with a gag in her mouth that was tied behind her head. Her arms were tied behind her and her legs were tied at the ankles. Her face was soaking wet with sweat and tears. Plum had only looked for two seconds, hardly able to process what she was seeing, when a figure appeared before her, moving directly in front of the window. Plum's heart dropped in her chest as she shot back around the corner, praying that she hadn't been spotted. She listened intently for anything- a door creaking or a window clicking open- but only heard the sound of her own heart pounding in her chest. After only a brief moment, she began to hear a voice, deep and muffled, coming from inside the cabin.

Whoever it was, they hadn't seen her. Plum felt certain of it. But they had Bethany. *Beth. She looked so scared.* Plum could see her home from here, shining brilliantly at the top of the hill. *I could run there and get my dad. I could call the police. I could... I can't... I can't leave her. She needs help NOW.* Plum breathed in and let out a quiet, shaky breath. *You need to think. Think. Think. What did you see? She's tied up and gagged. Someone knows that we found the body. Who? Was that Uncle Theo? What is he saying?*

She got down on her knees and crawled, slowly, slowly, keeping the shovel in her hands as she moved. She stopped just underneath the window and listened with her ear against the siding.

“Why couldn't you leave it alone?”

The voice was clearer now. Plum was certain of two things: this voice belonged to an angry, unstable person, and that person was her Uncle Theo.

Later she wondered why she hadn't been more shocked or frightened by this discovery and she chalked it up to two things: she never felt much kinship to a lot of her family, and she had never felt this much adrenaline in her life. Her only real thoughts were of Bethany. The fear in her eyes. The gag in her mouth. The ties around her wrists and ankles. The increasing tone of Theo's voice. And what he was planning to do.

Suddenly, there was a scuffle, “SIT DOWN!” Theo screamed, and a *crash* as something inside the house shattered. There was a muffled cry and Plum's heart leapt in her chest. She sat completely still and realized she was holding her breath. *I need to do something now. He's going to kill her.*

She crawled around to the front and stood up at the door. Please don't be locked, please don't be locked, please don't be locked, she chanted in her head. She reached for the door handle and turned it slowly with her left hand, still holding the shovel in her right. She turned and turned until it pulled all the way around. *Yes.* She pushed it open, slowly, slowly. The living room was still dark, with the only light coming from the crack under the bedroom door and the moonlight behind her. She let go of the door handle and stepped inside. Her feet were silent on the carpet as she moved. She could still hear Theo in the bedroom and see shadows under the door. She knew there was no time to ask questions and no time for a villain's monologue. This was real. She would have to move.

She had seen a knife block sitting on the kitchen counter when she first peeked through the door. She crept over and pulled out the biggest one. She would need it to cut the ties so Bethany could run. If she needed to use it in other ways, well, she couldn't think about that right now. The footsteps behind the door was getting frantic, and she could hear Bethany crying. He could come out any minute and catch her. She had the element of surprise on her side and she needed all the help she could get. There was no time to second guess herself. It was now or never.

She crossed the room in a few footsteps and threw open the door. She swung the shovel up over her head and slammed it down as hard as she could on the back of Theo's head. He had been crouched down in front of Bethany when Plum burst in, completely caught off guard. The blow landed with a sickening *thud*, and he threw his arms up over his head as he staggered sideways. No time to think! AGAIN! She swung the shovel up and slammed it down again, smashing it into the side of his head as

he fell. He slumped to the ground and Plum realized there was a trickle of blood from where she struck him. She felt dizzy and sick. Bethany's scream brought her back and she ran over, setting her shovel down as she quickly sawed the knife back and forth to cut the ropes.

Bethany wiggled loose and stood up quickly, grabbing Plum by the arm. She ran out of the bedroom door, yanking Plum behind her with a force so strong she dropped the knife and nearly fell forward. Her feet followed blindly beneath her as she scrambled out the door and through the living room when a hand slammed down on her back. It pulled at her shirt and Plum suddenly felt herself being choked by the collar and dragged backwards. Bethany, still holding Plum's arm, turned and shrieked, yanking Plum harder.

“NO! LET HER GO!” she screamed, pulling back. “LET HER GO!”

Plum was powerless. She could feel herself being dragged as she kicked her feet under her, trying desperately to get some traction and pull herself forward. Beth clung to her arm as she was choked back, feeling like the rope in a sick game of tug-of-war. But the game was rigged. One opponent was much more powerful than the other, and Plum found herself tossed back into the bedroom with such force that Bethany's grip slipped loose. Bethany ran in and tried to tackle him, but he shoved her into the nightstand with a rough and lazy grunt. He stood with his powerful shoulders hunched over, breathing heavily, arms hanging at his sides. He turned toward Plum, who had fallen to the floor, and for the first time that night she found herself face to face with her Uncle Theo.

