# the waiting

The true story of a lost child, a lifetime of longing, and a miracle for a mother who never gave up

CATHY LaGROW
*with Cindy Coloma*

"LaGrow tells Minka's story with candor that makes the story come alive. It is a stunning story of forgiveness, faithfulness, and persistent hope."

*Publishers Weekly*

"I found *The Waiting* to be one of the most eloquent, moving, irresistible true stories I have ever read. It begins with a sudden and terrible crime against a completely innocent schoolgirl that could have sentenced her to a life of tragedy. But Minka was no ordinary girl. After giving up the child the crime caused her to have, she began to search and wait for decades for the moment she knew somehow had to come—the moment when she would at last be reunited with her daughter. Authors Cathy LaGrow and Cindy Coloma, with the help of the families involved, have eloquently captured this magnificent story of tragedy overcome by love, hope, and perseverance. Most readers will discover, as I did, that as the pages turn, they will shed more than a few tears, but they will also find their faith in humanity restored and their hearts more than a little bit lighter."

**HOMER HICKAM**
#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Rocket Boys/October Sky*

"*The Waiting* will engross you. It is a powerful story of love and fulfillment, told with amazing detail and sparkling prose. Rarely has a book moved me so completely."

**BILLY COFFEY**
Author of *When Mockingbirds Sing* and *The Devil Walks in Mattingly*

"A poignant story, masterfully told with heart. Minka's journey comes to light in this beautiful work. And it is a story to be treasured."

**LIS WIEHL**
Bestselling author and FOX News legal analyst

"*The Waiting* is a story of a life conceived from one horrible act and a mother's love. Minka chose the best for her daughter, only to discover a family that was greater than she ever imagined. The beauty of this story is that it's about an ordinary life, yet an extraordinary love. As someone who met my own birth father at age twenty-eight—and who has adopted three children—I couldn't stop the tears from flowing. Families are created in different ways, but *The Waiting* reminds us that love conquers heartache and that the smallest flame of hope can lead to answered prayers. I highly recommend this book!"

**TRICIA GOYER**
*USA Today* bestselling author of over forty books, including *Plain Faith: A True Story of Tragedy, Loss, and Leaving the Amish*

"Every woman's nightmare. Every mother's wonder. . . . Author Cathy LaGrow's captivating family memoir is rooted in silence and shame, where grief is denied and hope is an unspoken prayer. *The Waiting* is a stirring testimony of God's goodness and grace to a troubled young girl and an inquisitive aging woman."

**KAREN SPEARS ZACHARIAS**
Author of *Mother of Rain*

"An amazing story that proves God hears our prayers and does sometimes give us the desires of our hearts. Written with heartfelt, poetic prose, *The Waiting* will move you as you read about this unlikeliest of reunions."

**TRAVIS THRASHER**
Bestselling author of *Home Run* and *Never Let Go*

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*The Waiting: The True Story of a Lost Child, a Lifetime of Longing, and a Miracle for a Mother Who Never Gave Up*



Designed by Nicole Grimes

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# *Preface*

She'd had only the photograph, all these years.

The old woman had viewed the cherished black-and-white image thousands of times in secret. She knew every detail by heart. There was the wisp of a baby with a sweet, sleeping face, always the first place her eyes went. And off to the side, gazing at the baby, a young mother, her damaged hands lying across the skirt of a good dress. Those same hands, now thickened and spotted by age, held the precious photograph carefully.

Had she really been so young once?

Her tidy apartment was quiet, as usual, with a warm ocean breeze filtering through the open windows. But the silence no longer echoed emptiness. In recent days the space had been filled to overflowing, like her heart.

She was ninety-four now, undeniably old. And after all this time, along with everything else that had been restored, her letters had come back to her. So many pages, hundreds of them, written over years and years.

The trauma of that long-ago time covered her memory like a fog, but she remembered the pain revealed in the words—the pain and the love. She remembered those well. They had been her constant companions for nearly eighty years.

Her bent fingers reached for the pages, and time unspooled.

Her hands stopped at a letter bearing a signature other than her own, a letter she'd never seen before. This one was written by the dear Reverend, long dead now, like nearly everyone else mentioned in these letters.

She read, and the words opened the door to another time, another century. Another August day, like this one and yet nothing like it at all . . .

