

Jill Hale becomes the Wardrobe Lady because that is the only job left in the eighth grade choir musical Tom Sawyer when she joins the class. A misfit Army brat who has lost her mother to cancer, Jill has a natural singing gift but lacks the confidence to use it until she survives a brush with death and gains the admiration of the coolest boy in eighth grade.

## **Wardrobe Lady**

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A row of five stage spotlights is visible at the top of the image. Below them, a red prop and a blue prop are partially visible.

# Wardrobe Lady

Cindy  
Reese Payne



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## The Play's the Thing

"Tooooo many directors in this room!" Mrs. Forrest bellowed when half a dozen eighth grade chorus members called out suggestions to Tom Sawyer and Becky Thatcher as they rehearsed their big duet for the upcoming musical.

Everyone got quiet for a minute.

Then Emily York tossed out a cliché that sprang into her head.

"Too many cooks in the kitchen," she suggested, proud of her mental agility and oozing the feminine charm that had won her the role of the flirtatious Becky Thatcher.

"Yes, Emily, thank you," Mrs. Forrest smiled, counting to ten in her mind.

"Too many chiefs, not enough Indians," Jon Vest contributed, trying to get Emily's attention with his own mental acrobatics. Jon grinned foolishly and pushed back the coke bottle lenses that kept him from being classified as legally blind. He was the kind of kid who skittered on the fringe of the popular crowd, a shaggy-haired wannabe player who operated under the misconception that he was a player. But he was harmless.

"Yes, Jon, that works too," Mrs. Forrest said, (eleven...twelve...thirteen...). She faced five more days of hectic rehearsals before the class presented Tom Sawyer to an auditorium full of parents, grandparents, siblings, and friends. And her fuse was getting frayed.

With only a week left, Mrs. Forrest wasn't the only one with a short fuse.

"Yeah, well I'm about the only Indian in this tribe full of chiefs," Jill Hale grumbled to herself as she snatched up yet another rumpled frock from the wardrobe room floor.

At the same time, the Hale curse hit and her glasses tumbled into a pile of petticoats, leaving her fumbling squinty-eyed for five minutes, while the sleek black hair she usually kept neatly swept back in a thick ponytail became a mass of tangles. Today she had decided to let it fall to her shoulders just to see if anyone noticed. *It's back in a ponytail for you tomorrow*, she thought. Let those other girls spend hours messing with their hair, she had better things to do...like figuring out how to make a coonskin cap from last year's play into a dead cat for Tom Sawyer. The rest of the costume committee had long since abandoned the mass of vests, petticoats, frilly period dresses and straw hats in favor of idle gossip and hair braiding. They always did this to her, and she always picked up their mess.

*Why?* she thought, tossing a pirate hat and sword into a handy prop box.

*Why do I care about this stupid play anyway? No one would notice if I disappeared from the choir room today, beamed up into an alien spacecraft hovering over the gymnasium in a cloud of boiling blue haze.*

"I could be the subject of some sick Martian medical experiment or be changed into a mindless pod and returned to the costume room a hollow mutation of my former self and no one would suspect a thing," Jill grumbled, peeking through the door at the rest of the choir.

There they sat, a little knot of hair-braiders, clueless about the alien spacecraft hovering over the gym.

Small groups of unneeded cast and crew hid in the far corners of the choir room as Mrs. Forrest struggled to teach a simple box step to her stars. The line of assorted adolescents

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appeared to be box-step challenged and ranged in height everywhere from NBA center to a member of the Lollipop Guild. Jill shook her head and went back to work, almost glad that the only part left in the spring musical when she joined choir at semester was that of wardrobe lady. Even though Mrs. Phillips, her English teacher, had encouraged her to join choir so that she could sing in the musical, she had found out pretty quickly that no matter how much talent she had, getting a major role was out of the question.

"You can forget a singing part," Emily York had told her the first day. "Mrs. Forrest never gives those to new people. You need to have experience, and most of us have been in choir since sixth grade. But I'm sure there will be something you can do to help out."

Jill had been so nervous during auditions that her voice had trembled. All those eyes glaring at her, daring her to take their rightful roles. She had choked. And now she was stuck here in the wardrobe closet, sorting petticoats. But at least she was safe from Mrs. Forrest's dreaded choreography sessions.

"It's not that difficult, people!" Mrs. Forrest wailed, her eyes beginning to bulge and her long dark curls sprouting gray hairs at an alarming rate. That same robust Italian heritage that gave her singing and teaching such passion also gave her a healthy temper, and it was showing.

"We only have five days left! Come on, one-two-three-four, one-two-three-four."

The bell sounded just as Jill straightened the big silver star on the sheriff's vest and hung it up.

"Jilly, you coming? It's lunch," Susan said softly, hunched over from the weight of an eighty-pound mesh backpack, which she carried to every class for fear of leaving something important in her locker. Jill shrugged. Maybe there was one person who would notice if aliens abducted her--Susan

Schoenberg. But then she was so timid and invisible to students and adults at Wildwood Middle School, Jill wasn't sure she would count. Susan drifted through the halls like a shadow, her dark eyes as watchful as a doe grazing downwind of a panther.

