

# TROUBLE IN THE BARRENS

The wildlife area that *Cory* has grown to love  
is about to be destroyed—and it's all his fault!

a novel by  
**Joe Riederer**

*Author of the award-winning  
Restoration in the Barrens*



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First Edition

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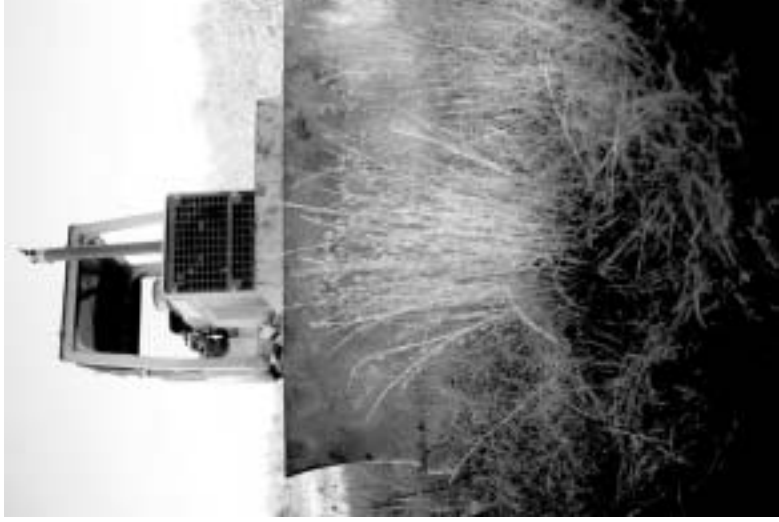
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For Ricky





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# 1

## The Dream

A humid late-August breeze blew in through the second-floor window of the Central Wisconsin farmhouse. Faded curtains lifted, then fell back again. Their whisper was enough to wake the thirteen-year-old boy as he struggled to fall back to sleep. Corey Nelson rolled from his stomach to his back, trying to stay cool. A faint smell of cigarette smoke and stale beer filled the room. Corey's heart began to beat faster and his breathing became deeper and more deliberate. A yet-undefined fear was building inside of him. The feeling that he was not alone in his small bedroom sent an electric chill down his spine.

"Hello Cor," said a harsh voice from a darkened corner of the room. "It's time to go." An unshaven man stepped forward into the glow from the yard light, revealing his identity.

"Uncle Jeff, what are you...?"

"Don't look so surprised. You didn't think I'd let the Adams County sheriff keep us apart, did you? The man stepped toward the bed while taking a drag from his cigarette. His eyes locked onto the seven-inch scar that ran across the boy's abdomen. "Looks like they patched you up pretty good."

"But you..."

"Now don't get weird on me, kid. I'm getting you out of this house once and for all."

Without taking his eyes off his uncle, Corey backed away to the far side of the bed.

"Don't bother trying to run; it won't do you no good."

Corey saw bloodstains on the man's shirt and stopped breathing.

A triumphant grin came to Jeff's face. "I guess we don't have to worry about Ben and Ellen any more, do we?"

Corey screamed.

By the time Ben and Ellen Raine got to Corey's room, he was sitting up in his bed with the light on. He was shaking, breathing heavily, and covered with sweat.

Ellen sat down on the bed and pulled him close. "It was just another bad dream. You'll be okay in a little while."

Embarrassed and exhausted, Corey collapsed on her shoulder and sobbed.

She pushed his sandy brown hair, lightened from a summer in the sun, from his eyes. "Why don't you try to get back to sleep?"

"I can't. I know I should but...I can't." The fear in his voice was intense. At just over five feet, Ellen was not much taller than the boy she was comforting. Her size was deceiving. From the first day that Corey came into her life as a foster child, in March, she was a force to be reckoned with. Like a lioness defending her cub on the plains of the Serengeti, Ellen had kept a careful watch over Corey. After the near-tragic events that eventually led to his adoption, Corey had come to rely on Ellen's strength even more.

"Look," Ben said, now fully awake, "it's still about a half hour before sunrise. You've been trying to get me to see what the Barrens looks like early in the morning for a long time. Why don't we go for a walk and you can give me the grand tour?"

Corey took a deep breath. "Anything would be better than trying to sleep right now." Zombie-eyed, he got out of bed and walked to the bathroom.

Turning to Ben, Ellen said, "I'm getting worried."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. This is the third time this week. Do you think he needs to talk to someone?"

"After the ordeal with that psychologist last month, there's no way we're going to get him to do that again."

"We've got to do something. The poor kid walks around all day like he's in a trance."

"I'll call Karen at school this morning. I think the guidance counselors are back in their offices already."

"You talk to Karen and I'll see if I can get Corey to talk to me." Ben paused, and then asked, "Did I really just offer to go walking around in the Barrens before sunrise?"

Ellen smirked. "And you are such a morning person! Well, you guys go explore—I'm going back to bed."

