

## The Elm

I remember how everything started, before my world turned upside down. I didn't know then what Conner's Construction was or how it would hurt me. Let's go back before everything changed, when I still knew what normal seemed to be.

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! I rolled over and smacked the snooze button on my alarm clock. I pushed myself up with my elbows slowly and rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. "So, it's a Tuesday," I groaned out loud. I had been dreading going back to school all summer, and the day after Labor Day had finally arrived. I eased myself out of bed and quickly showered and dressed. I trudged downstairs and sat down next to my older sister, Lauren.

"Morning," I muttered tiredly.

"Liz, are you really going to wear that to the first day of school? You look like a complete slob. I can't admit to you being my sister if you wear that hideous shirt. It's tie-dye," Lauren declared, her glossed upper lip curling into a sneer.

"Lauren, relax. You can lie and say I'm your foreign cousin or something, if you feel the need," I replied, feeling rather repulsed by her behavior. Lauren was snobby to the max and was one of the most superficial, shallow people I knew. Of course, that's not considering all of her popular "friends" that gossiped behind each other's backs.

"Well, that won't work. Everyone already knows that you're my sister. You know, the more time you spend in that tree in the park, the weirder you seem to get. Normal people don't have a favorite tree," she told me, her eyebrows arched.

"Normal people don't have a favorite lip gloss," I retorted. "Besides, you used to love that elm as much as I did. We used to spend all summer in that park, playing under that elm," I replied as I grabbed my stuff and left. "Anyway, I'm leaving now, Lauren," I yelled.

"You still need to change! Wait! Liz! You can't!" she half screamed into the hallway. "Why don't you ever see reason? You're such an embarrassment!"

"Bye," I yelled, one foot already out the door.

I walked briskly to school, feeling the fresh early autumn chill in the air. Lauren passed me in her brand new car without looking back. I rolled my eyes and decided I was glad she was going to ignore me in public. I stopped at the old neighborhood park for a second and stared at my favorite elm tree. The leaves were just starting to curl into a yellowish brown color as the fall chill fluttered across my face. I remembered when Lauren and I had played in the giant elm,

when we had both loved the tree. Our mom had brought us to the park when we were little, and we would climb to the top and just sit there, talking. Things were so different then. All we ever do now is fight with each other. Lauren had gotten too cool for the tree when she started high school, and suddenly, all she cared about was where the next party was. I wish that things could go back to the way they were before, when we were still friends, or friendly, at least. But then again, can things ever really be the same?

I turned to keep going to school, but I came to an abrupt halt when I noticed a giant sign saying, “Coming Soon: Red Leaf Mall, To Be Built by Conner’s Construction.” My mouth fell open. I grabbed the sign, ripped it in half, and shoved it into the nearest trash can, out of sight but not out of my mind. I ran the rest of the way to Washington High. “The sign means nothing,” I muttered to myself, trying to calm my already jittering nerves. “One thing at a time, just get through school first.” The sign had to be a mistake.

School went by in a flash that day. People jabbered in the halls about how much they had missed each other over the summer. I did my best to try to act normal, but all I could think about was what that sign meant. Why would the city sell that particular park to build a mall? There was already a huge mall nearby. Why would they need another one? I decided I better go find Conner’s Construction after school, and that meant having to beg Lauren for a ride.

I saw Lauren’s glossy black hair before I actually saw her face. Of course it was her; she was surrounded by gobs of people begging for just a moment of her attention. What quality did she have that made people flock around her like flies? I tried to wipe my disgust off my face before I ran after her like a sick puppy; I had never pictured myself asking for help from Lauren. She wouldn’t let me forget I owed her a favor, and Lauren is not the kind of person you want to owe a favor too.

“Lauren, wait up!” I pleaded. I caught up with her and her groupies. Her admirers scurried away, giving Lauren hasty goodbyes. No one wanted to be caught with me, even if Lauren was there. I could tell Lauren was livid so I would have to tread lightly. “Lauren, can I have a ride to Conner’s Construction? I need to ask about this sign at the park I found this morning. They’re going to cut down our elm to build a mall,” I told her cautiously, waiting for her to start screaming at me.

“Oh, really? You need a RIDE? Are you kidding me?” she scowled, her green eyes flashing angrily.

“Yeah, I’d really appreciate it,” I responded timidly, almost inaudibly.

“Fine, I guess I better do my pathetic little sister a favor since Johnny isn’t still here to invite me to his party. You scared him away. Come on then,” she said, dragging me along by my arm.

