

Ahead of them rose a murmur of voices and the familiar thunk of an axe. “It sounds like it’s on the property,” he said, frowning. Plenty of fallen branches lay around his uncle’s cabin, and nobody would object to other area residents cutting them up for firewood, but none of the locals would do so without first asking permission.

“There’s a truck up there,” Desi said. The pickup was barely visible through the trees.

“Go on up to the cabin,” he said. “I’m going to tell them to ask next time.”

She didn’t let go of his hand. “Don’t start a fight,” she said.

“I never start fights,” he said. “I’ll be polite.” She stayed close as they climbed toward the truck. She never followed instructions unless she wanted to. She just ignored them.

The pickup was a very old, battered Dodge. Beyond it were two bearded men in plaid flannel shirts. The one with the axe was about forty, broad-shouldered, and dark-haired. The other one was tall, scruffy, a little younger, and had red hair. They both turned toward the approaching couple. The red-haired one stared at Desi in a way Eric didn’t like, but the other man smiled genially and said, “Howdy, folks. Pretty day, ain’t it?”