

Summer school was finally over. As exciting as that may seem I only had another month of freedom before the next school year. Walking down the dusty dirt road with my heavy backpack I thought I would melt. The sweltering Kansas sun beat down, burning off all traces of the clouds from last week. It was more humid than I could remember, so muggy I could hardly breathe. Sweat beaded across my brow, I brushed it off and kept my pace. There was a slight breeze stirring, delightfully fragrant with the smell of new mown hay, and flowers from the principal's window box.

"So, what should we do for the rest of the day?"

I jumped and turned. Valerie stood there grinning at me. "Don't sneak up on me like that! You nearly scared me out of my skin." I brushed the stray the hair away from my face. "I think we should go swimming in the creak. We could at least wade and cool off."

"Swimming sounds great! Race you home!" she said, and sped away.

"Last one home's a rotten egg!" I yelled, as I passed her. The heat of the day now forgotten.

The run home took me out of my funk. I dashed off the road to beat Valerie home. Along the green, grassy paths of clover and grasses, through the tall cottonwood, past the flood gates and through the neighbors' yard to get home. At the end I slowed my pace so she could catch up. After all, she was my cousin. She'd just moved here and was staying with us until her dad could find a place to live.

"Okay, I win as usual," I said as I panted to catch my breath. I smiled as we passed my little brother playing with his cars in the family room. Valerie collapsed on the couch with a loud grumble.

"I'll go change first," I said, turning to leave the room.

"Change what?" said Todd. "What are you gonna do, Christina?"

"Never mind," I said, turning down the hall to my bedroom.

Mom came into the room as I left. I could hear the murmur of voices through the door . . .until Todd began shouting.

"Oh, boy! I'm going to change too. I'm going swimming. I'm going swimming." He sang loudly, all the way to his room.

Mom was still talking to Valerie when I returned. "What's going on?" I said, crossing my arms across my chest. "We don't really have to take that brat with us, do we? What a pain!"

"Dad and I are going out with Uncle Rick this afternoon. You girls need to watch Todd."

Valerie backed toward the hall, "I'm going to change so you two can talk."

"Mom," I said, with a heavy sigh, "do we have to baby-sit? I'm seventeen now. Don't I deserve some time for myself."

"Yes, you do, but you're going to watch Todd today anyway." Mom said, "You know how he gets when he goes swimming in the creek. He's so young he thinks he can do everything you do and be invincible."

Discouraged, I sulked outside to wait for Valerie. *I wish I never had a brother. That he would just go away.* Todd was already in the backyard, raring to go. He beamed at me when we turned toward the creek and started across the yard. Todd ran ahead of us.

"Todd, you'd better not bother us! Just go swim by yourself and leave us alone," I shouted after him. *I still can't believe mom made me watch him.*

He must have heard me because he was already swimming when we put our towels down by the big oak tree.

"Let's check out the floodgates. We can see how high the water is today." I said walking down side the creek, on a well-worn path. The large structure stood about twenty feet high and

fifteen feet wide. It had three openings close to the bottom covered by grating. I could hear Todd splashing and having a blast. A smile escaped me despite my feelings. I really did love him; I just didn't want to watch him.

"Oh good! The gates are closed. At least Todd can't get into trouble there."

I loved the creek. It was so deep, in some places, I could stand in it and let the water ripple around me. I ran to jump into the cool refreshing water. I floated on my back as small fish swam by tickling my legs. The perfumes of summer came rushing back to me. The creek was so calming I didn't even mind the fishy smell. Live oaks and cottonwoods grew along the banks, their emerald green leaves sang to me in the soft breeze. Branches hung down into the water, reaching as if to drink. Wildflowers close to the floodgates grew in patches of red, pink and yellow they looked like a painting reflected in the creek. I could see Valerie pacing, trying to get up the nerve to join me. Finally, she jumped in with a splash.

We swam and talked about nothing in particular. Dunking each other and screaming out happily for what felt like hours before we decided to rest on the bank. We did agree it felt wonderful to cool off.

A loud screech woke me with a start. "Did you hear that?"

Valerie pointed to the water which was now flowing swiftly unlike before. My eyes slid to the flood gates. They were now open like three gaping mouths. "That might have been the loud noise I heard, but I never heard them like that before." I said.

"They weren't open before, were they?"

"No, but I'll bet that noise was Todd trying to scare us. It won't work." I said. "You had better come out now, Todd! We have to get back home."