"I'm coming," Jill said, grabbing the pink nylon lunch tote her father insisted on packing for her each day, even though the popular thing to do nowadays was to show up in the cafeteria with nothing, claim you're "not hungry" and sit and gab animatedly with friends-- the whole time wishing you could become a large, thick crust supreme pizza with extra cheese so you could nibble on yourself.

Susan and Jill rarely did the popular thing, though, and the fact was Jill was always starved after three hours of classes, and she preferred eating colorful foods to the cafeteria's beige buffet. She glanced at the serving line dishing up gravy-drenched mystery meat, french fries, salad and a pear--all beige, even the salad. Her own lunch today included some colorful favorites--raw carrots, green and red peppers, cucumbers with ranch dip in a little plastic tub, kiwi flavored applesauce, and half a peanut butter and jelly sandwich on wheat.

Ever since her mom had died last year, Jill's father had done his best to be mother and father, but she knew it was hard on him. He had to report for duty at the Army hospital on post each day by 7 a.m. where he was in charge of medical supply and maintenance, so he was in the kitchen at 0-dark-thirty (Army talk) smearing peanut butter on bread for his only child.

Jill smiled when she opened the neon pink flap of her lunch bag and saw the note her father had inserted neatly into a zip-loc baggie. Her mom used to toss a scribbled note in carelessly each morning. No zip-loc. Not so much as a casual fold-over sandwich bag. It was the thought that counted. But soldiers, especially officers, were psychotically neat. Her father had once run his pickup completely off the road into the ditch because he



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was too busy wiping a greasy spot off the inside of his windshield to notice that the white line in the center of the two-lane was nowhere in sight.

But Jill appreciated her dad's effort. The daily note was a little habit of her mother's that he had insisted on continuing, even though Jill was old enough to live without it. Because they moved so much, Jill's mom had known school life wasn't always easy, so she used to insert lines from her favorite songs or poems or commercial jingles into her lunch each day to cheer her up. Her dad had tried to imitate this little ritual. His lunch bag messages were distinctly "dad" type messages, though. *When the going gets tough, the tough get going*. Very original. And *Give 'em hell, Jilly*--always a good one for young ladies. One time he had been pressed for time, she guessed, because he had twisted a beer commercial into *This day's for you*.

Jill opened the note.

*Be all that you can be. Love, Dad*

Jill smiled again. Originality was not his strength.

"Hey, Jill,"

Emily's velvety voice oozed over Jill's shoulder. Beautiful, Barbie-doll-blond Emily, every Middle School boy's dream. What was God thinking the day Emily was conceived? Jill wondered. Did he forget about saving back a few graces for the rest of girl-kind? Besides the silky blonde hair that fell just below the shoulder were these huge blue eyes that widened to the diameter of Jupiter when guys were near. And guys were always near. And let's not forget the non-stop Miss Congeniality smile. Susan once said in a rare moment of sarcasm that she thought Emily's parents had put braces on the girl's teeth while she was in pre-school. Otherwise, why was she getting hers off when all the rest of us were just getting ours on?

Where was the justice, Jill wanted to know, when a girl like Emily had no zits, could sing like a nightingale, and made the

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Honor Roll every semester? Teachers loved her. Parents loved her. And did anyone mention the guys? Yes. Well. Every school has one. And Jill seemed bound to steer a collision course toward every Emily in every school. She turned around slowly, plastering a fake smile on her lips just in time.

"Yes, Master, you rang?" she said, lowering her gaze in a humble bow. "What does your worship require of this underling, this Hobbit, this creature of middle earth?"

Emily ignored the sarcasm, tossing her silky mane.

"Justin wanted me to remind you that you have to ride home with his mom today because your dad is out in left field." This brought giggles from the clones surrounding her, hanging on her every breath.

"That's out *in the field*...on maneuvers, Majesty," Jill countered smoothly. But it got her goat, and Emily could sense a small victory. Jill returned to her kiwi applesauce with less appetite than before, her cheeks burning. As if things weren't already bad enough, now she had to deal with Justin. Although Justin Alexander's parents were the greatest neighbors in the world, Jill believed their eight-year-old daughter Theresa had been switched at birth by the Children of the Corn, and their son's highest accomplishment in life so far was receiving two detentions for passing gas in science. What was even worse was that afterwards in history class when Mr. Gordon had said he was guilty of "flatulence," he had protested that he had NOT touched any girl in an inappropriate manner!

Give me a break, Jill had told him that day on the drive home, explaining that "flatulence" means gas.

"It means you farted, you dweeb!"

His frustrated mother hadn't been able to decide whether to laugh or cry, but finally opted for screaming.

"Justin, why can't you be more like Jill? She never gets in trouble at school!"

Great. His eyes had narrowed to tiny bullets, staring at her forehead as if imagining a tiny target planted there. She had known he would find a way to get her back. But it had been almost a week and nothing had happened. Justin had seemed almost pleasant. A bad sign.

