



## Founder's Day

See, here's the thing.

In the big scheme of life and planet Earth, the town of Redhood is a tiny speck. An itty-bitty speck of a speck. Don't even bother pulling out a map, because the town isn't on most of them. It never held a witch trial, wasn't responsible for starting any kind of revolution, and the Pilgrims landed on a rock about two hundred miles away. To most people, the only interesting thing about Redhood is the family that founded it.

Well, *you* might be interested to know that there is nothing interesting about us Reddings. I mean, okay, my great-great-great-great-great-whatever came *this close* to signing the Declaration of Independence but got held up

## THE DREADFUL TALE OF PROSPER REDDING

by a sore throat that killed him two days later. *A sore throat.* Which, sorry, is just about the lamest way a guy could go. I don't think he should get points for *almost* signing. That's like me telling my parents I *almost* got a perfect score on my math test—a D is only four grades away from an A, right?

Anyway, the point is, my family has been around forever and doesn't seem to be going anywhere. The walls of the Cottage are stuffed with portraits of frowning ancestors in black coats and bonnets. Every day is like a bad Thanksgiving play over there.

Just below those are pictures of a few dozen four-star generals, important congressmen, and some CEOs. Grandmother likes to say that if any one of us decided to run for president (aka her), the country would be so in love (with her), they'd get rid of "this pesky democracy" and name President Redding (her) a monarch (queen).

The faces of my family changed with each generation, but you couldn't say the same about Redhood. It never changes, not really. Probably because it takes years of town meetings and vote after vote to get anything done. I mean, it became front-page news when my grandmother, the mayor, finally allowed them to bring high-speed Internet to the town. Before that day, I don't think Grandmother had ever touched a computer in her life.

Redhood was like a page that had fallen from an old history book and was stuck, forgotten, under a desk. It was

## ALEXANDRA BRACKEN

still around collecting dust, but if you weren't looking for it, you'd never find it. Families came and went, but they always seemed to return eventually. And the worst was that everyone was constantly all up in each other's business—especially my family's. The place felt smaller every year.

Which was why it was so weird that no one else noticed when a stranger came to town.

On Founder's Day, the only place to be was on Main Street, under the ropes of warm, twinkling lights draped between Peregrine S. Redding Academy and the courthouse.

The steps of the two redbrick buildings were littered with straw-stuffed cushions and folding chairs, every last available spot claimed by the town's residents for the evening's Candlelight Parade. The tourists who wandered into Redhood to see its famous festival were too entranced by everything to know they needed to reserve their own seats long before sundown.

Most of the time, I would do just about anything to get out of this place. Founder's Day is the exception. It's when the town wakes up from summer's sweaty sleep and exhales some strange magic stirring inside it. You feel it shift, transforming a place as stiff as a book's spine into a maze of haystacks, wreaths, and garlands. The air crisps and sweetens, and breathing it in is like taking the first bite of a freshly picked apple.

## THE DREADFUL TALE OF PROSPER REDDING

In the dark midnight hours of October, the trees of Main Street set themselves ablaze with color. They lean over the streets and create a canopy of dazzling gold when the sunlight hits them just right. I *still* haven't found the right blend of paint to capture it, and maybe I never will. Most of the fallen leaves are then rescued and stuffed into scarecrows that guests can take home with them from the celebration.

The best part of it, though, is the morning mist that creeps along the streets, glowing just enough to mask everything secretly ugly and rotten about this place.

A chilly breeze suddenly slipped up beneath my school uniform blazer, ruffling the edges of my notebook. I slammed my fist down to keep it from flying away with the fluttering leaves.

I should have sharpened my pencil before I left school. When I tried to sketch the nearby kids tossing rings over pumpkin stems, everyone came out looking like one of those troll dolls. Their parents watched from a short distance away, gathered in front of the white-and-orange-striped tent that the local café, Pilgrim's Plate, had set up to sell pie, cobbler, and apple-cider doughnuts.

I think that's why I noticed him then. He wasn't standing in one of the parental unit clusters, sipping hot cider. Instead, the stranger stood on the opposite side of the street, by the cart selling sugar-sweet-smelling roasted chestnuts. He was broomstick thin, and if I had to draw his face, I

## ALEXANDRA BRACKEN

would have started first with his long nose. He sneered as someone tried to pass him a piece of paper to use for the growing bonfire at the center of the square.