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Corey staggered out of the bathroom.

"Hey," Ben said. "If we're going to the Barrens you'll have to wear more than just your underwear. I think it's like a rule or something."

Corey faked a grin.

The late summer sunrise struggled to cut through the morning fog as Ben and Corey walked the nearly two miles to the Barrens. The silhouette of Ben, slightly over six feet and slightly less than two hundred and fifty pounds, towered over the smaller-than-average thirteen-year-old. The transition from farming to driving trucks had dramatically changed Ben's waistline. A few years of truck-stop food and too many hours of sitting behind a wheel had him buying new pants faster than he could wear them out. With Ellen's help and persistence, he was making changes. Whole milk was replaced by skim, and white bread was replaced by whole-wheat that looked as if sticks and twigs had been baked in it. Fried foods were now a rare treat. Keeping up with an active teenager was the most exercise he'd had since he sold the farm that was still the home to the three of them.

On a map, the Barrens was known as the Mary G. Lincoln Wildlife Area. To the residents of Richmond, it was fifteen square miles of scrub oak, jack pine, and prairie remnants. To Corey, it was much more than that. From almost the first day he'd arrived to live with the Raines five months earlier, Corey used the Barrens as a refuge. His daily trips to the area gave him time to be alone and to work through his problems. The natural surroundings also helped him remember his parents. That his love for the Barrens had made him an outcast at school and almost cost him his life was secondary. The bond he had with that flat, open land was something he stopped trying to figure out. The place helped him feel alive, and that was all that mattered to him. Now, after yet another bad night, he needed the Barrens to come to his aid one more time.

"Feel like talking about it?" Ben asked.

"I don't know." Corey kicked a stone from the crown of the dirt road. "This one was the worst."

"You know you can talk to me about anything."

Corey laughed slightly. "Yeah, I know."

"So...?"

There was a long pause. Ben waited, a skill he'd had to relearn.

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a majestic sight. The fog lifted in a swirling breeze and while they watched, the sky brightened as the sun climbed higher. "Are you happy here?" he asked.

"Sure, I love coming here."

"No, I mean with us...with being adopted."

"Of course! Did you think I'm not? Do you think that somehow these bad dreams are because of...?"

"I just know that this kid we love very much is hurting right now, that's all."

"Well, I don't know why I get these stupid dreams, but it's not you guys. You're the only thing that keeps me from going nuts."

"If there was a problem, you would tell me, wouldn't you?"

"I've already told you things I've never even told myself."

"Yeah, I know," Ben laughed.

Ten minutes went by without a sound, except for the distant call of cranes and an occasional crow. This was enough time for Corey to gather up the courage to say something that had been on his mind for a long time.

"Sometimes..." Corey began cautiously, "sometimes when we're doing stuff, you'll look at me."

Ben waited.

"Sometimes I can't help thinking that you wished Andy was here and not me." Corey immediately regretted saying that. He stopped breathing as he braced himself for Ben's response. What was it about this man that made him say the things he did? It never happened when he was around anyone else. With most people, he could keep his feelings safely hidden. With Ben, that felt dishonest. For some reason, he had to tell Ben everything. Sometimes he would find himself looking around to be sure no one else had heard what he'd just said aloud.

"You're half-right," Ben turned to look directly at Corey. "Sometimes I do wish Andy were here. I think he would have made a terrific big brother for you. You'd have loved him. But you need to understand that you're not a replacement for Andy. You're Corey and we love you because you are you."

"But if you hadn't lost..."

"If Andy hadn't died, we would have never met you."

"But that means..."

"That means we would have missed out on something incredible." Corey didn't look convinced. "Let me put it this way. God gave us two sons. One died." Ben's strong arm went around the slender boy and lifted him to

"Okay... It was like most of the other dreams. I wake up in the middle of the night and he's standing there."

"Who? Your Uncle Jeff?"

"Yeah." Another pause. "He tells me that he's taking me away. Only this time..." Corey kicked another stone.

"This time what?"

Corey stopped and looked straight into the glow of the fog-filtered sun. "This time he killed you guys." Tears returned. "He had blood all over his clothes!"

"Relax, Bud. It was just a dream."

Corey wiped his eyes with his hand. "I know that now; I'm awake. But it's gotten to the point where I'm afraid to go to sleep."

"It's going to take time...a whole lot of time." Walking again, Ben rested one arm over Corey's shoulder and said, "And just for the record, no one is taking you away. Not now, not ever. You're stuck with us."

They walked silently, until they came to the large wooden sign that marked the entrance to the Barrens.

"Ben?"

"Yeah, Bud?"

"Did you ever have bad dreams—I mean, when...?"

"You mean did I ever have nightmares after Andy died?"