Now it was Friday and lunch was almost over. She took a bite of her pepper and glanced across the cafeteria. Like all the others, Justin was hopelessly bewitched by Emily's charms. He tripped all over his six-foot gangly self just to get a seat with a view of the back of her head at lunch. Of course, Emily surrounded herself with girlfriends so that she could absorb as much eighth grade gossip as one human can digest in twenty minutes. Each day they flocked to one table, a gaggle of eighth grade geese, honking and craning their necks to check out the latest subjects of their scorn or admiration. Occasionally their heads would dive down into a circle to share secrets, then they would jerk back, letting loose a frightening cackle.

Disgusted, Jill tossed her lunch trash and caught sight of Ryan Esposito sitting alone in a corner, his nose buried in a Tom Sawyer script.

Dark-haired and serious, he seemed an unlikely Tom Sawyer, but he had been picked because he was smart enough to learn the lines and competitive enough to consider it a challenge to be the best Tom Sawyer ever. And it didn't hurt that he could carry a tune without having his voice crack. His was already a deep mature baritone. But the weeks of practice had taken their toll, Jill noticed. Ryan had grown moody and distant as the performance neared.

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Yesterday he had perched on a windowsill in the back of the choir room and stared gloomily out at the spring rain while others ran through their scenes.

Jill had wanted to speak to him, to encourage him about the part he was struggling to play, but before she could get up the courage, Emily had waltzed over and spread her own form of sunshine on Ryan's dark mood. Frustrated, Jill had watched from the wardrobe room as Ryan's dark brown eyes focused on Emily's huge Jupiter ones. In minutes, she had drawn him out of his mood and pulled him over to join the others. But that was yesterday.

Now he sat alone again--the eye of a cafeteria hurricane, surrounded by a whirling out-of-control frenzy of rowdy obnoxious boys and giggly girls making the most of their twenty minutes of freedom. Hormone hell. That's what Jill overheard Mrs. Phillips, her English teacher, call it once when she had lunchroom duty.

Jill got up and moved across the room.

*I know he's going to look at me like I'm a geek. I don't know why I'm doing this. I must be crazy. Why can't I just go up to Mrs. Phillips's room and pretend to have a computer assignment like I always do?*

But her feet propelled her in Ryan's direction. Closer and closer. She was being kidnapped by her own feet, sucked into the eye of the hurricane.

"Jill?" he said.

Silence.

"Jill? What's up? Are you okay?"

"Huh?"

Jill looked down and there he was, staring up at her with those big brown eyes. He had the carved features that would with age and character turn him into movie star handsome. Already most of the girls thought he was "hot", especially when

that one dimple imploded in his cheek, throwing an unexpected twist in the reputation he had for being this intellectual strong, silent type. So far, no girl had snagged him, though. He seemed more interested in history and football than girls, which drove them even more crazy.

Jill swallowed hard, but was encouraged to see him give her a not-at-all-like-he-thought-she-was-a-geek look. But more of a I-wonder-if-she-ate-something-that-disagreed-with-her look. She took it as genuine concern, and brightened, finding her voice.

"Oh, Ryan, hi," she said. "I just wanted to tell you that I...I...I think the play is going great, and I think you're doing a great job with the part of Tom. You know she picked Tom Sawyer because we live in Missouri and, you know, Mark Twain and all. Uh, I guess we're lucky we don't live in Massachusetts where Melville is from. We might be doing a musical version of *Moby Dick* or something. Can you imagine? School kids there must really have it bad trying to portray a crusty old one-legged sea captain, a grossly tattooed first mate, not to mention a gigantic whale..."

She paused and mentally kicked herself for what she had just said.

*Where on earth did that come from?*

Ryan was still staring up at her, no longer wondering what she had eaten, but probably wondering if her room at home was padded.

But then, miracle of miracles, he smiled. The dimple surfaced, the dark eyes sparkled, and then he patted the bench next to him, inviting her to sit down.

"You know I never thought of it that way, but you're right. I wonder if the school kids in Paris have to figure out a way to make musical comedy out of *A Tale of Two Cities*," he said,

closing his script and singing 'It was the best of times; it was the worst of times' to the tune of Beethoven's Fifth.

Jill relaxed.

Not only did he smile, but he got it. She revealed the twisted intelligence of her mind, and Ryan understood it. She laid bare the inner hideousness of her weird perspective on life and he did her one better with his own twist.

"Well, anyway, I just wanted to tell you that I think you're going to be cool as Tom Sawyer next Friday, so break a leg, okay?"

She stood to go.

"Wait a minute...I've been meaning to ask you something, Jill...about this weekend," he said.

But just as she was sitting back down, a sugary voice intruded, and Jill found herself being yanked aside by an army of giddy invaders.

"Ryan, I'm sorry to interrupt your visit with the wardrobe lady (eye roll), but I was wondering if you could settle an argument for us," Emily said.

