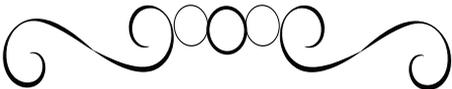


“The Story People have lived here for ages,” the boy says. They moved in when the books moved in.”

“Where are they now?” The girl looks frightened.

“They’re out in the bookstore gathering stories.”





THE
STORY
PEOPLE



a novel

HEATHER
KAUFMAN

To Andrew, with love



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The girl is lost. *She is in the middle of a row of bookshelves that she is too short to see over and now she is beginning to feel the first twinges of panic. She realizes too late the wisdom of staying with an adult when you are told to stay. But she is a brave girl, and she does not cry.*

The girl sees a door and thinks this is the way out, but when she opens it, she sees it's just a cluttered old closet. Now she thinks she will cry. In fact, she has just decided to do so when she sees a sliver of light against the far wall. There is another door, only this one doesn't look much like a door. She would never have seen it if it weren't cracked open. It is not much wider than she is, and she is barely five and not that big at all. She has never seen a door this narrow. It doesn't seem like a way out. It seems like a way in. Still, she is a brave girl, and she decides to explore.

The girl opens the strange door. There is no doorknob, so she must push. Now she sees a narrow passageway and, far ahead, another glimmer of light. The girl moves forward slowly. She thinks of Lucy and the wardrobe in the book her grandmother is reading to her and wonders if this, perhaps, is how Lucy felt when she reached out her hand to find a tree branch instead of a coat.

The girl reaches the light when she hears the noise—a soft, clearing-the-throat noise.

This is when the girl realizes that she is not alone.

CHAPTER ONE



HE DIDN'T FEEL MUCH OF ANYTHING AFTER ALL

Ben didn't typically wish to be shorter, but he wished it now—not anything drastic, a few inches less would suffice, just enough so he could fold himself behind the billowing standing banner, which advertised Palermo's Books. Instead he found himself fumbling clumsily, with limbs poking out from behind the banner, giving away his position to the ever-approaching Mrs. Matilda Gardner. He knew he looked ridiculous, but the thought, rather than making him move, just made him embarrassed, which in turn made him more zealous to hide himself.

He'd left the relative safety of his shop in order to bring in the banner before the growing storm blew it away, and just now he caught sight of Mrs. Gardner's hunched form scurrying across Main Street toward his store. Her oblong shape and tendency to walk with her chest shoved forward gave her the figure of a penguin perched for flight—made all the more ridiculous by the impossibility of takeoff. Her distinctive form never failed to spark a flutter of panic in Ben. Inevitably any conversation he held with Mrs. Gardner turned to the fact that he, a grown man of twenty-nine, was unmarried and, good heavens, didn't he think that was unfortunate, and what on God's green earth did he

intend to *do* about it? Now, as he bobbed and weaved in time with the banner's erratic movements and became steadily soaked by the rain, he wished he'd stayed inside.

A quick peek informed Ben that Mrs. Gardner had nearly made it to his shop. Her face, pink and shiny from exertion, swiveled back and forth as if scouting for any number of disasters, and her bustling form looked like she was trying to outdo the raindrops, which were managing to soak her gray, curled updo despite her best efforts to shield it with her purse. Just as she reached the awning of Palermo's Books, another woman tugged at her arm, causing her to spin with a squeal. Ben watched Mrs. Gardner's face light up in anticipation of juicy gossip as the two settled into a comfortable conversation. He sighed in relief, for he knew she wouldn't be inside for at least another half hour. Taking advantage of this momentary distraction, Ben ducked around the banner, slid behind Mrs. Gardner, and leaped up the front steps, cringing as the bell above the doorway chimed his presence. He headed back to his swivel chair behind the counter and scanned the first floor of his store. No one was directly in sight. Quickly he tugged on his T-shirt, pulling it up and swiping at his face to remove the last of the rain.

The bookstore was three stories tall with the flight of stairs in the middle. The first floor was the coziest, with the front desk immediately to the left of the entrance and a quiet reading alcove in the back of the store. The used books, children's, romance, and classics were all on the first floor; nature, poetry, and nonfiction were on the second; and hobbies, travel, cooking, and clearance were on the third.

Ben plopped down on his chair and glanced at the doomed banner through the front window. "It's not worth it, JC." Petting the small mutt, who looked like a mix between a Chihuahua and a miniature poodle, he took a swig

from his now-cold cup of coffee. “We’ll just have to chance the banner.” JC groaned in an agony of joy and tilted his head into Ben’s palm as Ben continued to scratch behind the ears. “JC? Jesus Christ?” people often asked, looking at him askance as if he’d committed blasphemy. “No,” he’d clarify, “Julius Caesar.”

