

ROAM



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In Loving Memory of Linda Curtis
December 31, 1941—May 31, 2018

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said,
people will forget what you did, but people will never
forget how you made them feel.”

—Dr. Maya Angelou

ROAM



CHAPTER ONE



I HATE THIS TOWN ALREADY.

My stepdad, Nick, drives down the main street of Rochester, pulling even with a car filled with teenagers. I stare at them, thankful for the van's tinted windows, which keep my gaze from catching their attention. The driver is a girl about my age, and the car is a fire-engine red sports car with temporary tags. She and her passengers dance in their seats, singing to the blaring music.

Everywhere I look screams wealth and privilege—from the carefully manicured lawns to the kids in the car next to us. The cost of their clothing alone would probably eat up Nick's whole paycheck—if he still had one. But he doesn't, and neither does Mom.

I wonder about the kids in the sports car. Are they as perfect as they appear, or are their lives secretly as screwed up as mine? Maybe the driver's dad is embezzling money from his company. He'll get caught next week, the scandal will hit the newspapers, and the whole family will be ruined. Or the guy in the passenger seat: maybe he's about to discover his parents are really his grandparents, and his "older sister" is really his mom. Everybody's hiding something. We all have secrets. It can't be just my family.

Angry tears threaten. The kids pull ahead, so Nick holds back, allowing them to pass. What would they think if they knew our secrets? Anger flows like hot lava as I imagine them laughing at our ratty old van with the rusted-out fender on the driver's side. Next to them, we look homeless.

Manic laughter erupts from my belly. I smother it, but not before Mom hears from the front seat. She turns around and shoots me a smile that says, “*Tell me what’s so funny,*” but I ignore her, turning away and staring out my window. I should feel bad for ignoring Mom but she’s pretty much ruined our lives, so I’d call us even.

Seated next to me, my little sister, Amber, taps my arm. “What’s so funny, Sister?”

“Nothing.” I smile, taking the edge off my short reply.

The sports car disappears around a corner into a residential neighborhood. At the next stoplight, Nick turns into a 24-hour Walmart parking lot, then rolls the windows down about two inches before turning off the engine.

“We’ll park it here for tonight,” he says. “With so many other cars, nobody will notice an extra van in the lot.”

“Is it safe?” Mom scans the parking lot, her expression skeptical.

“Pretty much. The doors’ll be locked, so we should be okay.”

“I miss BooBoo Bunny,” Amber cries.

At six, everything in the last two days has been confusing to her. She’s asked endless questions for which none of us have answers—at least not answers you can give a first grader.

Why can’t we go home?

Why do we have to sleep in the van?

Why can’t I bring my bicycle?

My patience is short and, before I can stop myself, angry words spew out. “None of us like it. Deal with it.”

Mom spins in her seat. “Abby, you’ve made it clear how you feel about this situation, but there’s no need to snap at your sister.”

I narrow my eyes at Mom. Just as I open my mouth to let her know how I *really* feel about her and this entire messed-up situation she’s put us in, Nick turns and catches my eye. His expression says, “*Leave it, Abby. Please.*” I bite down hard on the inside of my cheek and turn to glare out

the window. For Nick's sake, I'll shut my mouth—but only because it's Nick asking and, deep down, I'm terrified he'll leave us. Because without Nick, this shit-show our lives have become would be even worse. He's the one who keeps us going—the one who keeps me from strangling Mom—and he's the only one who can help us out of this mess.

Be nice. Be nice. The words scream inside my head like a mantra. I take in a breath and, ignoring Mom, I turn to Nick and ask, “So what do we do now?”

Nick smiles his thanks. “Tomorrow, we get you two started in school, then your mom and I will see what the Salvation Army has to offer.” His face flushes. “I hate to ask, but can you help us out?”

I lift an eyebrow. “Sure. What do you need?”

“Can you check out the newspaper office one day this week? If you got a job delivering papers, you could take Amber with you and it'd be a huge help.”

“Sure.”

Nick's smile is sad—embarrassed, maybe. Asking my help must be a blow to his pride.

“Mommy?” Amber asks. “How're we gonna sleep in the van?”

“It'll be fun.” Mom's chipper voice grates on my nerves. “Like camping. We have pillows and blankets, and we've already folded down the rear seats.”