Board of Foreign Missions
Ev. Luth. Synod of Iowa
And Other States

**OFFICE OF SECRETARY**
**REV. W. F. KRAUSHAAR, M.A.**

Aberdeen, South Dakota
April 3, 1929

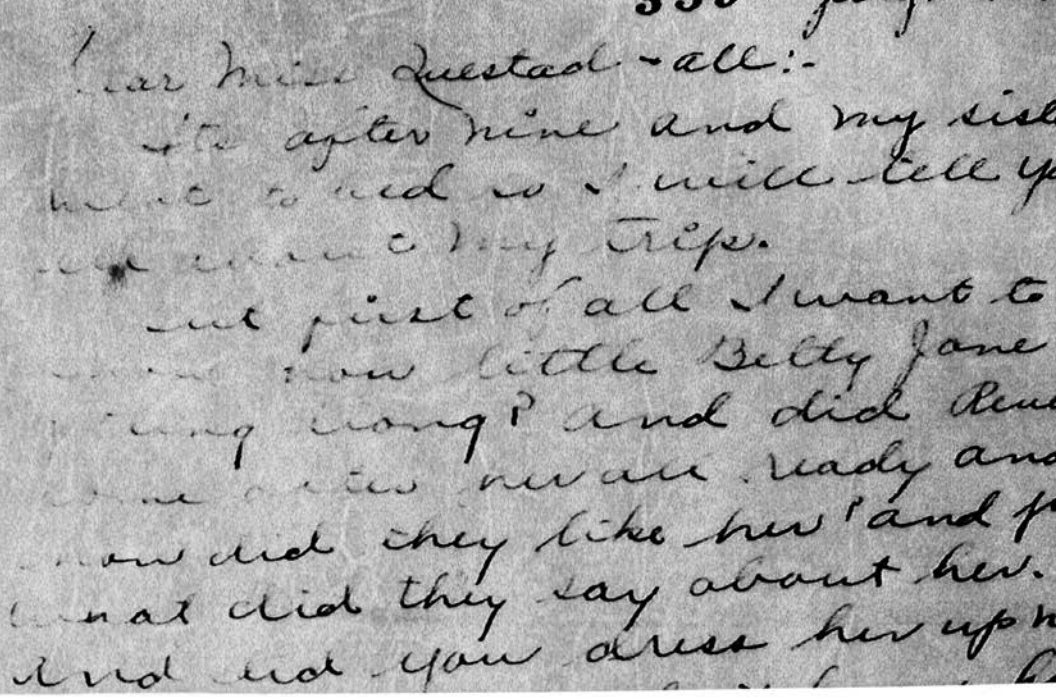
My dear madam,

I have an unfortunate girl in my congregation that expects to give birth to a child about the end of this month. I have investigated her case and am convinced that she was the victim of a dastardly crime of assault. She comes from a good family and has been staying with relatives in Sioux City. Could you take her in and help her when her time comes? Her family is not wealthy, but they will pay whatever your regular fees are.

I must mention too, that her people want her to give her baby away since the father is a fugitive criminal, but the girl seems rather inclined to keep it, possibly you can give them the best advice. Do you find good homes for such children? Of course, they would prefer a Lutheran home.

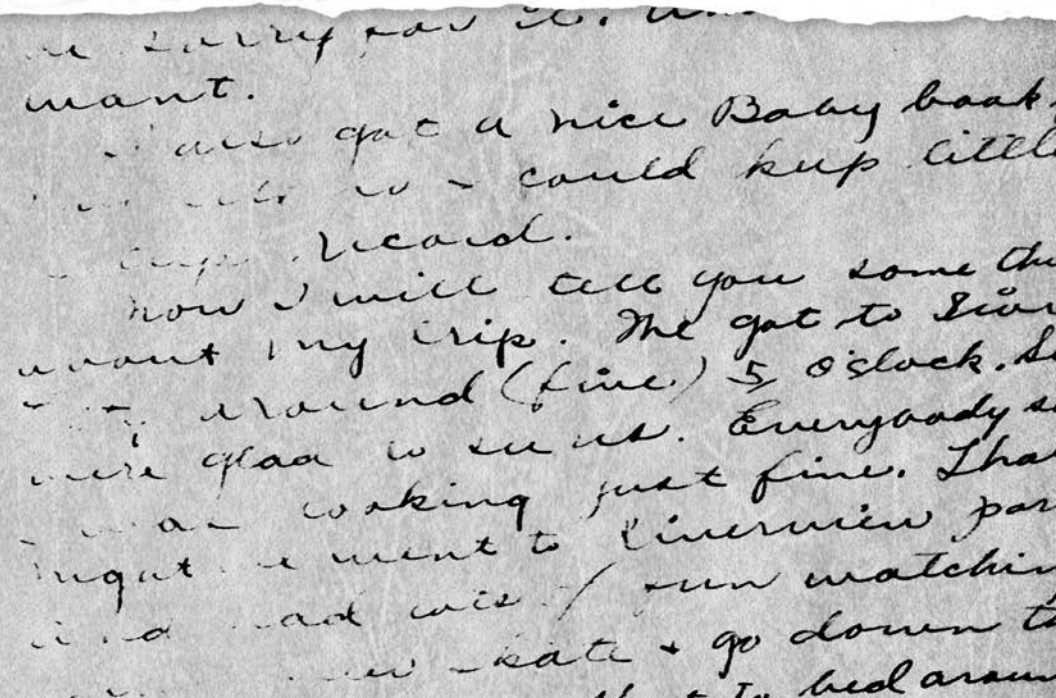
I would greatly appreciate an early reply.