He was dressed like a Pilgrim, but sad as it was, that wasn't actually weird. A lot of people in Redhood got dressed up for Founder's Day, especially the old people. Old people love those big black buckle hats and billowy white shirts, I guess.

I glanced at the wide-brim straw hat he wore, then down at his shoes. Unpolished and missing buckles. He was lucky Grandmother wasn't around. She would have tossed *him* into the bonfire, instead of a slip of paper that listed her regrets she was hoping to burn away.

The bonfire was the whole point of the Founder's Day festival—the time we could let the fire eat up every bad feeling, thought, or secret we had and be free from it. That's what Grandmother says. I think most people just came to make their s'mores.

The guy, whoever he was, waited until the man running the cart turned to help another customer before snatching some chestnuts for himself. He must have felt me staring, because he turned with a crooked grin and a wink.

*Okay, then*, I thought, and turned back to my drawing—only to immediately jump up to my feet. “Aw, *crap!*”

A glob of maple syrup had dripped from my Silence Cake onto the notebook page, and slowly made its way down

## THE DREADFUL TALE OF PROSPER REDDING

onto my pants, where it pooled in the worst place imaginable. Awesome.

With a small sigh, I popped the rest of the treat into my mouth and tore out the ruined sheet of paper. A whole hour's work, reduced to use as a napkin to wipe away sticky pumpkin leaf crumbs. That's right. Some towns get caramel apples. Others get a special chocolate treat as their claim to fame. We got fried pumpkin leaves.

Some backstory: way back, and I mean *way* back, before Redhood was even named Redhood, the small group of settlers that arrived with their terrible hats and frowns experienced an endless string of crop failures. During one particularly bad season, the wife of our town's founder, Honor Redding, was left with nothing but the leaves of their sad, dying pumpkin field. Her name was Silence, which probably tells you everything you need to know about what was expected of her in life. Anyway, legend has it that she saved our fledgling town from starvation by sharing their pumpkin leaves and finding different ways to prepare them to survive the winter.

Since no one wants to eat a plain pumpkin leaf if they aren't starving, we now fry them and dunk them in honey, maple syrup, or chocolate and slide a stick through a line of them to munch on. And we call them Silence Cakes in her honor because her husband, actually named Honor, gets credit for just about everything else.

The *bong, bong, bong* of the bell in the clock tower tolled.

ALEXANDRA BRACKEN

I looked up, frantic, checking the time—how was it already five o'clock?

Climbing onto the bench, I searched the heads and hats of the milling crowds, the volunteers who were beginning to light the thousands of candles that would eventually be added to floats or carried by the school choir as they sang during the parade. Prue had been pulled away by her group of friends, each dressed in the Academy's navy blazer and plaid skirt, and my heart started hammering in my chest, just a little, when I realized I'd been so focused on my own stupid sketch I'd lost track of her completely.

But—there they were, by the haystack maze. I leaped down, charging through the line of tourists waiting for their chance to paint pumpkins.

There was a quartet of string musicians playing some dead composer's song in the white gazebo, under a banner that read CELEBRATING 325 YEARS OF REDHOOD HISTORY. Just as they finished and people began to applaud, the black iron streetlamps flickered on. I tripped over one of the jack-o'-lanterns lining the sidewalk.

Crap. We'd have to run.

I shoved my way through the crowd around the gazebo, fighting through the sea of elbows and baby strollers.

"Watch it—"

"Hey!"

I ignored them. That is, until a hand gripped the back of my neck and yanked me so hard I dropped my backpack.

## THE DREADFUL TALE OF PROSPER REDDING

One whiff was all I needed to know who the hand belonged to. Mr. Wickworth smelled like lemons and dry-erase markers. My stomach turned into a knot of wriggling worms.

“Mr. Redding. Would you care to explain this excessively rude behavior?”

