



1 THE WOODEN TROLL

THE FIRST TIME HIS FATHER DISAPPEARED, TUCKER FEYE had only just turned thirteen.

That morning, he had been amusing himself by building a simple catapult—a wooden plank balanced across an old cinder block—in the backyard. He placed a stone at one end of the plank, climbed onto the seat of his dad’s lawn tractor, and jumped down onto the other end of the plank. The stone hopped vigorously from the far end, but not very high. Thinking maybe he wasn’t jumping hard enough, Tucker moved the catapult over by the garden shed. He found an old toy metal fire truck he would never play with again and set it on the end of the plank.

A fire truck needed a fireman. Tucker went into the house to find one of his old toy soldiers, but then he remembered he’d given them away for the spring rummage sale at his dad’s church. All he could find was a six-inch-tall wooden troll that his dad had carved as a boy. The troll had been standing guard

over the bookcase in the living room ever since Tucker could remember. He took the figurine outside and wedged it into the fire truck. He then climbed onto the roof of the shed.

It took him a few moments to gather his courage. Finally, after a few false starts, he jumped. His feet struck the end of the plank perfectly. The fire truck leaped from the end of the plank, flew through the air, and landed on the house, tearing loose a shingle as it tumbled down the steep roof.

Tucker quickly retrieved the truck from his mother's herb garden and disassembled the catapult. The wooden troll was nowhere to be found. When his mom came out and asked him about the noise, he told her a blue jay had hit the window and flown away.

She crossed her arms and gave him a skeptical look.

"Must have been a big jay," she said.

Tucker grinned and shrugged. His mom managed to hang on to her stern expression for a few seconds, then grinned back at her son, shook her head in mock frustration, and went back inside.

The Reverend Adrian Feye had performed a baptism that morning at the Holy Word, his small ministry in downtown Hopewell, Minnesota. The boy child was christened Matthew, a good biblical name of which the Reverend approved. After the baptism he walked home alone, a twenty-minute journey. As he came up the long driveway, he noticed the loose shingle on the roof.

The Reverend stood frowning for a few seconds, wondering how the shingle had become damaged, and why he had not noticed it before. When the answer did not come to him, he sought out his son, Tucker, whose name was nowhere mentioned in the Bible. He found him in the garage fixing a flat tire on his bicycle.

“Tuck?”

Tucker looked up. He could see in his father’s features the man he would someday become—the long jaw; the small, bright blue eyes; the wide mouth—but their differences were equally striking: the Reverend’s creased face and graying hair made him look older than his forty-two years, and the set of his mouth gave him a perpetually disapproving air, whereas Tucker seemed always to be on the verge of an impish grin.

“Something tore a shingle off the roof,” said the Reverend. He waited for Tucker to incriminate himself.

In that moment, Tucker almost confessed, but something about the way his father crossed his arms—the way he seemed to already have found him guilty—caused Tucker to deny all knowledge of the damaged roof.

“Maybe it came off in that storm last week,” Tucker suggested.

His father gave him a piercing look.

Tucker put on his innocent face, committed to his lie.

After several seconds that seemed to last for minutes, the Reverend shook his head and muttered, “As thy children are conceived in sin, so shall sin conceiveth in their hearts.”

Tucker had heard him say such things before. He had stopped taking it personally. His father quoted scripture the way other people breathed the air. Tucker watched him go into the house. A few minutes later, his father reappeared in jeans and a blue flannel shirt. He fetched the extension ladder from the shed and leaned it against the eave. Tucker offered to help, but his father refused.

“It’s too steep, Tuck. Where there is one loose shingle, there may be others. I don’t want you falling off the roof.”

Tucker felt bad that his dad had to climb up on the roof. He promised himself that he wouldn’t tell any more lies for the rest of the week, then went out back to dig some bait from the compost pile. The pond behind the house was good for catching bullheads and perch. Tucker had just found his first angleworm when he heard a startled exclamation. He looked up to see his father standing at the peak, holding a small object in his hand.

The wooden troll.

Tucker ducked behind the shed. How could he explain how the troll had gotten on the roof? He would have to confess. He was not afraid of physical punishment—the Reverend was severe, but he would never lay a hand on anyone. What Tucker feared was the look of weary and profound disappointment his father would lay upon him, more painful than any beating.

He was trying to think how to phrase his confession when his thoughts were shattered by his father’s scream—more of a hoarse shout—cut off just as it reached the high point. Tucker ran back around the shed and looked up.

The roof was empty, except for something hovering just off the edge. It looked like a thin, perfectly round disk of wavy glass, about four feet in diameter, hanging in midair. As he watched, the disk faded, then vanished completely.