“Will we all fit?”

“We should.”

Amber frowns. “What if someone sees us?”

“Nobody will see us. They'd have to peek in, and there's no reason for anyone to do that.”

“Like a monster?”

“No, baby, we'll be fine. Daddy will protect us.”

My face flames red with anger. *Daddy will protect us? Is she serious? How much more weight can Nick's shoulders stand?* I bite my tongue before

the words spew out.

We left Omaha this afternoon, just one step ahead of eviction. The landlord visited two days ago, warning us we had seventy-two hours to pay the current and last month's rent or she'd return with a police escort and a locksmith. There was no point in fighting it, Nick said, so we spent all day yesterday packing only our absolute necessities. We left everything else behind—there just wasn't enough room.

Now, with darkness descending, Amber's getting antsy and her whining is playing on our last nerves.

"Why don't we turn in for an early night?" Mom suggests.

"But it's too early," Amber cries. "I wanna watch TV."

"You know the van's TV doesn't work, sweetheart," Nick says. "Just try closing your eyes for a bit."

Amber grumbles but stretches beside me on the hard floorboard in the back of Mom's van. Tossing and turning, she reminds me of a dog turning circles before lying in its bed. Just when I think she's found a comfortable position, she rolls over again.

Oof! A bony elbow gouges my stomach.

"Quit it, Amber," I growl. "Be still!"

"I can't sleep," she whines.

"How about Sister sings to you?" Mom suggests.

I narrow my eyes and shoot Mom a scalding glare.

"Yeah!" Amber agrees. "Sing the rainbow song!"

"Not tonight, Am. I don't feel like it."

"Please, Sister?" Amber begs.

"No."

"Abby." Nick touches my arm. "Please? You know it helps her fall asleep."

"Fine." I blow out a frustrated breath and pull myself to a sitting position beside Amber.

Singing used to be a relaxing outlet for me—something I did effort-

lessly and often just to see Mom smile. But making Mom happy isn't at the top of my list anymore and, at the moment, I'm not at all in the mood. Now that Nick's asked, though, I relent. He doesn't ask much of me and I don't want to be the reason he gives up and leaves us. So I close my eyes and disappear inside my head with the first few bars of "Over the Rainbow." With my eyes closed, I imagine myself as Dorothy and almost forget the last six months.

My mind drifts to my old bedroom. Though small and cheaply decorated with frilly old-lady curtains purchased at a garage sale, it was mine. My heart aches for all we've left behind—my books, Amber's collection of stuffed animals, Nick's guitar, and even Mom's Mickey Mouse collection. But we can't go back, so I focus on happier times, like singing on my comfortable old bed while Amber danced around the room pretending she was a famous ballerina. The memory is bittersweet, and I return to the present as I close out the last measures of the song.

Amber breathes a contented sigh, and I smile down at her relaxed features. Sound asleep, her long, dark lashes gently brush her cheek. My heart warms at her sweetness. As angry as I am at everything, I can't stay angry with Amber. I brush her soft blond hair away from her cheek, then crawl under the blanket and rest my head next to hers. With Nick on one end and me on the other, and Mom and Amber sandwiched in between, we settle down to sleep for the night.

"9-1-1, what is your emergency?"

The woman's voice comes through the line as though through a tunnel. My mind goes blank. Cold rain pelts the patio door to my left, while my mother lies on the kitchen floor only inches away. She jerks spasmodically and all I can see are the whites of her eyes as the pupils have rolled into the back of her head. My own body shakes until I almost drop the phone.

"Hello?" the voice says. "This is 9-1-1. What is your emergency?"
An invisible hand squeezes my throat. "My mom."

“Ma’am? Could you please speak louder? What is your emergency?”

I clear my throat. “My mom. She’s—I don’t know. She fell down and now she’s—I’m not sure! She’s shaking—like she’s having a seizure or something.”

“What is your address?”

I force myself to think. “Meadowlark Lane. 1113 Meadowlark Lane.”

“I’m dispatching an ambulance, but I need you to stay with me. Is your mother breathing?”

“I think so.” I squat and place my ear near Mom’s mouth. A light waft of breath tickles my chin. “Yes.”

“That’s a good sign. What is your name, please?”

“Abby. Abby Lunde.”