With Jill out of the way, Emily gathered her flock around Ryan's table and demanded his full attention. Stunned and confused, Jill backed away and fled up the stairs to Mrs. Phillips's room. She willed the blood in her cheeks to cool off to prevent her face from exploding.

What a lot of nerve, she fumed, angry with Ryan as well as Emily.

*Boys! Who needs them?*

Still, she wondered what he had been about to say to her. What could he possibly need to know about this weekend? Don't think about it, she told herself.

*He probably just wants to double-check the page of our algebra assignment.*

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The English classroom was empty, but the door was unlocked as usual. Mrs. Phillips knew that some days Jill needed a place to just *be*. When she was going through the hell of watching her mother slowly destroyed by breast cancer in seventh grade, Mrs. Phillips had been her English teacher. And when the opportunity came this year for the veteran teacher to move up to eighth grade, she took it. Maybe not just to watch over Jill, but the motherless Army brat liked to think that was part of it. So in a world of change, Mrs. Phillips was the only constant. With her glasses perched on her nose, her soft eyes crinkled at the corners, her hair almost white, and her eyes glazed over from years of reading teenage love poems thrust at her between classes by aspiring writers, Mrs. Phillips was a fixture in Jill's life now, the one person besides her father that she could trust.

A honeysuckled breeze ruffled the mini-blinds, making them stutter. Jill stood at the window and took a deep breath. Spring was just holding its breath, waiting for the last nip of winter to leave the Ozarks before bursting forth. Pretty soon, the farms along the Gasconade River valley would turn emerald green with fescue, and the rocky bluffs overlooking the winding river would be reflecting brilliant white against a warm, clear sky. Her chores at home would diminish now that the horses could eat grass and the little dry creek bed that ran through their twenty acres would flow with sparkling water again. She smelled rain, but knew it was a ways off yet.

"So. How was lunch today?" Mrs. Phillips said, startling Jill.

She had slipped in and was sitting behind a desk cluttered with a zillion paragraphs on who is the most tragic figure in *Flowers for Algernon*. She peered over her glasses at Jill, concern wrinkling the area between her eyebrows, but not showing in her voice. Mrs. Phillips had a way of keeping her

voice calm and gentle, even in the most alarming crisis. One day while students were reading, she sliced her left thumb almost to the bone while cutting some cardboard, and she calmly grabbed a paper towel, applied pressure and turned to her class.

"Don't worry, children," she said smoothly. "I think it's just a scratch, but I'd better check with the nurse. Be back in a minute."

Nurse Deb immediately drove her to the nearest health clinic, where she received 10 stitches.

And then there was the time when the school, only minutes from an Army post, received a serious bomb threat during a heightened terrorist alert, and Mrs. Phillips turned off the light, picked up a copy of *Green Eggs and Ham* and invited her students to gather around her for a read-aloud. Her voice took students to a place where they were children again, protected. Where silliness prevailed and bombs could not fall.

"Wonderful...and awful," Jill said, remembering the scene in the cafeteria, still gazing out the window.

"Does that mean that it was awful wonderful, then?" Mrs. Phillips said, raising one eyebrow. "Let's have some chocolate and we'll talk about it."

Mrs. Phillips opened her drawer and pulled out a huge kit-kat bar. Leaving half for Jill, she began munching on her half. Chocolate was Mrs. Phillips's answer for every problem. She had a drawer full for days like this.

Jill turned away from the window. A reluctant smile crept onto her face, and she dragged up a stool beside the desk, accepting the kit-kat bar. Then she got ready to spill her guts about Ryan and Emily, the play, the wretched wardrobe committee, the gratitude she felt for having been urged to read *A Tale of Two Cities* in seventh grade when others were reading



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*Amelia Bedelia*, and the anxiety she felt every time her father went on maneuvers. What if she lost him too?

But the bell rang. And students swarmed into the classroom, colliding with desks and each other, tossing books down with a loud clump. Wild chatter grew suddenly to the level of feeding time in the gorilla habitat at the St. Louis Zoo. Leah, the tiny filmmaker wannabe, chased a 200-pound gorilla named Ralph around the room, threatening to whack him with her tripod if he didn't return the notepad full of her current storyboards.

"We'll talk later," Mrs. Phillips said, cramming the rest of her candy bar in her mouth and touching Jill's hand just long enough to reassure her that she would be there later. The talk would have to wait until PE, last period.

American History was right after lunch for Jill. That meant Mr. Gordon, a cross between Robert E. Lee and Santa Claus in appearance, but a dead-ringer for General Patton in manner.

All through class, she felt confused. Not just because of lunch today, but because the Civil War was *waaay* confusing.

Who could keep all those battles straight? Especially when Mr. Gordon shouted his lectures as if the battles were raging about him. She felt like canon fodder some days, dodging questions as the lesson exploded from Mr. Gordon's raised teaching platform.

Today she felt even more confused because one minute she grew all warm and tingly, remembering the way Ryan had smiled and patted the bench for her to sit. Then just as quickly, she turned red hot with anger and frustration, thinking of Emily snatching away her chance to talk to Ryan.

