

Finding Ma

He looked maybe, fourteen. He was tall, muscular, and had a sort of glow to him. He looked, well, different. I wasn't spying, I was merely watching from the hayloft in the barn. And it's not like I was the only one paying him any attention; the whole farm was in front of the house meeting the newest member. True, I was the only one looking from a hiding place, but like Pa said, some things are better undiscovered.

Our farm was a nice one. Corn was our main crop, but we also grew cucumbers, tomatoes, peppers, and lettuce. The family side of the farm consisted of Pa, Grandpa Larry, and me. We had twenty-seven farm hands to help in the field, and now twenty-eight. Ma and Gran used to be here with me. Ma left us early on to go back to the city life, and Gran said farewell to the world a year ago.

Because I am the only girl, I am head boss. I tell the farm hands when and where to be. I tell Pa what needs to be done to get our monthly income. I even tell Grandpa Larry what clothes to wear on certain days. Being the girl means I also cook breakfast for thirty hungry men. Each man gets two eggs and three slices of bacon for breakfast, and a hearty chicken sandwich for lunch. Dinner is left to the men to cook.

While the men are out in the field, I spend my time in the barn with the animals. By now I've named every pig, cow, horse, sheep, chicken, and dog on the whole farm. I've even named the neighborly ducks that eat the feed. Sometimes, I spoil myself with a long ride on Damian, the family horse. Damian and I have a strong connection. It's like we know what's going to happen before it does. Damian is by far the most treasured animal in the barn.

From the hayloft, I get the perfect view of all the animals. Through a hole in the wall I can see the men in the field and the family house. It is from this semi-secret spot in the hayloft that I watched the newcomer. Pa had mentioned a name a couple dinners ago. I think he said something about Jordan.

I decided that if I wanted to ever have a friend in my life, I should go down and greet the newcomer like a normal person. Gravity thought otherwise. On the way down, I accidentally tripped on the ladder to the loft and, with a thud, found myself staring up into Pa's eyes.

"That's an exciting entrance, Xander," Pa said with a hint of laughter in his eye. Pa's looks quickly became a muddled mess of eyebrows and wrinkled skin as I quickly got up and attempted to rake my hand through my chocolate brown hair with no avail; I was a mess. "Have

you ever met a brush before? Or some soap? Xander, you smell like manure!” Pa teased. I could feel my ears growing redder by the second.

Embarrassed by my clumsiness, and Pa’s retorts, I managed a stifled sob and ran to the house. Behind me, I could hear Pa whisper to the newcomer that I would come back to my “old self” in minutes. I couldn’t help but run faster toward the house. Once inside the lifeless wood building, I drenched myself in well water. Hopefully, for my sake and for Pa, I would come out cleaner than before. After what felt like a long shower, I pulled out the collection of old overalls, t-shirts, and jeans that made my wardrobe.

With my daily outfit of overalls and a t-shirt on, I twisted my hair in a ponytail and turned to my window. I unlatched the old lock and threw the wooden frame up. I leaned out into the inviting wind, closed my eyes, and took several deep breaths.

A snapped twig brought me back into motion again. Pa and the newcomer were standing mere feet from my windowsill. Realizing that I’m still leaning out the window with my head high, I lost my grip on the wood and plunged myself backwards onto the floor. Dizzy and confused, I got back to the window and swung my legs over the side into a sitting position. I could see Pa trying not to laugh, but a smirk escaped his lips and I felt my ears turning red again.

“Ah, there’s my princess,” Pa teased.

“And are you my prince charming?” I asked in mock romance.

I jumped down from the sill and landed in Pa’s arms. Pa chuckled and swung me around. We finished our spin and he set me down on the grass with a small thud. I walked up to the new guy and held out my hand. “Hey, I’m Xander. Um, you are?”

“Oh I’m Jordan. Nice to meet you, Xander.”

He sounded kind of shy, and a bit nervous. I tried to be helpful.

“Did Pa give you a tour?” I asked. “Our farm’s pretty big so there’s a lot to cover.” I couldn’t think of anything to say. I’ve done tours before, but never with someone my age. This was different.

“Well your Pa gave me a tour of the field,” he said. “And the barn, and the house.” So he’s seen everything. That’s good. Pa left nothing for me to do.

I walk up to Pa and grab his coat sleeve, bringing his ear to my face. “What can I show him?” I asked. “You showed him everything else.” I was lost for options. The only other place he hadn’t been was the farmhand building, and I wasn’t allowed.

“The pond, Xander!” Pa said a little louder than I hoped. “I saved that one for you.” Pa always “saves” the most personal places for me to tour.

