

CHAPTER 1

AGNES EAGLEMAN KEPT THIS MEETING A SECRET. Never said a word about it to my twin brothers, Chetan and Nashota, who were born a year afterwards. Never a word to me, Shyla, who came along five years later.

All we kids knew was that our lives weren't like other kids'. Every year our mom would collect grubby boxes from behind the local supermarket and pack them with our stuff wrapped in newspaper. Then the day before a moonless night, she'd rent one of those trailers, and as soon as it was dark, we'd begin filling it. Last to load were the old couch, our mattresses, table and chairs. The early morning hours found us scurrying into our beater Dodge, and taking off for parts unknown.

"Why do we have to move again?" one of us always asked.

"It's for your own good," she'd say.

"Where are we going this time?"

"I don't exactly know myself," she'd say. "The highway will give us a sign."

When I was really little I'd just fall asleep as we drove, but once I'd started preschool, there were friends I tried to send good-byes to in my mind. They were mostly animals: squirrels, a crow and different blue jays, a fat lizard, a tame

deer. How can you wrap *them* in newspaper and pack them in a box? How can you even promise to keep in touch? In each place, it was like I'd just begun to send down roots when they'd get yanked out.

Then one morning five years ago, I woke up in the back-seat, squished between boxes, to find that we were in a place called Bison, South Dakota, the middle of nowhere—the pits.

Trash littered the streets, and half the stores were boarded-up. As we drove into town, the few people we saw slouched around in shabby clothes, too worn-out to stand up straight.

"Why here?" the boys asked, looking out the car windows in dismay.

"Why not?" was all Mom would say, leaving us to find out the hard way that she'd been here before.

We noticed these guys dressed in black T-shirts and black pants planted on corners near the center of town.

"What're *they* doing?" I asked.

"Who knows?" she said.

We turned onto Main Street, and suddenly a black Hummer with black windows was right behind us. Mom took a left and then a right, and the ugly thing stayed on our bumper. Then she turned right again, and it went straight. So we eased back onto Main Street and soon passed another black Hummer parked at the curb! It pulled out behind our Dodge, and tailed us around two different blocks until Mom stopped in front of a dark green house with white trim. The twins exchanged a look of surprise and gave each other high fives. I let out a *wow!* of approval.

The Hummer cruised off, and we unbuckled our seatbelts. "What was that all about?" Nash asked Mom.

“No idea,” she said. “Better buckle back up. This isn’t where we get out.” She eased away from the curb and headed in the other direction.

“Wait a minute,” Chet cried. “We want to live *here*.”

Mom didn’t say anything. My mood crashed, and I could sense my brothers’ coming down too.

“Where are we going?” muttered Nash, as if he already knew the answer.

“Home,” she said, turning onto a street of not-nice houses, like the ones we’d always lived in—houses with peeling paint, sagging porches, rotting fences. Actually the ramshackle handyman’s special Mom rented in Bison made all the places we’d lived in before look pretty plush.

Before I go further, I’d better prepare you for my brothers: Chetan, meaning *hawk*, and Nashota, meaning *twin*, which is what they both were—identical ones. Only Mom and I could tell them apart.

Their matching features fooled everyone: bronze skin and black eyes, high cheekbones and straight noses. Both were tall, with puffs of white hair, which swirled around their heads almost like halos and could tear the teeth out of a comb. I was small for my age, with washed-out blue eyes and sickly white skin I hated. I had a purple spot on one cheek shaped like a teardrop. Mom used to call it a beauty mark to make me feel better.

I always thought Chet and Nash were cool, brothers to be proud of, even if they did act like I was a total pest, the ten-year-old half-sister nuisance they had to put up with. They had a whole dictionary of bad names for me when they were sure Mom couldn’t hear, like Pipsqueak or Blabbermouth or

Booger Brat. It wasn’t exactly fun to be at the bottom of the family pecking order. But it’s been even harder now to be the only kid left. I love my mom, but she is so not normal, and with the boys gone, all her weirdness comes down on me.

So that brings me to my story about the first and last adventure of The Three Eaglemans. And I’ll tell you right off, this writing business wasn’t my idea. And now that I’ve started, I’ve got this empty feeling in my chest. Mom claims to understand. “Who knows?” she’s said more than once with a catch in her voice. “Maybe if you write down everything we remember about the boys, it will be like they’re with us again.”

She only meant in memory, of course, not in real life.

Anyway, as far as keeping the twins straight, here’s what to watch for: Chetan had a purple birthmark on his neck behind his left ear, while Nashota had the same mark behind his right. Also Nash always glanced down when he was deciding something, while Chet gazed up. When it came to personalities, Nash liked to act first and think later while Chet preferred the opposite. Chet was more sensitive; he wanted life to be fair. Nash tended to joke around; he wanted life to be fun. But you know, it would be impossible to list all their differences. I’m sure they’ll become pretty obvious in the pages ahead.