Faithfully yours,
Reverend Kraushaar



PART ONE

# Loss



# Chapter One

AUGUST 1928

FOUR AND A HALF HOURS before her life would change forever, Minka stood in a dusty parking lot, twisting her handkerchief as she willed her family to hurry up. If they took much longer, she might just pick up her ankle-length skirts and run all the way home.

Her stepfather, Honus, leaned against the black side of the family's milk truck, blocking out the white *D* in Sunnyside Dairy, his hands jammed into the pockets of his summer suit. It was not yet noon, but the air was already thick and hot. Around them, engines loosely clattered as men cranked up Model Ts. Women called out good-byes to one another and gathered children before climbing inside their cars.

Minka's sister, Jane, and their mother were still on the circular brick steps of Zion Lutheran Church, visiting with friends. On any other Sunday Minka might have lingered too, joining in conversations if she felt bold enough, speaking whichever language was being used—English, German, or Dutch. The church

community, largely made up of immigrants, had finally voted ten months earlier to conduct all services and business meetings in English, but once they were outside, people's native tongues were loosed.

Today, Minka had fidgeted through the entire service. She couldn't wait to get back home.

Minka DeYoung was sixteen years old, taller than average and as thin and straight as a stalk of wheat. Her fine brown hair was cut in a loose bob and pinned back on one side with a frilly ribbon. Her gaze was lively and intelligent, though she often ducked her head bashfully and, like other people who fought shyness, had a habit of holding herself very still in public. Minka knew her nose and ears were too large for her face; she didn't realize her delicate cheekbones were beautiful. She was always careful not to draw attention to her hands, which had been damaged long ago.

Honus removed his fedora, but rather than fan his face with it, he held it in both hands and squinted at the pale sky, watching a thrush flap its way to the top of the church's steeple.

Minka glanced toward the church. Her mother had moved to the bottom of the steps, but Jane was still deep in conversation, leaning close to her friend Jette and smiling about something. Minka wished they'd hurry.

This afternoon was the event she'd been waiting for and thinking about for weeks: her sewing class picnic at Scatterwood Lake. Back home, a new dress waited on a hanger, freshly pressed. She would put on just the right jewelry and redo her hair, and then, for a few hours at least, she'd be like a normal teenaged girl, not a full-time worker who split her time between the family dairy and a meatpacking plant.

But Minka couldn't do a thing until her mother and Jane *hurried up*.

One row over, a car rolled by, carrying a banker from First National. Its paint was an exquisite dark blue, shiny enough to

reflect trees. Minka's eyes followed it. She loved beautiful things, even if they weren't hers.

Honus nodded to the banker behind the wheel. The man returned the gesture.

"Dat is one of de new Fords, called Model A," Honus said to Minka.

"Are they better? Than the tin lizzies?" Minka asked. She usually managed to contain all the questions that popped into her head when adults were talking—she'd been raised with perfect manners, after all—but excitement about the picnic loosened her propriety with her stepfather.

"Dey are supposed to haf a ride . . . not so bumpy. Dey are fast. But also *duur* . . . expensive, I think." *Think* came out sounding like *sink*. Like Minka's mother, Jennie, who'd sailed to America just months before Minka was born, Honus had emigrated from Holland. He would speak with a thick Dutch accent all his life.