Did you know that human beings can, in fact, cluck? I didn't, not until Mr. Henry Wickworth found me dozing off in class on the first day of seventh-grade English at the Academy. His face turned a shade of purple not normally found in nature, and me and the rest of the class had to sit through a ten-minute rant about *respectful behavior* and *rudeness*, and how he'd be expecting an essay outlining the difference by the end of detention that same afternoon.

Yeah, detention on the first day of school. Detention every day for the entire first week of school, actually. So far, I'd written papers on *disrespect*, *inconsiderateness*, and *honor*. I thought he was actually going to take his ruler and break it over my head when he asked for one defining *wiseacre*, and I only wrote one sentence: *I prefer smart aleck, sir.*

The truth was, Mr. Wickworth spent more time watching those survival reality-TV shows on his school computer than he did teaching us. The walls of his classroom were decorated with quotes from famous authors I'm pretty sure he made up (“*School is important. Pay attention in class.*”—Ernest Hemingway). Trust me, if I had the choice between listening to an hour of TV static or sitting through one of

ALEXANDRA BRACKEN

his lessons, the static would be about a hundred thousand times more interesting.

“Well?” he said, fingers pinching my shoulders. “What do you have to say for yourself, Prosperity?”

Sometimes I wished I could be reprogrammed to think before I opened my mouth. “Since when do I have to say anything to you outside of class?”

You know when you try to cook an egg in the microwave, how the yolk starts to wiggle, then puff, then explodes all over the walls? I was pretty sure Mom would have had to take my uniform to the dry cleaners to get Mr. Wickworth’s brains out of the fabric if Prue hadn’t suddenly appeared.

“There you are, Prosper!” she said, brightly. Her friends trailed behind her, glaring at me over her shoulder. “Oh, hi, Mr. Wickworth! Are you enjoying the festival? Grandmother asked me to pass along a hello and to thank you for all your hard work.”

Mr. Wickworth’s hand lifted off me. I turned just in time to see the amazing change come over his face. His lips parted, and the face that had been as red as Prue’s fire-bright hair took on a delighted, rosy kind of pink. “Oh. Miss Redding. Forgive me, I didn’t see you there.”

He, along with everyone else standing nearby, created a path for her. When she reached me, she put a hand on top of my head and gave it a little pat—a stupid habit she’d developed since she shot up three inches taller than me over

## THE DREADFUL TALE OF PROSPER REDDING

the summer. Clearly we weren't identical. With my black hair and dark eyes, and her red hair and blue eyes, we didn't even look like we shared the same parents.

But I remembered how it used to be. I remembered all the hospital rooms. I remembered having to go to school without her, and then coming home and showing her all the pictures I'd drawn of it since we weren't allowed to turn on our phones to take photos. I remembered the way my blood turned cold each time she looked pale, or her breathing became labored.

I remembered, when we were really little, getting out of bed in the middle of the night to check on her. To make sure her heart was still beating.



## A Spell of Bad Luck

Grandmother called Prue's heart condition the only bad luck the family had had in centuries. That's true. But even on the worst of days, I could make her laugh with a dumb story, watch a movie with her, help her get around the house, or make her lunch when our parents were traveling. I knew all the emergency numbers for her doctors, and still do.

But Prue was a Redding, and she survived, even when doctors said she probably wouldn't. Our parents founded Heart2Heart, an international charity dedicated to raising funds for underprivileged children with heart defects, and Prue became the face of it. The whole country was pulling for her with each surgery, and the most recent one, two years ago now, made her healthy and strong enough to do the things she'd never be allowed to before.

## THE DREADFUL TALE OF PROSPER REDDING

Prue enrolled in the Academy with me. She made friends who weren't related to us, and those friends happened to be the kids I never told her about, the ones who would fill my backpack with dirt or steal my homework.

And then, like all of the pent-up Redding good luck previously denied to her hit at once, she became president of our class, and set three consecutive track, horseback-riding, and archery records, and won a statewide essay contest about the need for better access to clean water in underserved parts of India. The one time she had brought home a report card that had a single A- on it, the teacher actually apologized to *her* for failing to teach up to her standards.

Prue is amazing, anyone will tell you that. It was just . . . now she knew the truth about me. I couldn't hide what other people really thought of me when she could see it for herself.