"Well...yeah. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"No, it's a fair question, but the answer is 'no,' not after he died. The months before...when he was sick, that's when I thought I was losing my mind. The dream...the nightmare, that kept coming back, was always the same. Andy was on a frozen river, only there was a crack in the ice and he was slowly floating away. I was stuck on shore and somehow I couldn't move. It was as if my feet were made of lead. I felt so helpless. Instead of being scared, Andy kept saying, 'Don't worry, it'll be alright.' That's just the kind of kid he was...dying of leukemia and all he could think of was making us feel better."

"I'm sorry." Corey's voice was soft.

"It's okay, Bud. We're both going to be okay."

The tall grasses of the Barrens, wet with dew, soaked their jeans to the knees. Corey led Ben to a small stand of trees. "Here's one of my favorite places to sit."

After almost squashing some unidentified scat, Ben relaxed. The warm air made it easy for him to ignore his wet clothes and take in the view. It was

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his feet. "Look Bud, I love you. I'm wet, I'm cold, and I think I sat in gopher poop. Let's head home."

They walked back without talking. Corey thought of sleep. Ben thought of coffee. Nearing the driveway, Ben interrupted the silence. "Here's the part you're really going to love. We're going to set up an appointment for you to talk to someone...someone who might be able to help."

Corey closed his eyes and then slowly let his head fall backwards. "I hate talking to people like that. I thought that was all over."

"This time it will be better, I promise."

Looking somewhat dazed, Corey walked into the farmhouse.

Pulling a simple white envelope out of his back pocket, the average-looking man said, "I'm sure you'll find that I've kept my part of the deal. Now it's up to you to follow through with your part."

"Don't worry about me. You'll get exactly what you're after."

"And when I do," he said unwrapping another butterscotch candy and popping it into his mouth, "you'll get the rest of your money."

The brown Taurus pulled to the side of the road. The average-looking man crunched the candy in his mouth and got out.

## 2

### The Average-Looking Man

Two days of steady rain turned the state capitol's lawn into a mud field. However, it was Saturday morning and the farmer's market was not about to be stopped by soggy grass. Fortunately, most of the transactions took place on the sidewalk under heavy, blue plastic tarps. Produce from around the state and coffees from around the world were just a part of what this weekly event was about. Mostly, it was about meeting people. Families from rural areas of the state came to town to see what city life was like. People who lived in the city came to buy fresh vegetables and dream about how they might someday throw away their briefcases and move to the country.

Almost unnoticed in the crowd, an average-looking man wearing average-looking clothes stood at the crosswalk. Ignoring the rain, he alternated between looking at his watch and at the "DONT WALK" light. Only two things made him slightly noticeable. First, he was actually waiting at the crosswalk. Madisonians mostly ignored those lights, and in fact, waiting for the proper "WALK" signal could get a person trampled. Second, when the light changed to "WALK" and the people from out-of-town crossed the street, he stayed put. He looked at his watch one more time, and when he saw a brown Ford Taurus stop at the light, he jumped into the passenger seat. The car drove away as the rain started to fall harder.

"Good morning, Senator. I thought you might be thinking about backing out on me?"

"Damn traffic."

"Now, is that any way to talk about the taxpayers who provide you with a comfortable, yet modest, living?" The average-looking man laughed loudly. He reached into his pocket and took out a butterscotch candy. Removing the gold foil wrapper, he popped it into his mouth and began to chew. The crunching sound of the rock-hard candy filled the car.

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### Meeting with Counselor

Monday morning was gray and overcast. As a light rain fell, Corey walked nervously through the complex of small medical office buildings. Each building in the park-like setting had a brass sign in front, quietly proclaiming what services were offered inside. He passed an oral surgeon, a podiatrist, two obstetricians, and a sports injury clinic. His destination was the last building on the right, Family Counseling Services. Corey opened the solid glass door and walked into the overly air-conditioned waiting room. The only other person in the room was the receptionist, whose name tag, pinned to his T-shirt just to the right of Jerry Garcia's head, read "Jacob." Jacob was reading a book.

"I have an appointment with Dr. Morgan."

"Dude! You shouldn't sneak up on people like that!"

"Sorry."

"No problem, man. I was just kinda get'n into this book I found."

Corey looked over the counter to see which book was holding the young man's attention. It was a thesaurus. At this point, he began to wonder what he'd let Ellen talk him into.

"You must be Corey."

"Yeah, I am."

"I think I need to have your mom or dad sign a form or something. To tell the truth, I'm just filling in for the day until they hire a real receptionist. I'm really in a rock band, but we haven't actually had any jobs yet."

Before Corey could say another word, a tall woman stepped into the waiting room and introduced herself as Dr. Morgan. She reached out her hand and Corey shook it out of reflex.

"Just call me 'Amme.'"