“Okay, Abby,” the operator says, her voice calm. “My name is Elena and I’m gonna stay with you until the ambulance comes. Is your mother lying on her side or on her back?”

“On her...” I pause mid-sentence as a dark stain colors the front of her gray pajama bottoms. “Oh, God. She just—she peed her pants.”

“That’s okay, Abby. Now I need you to listen, okay? If she’s on her back, I need you to roll her into a side-lying position.”

“What does that mean?” Even the smallest instruction confounds me.

“Carefully roll her over so she’s lying on her side if you can. Can you do that for me?”

“Yeah.” I press the speaker button before setting the phone down and kneel beside my mother. Her body jerks and resists, but after several moments I have her on her side.

“Abby, are you still there?” The voice is tinny through the speaker.

“Yeah. It’s just—she’s jerking a lot and I don’t know if I can keep her in that position.”

“The ambulance is two minutes away. Is the front door unlocked?”

“I—I don’t know.” My eyes flash to the front door. “No.”

“Okay, Abby. As soon as you have your mom stable on her side, you need

to unlock the front door for the EMTs. Can you do that?"

I reach for a chair, pulling it onto its side and propping it behind Mom's back. I say a silent prayer that it'll stay put and move away slowly. It holds—for the moment, at least. "Yes. I'll do that now."

In my mind, I run to the door, but everything moves in slow motion. My legs shake like they're weighted by cinder blocks. It's all taking too long! I turn the deadbolt and throw the door wide as the sound of sirens reaches my ears.

"Abby?" the voice calls urgently from the phone. "Abby? Abby!"

"Abby!"

I'm jolted awake by Nick's hand on my arm as he shakes me. My eyes flash open and it takes me a second to realize where I am. Amber lies beside me, her thumb resting inside her gaping mouth. My pulse races as the realness of the dream swallows me.

"You okay?" Nick asks.

I nod, my mouth too dry to speak.

"Same dream? The 9-1-1 call?"

I nod again.

Nick smiles sadly, his empathy reaching me through his gaze. "It's gonna be okay, kiddo. I promise."

I moisten my lips with my tongue. "How do you know?"

"Because I do. I swear I won't let anything happen to you girls. The next few weeks are gonna suck, but we'll get through it. Someday you'll look back on everything and a small piece of you will be thankful for it."

"If you say so." I roll my eyes, but temper the sarcasm with a smile.

"I do say so. Now go back to sleep." He squeezes my shoulder twice, something he's always done to spread his confidence to me.

For the next several hours, I lie there in the gray dark of Mom's van. My eyes are closed, but every time I doze off, I'm jolted awake. Voices assault me from outside—a young couple laughing as they carelessly bump the back of our van with a grocery cart. I hold my breath, praying they

won't notice us inside the van. They move away until their words are indistinct, then the piercing cry of a young baby echoes through the quiet night. I glance at my watch—3:22 a.m. *Who takes a baby out at this time of night?*

“Breathe, Abby,” Nick whispers. “I promised you it’ll be okay, and it will.”

The parking lot lights shine brightly through the van’s windows, revealing Nick’s gentle smile as he lies nestled close to Mom.

“What if they saw us?” I whisper.

“They didn’t. Go back to sleep.”

Anger churns in my belly at the helplessness of our situation, but there’s nothing I can do to change it. My home is with my family, which means my home is currently the back of Mom’s van. I close my eyes and force myself to sleep.

A Note from Cathie . . .

My most sincere thanks to Michelle Halket and Central Avenue Publishing for granting permission to distribute this this one-chapter excerpt to my readers. To see other wonderful titles offered through this publisher, please visit their website at www.centralavenuepublishing.com.

I hope you've enjoyed this preview of ROAM and will consider sharing it with your friends in anticipation of its national release on February 5, 2019.

ROAM is regularly priced at \$14.99. However, as of today (January 13, 2019), it is on sale at a significantly reduced pre-order price through most major booksellers. If you enjoyed this first chapter, please consider pre-ordering now. Not only will you save money, but you'll save time and gas by having it delivered to your door!

Below is a list of pre-order links, as well as other related links that might interest you. I hope you'll take a look!

www.tinyurl.com/charmstrongbooks

Happy Reading!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "C. H. Armstrong". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "C".