Tucker ran toward the house, his eyes raking the ground, expecting to find his father, but he was nowhere in sight. He circled the house, looking up, looking down, calling out for his father. He ran to the back door and shouted through the screen, "Mom! Come quick!"

His mom came running up from the basement, a full laundry basket in her arms. "What? Are you all right?"

"Dad fell off the roof!" Tucker pointed up.

The laundry basket dropped from her hands and rolled, spilling a ragged line of wet undergarments across the kitchen floor. She ran out the door, looking left and right, her long, reddish-orange hair whipping back and forth. "Where? Where is he?" She ran around the house with Tucker following closely.

"He was fixing a shingle, then he yelled and he was gone," Tucker said.

His mother stopped running and looked at the ladder leaning against the eaves. She took a shaky, calming breath. "Honey, maybe he walked into town for some supplies."

"No! I'm telling you! He was up there, and he yelled, and he was gone. And I saw something up there."

"Saw what?"

"I don't know. It was round." He pointed up at the roof.

There was nothing there.

His mother put her hands on his shoulders. Her eyes, sometimes blue and at other times green, searched his face. "Maybe he went over to the Reillys' to borrow a tool. People do not just disappear, Tucker."

"Yeah, well, he *did* disappear."

"I'm sure he'll be home soon." She went back into the kitchen and began picking up the spilled laundry. Tucker stood outside, watching her through the screen door. Had he imagined it? He didn't think so. Maybe his dad had fallen off the roof, banged his head, and run off into the woods . . . but that didn't explain the disk he had seen. He walked around the house again and again, looking for any sign of his father hitting the ground, but found no trace of him.



LAHLIA

TUCKER'S MOTHER WAS PROVEN CORRECT. AN HOUR later, the Reverend came walking up the long driveway. He was not alone. Beside him was a slim, pale girl with hair the yellow-white of corn silk.

Tucker ran to him.

"Dad! Where'd you go? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Tuck." The Reverend Feye clasped the boy to his hip with one arm, then released him. Tucker looked from his father to the girl, then back to his father.

"Tucker, this is Lahlia," said the Reverend.

The girl might have been anywhere between ten and fourteen years old. She wore a slightly torn and smudged shift made of material that shone like silver foil but draped like fine fabric. Her feet were covered with what looked like bright blue painted-on stockings. In her arms she held a small gray cat.

“Hi,” said Tucker.

Lahlia stared at him with the biggest, blackest eyes Tucker had ever seen. She looked frightened. Tucker looked to his father for an explanation, but the Reverend stood gazing at the house, lips parted, eyes moist. The clean jeans and blue flannel shirt he had been wearing an hour earlier were dirty. One knee was torn open. His skin was a shade darker, and the lines radiating from the corners of his eyes appeared deeper, as if he had spent hours squinting under a hot sun. His feet were covered by skintight blue sheaths identical to those worn by the girl.

“What’s on your feet?” Tucker asked.

His father looked down. “I lost my shoes.”

“What happened to you? You look different.”

“We’ll talk about it later,” he said. “Let’s go see your mother.”

Tucker followed Lahlia and his dad into the house, where his mom was sitting on the sofa, reading a book. She looked up, set the book down, and smiled.

Unlike the Reverend’s grim, flat smile, Emily Feye’s smile transformed her face and brought light into the room. She stood up and kissed her husband on the cheek. He put his arms around her and hugged her, burying his face in her hair.

“Emily,” he said. He held her as both Tucker and Lahlia stared at them. Tucker was surprised—his dad was not usually so demonstrative. After a few seconds, his mother gently broke the embrace and gave her husband a searching look.

“Where have you been?” she asked.

“I had to . . . I had to run into town.”

Emily Feye frowned, waiting for more, her eyes moving from his face to his tattered clothing and back again.

The Reverend put a hand on the girl's shoulder. "This is Lahlia. She'll be staying with us for a while."

"My goodness," Tucker's mother said, her puzzled frown becoming a puzzled smile. She knelt down to face the girl. "Where ever did you come from?"

Clutching the kitten to her chest, Lahlia stepped back, bumping against the Reverend's leg.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Emily Feye said.

Lahlia stared back at her and swallowed. The kitten yawned.

"Such a cute kitty. Look at those big yellow eyes."

The Reverend said, "Lahlia is an orphan. She is from . . . Bulgaria. I don't think she speaks much English."

"An orphan! Oh, dear!" Emily Feye looked at Lahlia, then back at her husband with a slight frown. "From *Bulgaria*?"

"We can talk about it later," the Reverend said. It was the same thing he had said to Tucker—his way of saying, *I don't want to talk about it at all*. Or maybe this time he was saying, *Not in front of Tucker and the girl*.