They watched the car turn onto Jay Street and disappear. So many things had changed in the decade since the Great War ended. There was still a hitching post on the other side of the church building, and some farmers came to church by horse and buggy. Minka remembered when that was the only transportation *anyone* had.

A few years back, she and her siblings had gone to a picture show for the first time. As they'd watched people and scenery move silently across the white cloth screen, her mouth had dropped open and stayed that way until her tongue dried out and she'd had to swallow painfully. Jane and John, always quick to tease their sister, hadn't so much as nudged her. They too had been staring, goggle-eyed.

Every month seemed to bring a new innovation. Most homes in Aberdeen, South Dakota, now boasted electric lights indoors, and a few had a newfangled mechanical box for cold food storage, an improvement over root cellars, so long as the toxic chemicals

used for cooling didn't spill onto human skin. There were radios in living rooms, and skirt hems that ended more than twelve daring inches above the ground.

Honus's house had an indoor bathroom, a luxury to which Minka and her family had quickly—and gratefully—grown accustomed. Before moving in with him, they'd lived for twelve years at Uncle's farm on the prairie, where Jennie worked as housekeeper and conditions were more primitive. Three years ago when Uncle retired, Honus Vander Zee came calling, and shortly thereafter, with no announcement or fanfare, Jennie had gotten married.

The marriage gave Jennie's children a permanent home, but it upended the only life they'd known. Honus was starting up a new dairy and needed strong workers, and he believed that high school was "for city kids who haf nothing else to do." When each DeYoung child reached the age of fourteen, he or she was put to work milking cows full-time. Minka's older brother, John, soon escaped to the navy.

In the parking lot, Honus cleared his throat.

"It will be a hot day." He looked at his hat, eased it through his hands. "Hotter den yesterday, maybe."

"Yes, sir." Minka lifted her arms away from her body. She didn't want to start sweating in her church dress. During the sermon the sanctuary had rippled with a sea of paper fans, and Minka had kept shifting on the hard wooden bench, thinking of her new dress, the waiting lake, the hours of freedom in front of her. She couldn't resist bringing it up. "Maybe it'll be cooler by the lake this afternoon. At the picnic."

"Ja, maybe."

Minka didn't know that her mother had convinced him to let her go. Honus hadn't married until he was nearly thirty-five years old, and young women were a mystery to him. Raised in Europe, he had absorbed the austere attitudes of a different century regarding

children, work, and rewards. From his perspective, duty trumped pleasure—and there was plenty to be done at the farm every single day. Any time away created more work that needed making up.

Sometimes on warm Saturday evenings after milking chores, Honus would lean through the kitchen doorway and say in his quiet way, "Come go for a drive." Since bedtime came early at the dairy, there wasn't time to freshen up or change out of work overalls. Minka and Jane climbed into the stuffy back of the milk truck, and Honus drove them and Jennie to the ice cream shop in town. After buying one malted shake in a tin canister and requesting four paper straws, Honus brought it to the truck and passed the shake around. When they'd each had an equal number of sips and the last bit of ice cream was gone, Honus returned the canister and drove home. To him, such an impractical treat—likely more than he'd gotten as a boy—was enough.

As clusters of the congregation moved toward vehicles, Minka spotted girls from her sewing group. She watched the friends wave to one another before climbing into their cars.

Across the parking lot, Minka overheard a girl named Dorothy call out to a friend, Clara. "We will get you in an hour!" Dorothy slammed the door to the already-rumbling Model T.

Minka clenched her fists and blew air into her cheeks. Her eyes jumped to Mom and Jane, who had yet to move, and then up to Honus, still leaning contentedly against the side of the milk truck. He usually didn't allow dawdling; despite Reverend Kraushaar's sermons about the Sabbath, there was work to do every day of the week. But Honus merely glanced at Minka, deflating the hope that he'd wave her mother and sister away from the church steps.

Though every day of her life was consumed with heavy labor, work had never bothered Minka. Her bony frame masked a surprising stamina. Often, the longer she worked, the more invigorated she felt. She knew that her natural gifts were physical, and she was proud of them. Maybe she couldn't light up a room just by

walking into it, like Jane, but she could work as long and accomplish as much as anyone she knew, including adults.