"Jillian Suzanne Hale!" Mr. Gordon shouted.

*Uh oh. Incoming.*

Jill knew she couldn't dodge this one. Not when he used her middle name. He only did that when he suspected you weren't listening.

"Yes, sir," she said, snapping to attention, all ears, too late.

"How about answering the question I just asked you," he said, not giving her much to go on. She felt the cannonball's shadow bearing down on her. Just then, Susan whispered from behind her, "September 2, 1864!"

"Uh, September 2, 1864 sir," Jill blurted out.

"And what happened on September 2, 1864, Miss Hale?" Mr. Gordon lowered his whiskered chin and peered at her over his glasses. A retired Army drill sergeant, he wasn't born yesterday.

"The siege of Vicksburg?" Jill said hopefully, remembering how Mr. Gordon, a Mississippi native, was partial to battles from his home state. She knew she had made a mistake when she said it. Boom! The artillery landed. Direct hit. When Mr. Gordon finished with her, there wouldn't be enough left for pigeon food. Her body would decorate the walls of the history classroom permanently.

*Where is a Martian spacecraft when you need it?*

Jill closed her eyes and chanted to herself... *There's no place like home. There's no place like home.* But that didn't work either. When the bell rang, her eyes opened and the classroom was empty except for Mr. Gordon. Everything about him bulged...his eyes, his belly, his temper.

"Jillian, I don't know what's come over you lately, but you had better get over it before it's too late. Chapter test next week. Understand?" he said. Then more softly. "Now get on out of here and skeedaddle to science class before you're tardy. And read your lesson this weekend, you hear!"

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"Yes, sir!" Jill said, thanking this kinder and gentler Mr. Gordon, who had a soft spot for children who lost their mothers the way his daughters had lost theirs a few years earlier.

Now she just had to survive one more class. Science. Unfortunately, it was lab day, and her partner hadn't received the memo that this just wasn't a great day for Jill. Jonathan Silverman resembled an unmade bed in khaki shorts and a sloppily tucked but neatly collared polo. He was, no doubt, the farthest thing from Ralph Loren's mind when he employed people to embroider a tasteful pony on the chest of his clothing line. Jonathan smiled his goofy grin as he schlumped over, pulled up his lab stool and began digging through his bulging backpack.

"I know it's in here somewhere," he said, peeking at Jill through a tangle of thick blonde bangs.

Jill said nothing.

"Uh, well, maybe we could write everything in your notebook today, and I could borrow it later and copy it into mine. I'm sure I must have left it in history. Or it could be on my night table at home. I'm not sure, but-oh yeah-now I remember. I think I left it in the car this morning...but then again, I seem to remember..."

"Oh, for crying out loud, Jonathan. Who cares? Just get the darn dead frog and bring it over here. You cut. I'll write," she said. It was not a pleasant experience. But they survived. Well, all except the frog.

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True to her word, Mrs. Phillips sent for Jill during PE class. Although she didn't make a habit of it, Mrs. Phillips knew that sometimes Jill needed to talk more than she needed to play

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volleyball. Today was one of those days. And Jill unburdened herself of all the trials of her week in one long rush.

Just as she finished describing the disastrous encounter with Mr. Gordon and the icky lab experiment, the bell sounded, and her next-door neighbor Justin poked his head in the door. From past experience, he knew this was where she would be.

"Come on, Jill, Mom's waiting out front, and I gotta get home because I got company coming this weekend and I gotta get my chores done," he said, annoyed with her as usual.

"I'm coming," she said, grabbing her book bag and lunch tote along with the heavy jacket she needed this morning, but would lug home now because it was too warm to wear.

"Thanks, Mrs. Phillips, see you Monday, and I promise I'll read my history assignment...TWICE!" she said. Mrs. Phillips smiled. She hadn't said a word in 20 minutes.

It was Friday. Jill had a whole weekend to forget about the horrible week. The skies were clearing. The sun felt warm. The farm was waiting for her. And she anticipated a relaxing two days. Boy! Was she wrong!

## Snake in the Grass

The drive home was pretty uneventful. Justin refrained from farting for once, and his mom chatted happily in the front seat with an unusually pleasant Theresa. Jill was free to plan her weekend.

The first thing she would do was throw all the dirty laundry in the washer before her father could get home and find a weeks' worth of underwear, jeans, and socks crammed under her bed, ripening. She had done this for as long as she could remember, but when her mother was still alive, Jill had to keep changing the hiding places. Her mother had an uncanny way of laying her hands on anything that came up missing within seconds. It was as if she had wayward underwear radar or something. But with Dad, it was different. It never occurred to him that anyone would hide dirty laundry in order to avoid doing it. So she just tossed it under the bed from Monday through Friday, then rushed home Friday after school, dragged it all out and shoved it into the washer. On Saturday, she did Dad's laundry, but there really wasn't much because he took his uniforms to the dry cleaners so that they would be cardboard stiff. And he put his towels and underwear in neatly folded piles in the laundry basket, knowing Jill would return them on Saturday, not quite as neatly folded, but nice and clean.

