

GIRL  
IN A  
BAD  
PLACE

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*Point*

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# ONE

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“Do you want to continue down a path of emptiness, or do you want to help bring order to this chaotic earth?”

When I hear this come out of the mouth of a girl no older than six, I stop walking. It’s not the sort of thing you expect a kid that young to say—especially not at the mall on a Saturday afternoon. She’s staring up at me earnestly with wild curls of brown hair pulled into two pigtails, and a tiny smudge of food on her cheek. I glance around, but there are no adults nearby who she might belong to.

“Are you lost?” My best friend, Cara, crouches so she’s at eye level with the girl.

“No.” The little girl smiles a precious, dimple-cheeked smile. “My mom’s right over there. But I saw you walking and I thought you were the kind of people we need and I didn’t want you to get away.”

Cara and I exchange a look. This kid is . . . a touch creepy. “Let’s get you back to your mom,” Cara says uneasily.

We don't have to find the girl's mom, though; she finds us first, wild-eyed with panic. "Avalon! What have I *told* you about running off! Thank God."

The kid's mom is young—not as young as Cara and I, but young enough that even though I know I'm not supposed to judge . . . I'm judging a little. She's got bright green eyes and a thick braid of dark hair pulled over her shoulder. It's so long that it reaches the middle of her stomach. Her clothes are clean but her fingernails are filthy.

"Your little girl came up to us," Cara says. "We were about to help her find you, but she should really be careful about approaching strangers. It can be dangerous."

The woman's nostrils flare a bit. "I know that. Why do you think I was so worried?"

"She wasn't trying to judge your parenting." I step in. "She was just . . ."

My voice kinda fades out because I don't know where to go with my sentence. Cara doesn't mean to condescend, but she's pretty sensitive about the safety of kids after losing her younger sister in a car accident a couple years ago.

"I'm sorry," Cara says. "I didn't mean anything by it. I'm glad she's okay."

The woman lets out a breath and nods. "I shouldn't have snapped at you. You just get wound up when you turn around and your kid's not there, you know?"

"Mommy, I think they should come to the Haven," says the little girl—Avalon, I guess—tugging on her mother's shirt.

“Oh, sweetie, that’s not what—”

But Avalon has turned back to us, enthusiastically. “We live at this place called the Haven. It’s in the mountains and it’s so pretty there. You should come. Please come?”

“It’s a commune,” the woman says quickly, almost apologetically. “Not anything weird. We just live off the land and stuff. We’re not looking for more residents right now.” The woman pauses and smiles at her daughter. “But Avalon is usually right about people, so if you wanted to come and visit, I think it’d be cool.”

“A commune?” I don’t know much about communes, but nature is gross. And filled with spiders. “I’m not sure—”

“Can you tell us more about it?” Cara interrupts. I blink at her. She doesn’t notice my reaction, though, because her eyes are on the little girl.

“Sure! Come on, let’s sit or something.” The woman gestures toward a bench. “I’m Alexa, by the way.”

“We’re Cara and Mailee,” says Cara as we join Alexa on the bench. Avalon squeezes between them.

“Well, about the Haven, there’s not a lot to explain, really. We each have our own little houses. I mean, Avalon and I live together, but she’s the only kid. So everyone else has their own house. Most of us are pretty young, like, early twenties. Firehorse is the oldest, he’s forty-one. He’s our founder.” There’s something reverent about the way she says his name.

“Firehorse?” It slips out before I can stop myself.