It was the loss of her education that scraped at Minka's spirit. She'd been raised poor but with self-respect. Even as a child, running barefoot in the summer dirt at a farm that wasn't her family's own, she'd carried herself with a sense of dignity, had felt as worthy and capable as any other girl. Now, at sixteen, Minka felt ashamed. What if milking cows was all she was good for—what if an uneducated milkmaid was all people would ever see when they looked at her?

This afternoon's picnic would allow her to once again feel "as good as." Her heart pounded, partly from nerves, partly from excitement. Perhaps if her mother and Honus saw that today's outing didn't affect her work, she'd occasionally be allowed to go on future adventures.

Finally, here came Jane across the field. Her arm was linked through her mother's, and she leaned against her, giggling about something. Jennie was smiling. In this pressing heat, they moved slowly. Minka wanted to drag them forward. She turned and opened the truck's back door. Its metal handle was hot to the touch, and the hinges squealed. As she climbed up, she banged her knee on the wooden crates that served as seats, and her handkerchief fluttered onto the metal floor. She'd been twisting the cloth so anxiously that it looked like a wrung-out chicken's neck.

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Minka stood at the mirror in her mother's bedroom, trying on strands of necklaces. Despite growing up on a hardscrabble farm, she'd always loved pretty jewelry. Jennie had brought some simple accessories from Holland many years ago, and Minka had often capered around Uncle's house wearing every strand she could find, all draped together around her neck. Jane and John had nicknamed her "Gypsy."

Jane wasn't calling her sister names today. Minka's younger sibling had been trying not to sulk ever since they'd arrived home from church. With excitement such a rare commodity in their lives, the sisters nearly always shared it; the night before, Jane had volunteered to help Minka bake cookies for the big event.

But Jane was the charming "baby" of the family, unaccustomed to standing in the shadows, and now the sharing of joy stretched taut. Minka's new dress was the best item in their shared closet. Only Minka would be going on the picnic. Jane's steps had been heavy and a pout had crimped her pretty lips as she changed into work clothes for her usual afternoon of chores.

The summer sewing class was made up of girls from Zion Lutheran. Although store windows now overflowed with finished goods, from ready-made clothes to canned food to toiletry items, sewing was still an expected skill for a future housewife. Like most farmers, the Vander Zees took care of their own animals, grew and preserved their own food, performed their own mechanical repairs, made their own soap and clothes.

Jennie sewed skillfully and would have made a fine teacher if she'd had time, but she was too busy with chores. So Minka went off to sewing class, where she demonstrated an innate creativity and quick skill that surprised and pleased her. She produced the most immaculate stitches in the group—she'd heard her teacher praising her work to Jennie. Minka loved the feel of new fabric in her hands. Sometimes, while doing chores or riding in the car, she daydreamed of expensive silk in bright colors, falling like water over her shoulders and resting perfectly against her thin hips.

For this first dress Minka had chosen a modern shift pattern with a dropped waist in a fetching green-and-white cotton. She couldn't resist adding a decoration: an apple-and-leaf appliqué, cut from a contrasting fabric and stitched below her left shoulder. Compared to this fresh style, even her best church dress seemed dowdy.

As Minka fastened a strand of beads behind her neck, Jennie came through the doorway. She covered her mouth when she saw her daughter, her quietest and most diligent child. The mirror reflected the woman Minka would soon become.

"Je ziet er mooi uit," she murmured. *You look so pretty.* Then, louder: "You are a fine seamstress, Minnie."

Minka savored the compliments. Since babyhood, her pretty sister had always been the center of attention. Minka was happiest out of the spotlight, but sometimes when she watched Jane fling herself into their mother's lap, she longed to do the same. In a household marked by Dutch reserve, compliments were few and physical touch came only to those who demanded it. Minka was too shy—and too stubborn, really—to demand anything.

"Dey are picking you up here?" Jennie asked, crossing the room to lift Minka's overalls from the bedstead.

"Yes, Mom." Minka pushed at the bottom of her hair. She'd dampened it in the bathroom and attempted to make some finger waves, but it had dried too quickly in this heat and now looked straggly. She supposed the other girls would have the same problem today.

"And you be back in time for de milking, ja?" That chore commenced at five o'clock at *both* ends of the day, and the cows' full udders wouldn't wait, picnic or no.

"Yes, Mom, that's what they said."