I looked at Jordan and saw the utter confusion that filled his eyes. I motioned with my head for him to follow me. He asked where we were going. “It’s a surprise,” was all I could think of.

The walk takes five minutes but it felt like hours. I come to the pond area almost weekly. I sit on the old rotting raft that’s been attached to shore for as long as possible and dangle my feet in the water. Jordan stands awkwardly on shore next to my shoes and stares down at his reflection. I lean to the left and the raft creaks. Jordan looks up.

“The water feels nice,” I say. I can’t think of anything to talk about. Normally I talk forever.

Jordan cautiously takes off his shoes and bleached white socks. He steps down into the mud surrounding the water. Apparently Jordan has never been in mud before because his face makes me want to burst out laughing, but I hold it in.

By the time Jordan steps onto the raft, I can’t hold it any longer; I burst out in tears and laughter. Jordan plunks himself down into a sitting position, far enough away that I can finish my fit of hysterics. I finish and sit up, blood rushing out of my face.

Jordan is looking at the water when I finally pull myself together. “So . . .” I start, trying to fit together a question in the two seconds I have to think. “How are you liking it here?” I ask. It’s cheesy, but it works.

“It’s better than my old home.”

“Did you come from the city?” I ask, my interest peeking.

“Yeah, but the air is smoky and this place is open and, well, free.” The way Jordan talks about the city makes me think of a little boy who didn’t get his candy. He doesn’t smile when he talks about the life around a million people. His face seems to become darker and more veiled the longer he talks about the life he once had.

Ma used to tell me stories about the city, before she left. She said I would really like it. I was only four years old, though. I remember her telling me about the “high life” and living surrounded by friends and children my age. At first, I really wanted to go, but I had to chose between parents. So I chose the life I knew.

I tell Jordan about Ma. I tell him how much I miss her. I tell him the stories Ma used to tell me about the city. I can see his eyes light up when I tell him about having friendly neighbors and

all the colorful plants and people walking down the street. Even though I don't know what living in the city feels like, I like sharing the stories that make people smile.

Both Jordan and I are lost in thought, thinking about opposite ends of the city. Neither of us noticed the raft slowly sinking under our weight. A sharp knife of cold sends a shiver up my back. I look down. Water is encasing me inch by inch. Jordan is still lost in thought.

I start flailing. Swimming is not my strong suit. I splash Jordan in the face, sending him into a freak out mode. The water is now up to my chin. I can barely breathe. Jordan is having no trouble finding his way to shore. Another thing that I somehow missed was our raft was dislodged from the ground, it had sent us to the middle of the pond.

Jordan has made it to shore now. I haven't gone a foot. I attempt swimming, but that only makes me go down faster. I'm stuck. There's no getting out now. I stop flailing and let my body sink below the surface. I need to come up for air, but I don't know how. My body seems to be separate from my brain; I can no longer control it.

I hear a faint splash. Then another. The sound is getting closer. I turn in the direction of the splashing, hoping my body will listen to my needs now. I think about letting the last bubble of oxygen escape my lips when a hand comes around my waist and heaves me toward the sky.

I can breathe. I can breathe. I sit up and gag on the remaining water in my lungs. Jordan is sitting next to me on the grass. The pond is near, but I can't touch the mud. Jordan is soaked to the bone. He saved me. I owe him big time.

I think of something to say, but my brain is full of water. "Thanks," is all I can muster.

Jordan turns toward me. He nods his head, but doesn't say anything. I stand up quickly, making my head bubbly. Jordan stands up and grabs my upper arm to stabilize me. Together we walk back to the house.

"What is this?!" Pa says. I can hear him moving closer and I feel him pick my wobbly body off the ground. He clears his throat and starts over. "What happened?" he asks, clearly concerned.

"Apparently, two people can't sit on that old raft together," Jordan replied. He didn't add any more. I could feel Pa relax a little, like he was having a moment of understanding with Jordan.

Pa carried me to my room and set me down on the bed. I was to stay there until my head cleared and I could work.

Days later, I felt a lot better. I sat up in bed and rubbed my eyes. There was someone outside the window. I pushed the wood frame up and found myself face to face with Pa. “Hi Pa. How long was I out? Need help?”

“You’ve been out since Friday. It’s now Sunday. Can you get my work boots? They’re in my closet. Your lunch is on the counter. Thanks Pumpkin.” He looked a little flustered, like the bills had just come in the mail. I followed orders and turned toward my door.