His eyes were burning like black coal as he starred. Blood was running down his head, and as he reached up to wipe it from his eyes, she realized his fingers were cut and bleeding, too. She must have struck them when she hit the second time. She felt a lump in her throat and a pounding her chest, and her gaze shifted to Bethany, who was laying on the floor and staring right back with wide eyes. She looked back up at Theo. He was fuming, but he seemed slow and stunned. She looked back at Bethany. *I'll distract him. Hit him*, she tried to say telepathically. *Hit him now*. She was positive he would lunge for her if she tried to make a move, but Bethany was close to both the shovel and the knife. *Pick one and get us out of here*.

“What are you going to do?” she asked, feeling betrayed by the tremble in her voice. *Stay strong. Keep his attention on you*. She looked at Bethany again. *Hit him!*

His answer didn't come easily. He would squint his eyes and blink slowly, seeming to sway above her. Plum looked at Bethany again, and this time she seemed to get the message. She nodded and slowly slid up, crawling toward the knife.

Plum looked back up at Theo's face. She swore she could see the electrical signals passing back and forth to his brain, scrambling to grasp what was happening. *He has a concussion*. She looked at Bethany one last time.

“NOW!” she screamed and lunged straight for the door. Bethany grabbed the knife off the floor and drove it straight in to Theo's upper back. He shrieked and flung his arms back as he bent forward and gasped wildly at the knife. Plum was out the door with Bethany right at her heels. They ran through the living room, desperate to escape the cries behind them. Plum reached the door knob when she heard a horrible, angry scream that made her blood run cold. Theo ran toward them, feet pounding on the floor, holding the bloody knife he had pulled out of his back. She screamed and swung the door open as they scrambled out in to the night, and ran straight in to Plum's father.

Plum sat on the edge of her bed, toes dangling above the floor. Her father sat in the chair he had pulled close to the bed, starring at her in an uncomfortable silence. Plum had so many questions. She was still trying to make sense of what had happened after they finally escaped the house.

They ran straight in to him, bouncing off his chest as he stood rigid in the moonlight. Plum had to blink several times and grasp on to his arm, unsure that what she was seeing was real. Relief swept over her, but her confusion was stronger than ever. Theo charged out and stopped at the door, still

holding up the knife.

“Enough, Theo.” Oliver barked. His voice was deep and angry. “This ends now. You don't touch another hair on their head.”

Theo swayed in the doorway.

“They're going to tell,” he slurred. “They found her and they're going to tell.”

“Put the knife down, Theo. Don't make me do this. Put it down now. I've already called the police. Do you hear me? They are already on their way. I called them, not the girls. I should have called them a long time ago.”

Theo just starred. Plum was terrified that he was going to charge. She imagined him lurching across the driveway, stabbing her father, and coming after them. But he didn't. After only a moment, he dropped the knife and slumped to the ground. Oliver instructed the girls to stay back as he walked slowly up to his brother and kicked the knife away from him. He walked back and looked over each girl, careful not to turn his back to Theo, although he seemed to have finally passed out.

The police arrived minutes later, and the ambulances followed. They separated Bethany and Plum to treat their wounds while the police took Theo away. Oliver had called Henry and now he and Aunt Becca were sitting at Bethany's side. Plum had never seen her uncle look so fragile. His face was pale and almost green, like he was going to be sick. Aunt Becca had her arms around Beth and squeezed her in giant, sobbing hugs. Every now and then Plum would catch Bethany's eye and she noticed her father and Uncle Henry seemed to be doing the same.

Everything became a blur of officers and EMTs, hearing question after question and trying to offer answers where Plum felt she had none. She told them about digging for treasure, how she had been followed, how they found the skull in the hole, about finding Beth tied up, how she had to hit him with the shovel... Oliver sat close and wrapped his hand around her shoulders, squeezing to reassure her that she was safe. She felt like crying. She wanted her mom, she wanted her bed and a hot shower, and she wanted to know why her own uncle had just tried to murder her.

Now she was back in her room, sitting on the bed after a good cry, hug, and shower. It was time for some answers. They both wringed their hands awkwardly, sitting on the cusp of her new/his old nightmare. Where do you start? She found it hard to look her father in the eyes and she couldn't find the words. Her mind reeled but her tongue stood still. She finally managed one word.

“Why?”

He started speaking slowly.

“When I was 10, Theo was dating a girl named Anna Vogel. They were 16, and we had just gotten a new car. There was a lot I didn't know then, and it's not something I want you to know, either. He... there was a... fight. Theo always had a terrible temper; I learned to steer clear of him real quick. Anna wasn't so lucky. Abusers do that, see. They start off sweet and kind. They say all the right things and work their way under your skin. You don't realize who they really are until it's too late.