Jennie bent and wiped the tops of Minka's shoes, then set them where Minka could slip into them. The clunky leather shoes would make her feet sweat, but they would have to do. Mary Janes did not come in a large-enough size for Minka. Jennie's children had inherited a scattering of oversized genes from some unknown branch of the family tree—John would eventually stand well over six feet, much taller than his father had been. And at a time when most girls' feet were a dainty size 4 or 4.5, Minka's were twice that big.

Minka's hands were large too, although that was not the reason

she made a concerted effort to hide them. She was most bothered by their disfigurement. Daily hours of milking had taken a toll, but the real damage had been done when she was a small girl. At Uncle's, out of necessity, children had been put to work as soon as they could walk in a straight line. John helped with the horses and out in the fields, while Jane loved to hang close to her mother's skirt, doing chores underfoot. As the oldest and strongest girl, Minka took on the most arduous household work. She toted buckets of water, hauled pails of animal feed, and lifted bulky sheaves of wheat at threshing time. Minka volunteered for these tasks, relishing the nod or smile from Jennie as she did so. It made her happy to help her busy mother. But by the time she was thirteen, Minka's fingers were permanently deformed, the bones bent inward at the ends where her tiny joints had grasped and lifted a thousand heavy handles.

Through the open window a noisy engine signaled the arrival of Minka's ride. She glanced in the mirror once more, automatically pushing her hands into her sides so the folds of fabric obscured them. She was giddy enough to let a vain thought cross her mind: She had never looked better. She spun and hurried toward the kitchen, where her dinner basket waited.

"Don't forget these," Jane called after her. She held out the cookie tin. After the whole batch had cooled last night, Jane had chosen the twenty most perfect cookies, enough to share with all the girls and chaperones. Minka had stacked and restacked them onto two big cloth napkins, which she neatly tied up and placed in the tin.

"Danke." Minka had nearly rushed out without the treats.

"Tell them I helped," Jane said, looking wistfully at the package. And Minka—even though this was *her* special day, and even though she'd spent her whole life on the sidelines watching Jane accept easier chores and more praise—felt sorry that her little sister couldn't come along.

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On the road to Scatterwood Lake, large plumes of airborne dirt billowed behind the caravan of vehicles. The cars trailed one another at quarter-mile distances to avoid being completely engulfed in dust.

Three girls in the backseat made lively chatter as Minka stared out the front side window toward the hazy countryside. Agatha's mother was driving her husband's big Chrysler Imperial, gripping the steering wheel so hard that her knuckles turned white. She'd made a couple of polite inquiries at first, asking after Minka's mother and the dairy, but now she seemed focused on maneuvering the car past the occasional oncoming vehicle. Minka studied a flock of sheep bunched together in the shade of some cottonwoods, then tugged at the hem of her dress and silently practiced sentences. She was determined to join in the girl talk once they arrived at the park.

The heat was stifling, almost made worse with the windows down. Dust-filled air swept against the girls' skin and collected in their lungs. With a clean, embroidered handkerchief, Minka tapped at the sweat that flattened her hair along the edge of her face and against her neck. The other girls beat at the air with wood-and-lace fans. Minka didn't own a fan, only handkerchiefs made from former dresses that had moved down the ladder from Sunday best to work dresses to scraps.

The park at Scatterwood Lake drew locals from all around Aberdeen. In addition to dance pavilions, the grounds offered roller-skating, swimming, picnic areas, fishing, and baseball fields, although the main draw today would be the water. Several years earlier, a young North Dakotan musician named Lawrence had played to a surprisingly large crowd there after rain canceled the county baseball championship and sent spectators running to the pavilions for cover. Years later, that singer would

inspire Midwestern pride as he reached worldwide fame with *The Lawrence Welk Show*.

The large size of the park and surrounding lake also appealed to travelers passing through the area. Drifters were as common as grasshoppers in a cornfield. Jobs that had been plentiful after the Great War were vanishing, although the coming Depression was still a mostly hidden threat.

The caravan of vehicles pulled into a field to park, and girls spilled out of cars, smoothing hair and brushing at crisscrossed lines wrinkled into their dresses. Many continued to fan themselves as they came together, calling out names of girls from other cars. After a few moments of uncertain pointing toward various picnic spots, the group headed to an unclaimed grove of trees that provided patches of shade. It felt like they were walking through a hot oven.