I walked down the hall to Pa’s bedroom. Inside, I picked my way through the piles of muddy overalls and long fishing boots to the open closet. I grabbed the worn work boots and turned away. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something out of place. To make sure I wasn’t seeing things, I turned around to face the closet again. The floorboard was definitely not where it should be.

Under the floorboard was a box. It was beautifully carved with a golden M on the top. I grabbed the box and slid the floorboard back in place. Once inside my room, I slid the box under my bed and jumped out the window in search for Pa.

Back inside, I grabbed my tuna sandwich from the counter and went upstairs. I pulled the carved box from under the bed and carefully set it on the mattress. I unlocked the lock and lifted the lid. Inside were papers from Ma, for Ma, and of Ma. I pulled out one sheet of paper that had my name on it. It was a letter from Ma, sent to me for my eleventh birthday. Pa never showed this to me. The handwriting was so beautifully etched onto the paper. Ma talked about maybe planning a trip to the farm one summer. She said she missed me. I believed her. I held the letter to my chest, took a deep breath, and replaced it.

Another letter caught my attention. The date on the page was January 10th, 2011. That was eight months ago. The letter looked the newest of the bunch. It was white and crispy. (The last one addressed to Pa had become yellowed and fragile.) The handwriting was obviously Ma’s. The letter read:

Dear Xander,

Jan 10, 2011

I hope you enjoyed your thirteenth birthday! I hope you received lots of goodies and love from your father. Oh, I still remember the day when you turned three - charming as ever. I hope

one day you'll be able to come see the city and
all its delights.

With Love,

Malory XOXO

I could feel tears welling up in my eyes. I'd never felt so close to Ma before. I hardly know her, but somehow I feel she's been with me the whole time. She's still my Ma. I have the right to see her. I'll talk to Pa about a summer or fall trip out to the city. He might argue, but he can't keep my away from my Ma.

Digging through the box, I found a letter from Pa that he never sent. The big, messy handwriting formed words that made me choke on my breath. I could feel a river of angry tears stinging my eyes. Pa kept a world from me. A world I could've lived.

Times came and went, but the chicken in me dominated all else. I never had the chance to really speak my feelings about seeing Ma again. The box was never opened due to the harvest season. Jordan and I were becoming really good friends. I still hadn't paid him back for the pond incident, but he probably forgot about it anyway.

One day, mid October, I finally had a chance to look at the box again. While I was leafing through the papers, all of which I had memorized, Pa barged through the bedroom door. For a moment, we locked in each other's gaze, then Pa began the rant I knew was going to come.

"Xander Alexia Cross! What do you think you're doing going through my stuff?!"

I couldn't help but feel nine years of betrayal weld up inside me. "You lied to me!" I screamed as I picked up the letter from Pa I had found earlier that year. "I found this letter you never sent. You said no! She wanted to come! She wanted to see me! You sent her letters saying I didn't want to come."

"Xander, you're overreacting." Pa looked almost sympathetic.

"Overreacting?!" I lifted the letter to my eyes. I read the letter, but stopped before saying the last part. "From, Xander." I looked at him then turned back to the paper. "You used me. Why?"

He wanted the best for me. Great. This is what he always said when I questioned his logic. Pa thought it's okay to keep me from my own Ma, and he thought it's best for me? What father keeps his daughter from her mother?

“Pa,” I said, a little more softly. “Pa, can I go see Ma?”

“You have two weeks time. Be ready.” Pa sounded a little reluctant.

I welled up in joy. “Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! I love you Pa,” I said hugging him. He hugged me back, the reluctance still in his squeeze.

In less than a day I was ready. I paced the kitchen waiting for the two-week mark to come. One thought hit me as I was making lunches: Do I want to go alone? I considered bringing Pa, but he was the one who said no in the first place. That left the only other person I’d ever had an alliance with on the farm; Jordan. Plus, I still owe him for the pond.

A week before my leaving day, I saddled Damian and his buddy Sugar. I walked them out into the field where I figured Jordan would be. I found him pulling up dead corn plants in the outer field.

“Hey,” I said, making him jump.

“Hey, Xander. What are you doing out here?”

The words I planned on saying got clumped in my throat. “I, um, well.” I took a deep breath and began again. “So, you know how I’ve been telling you about Ma? Well, I really miss her. But you know that already.” I didn’t know where I was going with this story. Jordan didn’t either.

Jordan stood up and brushed my arm with his dirty fingers, leaving a trail of soil. “Deep breaths, Xander.”

I took another deep breath and began again. “Jordan?”

“Yes?” I hoped he would accept my next offer.

I couldn’t help the sly smile that was creeping over my face. I held out Damian’s reins to Jordan. “How would you like to see a different side of the city?”