We came from a family of winners, record-setters, and firsts, and there wasn't a day that went by that our grandmother let me forget that I wasn't one of them.

Well, I, Prosperity Oceanus Redding, was proud to report that I was the first to set the record for the most times of dozing off during class in a single year, winning me some disbelief from parents and teachers, and twenty-four straight trips to the headmaster's during sixth grade. The only reason they hadn't kicked me out of the Academy was because my great-great-great-great-grandfather had literally built it with his bare hands.

ALEXANDRA BRACKEN

You think it stinks to be named Prosperity? Try being named Prosperity when you get straight Ds in school, and everyone in your family starts hinting you should consider trash collecting instead of college. I don't know what's wrong with that. Trash collectors are nice people, and they get to ride on the back of trucks all day and do the important work of keeping the streets clean. That sounded pretty good to me.

But from the moment I'd first fallen asleep in his class, Mr. Wickworth had decided that *I* was garbage that needed to be disposed of, and Prue only proved his point when she swept in and acted like she had to clean up my messes, no matter how small.

"You know how Prosper is," Prue said sweetly. "He's, ah, well . . . he's Prosper. But clearly he needs glasses."

The girls behind her snickered.

"Glasses don't fix stupid," one of them said.

"And they won't fix his face either," said another.

I flinched as Prue coughed to disguise her laugh. A few of the adults nearby chuckled, craning their necks to get a better look at us. This was what it was like to be a Redding: when we were in Redhood, we were no better than zoo animals. I was surprised no one interrupted to ask for a selfie.

"Please excuse us," Prue continued. "We're due back at the Cottage for a family dinner. Will we see you tonight at the Candlelight Parade, Mr. Wickworth?"

## THE DREADFUL TALE OF PROSPER REDDING

The man couldn't help himself. He actually bobbed his head, like he was giving her a little bow. "I will see you there, Miss Redding."

"I'll see you too," I said between my gritted teeth. "After I get myself a pair of glasses."

"You do that, young man," Mr. Wickworth said. "Perhaps then you'll also be able to spot your manners."

I had something to say to that, but Prue tugged me away, leading us off Main Street. Behind us, the bonfire roared to its full size, sending sparks up into the shadows of the evening sky. People applauded and cheered, lining up to begin to toss in their regrets. I looked back, just once, to see the way the light made the nearby statue of Honor Redding glow so I could commit it to memory and sketch it later.

Once we were out of sight of the square, Prue finally let go of my arm.

"Why do you always have to stick your nose in everything?" I asked. "They already think I'm an idiot without your 'help.'"

Prue rolled her eyes. "If I don't play hero, who's going to rescue you? Besides, we're already late. You-know-who's going to kill us as it is."

Prue slowed down to let me catch up to her, digging in her bag until she pulled out a blue notebook. "Here—I accidentally picked this up instead of mine."

Heat rushed to my face, even as my shoulder slumped in

ALEXANDRA BRACKEN

relief. I snatched it out of her hands and stuffed it into my bag, like that would be enough to bury it forever. *Of course* she found it. How could I have been so stupid? She probably had gone through all the old sketches with her friends, making fun of every single one. She should have just thrown it away when she realized it didn't have her class notes in them. My breath locked in my throat.

"Some of those are pretty good," Prue said, keeping her voice casual. "I mean, you're no da Vinci, but they're not half bad. I didn't realize you still kept a sketchbook and drew those . . . characters."

From the stories I used to invent to make her laugh, back when she was stuck in her hospital bed. Why did I still draw them? I don't even know. Maybe in the hope she might want to hear the stories again. The way she looked at me, then, lips pressed together to keep from laughing, told me that was going to be the day after never.

I gripped the strap of my backpack. *You don't know anything about me*, I wanted to say. *This is the first time we've talked in a week.*

"Are you ever going to show them to someone? What about Mrs. Peters?"

Here were a few things I would have done to avoid showing my drawings to the crusty art teacher at the Academy:

1. Cut off my toes.
2. Eat my own liver.

## THE DREADFUL TALE OF PROSPER REDDING

3. Walked the length of the United States to swim through shark-infested waters to Hawaii so that I could throw myself in a volcano.