Minka spread out her blanket next to Clara, a quiet girl to whom Minka often gravitated. She uncovered her dinner: baking-powder biscuits Jennie had made that morning, a milk bottle filled with now-warm water, and fried chicken from a bird that had been scratching around the yard just the day before. Minka had plucked the feathers herself, first softening the quills by dunking the chicken in a pot of boiling water. She'd been dressing fowl for so many years, she could practically do it in her sleep.

Underneath a sky bleached milky-white by the glaring sun, diamond patterns glimmered and danced on the lake's surface. The roller rink, some distance away, appeared mostly empty that afternoon. Minka certainly wouldn't skate even if the day cooled off. While several girls owned skates, wheeled contraptions that strapped over their shoes, Minka had never tried the sport. Her sewing teacher had said that skates were available at the rink, but Minka knew there wouldn't be shoes to fit her, not in ladies' sizes.

Minka studied the other girls, and when it looked as though most of them had finished their chicken or sausages or roast beef sandwiches, she lifted the tin of cookies from her basket. The

nervous pang that twisted her stomach made her feel silly. Rather than make an announcement, she decided to approach each girl casually.

"Would you like a cookie? I made them. Jane and I made them."

Eager hands reached for the cookies. Not a single girl declined, and as they swallowed the first bites, they handed out compliments. "These are really good, Minka! Did you use butter in them?" They rearranged blankets and nudged each other over, and soon all the girls were in one big, lopsided circle. Minka sat down, her wide mouth curved into an irrepressible smile.

The conversation bubbled all around Minka, mainly about people in town whom Minka didn't know. Over the last two months, she'd heard enough scandals, rumors, and transgressions to make her head spin. She'd heard where the basement saloons or speakeasies were rumored to exist. It was hard to believe that regular people, not just criminals, gathered and broke Prohibition laws together—and in her own town. Perhaps some of them were the very people her family delivered milk to, although surely not anyone who sat in the church pews on Sunday morning.

There were other whispered rumors on the blankets. One of the girls who came infrequently was said to skip sewing class to meet a boy from town.

"You know what that means," talkative Agatha had said one day, and the other girls' faces creased with identical knowing expressions. To Minka, it made them look grown-up and wise, while her face burned. She had no clue what Agatha was talking about, but whatever it was, it was surely terrible. Growing up with a mother who never shared gossip or idle talk, Minka found the chatter both unsettling and titillating.

In this way, sewing class had educated Minka on more than patterns and needlework. Her only other glimpses of the outside world came in occasional letters from her brother, John, which

the whole family passed around and eagerly read, or from weekly visits from Honus's friend Charlie. Each Saturday evening, the two men settled into the living room and spoke in Dutch about world events, the economy, and local businesses.

Minka and Jane listened to these conversations. In recent months, the men had discussed the debate over whether tourists would truly be attracted to barren South Dakota for the sight of four presidential faces chiseled from some granite cliffs in the Black Hills. Many believed it was an enormous waste of federal money.

Minka didn't understand much about economics or tourist attractions or why people risked jail for a drink or why a girl would leave sewing class to meet a boy, but she was curious about everything beyond a world of cows and overalls.

Today the girls' talk turned more benign, probably due to the nearness of the chaperones. But Minka's naivete was about to be shattered, and more thoroughly than anyone could have imagined.

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With the picnic packed up, the group spread around the park so the girls could put their feet into the murky water, or mill around the skating rink, or remain in the shade, weaving more conversation. Minka heard the inner ticking of the day descending toward evening milking time. Soon her escape would end. She drew near Clara again.

"Do you want to walk around the lake?" Minka was far more comfortable with a single person than with a group, and undemanding Clara was a good companion.

They followed a small fishing trail that wove in and out of the trees and brush. Minka threw stones across the mirror surface of the water and wondered what it would be like to swim. She'd never learned.

The lake made her think of her real father. She had no memories of him, just a single studio portrait taken when he was seventeen

years old and a handful of stories that Jennie told time and again. Those scraps of information were precious to Minka, and she held them in her heart, paging through them like a journal when she felt lonely for the father she'd never known. She knew that his last day on earth had been hot like this one, although he'd died at a different South Dakota lake.