That was the first chore.

Then she would sling some dry cat food in the bowl in the corner of the kitchen and run back out to the mailbox to check for any junk mail addressed to Ellen Hale, her mom. It was amazing how often that happened. And even though it bothered Jill to find the letters, she knew it would bother her father more,

so she did this for him every day, trashing the reminders that would still hurt.

Mrs. Alexander dropped Jill off with a "Call if you need me," and a pleasant wave, so it was time to get in gear.

It didn't take long to get the wash going and feed the cats, and only one letter had arrived today from Publishers Clearinghouse addressed to Ellen Hale telling her she could be an instant prizewinner if the number on her golden ticket matched the winning number. All she had to do was return the envelope. (*yeah, and about a gazillion more over the next 6 months*) to win \$10,000,000. At first Jill had tried to continue her mom's tradition of filling out the prize tickets each time they arrived, but eventually, after searching for an hour one time for the super prize number authorization code, she had given up and decided it would be easier to become a millionaire by becoming a famous actress and singer than it would be to fill out those stupid letters. And that was her plan anyway, to become a superstar.

With indoor chores accomplished, she was free to whistle up her Australian shepherd Pistol, and head for the barn. It would be at least two hours before her dad came home, and then he would join her for a walk down to the creek and back before dinner. It would get dark too fast for a horse ride, but soon the Missouri spring days would lengthen and there would be enough sun left to ride with Dad before dark. Those were the times she loved. Even when her mother had been alive, Jill and Dad had always spent the evenings together walking or riding while Mom cooked dinner. It was not much time, squeezed in between his long work days and her busy school days, but it was enough to keep them connected.

Pistol bounded over, stubby tail wagging, with one blue eye and one brown eye smiling up at her. Then he began his routine of running toward her, then away toward the barn, then back,

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kind of like Lassie leading Timmy to the burning barn to save the animals. Only Jill's barn wasn't burning. And Pistol wasn't Lassie. Just a dumb cow dog with no cows to round up, only a couple of horses who paid no attention to him, so he settled for herding Jill each day.

At the sound of Pistol's barking, Jill's mare Lady nosed around the edge of the barn and snorted.

"Come, Lady, where's your buddy Blue?"

Jill's father's horse was a blue-black gelding half Arab, half Missouri fox trotter who had a knack for getting in trouble. A fiery temperament combined with little attention made him quite a challenge to ride and sometimes even to catch. Jill whistled high-low several times and called out "Blooo-boooooyy, where are you?"

As she called, she heard a soft ga-lump ga-lump sound getting louder and louder and rounded the barn to see Blue galloping toward her at full speed, tail twitching and ears pricked forward. He skidded to a halt just in front of her and nudged her with his nose while kicking one back leg at Pistol, who nipped at his heels.

"Steady, boy," Jill said, noticing the muddy hooves on Blue. "Have you been down at the creek, Blue Boy? Is that why you're all muddy and excited? Come on, let's check it out."

The walk from the barn to the rocky creek bed meandered down a ravine and back up again and across a small walnut grove planted by the previous owner. It took about ten minutes to walk down there, and Jill was delighted to hear the sound of rushing water before she topped the embankment this side of Murray Creek. This meant no more filling the water trough until late summer when the creek would run dry again. Then the fall rains would keep it flowing a few more months until winter set in.

*Cindy Reese Payne*

The water was indeed flowing over the huge flat stones in little terraces, dropping down by degrees into a small, clear pool that Lady and Blue sipped from noiselessly. Jill had forgotten how beautiful it looked in the spring with little daffodils springing up along the path and giant white-barked sycamores feathering into the blue sky.

Although the sun was still shining to the west, clouds were gathering. One thing you could always count on with Missouri weather was change. If you didn't like the weather, hang around for five minutes and it would change, her father often said. She decided the clouds weren't too threatening, though, and strolled along the creek for awhile, skipping stones and noticing signs of life bursting forth everywhere. A pair of red birds, frilly ferns sprouting from mossy mounds, a turtle. A campfire.

*Wait a minute.*

Jill stopped and stared at the campfire she had stumbled on. She bent down and sniffed. Smoke lingered, but the embers were cold. It had rained just two days ago, but this fire hadn't been wet. That meant someone had built it just last night. But who?

She automatically looked over her shoulder to see if anyone was there. No. She was alone. And this spot was so secluded from the house and barn that anyone could camp out down here and she and her father would never know. Probably just some teenagers looking for a spot to smoke or drink some beer, she thought, dismissing the campfire for more pleasant thoughts. She had a whole weekend ahead of her, and that thought made her feel like singing.

Plopping down on a fallen tree, Jill began to hum, then to sing the opening number of the school musical.

Pretty soon, she was getting into the music so much that she didn't hear the sound of footsteps on the dry leaves just beyond the creek bank. Jill sang in clear, even tones, with



perfect expression the sweet ballad Tom sings to Becky while they are lost in the cave.