“So, where is this place?” she asked bitterly after we were seated in her car.

“I dunno,” I muttered.

“Aren’t you helpful?” she responded sarcastically. Well, let’s drive into town and see if we can find it. If we don’t find it in ten minutes, we’re going home.”

I didn’t reply. I was too busy scanning the shops along the road to see if I could find Conner’s Construction. I was starting to wonder if Lauren cared more about the elm than she let on. Normally, she wouldn’t have even given me the time of day, let alone ride. I spotted a small, white, concrete building with red lettering reading Conner’s Construction. The white paint was beginning to peel at the edges, revealing the gray concrete underneath. I wondered if the place got much business.

“Lauren, right there! That’s Conner’s Construction,” I told Lauren excitedly.

Lauren pulled over the car and parked along the road. We both hopped out and walked into the building. The dilapidated building smelled like dust and could’ve used a good scrubbing. The receptionist looked up from her computer and frowned. I studied her for a moment, watching her talk on the phone, looking harried. Her hair was bright red, pulled away from her face into a tight ponytail with a few strands hanging limply around her face. She had square glasses framing her grey-green eyes. She might have been a beauty queen at some point in her life, but the worried look and stress lines etched into her face made her seem much older than she probably was. I looked at her name tag, which read Shelby.

“Hello. What are you girls doing here?” she asked, as she tried to twist her face into a fake smile.

“Hi, Shelby. I found a sign at our local park that said Conner’s Construction was going to build a new mall there. Do you know anything about that?” I asked nervously.

“Oh, yes, I do! My husband is Conner, actually, and he is always going on about how much money this will make. Not that we don’t get plenty of business, of course. You girls are excited for a new mall, then?” she rambled away, trying to sound happy.

I glanced at Lauren's face expecting her to reply yes, and to start up a conversation about her favorite stores. To my surprise, Lauren just looked livid, shooting the woman a look of contempt. The look gave me the courage to give the woman a piece of my mind.

"No, actually, we're not. We grew up playing in that park, and I think a place for children to play is much more important than a mall! Also, have you seen the elm tree? It must be hundreds of years old! How can you choose to destroy part of our city's history?" I screamed at Shelby, feeling my face turn red. I was embarrassed to be yelling at a stranger, but also upset at the same time.

Her fake smile slid off her face like ice cream melting on a hot day. "Well, Little Tree Hugger, you'd better say your good-byes. Construction starts tomorrow. Oh, by the way, we closed just a moment ago. Bye-bye now," Shelby said in a saccharine voice, dripping with sarcasm. She shoed us out of the building and put the closed sign up before we could say another word.

Lauren and I walked back to her car and got in silently. I felt tears starting to well up, and I turned to look at Lauren. I was surprised to see her eyes were full of tears, too.

"Oh, Liz," she half sobbed. "I'm so sorry for not being a better sister, and I'm sorry about the elm."

"Me too," I told her.

We both burst into sobs and hugged each other as if the world would come crashing at our feet if we let go. After what seemed like ages, we pulled apart and stared at each other. With Lauren's makeup half-melted down her face, she looked like a scary clown. I felt a smile forming on my face.

"What?" Lauren asked defensively.

"Isn't it funny that it took an old tree to bring us together?" I asked her, grinning now. We both burst out laughing. I'm glad no one saw us because we probably looked crazy, our emotions changing so fast.

The next morning Lauren and I walked to the park before school to say goodbye to the elm. The ugly orange construction equipment was already parked, waiting for its prey. I stared at the old elm. Tears fell down my face like gentle raindrops. I wasn't ready to say goodbye to the elm yet, but it was time. I took Lauren's hand, tore my eyes from the elm, and walked silently away. I had no desire for anyone to glimpse me saying goodbye to my friend. The tree had

brought Lauren and me together just as it had when we were little. Maybe things wouldn't ever be exactly the same as when we were little playing in the tree. But I think there was a chance that they could be better.

After school, Lauren offered to give me a ride home. But when we passed the street to our house, I knew something was up. We arrived at a tiny little nursery and Lauren parked the car in the gravel parking lot. Lauren turned to me, a smile playing on her lips. "You know, this doesn't mean that we're friends or anything, right?"

"Of course not," I replied, smiling back at her.

But Lauren put her arm around me as we strolled into the nursery, together. We had a tree to pick out.