Corey followed the psychologist to a large office behind the waiting

room. He noticed that she had long, dark hair and the build of a basketball player. Walking into the room, Corey stopped in his tracks. He had never seen anything like it, outside of a pet shop. Everywhere he looked, there were fish tanks. Not just your run-of-the-mill fish tanks, but huge tanks. They looked more like small swimming pools.

"Okay, so I guess I like fish."

"I'd say!"

"Have a seat and get comfortable."

Corey looked around for those evil tools of her trade, the notebook and the tape recorder. So far, so good, he thought. "Is this going to take long? My mom is waiting in the car."

"Why didn't she come in?"

"I kind of wanted to come in alone. The last time I did this it, well..."

"Relax, Corey. I may be new to this small-town living, but I learn quickly. I got a call from Judge Hester this morning. We both agreed that this would be much different for you than the last time. Seems he found out about some traffic tickets I more or less forgot about back in Chicago. The end result of our little talk was a few ground rules." Dr. Morgan set a single sheet of purple legal-sized paper on the desk. "I'd better read them to you because I'm sure he's going to call you to check on me."

Way cool! Corey thought. "Okay," he said quietly.

"Rule number one: at no time will I use a tape recorder."

"Rule number two: any notes written down will be copied and given to you."

"Rule number three: you are free not to answer any question."

Dr. Morgan looked up from the paper. "I do have a question for you. Is Judge Hester really as mean as he sounded on the telephone?"

Corey laughed loudly. "He's great! It's like having a Rottweiler as your best friend."

Anne Morgan's eyes widened slightly, and for a brief moment, her breathing paused. The description of the judge as a Rottweiler was too accurate. "Well, let's get started. If I break any rules, just let me know."

Judge Hester had done the impossible. With just the power of his words, he'd been able to get Corey to relax even though he wasn't present. After the usual questions about school (ick), and sports (ick), Anne got down to the real reason they were meeting.

"This may be a little rough, but I'm going to need to ask you to tell me some stuff."

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"Like what?" he asked cautiously.

"Let's start with the night your parents were killed."

Corey inhaled deeply and stared blankly at one of the fish tanks. "It was last winter. We had just spent the day skiing on some great trails near Eagle. It's a town near Milwaukee. I was tired, so I didn't go to the movie with my parents. If I were still twelve, they wouldn't have let me stay home alone...but I'm thirteen...almost fourteen now." Corey paused.

"Take your time," Anne said.

"I'm okay." Another deep inhalation and a long pause. "They were hit, head-on, by this girl who was so drunk she didn't know what happened until the next day." He turned from staring at the fish tank to staring at the pattern in the carpeting. "These people came and got me, but they wouldn't tell me why."

"Who did?"

"I think they were police officers, I don't remember. All I remember is that my grandma came to the police station to get me. She was crying and kept saying, 'You poor little boy.'" Corey paused again. "I don't think anyone ever actually told me that my parents were dead."

Dr. Morgan wrote a brief note on her notepad.

"Tell me about Ben and Ellen."

"They're terrific."

"Were they always terrific?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, did you get along with them right away?"

"I'm guessing you already know, but no, not really. See, I was having some trouble at school and I got mad. I said some awfully mean things, but I didn't know about Andy."

"Tell me about Andy?" Dr. Morgan spoke calmly.

"Andy was their son. He died of leukemia about eight and a half years ago. When I found out, I was sure they were going to send me away."

"Why did you think that?"

"I don't know...I said some stuff I shouldn't have. I wouldn't have said it if I'd known, but..."

"Are things better now?"

"I wouldn't want to be anywhere else."

"I'm glad for you."

Corey went on for twenty-five minutes. He told Anne about the Barrens, his Uncle Jeff, and the night he ran away. The session was definitely going

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much better than the time with Ms. Mephitis. Finally, Anne stood and said, "Hey, looks like our time is up, but I would like to hear the rest of the story. Can we get together again in a few days?"

"I guess."

"Let's meet out in the Barrens and you can show me around."

Way cool! Corey thought to himself. "Okay," he said quietly.

"I do have one more question I'm curious about."

"Yeah?"

"Do you call Ellen, 'Ellen' or 'Mom'?"

"I always call her 'Ellen,' why?"

"I don't know. It's just that when you walked in you said that your 'mom' was waiting in the car."

## 4 Barrens Session

Corey sat in the grass, twenty feet from the dirt road, leaning against the massive brown posts that supported the sign for the Barrens. The words "Mary G. Lincoln Wildlife Area" were carved into the four-inch-thick horizontal boards that were bolted together to make the face of the sign. In smaller print, the words "Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources" stretched across the bottom of the sign.

Corey knew almost nothing about Mary G. Lincoln. He did know that she loved this place so much that she fought to save it. That was enough for Corey to know that he would have liked her. What was she like? When did she die? Corey decided that he would make it his business to find out. It could maybe be the subject for whatever dumb English paper he would surely have to write when school started.

