

CHAPTER ONE

Thunder in Texas

*Tropical Storm Jacque
Highest winds—42 miles per hour*

Every time I pick up my pencil, lightning strikes. I don't mean it strikes me or my pencil, but it's close enough to make my writing wobble.

I'm trying to write in my notebook in the middle of a thunderstorm. Luckily, I'm not in the storm. I'm in the house—my grandparents' house. I guess they have a lot of thunderstorms down here in Texas.

Anyway, this thunderstorm is getting closer—and louder. Before I could even finish the last sentence—*flash! crash!*—lightning struck, and thunder shook the whole house. It isn't easy to write in the middle of a storm.

Still, it beats wrestling with chickens. I should know.

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Grandpa's farm isn't really a farm. Mom says it used to be, but now it's just a big house surrounded by tall trees and open fields. Grandpa says it used to be farmland for miles around, but now there are lots of houses around and just a few old farms. Still, it's a great place to explore, especially when all our cousins are here too.

I just wish they had some animals. You know, a few horses or cows or sheep. Something normal like that. But no, all they keep are you-know-whats.

Chickens—a whole chicken pen full of chickens. And not just your normal everyday egg-laying chickens. These are prize-winning chickens that have been taking the blue ribbon at the county fair for years.

After the hello hugs to Grandma, Grandpa, and Uncle Trav, Kayla and I and our cousin, Dusty, headed straight out to the hay barn. Grandpa calls it the hay barn even though there are only a few bales of hay in it. The best thing about a hay barn is the hayloft, the big room upstairs where the bales of hay are stacked.

We claimed the loft as our fort when we were all here two summers ago. That time, we were busy escaping and hiding from little brothers, sisters, and cousins. The loft was the perfect place for

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that—the only way up was a wooden rung ladder nailed to one wall inside. And the little kids weren't allowed to climb it.

"I'll be the first one up," Dusty shouted as we raced through the barn door. He's a little younger than I, but older than Kayla.

"Good," Kayla called back. "You can check for spiders—and mice."

Dusty ran straight through to the big loading doors at the end of the loft and pulled out the board that held them closed. "Zack, help me push them open." With both of us pushing, the doors swung out, and our spying post was open for business.

"This is perfect," I said. "Even better than I remember."

"And dustier," Kayla added. She stared suspiciously in the corners.

Dusty sighed. "Too bad we don't have someone to spy on. This place looks deserted. There's nothing going on." He held up his binoculars. "The only things moving are clothes on the clothesline and chickens in the chicken pen."

"What about over there?" I asked. He focused on Millers' barn, another hay barn like Grandpa's, only much older looking. Grandpa says the old Miller house burned down about thirty years ago,

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and no one has lived on the property since then. Millers' barn stands just past Grandpa's property at the edge of the woods.

"It looks like no one's been near it since the last time we were here," Dusty reported.

From behind us, Kayla hissed. "Shh! Do you hear that?" she whispered.

At first, I thought she was talking about a spider or something. But before I could say anything, I heard it. Somewhere down below us in the barn, something or someone was making a rustling, scratching sound. Something that sounded big.

"What on earth is that?" I wondered. "Did Grandpa get a horse? Or a cow?"

Dusty shrugged. "I don't think so. Just chickens. But if that's a chicken, it must be the size of a cow!" We both put our ears to the floorboard to hear better.

"There it is again," I whispered. It made me nervous to hear something without being able to see it. It was a kind of scratching, scraping sound.

"Maybe it's just the wind," Kayla squeaked.

Suddenly, a head popped up through the hatch behind us. "Hey, what are you guys doing?" a voice asked.

Dusty and I turned so fast we almost cracked

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heads. "What? Who?" Dusty stammered. "Oh, Sonia, it's you." He collapsed onto the floor.

"Didn't scare you, did I?" Sonia asked as she climbed out in the loft.

I had to frown. "That's what we heard. You stomping around down there."

Sonia and her family live on the next farm over past Millers' barn. You can just barely see the top of her house from the loft. Her dad, Mr. Tillman, is usually around, because Grandpa hires him to help do some of the heavy work around the farm. Sonia always comes over to play with Kayla when we're visiting.

Sonia nodded. "It wasn't me. I've been practicing being quiet. No one ever knows when I'm around. It was probably just a rat."

Kayla's eyes got big. "A rat? You don't think there are any up here, do you?" She started staring at the corners again. Sonia just laughed.

"You didn't hear anything strange?" Dusty asked. "Something that sounded big?"

Sonia shook her head. "You must have been imagining it. Sometimes, sounds in our barn sound louder than they really are. Once I thought someone was trying to knock one wall down when it was really just a woodpecker."

Before long, Grandma called us to supper. Sonia

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headed for home, and we headed for the house. We walked right past the chicken pen. Well, I wish we had walked past it, but Kayla wanted to stop. I should have kept going.

“I think Grandma’s got more chickens than ever,” Dusty said as we walked up to the gate. From all over the fenced-in pen, white heads bobbed up, and the clucking sounds got louder.

Kayla stuck her head over the fence and stared. “Where’s Old Red Top?” she asked. “Last time we were here, his crowing woke me up every morning.”

I leaned over the gate next to her, but I couldn’t see the old rooster either. As usual, the chickens came clucking over, looking for someone to feed them.

Bock, bock-bock. They crowded around the gate so thickly the ground looked like a white pillow with beaks.

“Go away,” I started to say. Then it happened.

I heard wings flapping. Then Dusty shouted. At the same second, Kayla screamed. I started to whirl around just as Kayla backed up against me. The latch holding the gate closed snapped.

You can guess what happened next.

Sqwaak! Bock-bock-bock!

I fell over backward on top of the chickens.