Tucker's mother put on a bright smile for the girl's benefit. "What *interesting* clothing," she said, fingering the edge of Lahlia's tattered shift. "I had a silver-colored dress when I was a little girl. What is your kitten's name, sweetie?"

"Lahlia," the girl said, pronouncing it *lah-LEE-uh*.

Tucker's mother smiled. "So you can speak! Your kitten's name is the same as your name?"

Lahlia shook her head and pointed at herself. "Lahlia."

"I don't think she likes being called *sweetie*," Tucker said.

"Oh! I'm sorry. *Lahlia*. That's a nice name."

Tucker's father cleared his throat. "I'm going to change clothes. Perhaps you could find something more appropriate for her to wear?" Without waiting for an answer, he left them and went upstairs.

"I think some of Tucker's old things will fit you," Emily Feye said. "I'll see what I can find. Then we'll have some cookies. Do you like cookies?"

Lahlia nodded. It was not clear whether she understood the question or was simply trying to be agreeable.

"Back in a jiffy." Emily Feye opened the basement door and trotted downstairs, where she kept boxes of clothes Tucker had grown out of. Tucker, not sure what to do, stood looking at Lahlia.

The girl's dark eyes flickered across the sofa, the easy chair in the corner, the coffee table, the pictures on the walls. *She is very odd looking*, Tucker decided. *Not exactly pretty, but interesting.*

He said, "So how'd you . . . uh . . . What are . . . What are you doing here?"

Lahlia stared back at him with an intensity that made his skin prickle.

"Can you speak English?" Tucker asked.

Lahlia did not say anything.

Uncomfortable with her staring silence, Tucker took a step back. Lahlia followed him with her eyes.

"*Tuckerfeye*," the girl said.

Tucker wasn't sure he'd heard her right.

"Just Tucker," he said.

Lahlia nodded. "*Tuckerfeye*," she said again, then walked over to the easy chair and sat down with the cat on her lap. Both Lahlia and the cat kept their eyes locked on Tucker. He stood there feeling stupid for as long as he could stand it, then said, "Excuse me," and ran up the stairs to his parents' bedroom.

His father was sitting on the edge of the bed, peeling off the blue foot coverings. His feet were as white as a bullhead's belly.

"Dad?"

"What is it, Tuck?"

"Where did you go? I mean, really."

The Reverend looked at Tucker. He seemed about to say one thing, hesitated, then said, "I just came up here to change."

"I mean *before*. You were on the roof, and you yelled, and all of a sudden you were gone."

"I went downtown." He squeezed the blue foot coverings into a surprisingly small ball and dropped them into the wastebasket.

"You disappeared!"

"Maybe it seemed that way, Tuck. I—ah—I remembered suddenly that I had to run into town. That's where I picked up Lahlia."

"After you disappeared, I saw something on the roof. Like a disk."

The Reverend took a moment to reply. “Probably just heat distortion from the hot sun.”

Tucker sensed he was being lied to, and it frightened him. He watched as his dad put on a clean pair of jeans and a flannel work shirt.

“You look different,” Tucker said.

“People change, Tuck.”

“Yeah, but not like *that*. Not that fast.”

His father regarded him for several silent seconds, his face growing hard. “Why don’t you go see what the girl and your mother are up to, Tuck,” he said at last, making it clear from his tone that the subject was closed.

Minutes later, the Reverend was back on the roof pounding nails, finishing the job he had started that morning. Lahlia and Tucker’s mom were in the kitchen eating cookies. Tucker went outside to finish fixing his bike tire and contemplate his father’s odd behavior.

The strangest part of it all—his dad never said a word about the wooden troll.

That evening, they sat down to a meal of roast pork, boiled new potatoes, and fresh peas from the garden. Tucker’s mom opened a can of tuna for the kitten. They sat at the kitchen table, hands folded, waiting for the Reverend to say grace. The Reverend picked up his knife and fork and looked at each of them in turn.

“There will be no more praying in this house.” He gave them a few seconds to absorb that, then said, “It’s all lies.”

It felt to Tucker as if a smothering mist had descended upon them. The act of breathing became a conscious effort.

Tucker’s mother put her hand to her heart. “Adrian . . .”

“There is no God,” said the Reverend Feye, serving himself a slice of pork. “And that is all I have to say on the matter.”

Lahlia, wearing Tucker’s old Mickey Mouse T-shirt, smiled uneasily. Tucker stared at his father, waiting for him to make it into a joke—except his father rarely joked, and never about God.

The Reverend began eating. Tucker looked to his mother, who, with a grim set to her mouth, began to serve herself and Lahlia.

They ate their meal in silence. Only Lahlia, who refused the pork but fell eagerly upon the fresh peas and new potatoes, seemed to enjoy the unblest food.