School. Just the thought of it made Corey's stomach spin. It was like waiting in line for a scary roller coaster, or biking past a farm where irresponsible pet owners allowed their dogs to run free. These last days of summer were dreadful.

It's not that Corey didn't do well in school. He got good grades and enjoyed most of what he learned. It was his classmates he didn't always get along with. Last spring, when he was still the "new kid," he got beat up because he didn't fit in. Most of that had passed. His classmates ignored him now, except for Don, his best and only friend.

He did have a few other friends, all with some connection to the Barrens. This was where he'd met Wendy and Steve. They were both in their last year of graduate school, studying wildlife management. They were doing research on the prairie chickens that made this area their home. They spent hundreds of hours following a handful of radio-tagged birds. Corey was fascinated to learn how each prairie chicken had a radio transmitter

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strapped to its back. Wendy and Steve drove the sandy roads of the Barrens in an old Chevy Blazer that had a huge antenna sticking out of a hole in the roof. Their data, along with that of countless other graduate students, helped to paint a picture of the habitat needs of the prairie chicken.

Besides helping save the prairie chickens, one of the transmitters also helped to save Corey's life earlier that summer. What started as a gift of scrap electronics, given to a curious thirteen-year old, became a talisman. Constantly worn on a cord around his neck, the small resin encased transmitter provided a sense of security. It was a lasting reminder that he had people looking out for him.

As Corey waited, he thought about one other important friend. Dr. Bill Whitehorse. Bill and Corey had met one afternoon in the Barrens as Bill was in the early stages of a major research project on prairie plants. Corey discovered that Bill had worked with his father many years ago. Within days, Bill hired Corey to help with his research in the Barrens.

Dr. Morgan's red Saturn left a trail of dust as it came to a stop in front of the wooden sign. A strong wind quickly carried away the dust, as well as her baseball hat as she stepped out of the car. "Hey Corey," she shouted. "I can't believe I found the place!"

"It's kind of hard to miss."

"This land is so open," Dr. Morgan said as she looked out across the flat terrain. "I'll bet you can see for miles."

"More like twenty. See that dark bump on the horizon?"

"Yeah."

"That's Friendship Mound. It's twenty-two miles away."

The breeze tossed Anne's hair across her face and she adjusted her baseball cap.

"Wow! Does the wind always blow this hard here?"

"Yeah. Sometimes it's even stronger."

Corey led Anne to a trail that twisted through the tall grass. After being reassured that no poisonous snakes were around, Anne Morgan relaxed enough to remember why she had driven all the way to the Barrens. She began with easy questions.

"How long have you been living in Central Wisconsin?"

"About six months."

"Tell me about it."

"About what?"

"Tell me about living here. Tell me about the very best things that have

happened to you since you got here."

"That's easy. Ben and Ellen." Corey said without hesitation. "The Barrens would have to be a close second."

"Tell me about the Barrens. What is it about this place that you like?"

"You wouldn't understand...not many people do."

"Try me."

"Okay." Corey thought for a minute. "I feel like I belong here. There's something about being out here that I just don't feel anywhere else. It's like I can see things...little things that everyone else overlooks. Every trail, every bird call, even every pile of scat tells me a story."

"What's scat?"

"Poop. Scat is animal poop." Corey stopped talking to gauge Dr. Morgan's reaction. "You probably think I'm nuts."

"Not at all. Actually, I was just thinking about basketball."

"Okay, so now I think you're nuts."

Anne Morgan laughed. "Let me try to explain. I like basketball. I've always liked basketball. In junior high and high school that's just about all I did. I went to basketball camps in the summer. I played three-on-three after school, and in my spare time I coached grade school kids. I read books only on basketball. Every essay I wrote for English class was about basketball. Most people considered me a little strange."

"So maybe you do understand."

As they walked along the grassy trail, Corey told Dr. Morgan about Wendy and Steve, and explained about how he started working for Bill Whitehorse. He told her about meeting Tony Whitehorse, Bill's grandfather. He even told her about Spider, the pilot of the crop dusting plane.

"You've told me a great deal about the people you met here in Adams County. Now tell me what it was like in Madison. What can you tell me about your relatives?"

"Not much really. My Uncle Jeff is going to prison—I hope. Grandma calls me every now and then, but I never know what to say to her."

"How so?"

He shrugged. "I don't know...she keeps saying how sad I must feel and how awful the accident was."

"What do you tell her?"

"I try to tell her that I'm doing all right, but just saying that makes me feel kind of strange."

"I don't understand."

"It's like I start thinking that maybe I should feel sad all the time. Maybe I'm a bad kid because sometimes I'm happy." Corey's eyes began to water. "It's not that I don't miss them. Sometimes it hurts so much, I think...." he picked up a small branch and began poking at the ripening seed heads of the big bluestem growing along the trail. "I can't win. I feel guilty if I think of Ben and Ellen as my parents because I should still love my mom and dad. But when I try to think of Ben and Ellen as something other than my parents, I feel guilty because I know they love me."