“One night, William woke me up and said we needed to help Theo. All of my brothers were standing around me, looking down, waiting for me. At first I thought it was a prank, but I could see by the look in their eyes and how hurried they were that something was wrong. I got up, got dressed, followed them out. All seven of us snuck out and walked down to the Camp Ground to meet Theo. He was standing there outside the car, smoking a cigarette. He seemed on edge, twitchy and agitated, and I just knew that something awful had happened.

“David pulled him aside and they walked off a ways, while the others walked up to the car. I followed. Anna was in the backseat. She wasn't moving. Her eyes were...”

He looked up and saw Plum staring at him with her innocent hazel eyes. He cleared his throat.

“She was gone. I was too young to know what was happening, but I knew she was dead. I tried asking William what happened, but he turned and pointed his finger right in my face. He said that our brother needed our help, and that was all their was to it. In some ways, it all felt like a horrible nightmare and

that I would wake up any minute.

“David and Theo came back with a plan. They pulled her out of the car and pushed it down the hill. It crashed at the bottom, shattered the windows and busted all the front end. Theo and William dragged her down to the trash pile and they told us all to dig. There were five of us taking turns digging and only three shovels, so Henry and I had to dig with our hands. We were the youngest and the easiest to push around. When we finished, Theo tossed her in. Just tossed her in, like it was nothing. He just looked at her down there and walked away. I still remember that look in his eye.”

Plum remembered it, too. The hatred in his glare like pure insanity. She gave her dad a little nod.

“The rest of us were left to fill the hole back up. Theo and David poured gas all over the car and set it on fire.”

Plum gasped. *The teal compact. It was Anna's?*

“Then we just walked back to the house. Walked back, changed back in to our pajamas, and went to sleep. Our parents were furious when they found out that he had wrecked the car. He said he'd been drinking because Anna had left him for another boy and that he had lost control and rolled it right into the trees. There was nothing left of it and Anna was missing.

“I was so scared of what might happen to me or my brothers if I told anyone. It was lonely, this secret. I shared it with eight other people and none of them ever said a word; we all just pretended it never happened. But the older I got, the harder it became to live with. I almost told my dad once. I felt the words coming right out of my mouth when I realized that he probably already knew. He knew Theo had a temper, he saw the car burned to a crisp, he knew Anna had disappeared. We were all covering for him. We were all involved and we were all afraid.

“It's not like no one ever suspected, either. The police had a lot of questions- everyone knew that Anna and Theo were together. Theo couldn't give the name of the mystery guy she left him for, and he was the last person her parents had seen her with. But there was no evidence.

Over time, it seemed to fade. People kept coming to the farm, rolling their trash down the hills. They were covering the grave and they didn't even know it. The car got so smashed up it was like it was never there. People stopped talking about Anna, and a lot of the people we went to school with that suspected Theo moved away.

“The guilt was crippling. I felt like I was drowning in it. When I went away to college, I decided that I would never go back. I felt sick to my stomach when I learned that Theo had built his cabin out there, so close to where she was buried. Even after I met your mom and you were born, I still refused to go back. I couldn't tell your mother why. Every holiday we were invited over, and I always made some excuse to keep us from going. But as you got older, I could see how much your grandparents loved you. I felt guilty for keeping you away. I was taking that love away from them, and away from you. I agreed to visit... occasionally.”

Plum was dumbfounded. Her dad helped cover up a murder. She took it all in, afraid to interrupt and stop the story.

“Theo was my brother. I convinced myself for the first couple years that it was loyalty to my family that kept my mouth shut. But it was cowardice. I was afraid of him. I was afraid of what might happen to my brothers if someone found out that we were all involved. I couldn't imagine how my parents would feel if they knew the truth. I started to hate him. I *needed* a way to expose the truth without implicating us all. So I started a rumor. I told a few guys that I heard there was gold buried on our land.”

Plum's jaw dropped. *He started the rumor?*

“I told an elaborate story about gold and spurned inheritance. It spread like wildfire. It was better than I could have ever imagined. My dad was shooing people off left and right and there were holes everywhere! Theo was on edge, but he never found out it was me that started it all. I was positive someone would find her, find something. But they never did. All these years...”

He sighed and buried his face in his hands.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart. I am so, so sorry. I never wanted any of this to happen. I didn't know what to do when we inherited the house. I couldn't stand the idea of living out here, knowing where she was and what we had done. Your mother didn't understand. We had bills to pay and suddenly we were offered this free house..."