It was then that Pistol's hackles raised, his ears laid down, and a low threatening growl made Jill to look over her shoulder nervously.

"What's the matter, boy? What do you hear?" She tossed her long dark hair out of her eyes and snatched up a tree limb to use as a weapon.

It was not common for anyone else to be down here or anywhere else on their place, and when the horses began to snort and fidget, looking up from their grazing like deer sensing danger, Jill suddenly noticed that clouds had covered the setting sun. It would be dark in a few minutes. She felt the urgency of her situation. Having no flashlight or lantern meant she would have to negotiate the long path back to the house and barn in the dark. She glanced around at the deep shadows masking what lay on the damp earth and saw that the beautiful sycamores were now white skeleton fingers clawing against the blackening sky. She also remembered that early spring was copperhead time in Missouri. In fact, the most dangerous time to be in the woods was just before and after dark because the poisonous snakes cannot see well and they strike at anything that moves.

Jill was just about to make a move to climb back up the creek bank when a lantern popped into view. She froze. Maybe it was a hobo or escaped convict or ...

"Jilly? Is that you?" It was Justin's voice. And then Justin's face appeared beneath the lantern bearing that smirky smile of his. She breathed a sigh of relief, and then blew up.

"Justin Alexander! You nearly gave me a heart attack, sneaking up on me like that! It's a wonder Pistol didn't go for your throat, you oaf." But she couldn't help being thankful for the light pouring into the shadows around her. "How on earth did you find me down here?"

Another voice, deeper, and one she recognized with horror, came from behind Justin.

"We just followed the singing," Ryan said, his face appearing above a flashlight, dimple exaggerated into a crater on his cheek. Both boys hopped over the creek bank and made themselves comfortable on the log Jill had vacated.

In the excitement of the moment, Jill had forgotten what she was doing just before the boys showed up. Then she remembered.

"How long have you been out there...listening?" she asked, remembering the rousing opening number with its tribute to Hannibal, which had been delivered with such enthusiasm that the horses had stopped grazing and stared at her.

Justin set down his lantern and grinned broadly.

"Let's just say that if the people in Hannibal stepped out their back doors, they would have heard you belting out that song too!" he said, nudging Ryan to get him to join in the fun of embarrassing Jill. But Ryan's eyes had lost their sparkle and held an unblinking gaze that went past Jill into the night. He didn't respond to Justin's barbs, but instead kept his eyes focused on something beyond their puddle of light and reached down for the tree limb Jill had discarded.

The next instant remained frozen in Jill's mind like a single frame in a horror movie. It all happened so fast, she didn't understand what was going on.

Without warning, Ryan raised the limb, leaped at Jill, pushing her to the ground behind him, and began beating the ground repeatedly with the huge stick. His flashlight fell when he leaped, so the only light was from Justin's dim lantern, which reflected the confusion and fear on his face. From her position on the damp sandy creek bed, Jill remembers smelling something foul, an odor like garbage, and then in a flash, Ryan

was bent over her, concern wrinkling his face and the dimple disappearing in a frown.

"Are you okay, Jill?" he said, pushing a clump of matted, gritty hair out of her face and pulling her to a sitting position. "Justin, get that lantern over here!"

"Huh? Yeah, sure. What the heck?" Justin stumbled over, holding the lantern up over Jill's head. He kept glancing at the spot where Jill had been standing, where Ryan had just attacked a huge snake, but he kept the light over Jill, whose face was splotted with mud and leaves and confusion. She looked up into Ryan's eyes, still unaware of the snake that had threatened her.

"Was the singing that bad?" was all she could think to say.

And then they all broke down laughing, their cackles joining the chirping crickets and the rippling water of Murray Creek.

\*\*\*

When Jill and the boys finally got back to the barn, her father was there, still in his uniform, with a lantern of his own, preparing to search for his daughter. He had called to let the Alexanders know he would be late so that Jill wouldn't worry, not realizing he was the one who should worry.

The story tumbled out of the three in ragged stretches between breaks for laughter, which had Jill and Ryan bent over double and Justin sprawled out in the hay, holding his belly. And finally Maj. Hale figured out that Jill had been singing and lost track of time down by the creek (which now had water in it, by the way, Dad), and that the boys had been sent by Mrs. Alexander to find Jill and let her know her father would be after dark getting home, and then a copperhead had slithered up behind Jill and was coiled and ready to strike when Ryan

*Cindy Reese Payne*

reacted by pushing her aside and beating the poor, blind snake to a pulp with a tree limb. It was the copperhead that had smelled foul like decaying garbage, Jill learned.

"And the best part, sir," Justin said, between gasps. "Was that Jill thought Ryan was just being a critic and hated her singing!"

Although he couldn't help smiling at the story, Jill's dad felt compelled to give her the parental lecture about being alone in the woods after dark. Jill promised not to do it again, and the boys gathered up their lantern and flashlight and headed home.