"Why do you have to choose?"

"I don't get it."

"Why can't you love two sets of parents?"

"I do. That's the problem."

"Now I'm the one who doesn't get it."

Corey tossed the stick as far into the tall grass as he could. A savanna sparrow shot up from near the spot where the stick landed and flew directly over his head. "Look, if it made any sense I wouldn't have to be talking to you."

"I guess you've got me there."

The wind blew harder, creating a sound that helped to fill the empty spaces when neither one of them spoke. They sat down on the leeward side of a very small crescent-shaped hill. The hill, and the hundreds of others, just like it in the area, were actually ancient sand dunes. Ten thousand years ago, as the glaciers were melting away, strong winds blew off the massive ice sheet and sculpted the sand that made these eight-foot hills into dunes. These dunes marked the shore of a vast inland sea that was called Glacial Lake Wisconsin. Today, the waves of grasses blowing in the wind replaced the waves of prehistoric lake water. The undulating grasses and the constantly changing hues of green were almost hypnotic.

"Tell me about the dreams," Dr. Morgan said.

Corey hesitated and then said, "They're just dreams, I guess."

"That's not quite the way I heard it."

"What did you hear?" Corey sounded defensive.

"Forget what I heard. Tell me about your dreams and then I'll have the real story."

This was beginning to feel a little too much like the last time, less than a month ago, when he was asked to talk about things he preferred not to discuss. This time, however, they were in the Barrens, and Dr. Morgan didn't even carry a notebook. Besides, he knew that Judge Hester was going to

be checking on Anne. Corey briefly wondered if maybe she had a hidden microphone, but then decided it was probably safe to talk. "The dreams are pretty bad," he began slowly. Without looking, he pulled a blade of grass and slowly rubbed it between his fingers. "Imagine going to sleep at night knowing that the man you fear most will be standing by your bed. I know it isn't real. I know Jeff is in jail, but..." Corey inhaled deeply and closed his eyes.

"Take your time," Dr. Morgan said.

"Jeff standing there isn't the worst part." Corey paused, before continuing. "He keeps saying that he's taking me away...and this last time—he killed them."

"Killed who?"

"He killed Ben and Ellen." Corey's voice hushed. A marsh hawk in the distance gave the young boy something to study while he thought about what, if anything, he should say next. "The other really bad part is what this is doing to my parents—to Ben and Ellen."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. It's more than just everyone losing sleep and it's more than just being worried about me. Maybe they think I might not want to be here."

"Do you?"

Instantly, Corey's back stiffened and his eyes grew wide. "You're trying to take me away from them, aren't you?" Corey stood up, as if to say that this session was over.

"Not a chance. Now will you just sit down?"

Still unsure of Dr. Morgan's loyalties, Corey slowly returned to the patch of matted grass. "Sorry," he said.

"Look, Judge Hester told me that the only place for you is with Ben and Ellen Raine. I'm not here to take you away from anyone. I want to help find a way to make the dreams stop. Deal?"

"I guess."

"Now, when Judge Hester calls you, and I know he will, could you please tell him that this went okay?"

"Sure. But why do I get the feeling there's more going on with you and Judge Hester than just parking tickets?"

"Well... I guess I can let you in on a little secret. Judge Corvin Hester is my uncle."

"Cool. He's your uncle and my bodyguard."

“Sure.”  
 “You told me about how you loved basketball but you never told me about the fish.”

“That,” she said with a quirky grin, “is a very long story.”  
 Anne drove away. Corey hopped on his bike and headed home.

As instructed, Corey sat up in his bed trying to think of the best time he’d had with his parents. There were so many to choose from. The trips to the Chequamegon National Forest came to mind. He turned off the light, settled into his bed, and tried to remember.

His father had taken a summer job teaching at the Pigeon Lake Field Station. The University of Wisconsin ran the field station, and yet it looked more like a summer camp than a school. Corey and his mother explored the north woods, while his father helped students learn plant taxonomy. Swimming in the clear lake, hiking in the woods, and watching the black bears scavenge for food in the dumpsters were just a few of the highlights he especially enjoyed.

Often, other groups would use the camp at the same time. There could be an art class making sculpture, or middle school science students learning about the forest. Corey’s favorite group was a strange collection of science teachers who were supposedly working on a research project. From the looks of things, they were having too much fun for it to be research. The best part was the way this group made Corey and his mother feel as if they were part of the gang. The two of them went along on field trips with the science teachers and took part in so many fantastic activities that they lost count.