"I tried to steer you away from there, Plum. I told you to dig to the south. To stay away from all that. I wanted you to stay busy somewhere else so I could put an end to all of this. I went out one night and dug it up. I couldn't remember exactly where she was or how deep. I just dug until the sun came up. I knew she had to be close. I wanted someone to finally stumble on it and find her. I never thought in a million years that it would be you."

So it wasn't Theo who had dug it back up after all, she realized. It was her father. The hole did camouflage her after all. Theo must not have seen it or else he definitely wouldn't have let me leave that day. That new hole had been her saving grace, and the old one had been Anna's doom. Plum shivered.

"How did he even know that I was digging out there? Why did he attack Beth?" Plum asked.

"I think he came out here because of what your mom said on Sunday. She mentioned that you were out digging. As soon as she said it, I felt like a dagger had been sunk in my chest. I tried to play it off but I glanced at Theo. He had laughed, but there was nothing in his eyes. It was like looking into a black hole. I think maybe he came out here just to be sure. I didn't think he would... you should have told me what happened, Plum."

She nodded, tears welling up in her eyes.

"I have no idea what was going through his head, what he was thinking, or what he planned to do. I don't know why he would have chased you at all. He must have already believed you knew. Maybe all these years of paranoia had finally caught up with him. I don't know. From what I understand after talking to the police, I think he left here and went back home. They think he was already planning on coming back to..."

"Get me?" Plum asked.

Her father nodded. "But Bethany had asked Becca if she knew anything about an old burial ground out here, and Becca told Henry."

Plum was already connecting the pieces in her mind as her father spoke.

"Henry called Theo. God only knows why. To warn him? Tell him to get out of town? He never thought Theo would harm her, I'm certain of it. The same way I never thought he'd hurt you.

"When you didn't come home that evening, I was worried. I called Henry to see if you were with Bethany, and he told me everything. We hadn't said a single word about it in 30 years, and suddenly he's crying, telling me about Bethany and her questions, about Theo. When we hung up, I had this horrible feeling in my gut. I went to the window and saw his cabin light on. Just like that, I picked up the phone and called the police. I told them to rush to the cabin, that I believed he may have kidnapped someone, and that he had killed Anna. I should have done it so long ago..."

"I hung up and ran straight over to the cabin. I don't know what I expected, but I know what I feared. I can't believe you went in there like that."

Plum wasn't sure what to make of his expression. It was one of fear with a tinge of anger, but mostly the soft gaze of admiration. He leaned in close and put his hand right on top of Plum's.

"Blood is biology, Plum. Birth is a random lottery. We all find ourselves thrust into life by no choice of our own. People have said that 'blood is thicker than water' to fulfill their own needs and justify their own toxic behavior. Do you know how that saying really goes?"

Plum shook her head.

"The blood of the covenant is thicker than the water of the womb.' Family is an important word. Maybe the most important word there is. But family isn't your biology. It's how you treat others, and how they treat you. It's the purest form of love- without selfishness and obligation. I don't think that the family you are born into is what really matters. It's the family you choose. I chose my parents

because of love. I chose your mother because I loved her. Together, we chose you.

“But I put you in danger when I refused to turn Theo in. I chose him, I chose fear, and I chose them both over you. I knew better, but I lied to myself. I let the fact that he was my brother cloud my judgment for too long.

You knew better than me. You were always wise beyond your years. You saw that Bethany was in trouble and you risked your life to save her. That is the true meaning of family. I am so sorry that I let you down. I promise that I will always, always choose you.”

Plum took her hand out from under his, and sat it back on top. “I choose you.”

She leapt off the bed and landed in his arms. He hugged her so tightly she thought he might crack a rib. She laughed and wiped away her tears and running nose.

“I’m sure there’s a lot more you want to know. We can talk about it another time. Right now, I think we all need a good night’s sleep.” He picked her up and tucked her in to bed.

The next day, Plum woke up and sat in numbly in bed, slowly recalling the events of the night before. She rolled over and made a mental note to herself to call Bethany when she got a chance. She had a few things to do first.

She got out of bed and realized she ached all over. *There’s gotta be a wicked bruise back there*, she thought as she stretched her back and shoulders. She leaned down and fished her green notebook out of the pocket of her dirty jeans that were lying on the floor. She flipped through the pages before closing it up and tapping the metal spiral against her chin as she thought. She tossed it back on the floor, stood up, walked down the stairs.

She would talk to her mom and dad later. She’d try Henry and Becca next, and the rest of her aunts and uncles. Then she would call the police to find out what Theo had said, and if they needed any more help with the case.

She went straight to the paper catch-all: a cluttered desk where her father kept old bills and receipts, and her mother kept expired coupons and old paintings. She dug around until she found an old yellow legal pad. She grabbed a black pen out of the jar on the top of the desk and wrote on the front page:

Private Eye

Plum Elman

It was time to make that call.