

The Quiet



Warning: *The following excerpt is unedited. You may find typos and grammatical errors galore.*

Double Warning: *Since this is rough-draft material, the scene I'm sharing with you may or may not even end up in the final book...if the story even makes it to publication.*

Triple Warning: *Sorry, I don't really have a third warning; I'm just a goofball who wanted to write "triple warning." It's so fun! Anyway, enjoy the excerpt!*

Prologue

~Zac~

The bruises from Mama's last boyfriend hadn't even faded from her yet when we rolled into Nebraska that year.

"Zac," she called from the front seat as she slowed the car to turn a corner, which jostled me from my nap. "Zac, wake up. We're almost there, darling. I need you to comb out your hair and brush the wrinkles from your shirt. 'Kay, baby? We need to look presentable for Mama's new boss."

I squinted my eyes open, hating the groggy feeling that came from sleeping in a car, and I sat up straighter, stretching my arms above my head before I wiped some dried drool from the side of my mouth.

The road was louder and bumpier here. Peering out the window to see where we were, I saw nothing but a sea full of dead, oatmeal-colored grass.

"Don't it rain here, none?" I asked, gaping at just how much of it there was. Fields and fields of tall, dried-out, lifeless grass. I wasn't sure how dead grass could grow so high, but it'd probably reach my waist if I went wading through it.

Maybe they didn't have lawnmowers in Nebraska.

"What do you mean?" Mama asked, sitting up in her seat so she could meet my curious gaze in the rearview mirror, only to sigh. "And don't forget that hair..." she reminded me. "It looks like there's a rat's nest sitting on the top of your head."

I frowned, irritated about having to groom myself, and I batted at my head a couple of times, only for my gaze to return to all that poor withered grass. "They should water their grass more. It's all shriveled up and dead."

"That's not grass, baby. It's wheat, and it's supposed to look like that this time of year. Soon, farmers are going to harvest it and grind it up into grain, so they can make flour and then all kinds of yummy bread."

My brow furrowed as I listened to her explanation. Then I shook my head, refusing to believe such a crazy tale. “That don’t look like wheat to me,” I declared, certain she was wrong.

Miss Patty, who watched me in the afternoon after school and before Mama got home from work, had wheat stuck in a vase on her kitchen table, along with a bunch of other fake flowers. And it didn’t look like dead grass at all.

But Mama only laughed. “It would if you got up close and saw it better. Trust me.”

I made a face, still leery, but didn’t answer.

The car slowed to a stop at the red sign when we came up on another road...this one, paved.

Another sign not far from it, with two white words on a green background, caught my attention. I focused on the letters of the top word, trying to sound them out. “Haze...”

“Hazard,” Mama finally told me when she realized what I was trying to read. “Hazard County. That’s going to be our new home. Don’t you like the sound of that? Hazard...”

To me, Hazard sounded like a warning or a beware sign. Don’t go in there. But Mama seemed to like it. So I shrugged and decided to call it the dead-grass place in my head because we never stayed in one town long enough for me to care or remember their real names, anyhow.

When Mama turned onto the highway, and we started to approach a town, I strained to see more, hoping to spot a familiar fast food restaurant with maybe a playground attached to it. My legs were itching to move, and I was ready to get out of this car. Plus, I was hungry.

“Welcome to the town of Beaumont, baby,” Mama said, her voice high and cheerful like it got when things were bad but she wanted to pretend they weren’t. Like the last time Boyd had slapped her around. After he’d fallen asleep on the chair in the front room, watching sports and drinking his beer, we’d packed our bags as quietly as we could and tip-toed past him, right out the front door.

Mama had used that same voice then as she was now when we'd climbed into the car in that night to leave him. She'd said, "Let's go on an adventure. Doesn't that sound fun?"

A week and a half later, I figured I wasn't a very adventurous person because right now, I just wanted to stop driving already. We'd been on the road for forever now, and I needed to run and play and explore. But mostly, I just needed to get out of this car.

But as we passed the first building, my hopes for a McDonalds or Burger King wavered. The place looked like one of those western movies that Boyd liked to watch. I half expected him to come swaggering from between some saloon doors with a cowboy hat and boots on, with a gun slung to his hip.

Except there were cars parked on the curbs, even a stop light ahead, and not a horse in sight.

I couldn't really process it all in my head, too much old mixed with too much new.

As Mama slowed the car and pulled into a spot between a really tall red truck and a family car, she announced, "We're going to need to stop by my workplace first and pick up the keys to our new house. Okay?"

I didn't answer because she didn't really expect me to. But as she stopped the car and killed the engine, my stomach tightened with dread.

There was just something about the air here...

It felt as if the breeze was suddenly whispering in my ear: *you don't belong.*

I shuddered and wiped the chill off my arms. No, I hadn't wanted to stay with Boyd, but I certainly hadn't wanted to come to some dead-grass town that didn't know if it was old or new neither.

"Come on, baby. Seat belt off. Out of the car," Mama encouraged.

I sank deeper into my seat. Anxiety mounted.

It was time to meet someone new. I *hated* meeting new people. And what's worse, I knew Mama wanted to impress this

guy, since he was going to be her new boss. Even though neither of us had ever seen him before.