The bog walk! Corey would never forget that day in the bog as long as he lived. He was walking down a boardwalk with fifteen teachers, hearing about the unique chemistry of the northern bogs and the fact that because of the acid water, things tended to decay very slowly. The leader of the tour explained how a well-preserved body found in a bog in Europe was actually hundreds of years old. He then asked the group to stare down at the coffee-colored water and try to imagine what could be discovered there. The sweet humid smell of the bog drifted through the still air. Corey heard the high-pitched buzz of an insect calling from across the bog. Suddenly, Corey had felt his ankle being grabbed by a man who had been submerged in the sphagnum moss, with only his nose and eyes out of the dark water.

Walking back to Anne’s car, Corey was relaxed enough to act as a tour guide for the Barrens. He not only told Anne the names of every prairie plant, but also went into detail on their adaptations to this dry land. Cranes calling in the distance led to a ten-minute lecture on their role in the ecosystem.

He told her how he would spend as much time as he could out here, but left out the part about getting caught skinny-dipping by a crop duster. Anne noticed more of the subtleties of the Barrens than when she first arrived. Corey knew his way around this place like she knew her way around a basketball court. She could see the same enthusiasm—the same fire—in Corey for the Barrens that she had for basketball.

“What’s that?” she asked, pointing to a two-inch-square flag on a small wire stem.

“Looks like a survey flag.” Eight more neon orange flags could be seen along a north-south line of trampled grass. “I’ll bet Bill Whitehorse has some research plot going on here.” Why didn’t he call me if he was doing stuff out here? He wondered.

As they reached the red Saturn, Corey said, “You haven’t told me what to do.”

“What?”

“About the dreams...you never told me how to make them go away.”

“We’ll keep working on that. I’ll give Ben and...” She caught herself. “I’ll give your parents a call tomorrow.”

“That’s not going to help much tonight.”

Anne got into her car, rolled down the window and said, “Try this—tonight before you go to bed, close your eyes and think about the best time you had with your...” Anne hesitated.

“With my first parents?”

“Yeah, that’s what I mean. I’ll call you tomorrow to ask how it worked.”

“Will you guarantee it works?”

“If you want a guarantee, buy a toaster.”

“What?”

“That’s something my sister used to say. Just try it and I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Can I ask you one more thing?”

Momentary terror quickly turned to uncontrolled laughter.

Campfires with those science teachers were great. Everyone sat around singing and telling jokes. Songs about Railroad Bill and far too many songs by John Denver filled the night air. A funny man with an Australian accent told great stories of his world travels, while his two kids, who were along for the research project, filled in the details he purposely left out. The best part was how Corey, wrapped in his father’s arms, knew that he wouldn’t want to be anywhere else. It was a perfect night.

Corey rolled over to his side and hoped that the image of that perfect night would carry him through until morning.

## 5 Summer Ends

“Morning, Corey.” Ellen looked up as the boy walked into the kitchen. “How’d you sleep?”

“Not bad, I guess. At least I didn’t have any bad dreams, unless you count the one about school starting next week.”

“You should be happy. This is the latest we’ve ever had school start.”

“Not that I’m complaining or anything, but why is it so late?”

“Seems someone got a law passed that said schools can’t start until after Labor Day. This year Labor Day is especially late. So enjoy your last days of vacation while you can.”

“One of my last days of freedom and I have to spend it waiting for Dr. What’s-Her-Name to call and tell you guys how to cure me.”

“Her name is Dr. Morgan and you’re too late. She called last night.”

“She called and you didn’t tell me?”

“It was after nine-thirty. If you were asleep, we weren’t about to wake you.”

“But I wasn’t asleep.”

“Well,” she said, setting a plate of pancakes in front of him, “you finish breakfast and then we can talk about what she said.”

“Like I’m going to be able to eat!”

“Okay, you eat and I’ll talk.”

“Deal.” Corey managed to pour syrup, eat his pancakes, and drink his milk without taking his eyes off Ellen.

“Dr. Morgan said you’re still trying to make sense of everything that’s happened to you. She thinks that maybe you need to spend some time in Madison.”

Corey stopped eating. “Why should I go back there?”

“Well,” Ellen said cautiously, “there are a few things that need to be

done.”

“Like what?” Corey ignored his breakfast completely. Logic was telling him that “a few things” didn’t mean “a few little things.”

“For starters, you’ll need to go through the storage locker and decide what you want to keep. If I’m not mistaken, your parents’ second car is still in there.”

“That’s easy; I want to keep it all.”

“You can’t, there’s no room for it all. You’ll have to pick the things that are special; things you’ll want to give to your kids someday.”

Any other time, talk of his having kids would have taken Corey’s adolescent brain in an entirely different direction. However, logic was a stern taskmaster. “What other ‘little things’ did Anne—Dr. Morgan—say I need to do.”

“She thinks you should spend a little time with your grandma.”

“I don’t want to see her. She doesn’t like me.”

“What? Why would you say that?”

“I can tell. She always tries to make me feel bad whenever I talk to her on the phone.”

“Corey, you’re not being fair.”

“How am I not being fair?”