Minka didn't realize how far they'd walked on secluded trails until she and Clara saw three men, and realized with a start that they were out of sight of anyone else. The strangers were adults, perhaps thirty years old. They closed in on the girls with friendly smiles. Minka immediately felt the familiar shyness well up inside her. She dropped her eyes and stepped to one side.

"Hi! What're you girls doing on this hot day?" one of the men said. Another one wore a cowboy hat and stood without speaking, his hands shoved deep in his pockets.

Minka said nothing. Clara murmured a greeting and then turned to Minka with a hesitant expression. Minka felt herself inwardly shrinking from them, as though that would somehow send them away.

"Come on, let me at least take your picture," the talkative one called.

Their camera brought the girls in close; what would it hurt to let them take a picture? Yet one of the men circled behind the girls and stood looking back the direction they'd come. The talkative one took hold of Clara and tugged her away, toward a thicket of trees. Minka stared after them, glancing into Clara's panicked eyes. As Minka began to move toward her friend, the one with the cowboy hat approached her.

He might have said his name was Mack, but now everything seemed to have slowed down, like a phonograph on the wrong speed; at the same time, Minka had the sense that events were moving away from her faster than she could run. She couldn't understand whatever words Mack was saying. Her vision had

telescoped. He looked tiny now, as though he were standing on the other side of a wide street.

She couldn't fathom what was happening, even as his hands pushed her down and lifted her dress. Shyness and shock kept her from saying a word in protest. She simply focused on his hat.

Afterward, Minka knew that something dreadful had occurred. The pain, the intimacy of the act, the look on Mack's face as he stood over her for a moment before turning and leaving without another word—all of these impressions were infused with shame. Somewhere to the right Clara was crying, but Minka was too paralyzed to go to her friend.

Minka had drawn her legs up beneath her dress and wrapped her arms around her knees. Dry thistles poked through the fabric of her outfit and matted her hair. Her wrists and knees stung, as did other parts of her, places filled with a new, throbbing humiliation.

She got to her feet. One of her shoes was under a bramble of weeds, and her dress was crumpled. Her fingers shook as she struggled to pull thistles from the skirt.

Clara's cries quieted after a few minutes, and then she came into view, walking hunched into herself, as though something was wrong with her back. She looked more horrified than Minka felt. Minka had the sense that Clara could shed some light on *It*, this thing that had just happened, but she couldn't bring herself to ask.

*What time is it?* Minka wondered. Clara didn't look her way, just mumbled something about having to get back. Minka hurried now, wincing with every move. She felt a stinging sensation, although she wasn't sure where it came from. She brushed dry grass from her hair and swiped at her cheeks. They were damp. Her teeth seemed on the verge of chattering, even in the oven-like air.

Minka felt the blood before she saw it. She touched the back of her dress, afraid a stain had soaked through, but found only thistles. She had nothing but dried leaves to try cleaning between her thighs. Finally, she followed Clara, who moved unevenly along

the path. They pushed out of the shade of the trees and back into sunlight. To the right, swimmers splashed and called to one another. The sewing group girls were standing near the cars, holding grass-flecked blankets and empty baskets. One of them shaded her eyes with a hand, peering toward the trees.

"There they are!" the girl called and waved.

Neither Minka nor Clara waved back.

Clara climbed into the backseat of one of the cars and pressed against the side, wiping her face. She ignored a concerned query.

"What is wrong with her?" Agatha muttered to another girl.

Minka waited until the engines came alive and their sewing teacher was counting heads before she sought a different vehicle, any vehicle but the one Clara was in.

On the drive home to Aberdeen, Minka squeezed her eyes shut against the golden hues slanting over the wheat fields. She was sticky with sweat, not just her own, and nearly overwhelmed by the desire to leap from the car and scrub herself clean in some deep, cool well.

Minka made a promise to herself as the car bounced down the dirt road. She was a thoroughly honest person, but Minka knew that she must keep this day folded up and buried inside. She would not tell a soul what had just happened. As long as Clara didn't tell either, it would disappear and be forgotten.

But Minka would be unable to keep her vow of silence. She could not imagine it now, but an agonizing journey lay ahead. And every day in the years to come would be inexorably linked to this solitary afternoon at Scatterwood Lake.

Time would scrub from her memory whatever words her assailant spoke, the clothes he wore, the contours of his face. But that cowboy hat, moving back and forth against a bleached-out August sky, was the image that endured.

Minka would never forget that single detail for as long as she lived. And that was going to be a very, very long time.