Silence. Nobody moved. Nobody came. I was starting to get alarmed. Trembling a little, I yelled again, "Todd, where are you?" *He usually doesn't go too far away.*

"We'd better go look for him," Valerie said. Her voice was shaky too; she was more worried than she let on. "We need to find him before it gets much darker."

"I'll swim over to the other side while you go over the top of the floodgates. I can check the creek on the way across. If I find that little brat hiding from me he's really going to get it," I said, through my clinched teeth.

I looked up and down the creek, out across the banks, but couldn't see Todd. The current was getting stronger now that the gates were opened. I could see Valerie on top of the floodgates, screaming something to me. She began to run towards me waving her arms.

"Look out!" she yelled.

Then, I saw what she was shouting about. Something caught in the branches of trees hanging down into the water. It was something purple. Todd's shorts were purple. *Oh God, don't let it be Todd.* I swam as fast as I could against the current. My arms and legs felt numb in the cold water, but I had to get to the bank. *I don't want Todd dead. I liked having a brother, even when he was a pain.*

"Ahhhhh," I said, shivering. Valerie grabbed the back of my shirt, pulling me onto the bank. Her face had lost all color and her eyes were glazed as she looked toward the creek.

I struggled away from her, scooting back to the edge of the creek to see what she was staring at. "Oh, no!" I flinched, "A body!" *Thank God, it's too big to be Todd, but who is it?*

I stood up panicked on shaky legs and yelled at the top of my lungs, "Todd! Todd! Where are you?" I shouted.

No sound. No movement.

Valerie snapped out of her staring and we looked all around the bank and through the brush. Then, a soft, quiet, whimpering sound came from the huge stand of cottonwoods behind us. *Is it Todd?*

I looked at Valerie, but she was already running toward the sound. Shoving the bushes to the side, I breathed heavily. Todd was pale and curled into a ball. He was moaning and shivering. I could only guess he had seen the body and was scared.

I bent over and carefully picked up my little brother, cuddling him to my chest. Valerie grabbed his towel and draped it around both of us.

"Shhhhhh. Christina will make everything okay." I carried him over the top of the flood gates and to the other bank. With Todd in my lap I was overjoyed that he hadn't been hurt.

"It's okay, Todd. It's over, now. Tell me what happened?" I asked calmly.

He looked up at me with vacant eyes. "I . . . I was swimming by myself like . . . like you told me," He said between chattering teeth. "Got tired of being alone . . . came to get you . . . but you were sleeping . . . didn't want you mad at me." He paused to catch his breath. "Got back in the creek near those gates . . . but . . . they opened and the water pushed me . . . and it moved fast . . . something hit me. When I opened my eyes he was staring at me." He shuddered. "I was . . . I was scared and scooted away . . . got out to get warm . . . so cold." Tears ran down his cheeks and he held onto me tight, then buried his face in the towel that Valerie covered us with.

I pulled him closer. "I'm so sorry I told you to leave us alone and not bother us, Todd. I learned something today. Don't ever be afraid to come to me again," I said, holding him close. When I looked up at Valerie, she was looking at me with a knowing smile. I was so glad to have found Todd; I forgot she was with us.

We walked home with Todd asleep in my arms.

After tucking Todd into his bed I returned to the family room where Valerie waited for me.

“We need to call the police and our parents.”

“Did you recognize the . . . uh . . . man in the creek?”

“No, but for some reason he looked familiar like . . . oh, I don’t know. You call your Dad and I’ll call the police, all right?” She nodded.

It wasn’t long before the house was a whirl of people. Mom, Dad, and Uncle Rick got home first and made sure we were all three okay. Then the police arrived and started asking everyone questions.

Todd stayed in his room with Mom at his side. Valerie and I led the police to where we’d seen the body. When they got to work there we returned to the house with the detective still asking questions. ‘No we didn’t know him . . . No we didn’t touch anything, as if we would have, huh?’ Finally they left and I welcome the quiet.

Valerie and I got ready for bed in silence. I wanted to check on Todd before going to sleep so I slipped out and pushed open his door. Peeking into his room I saw that he was still away staring at the ceiling. Moving slowly, not to startle him, I sat on the edge of his bed and brushed the hair out of his eyes.

“You know we still have a month before I go back to school.”

Todd turned his head to look at me. “So what? I’m not ever going to swim in the creek again.” I smiled at him knowing I felt the same way.

“I thought maybe there was something special we could do, together, all three of us. Think about what you might want to do and we’ll talk about it later. Any place you want to go. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

I saw him smile at me when I stood and walked back to my room.