“Don’t forget,” Ellen said gently, “that on the same day you lost your parents, she lost her son.”

Ellen’s words were powerful, treading a fine line between instilling guilt and awakening empathy. She, too, had lost a son. Buried deep in Corey’s not-too-distant past was the uncomfortable memory of how, without meaning to, he’d hurt the very people who loved him most. It might have been the tone of her voice, or her careful choice of words, either way; the message found its target. With one softly spoken sentence, she brought him back to a night last spring when he promised himself that he would never again overlook someone else’s pain. “Okay,” he said reluctantly. “I’ll go see her.”

“That would be nice. But there is one more thing I think you should do.”

Corey knew immediately that it was no accident that she said, “I think” and not “Dr. Morgan thinks.” He braced himself for whatever was coming next.

“I think you should visit your parents’ gravesite.”

“No, I don’t want to,” came the instant reply.

“But you’ve never been there since the funeral.”

“But...”

“At least think about it. We’re not going to force you into going, but Ben and I both think it would help.”

“How could it possibly help?”

“It’s called closure. Sometimes a person needs to really know something is over before they can get on with the rest of their life.”

“I don’t know...”

“Just think about it.”

“Okay.” Corey stood and carried his plate to the sink. “Now can I go enjoy one of my last days of freedom?”

“Let me guess. You’re going to do something completely different—you’re going to the Barrens.”

“Now why didn’t I think of that!”

Corey was almost out the door when the telephone rang. “Corey, it’s for you,” Ellen shouted.

“Who is it?” Corey dropped his voice to a whisper.

“Some hotshot botanist. I’ll just tell him you’ve left.”

Corey grinned and quickly grabbed the telephone. “Hey Bill, what’s up!”

“Howdy Corey, just thought I’d touch base with you. What have you been up to?”

“Not much. Just killing time until school starts.”

“So, read any good wildflower poetry lately?”

Corey laughed. “I don’t think so.”

“That’s too bad because I’m going back on Alice’s show and you’re coming with me.”

Alice Gerardi hosted a daily talk show on public radio. In June, Corey had heard Dr. Whitehorse on her show talking about his work with prairie restorations, while the host kept talking about wildflowers in poetry. That show had set a series of events in motion that eventually brought Bill and Corey together. Corey understood this. He knew that in spite of Alice Gerardi’s big words and her complete lack of understanding of prairie ecosystems, she had done him a tremendous favor. Bill became his only real connection to his father, and if not for Alice, that might never have happened. But did she always have to use such big words?

“There’s no way I am going!”

“Now you sound like my daughter! Look, the show starts at eleven o’clock in the morning, two weeks from Saturday. It’ll be fun.”

“You have a strange idea of what fun is.”

“Then you’ll do it?”

“I guess,” Corey voice betrayed his reluctance. “I’ll have to clear it with Ben and Ellen, but I’m sure they’ll say it’s fine.”

“Great. By the way, how are things going up there? You’ve been officially adopted now for two whole weeks.”

“Things are way cool, but it doesn’t seem any different to me. I think they actually adopted me last April and just didn’t tell me.”

“Glad to hear it. I’ll call you next week with more details, but plan on my picking you up early in the morning.”

“Bill, before you go, tell me about the new work you’re doing in the Barrens.”

“I’m not doing any work up there. I haven’t been up your way for a while.”

“But I saw a bunch of marker flags. I figured you were up to something.”

“Not me. Maybe someone out of U.W. Stevens Point has a project I haven’t heard about. Besides, how could I start a project, almost in your backyard, and not have you help me?”

I wasn’t going to mention that part, Corey thought.

“Tell you what. I’ll ask around down here and see if anyone knows what’s up.”

“Thanks.”

“Later, kid.”

“Yeah, bye.”

Sitting on a windfall tree near his favorite stand of oaks, Corey tried not to think about going to Madison. The trip was pointless. His parents were dead, and after the trip they would still be dead. Whatever closure was, he knew he didn’t need it. He had good days and bad days. He had average nights and terrible nights. Visiting his parents’ grave would not change a thing.

Seeing his grandmother again was a bad idea. She hated Corey for mov-

ing in with Ben and Ellen, and she hated them for adopting him. She didn’t even show up in court for the adoption. She was old and not about to change her mind about anything, so talking with her wouldn’t do any good. It was uncomfortable for Corey to think about his grandmother losing a son. It was easier just thinking about all the reasons he should not like her, but logic kept getting in the way. For a few moments he felt sorry for her, and then he quickly thought of something else.

The impending trip continued to haunt Corey for the rest of the day. As he walked along the path to where he’d hidden his bike he was so preoccupied he didn’t notice the kestrel that snatched a grasshopper just ten feet from him. He didn’t see the doe and almost full-grown fawn that were getting an early start on dinner. He didn’t even see the hog-nosed snake that his foot missed by inches. He did notice that the survey flags were gone.