The drizzle had begun midmorning, with a lull around noon, but as the afternoon progressed, the mass of black clouds condensed and let loose its rain with renewed vigor. Awnings up and down Main Street now shielded fidgeting people who were pawing at their umbrellas in nervous anticipation. Ben crossed his ankles with a grunt, picking up a splayed paperback from the counter as he let his eyes roam from the banner to the window, watching as the raindrops smeared across the glass.

It was mid-July, and the rain was a welcome change for many in New Holden, Indiana, who’d spent the last few weeks gazing at the sky and clicking their tongues in dissatisfaction. No rain for the local farmers’ crops meant no roadside stands with tempting fresh corn on the cob come late summer. With the downpour came renewed visions of bright yellow corn dripping with butter and sprinkled with salt. Family outings were already being planned to celebrate the coming bounty.

For Ben, rain had a more mercenary implication. Poor weather meant visitors would be forced away from the outdoor offerings of New Holden—horseback riding; canoeing, fishing, and picnicking by the Wabash; visits to the local historic mill and picturesque covered bridge. It would all be out of the question, and instead, a stream of wet and disgruntled people would trickle in to take refuge in the shops. Wet days, so often toxic to other businesses, proved invaluable here in New Holden’s historic district. This was one of the early lessons Ben had learned about his new home.

Three years before, Louis Palermo had passed away and bequeathed Palermo's Books to his only nephew. Ben had grown up visiting the store, and it held an enduring nostalgic place in his memory. Summer wasn't complete until the Palermos packed up the old cherry-red Suburban and made the long drive to visit Uncle Louie. Ben's memories of his uncle were so tightly connected to those of the store that it was hard to separate the two. He'd spent countless hours roaming the store and "helping" his uncle behind the front desk. Evenings were cozy and revolved around family and food, his father and Uncle Louie swapping childhood stories, their big laughs prompting laughter from Ben, even if he didn't always follow their inside jokes.

Those happy summers came to an end, however, when, on a drive home from a Christmas party, his parents were hit head on by a too-tired semitruck driver. Ben was just fourteen. He had gone to live with his grandma on his mother's side, and the trips to visit Uncle Louie had ended. But the bookstore took up permanent residence in Ben's mind, a symbol of happier, less complicated times.

When Ben received the news that the bookstore was his, he'd been an eager twenty-six-year-old MBA graduate who'd spent the past year working as financial manager for a college friend's start-up software company in Chicago. The news came unexpectedly, and he'd waffled on what to do, finally deciding to go for a year. He'd felt panic in leaving friends and his job for something so uncertain, but he'd maintained sanity by telling himself he'd only be gone for a year. He'd go, assess the business, sell, and then return home. His friend had agreed to hold Ben's job until he returned, but then the one year turned to two and then to three, and the job was no longer on the table, and the connections with Chicago slowly unraveled.

Ben hadn't expected to stay, didn't intend to stay, and

yet somehow he stayed. His uncle's life, he'd found, was one of quiet elegance, and he'd enjoyed steeping himself once again in the simple charm of small-town life. Ben had looked around at the business and realized there was more than loss or profit—there was legacy, and it was hard to put an estimate on that. The people, too, had been so pleased to have Ben there, so grateful to have Louie's family running their beloved bookstore, that before he knew it, he'd blown by his time frame. But Chicago was still there, representative of the future, while New Holden confronted him daily with the past and all the loss it contained. He'd found it increasingly difficult to shoulder his uncle's life, however briefly. Ben prayed daily for the strength and clarity to live out this part of his life well and to not be consumed by the emotional baggage it inevitably brought.

Uncle Louie's bookstore gave insight into a life thoughtfully lived, and Ben had enjoyed coming to understand what his uncle had built. But Ben was young and had given up a promising job to set up shop in the middle of nowhere. This beautiful community sucked you in, and no one heard from you again. The small town had a way of turning you into camouflage so that the lines between you and it became increasingly blurred. At first this was charming—and then it was suffocating. The three stories of Palermo's Books, so tantalizingly quaint at the beginning, now felt oppressive. Some mornings, Ben sat at the front desk and simply focused on breathing. In, out, in, out. *It will be okay.* A customer would move on a floor above, and Ben would listen to the creaking and imagine that the books, along with the walls, were slowly settling, adjusting themselves, moving downward, inward, until their combined weight crushed him. And then he wouldn't be able to breathe. No matter how hard he focused, he'd be smothered beneath a heap of C. S. Lewis, George R. R. Martin, and Dr. Seuss.