The other kids at school already had enough ammunition against me without knowing I liked to sketch pictures of them, not to mention benches and gardens around Redhood.

“What about Mom? Or Dad? He likes museums, I guess.”

As crazy talented and smart as my family was, not a single Redding could call him or herself an artist. The only exception was maybe Nathaniel Redding, a second cousin once removed, who wrote the *New York Times* best-selling book *The Lost Longship*. It was an incredibly popular story about time-traveling Vikings and the conspiracy to cover up that they had killed off the real Pilgrims from the *Mayflower* in a bloodthirsty rage.

I thought it was pretty awesome, but Grandmother just about went supernova when she read the first few chapters. Dad had bought a copy for Mom as a joke, and they had laughed together as he read passages of it aloud. And laughed. And laughed.

So I didn't need to imagine the look on my parents' faces if I were to show them my sketchbook. I didn't need to tell them I liked art. I already knew what their reaction would be. *When you and Prue are old enough to help us run*

ALEXANDRA BRACKEN

*the Foundation*, Dad would say, *then we'll really change the world*. Then Mom would smile, and talk about how the most important thing in the world was to help others. And then the only thing left in my head was the realization that art was something *I* loved, but it didn't do anything for the world, did it? It just made *me* happy.

So I kept my sketchbooks closed, until I was sure no one was looking.

I shook my head, my face turned down. "Can we just hurry? We're already late."

"Then let's go this way." Prue turned off the leaf-splattered road, and I felt a chill slither down my spine.

There was a small patch of dark forest between Main Street and the Cottage. I knew it pretty well, seeing how I'd spent all twelve and a half of my years trying to avoid it. It might have been a good shortcut, but it didn't make me feel any better as I slid down the soggy hill.

The woods made me feel like my skin was shrinking around my bones. There was a strange light there that turned the bright fall leaves to gray mulch. A little less than four hundred years ago, a terrible fire had torn through the area, and it was clear the trees never really recovered. Their trunks had grown a splotchy bark to hide the scars, but their bodies were twisted. They leaned away from the center of the forest, like they had tried to pull up their roots and run from the flames.

Sometimes, when the rain cut through their bare limbs,

## THE DREADFUL TALE OF PROSPER REDDING

I thought I could hear the echo of the trees screaming. *Don't be stupid*, I'd think, but the sound stayed in my ears for days. The place was damp, freezing, foggy, or some combo of the three, even in the summer. Even squirrels didn't like it, which is saying something.

"Prosper," Prue said suddenly. "Why does Wickworth give you so much detention? I thought you were feeling better. . . ."

I shrugged. "I just doze off sometimes."

"Pros—"

"I don't want to talk about it, okay?" I picked up my speed, running harder, pulling ahead of her. Anger and frustration made my head feel like it was boiling inside. "My teachers are just boring. I hate school."

That wasn't really true. I sort of liked school, aside from homework and tests. It was just that every few nights I had these dreams. . . . This enormous dark cat would come stalking toward me, eyes glowing like emeralds. Sometimes it would just watch me from behind a flickering line of fire, pacing back and forth and back and forth, teeth clattering in anticipation. Other nights, it would be cleaning meat off bones, licking the blood off its teeth. And always, just before I woke up, I'd hear the same words snarled over and over again: *Awaken the singing bone*.

I'd read that dreams, even nightmares, are our brains' way of trying to work out a problem, or remember something we've forgotten. So clearly this was my brain trying to

ALEXANDRA BRACKEN

tell me that my grandmother was going to try to peel off my skin and eat me one day.

It was nothing. Compared to what Prue had gone through, it was *less* than nothing. I didn't want my parents to have to worry about me even more than they already did.

Prue opened her mouth to say something, but closed it again. She reached over and punched me lightly on the shoulder. "Whatever you say. I'm always up for a rescue."

That was the problem. I didn't want her to rescue me. I just wanted her to like me again.

"We're here," I announced, tucking my chin down against my chest, waiting for her to lead. As always. Prue darted forward, only to stop dead in her tracks.

"What the—?" The words seemed to drop off my lips.

At the base of the hill was the start of the Cottage's long driveway—and dozens upon dozens of people, familiar and strange, were waiting there.

For us.