But I guess a friend of Mama's friend, knew a guy who needed a new secretary, and he was willing to give Mama the job after only one phone interview without meeting her in person first. So beggars couldn't be choosers, Mama had said.

In the front seat, she wasn't moving either, so I didn't. She was busy applying more makeup around her eye, dabbing at the bruise to make it disappear. I could still it, though, and that cheek was twice as puffy as her other eye. She wasn't fooling anyone.

But she didn't ask me what I thought.

"Okay, let's do this," she finally announced, cheerful and happy again as she slipped the bottle back into her purse before slinging it over her shoulder. She opened her door and slid out, then pulled my door open as well.

I hesitated, but she sent me a stern look and said, "No dawdling, Zac. Not today." So I reluctantly jumped down onto the pavement and took the hand she held out to me.

We stepped onto the sidewalk together and walked a little way until Mama murmured, "This is it." And she paused to pull open a door that made a bell ring inside.

She nudged me inside ahead of her. I shuffled about two feet forward into the chilly office, only to plow to a halt and turn so I could press close to Mama and hide my face in her waist and wrap my arms around her hips.

It smelled old. And moldy. And I didn't like it.

"It's okay, honey," Mama told me in a hushed voice as she set her hand on my hair and smoothed it in calming strokes, just before a man's voice called, "Be right out," from another room.

I lifted my face cautiously to see a desk. It looked full of important papers and files, but no one was sitting there. Then a man stepped from the doorway behind it, wearing a white button-up shirt that bulged over a pair of dress pants with a green and black diagonally striped tie around his neck.

Eating a donut, he jarred to a halt in the doorway and gaped at us in shock.

Mama cleared her throat. “Uh...Mr. Everly?” she asked. He nodded without speaking.

She smiled and shuffled forward, dragging me with her. “Hi,” she greeted, sticking out her hand. “I’m Grace Topper. Your new assistant.”

With a blink, he dropped the donut to his side. “You are?”

Mama nodded. “Yes, sir.” And I kept clinging to her, not about to let go.

“Well...” Mr. Everly just kept standing there as he slowly looked her up and down. I shifted around from Mama’s side until I was trembling behind her, hoping he’d stop staring soon because it was weird. But then he finally did stop, and he smiled into Mama’s eyes. “Brenda Sue said you were real competent on a computer, but she never mentioned how pretty you were.”

“Oh...” Mama pressed a surprised hand to her chest, and I could hear the blush in her voice when she added, “Thank you, Mr. Everly. I—”

“It’s just Jude,” he broke in, smiling even wider. “Call me Jude.”

“Jude,” she murmured, corralling me back around until I was standing at her side again. Then she set her hand on my back. “Er...This is my son.” She tried to coax me to look up so I could face the man fully, but I wouldn’t budge. “Zac.”

“Hey there, Zac.” Mr. Everly bent slightly and tried to give me one of those smiles that nurses gave you right before they delivered a shot.

I didn’t trust it.

“How old are you, son?”

I narrowed my eyes and burrowed hardest against my mother.

Mama started stroking my hair again. “He’s seven,” she answered for me. “And he should be ready for the second grade when classes start back up in the fall.”

“Second grade, huh?” Mr. Everly murmured kindly, nodding as he looked me over. He paused, however, when he got to my knuckles that were still swollen and cut from hiding Boyd,

and his gaze darted up to Mama's puffy eye before narrowing on my face.

"Yes, second grade," Mama carried on to distract him. "So we were hoping you had a school not too far from here."

"Hmm?" Mr. Everly tore his gaze from me and lifted it to Mama, only to blink his accusing expression away and add, "Oh. Sure, sure. There's three in town, actually. Two private schools: one catholic and one Lutheran. They both hold classes up to the fifth grade. And then there's the public school that, of course, goes all the way to twelfth."

"Oh good." Mama patted my back encouragingly. "The public school sounds just fine."

"It is," Mr. Everly assured. "Both my girls go there, in fact. One's two years older than Zac here, and the other's a year younger." His gaze returned to me before he lowered his voice as if he thought that would prevent me from hearing. Then he asked Mama, "He doesn't need...*special* classes. Does he?"

His tone heavily implied that something wasn't right with me. But Mama didn't seem to notice.

"Pardon?" she murmured, sounding confused before she gasped. "Oh! No, no. Of course not. He's as bright as they come. He's just being shy right now."

"Shy?" Mr. Everly repeated slowly, lifting an eyebrow in disagreement before he returned his gaze to me. "Hmm. I guess that's a phase they can grow out of at least."

Mama's hand on my back felt protective and secure as she vaguely murmured, "I guess. Did I hear right that we needed to stop here for a key first?"

"What's that?" Mr. Everly asked, finally tearing his attention from me. "A key. Right. Sure. Let me go hunt up that key. Be right back." And he disappeared back into his office.

Through the doorway, I saw him set his donut on his desk and wipe his hands on his hips before he started opening drawers and searching.

Mama leaned down and whispered. "I think we're going to like it here."

I looked up at her incredulously. She nodded encouragingly, but I saw tears in her eyes. She wanted this to work. She wanted to fit in and find a home. A place to finally stay.

So I nodded too. As long as no one here hit her, I'd find a way to make it work too.

...And that's where the story is now...