"Hey, Ryan," Jill called after them, standing in the light of the barn door as their lights bounced across the path toward Justin's house. "What was it you were going to ask me today at lunch about this weekend?" she said, suddenly unable to stand it any longer.

"Oh that," Ryan called back. "I was just going to ask if you would run lines with me since it's my last chance to get it straight before dress rehearsals start Tuesday. "But if you're busy, I'll understand."

"How about tomorrow after lunch? I guess I owe you that much. You can meet me up at the house," she called out. Ryan nodded and the two boys turned toward home a second time. Then Jill called out again.

"Hey, Ryan."

He turned back, but Justin kept walking.

"You promise not to knock me down this time if you don't like my singing?"

They both grinned. It was a date.

\*\*\*

Jill awoke Saturday to the smell of sausage sizzling on the stove and biscuits baking. She yawned and stretched and smiled. Biscuits and gravy and sausage. Dad's specialty. And her stomach was ready. After last night's excitement, there hadn't been much time for cooking, so they had eaten baloney and cheese sandwiches and some chips and gone to bed early.

"How's my girl after almost being bitten by a nasty copperhead?" Dad said, pouring the bubbling gravy over her biscuits before sitting down across from her.

Their farmhouse was ancient, but cozy. It stood a quarter-mile off the highway, two stories with a wrap-around porch, complete with swing and an old back porch well that was covered over with a sheet of plywood. The kitchen was her favorite part. Her mom had painted everything white with black spots and red accents when they first moved in last year. It reminded Jill of a Gateway computer store with kitchen appliances, but Jill didn't tell her mother that. She loved that her mom didn't do anything the ordinary way. Most moms would have painted everything white or had the whole thing remodeled to look more modern, but Ellen Hale was a southern girl raised on a dairy farm in Northwest Arkansas. And she had loved the old Missouri farmhouse and 20 acres the moment she set eyes on it. Jill was always grateful that her mom got to have at least a little time on her own farm before she got sick. After all that moving around from duty assignment to duty assignment, she deserved a place of her own, and Jill knew she enjoyed every last minute of the time spent there.

"Well, I think I'll live," Jill replied, slathering butter and honey on a steaming biscuit and then gulping down a tall glass of orange juice.

"And what's this about running lines for the play with Ryan? I thought you had chosen to help with wardrobe and

costumes instead of taking a speaking part," Dad questioned, being nosy.

"I am the wardrobe lady," Jill said. "But you know I listen when they rehearse, and, well, I pretty much know all the parts by now. It's easy. And you know I love to sing. It's just that I can't do it in front of crowds of human beings who might decide to throw sharp objects or rotten vegetables at me. What if they attacked me the way Ryan did? I'd be a mess," she finished, but before Dad could protest, she added, "I know. I know. I used to sing when I was a little girl in front of multitudes and they loved it. And I have this killer voice and beautiful face. You and Mom always told me this. But I figure you are slightly biased. I just have no self-confidence. Face it. I am a neurotic adolescent with low self-esteem. No matter what you say or do, I still feel insecure and inadequate and ugly."

"Are you finished?" Dad said.

"Yep. That about sums it up. Except I could add that I'm a wretched loser, and I'm considering throwing myself off a cliff later today."

"Good. At least I know things went well at school this week, and you're your usual perky self," Dad said, piling the dishes in the sink and winking at his neurotic daughter before heading out to do farm stuff.

The morning dragged as Jill anticipated her afternoon meeting with Ryan. She did Dad's laundry, swept all the floors, dusted one room (which she did each week), finished the dishes, made the beds and cleaned the bathrooms. All the while she hummed the songs from the musical, and rehearsed the script in her head over and over. She knew every part by heart and could sing every song, but Mrs. Forrest didn't know that. How could she? Jill had blown the audition so badly that she had been put in charge of costumes. That was fine with Jill. She had lots of time to become a famous singer and actress later. Maybe she

would try out for something at the high school next year if they stayed here.

Not wanting to appear over-anxious after lunch, Jill took her time getting ready, changed into three pairs of shorts before deciding on cutoffs with a skinny blue tee shirt that matched her eyes. She considered blush to brighten her cheeks, pale from being indoors all winter, but decided against it. Her mother's makeup could wait. It would still be there when she was older, and if Ryan didn't like her pale cheeks, then too bad. He's not going to notice me anyway, she thought miserably. He's only coming over here because he's staying next door and I'm convenient as a stand-in for Emily.

Grabbing a book, Jill went out to the porch and propped herself up in the swing, pretending to read, but she kept glancing casually up the hill toward Justin's house. Pretend to read. Glance. Pretend to read. Glance. Pretend...Oh, my God, here he comes. She swallowed hard and kept her head down until he stood on the steps of her porch and coughed a little to get her attention.

"Oh, hi. I didn't notice you standing there. Where's Justin?" she asked a little too casually.

"He's helping his dad with some fence mending this afternoon, so he said I should just come on over here and see if you were ready to start practicing our lines and stuff. I brought my script," he said, producing a Tom Sawyer play book from the back of his jeans. "And I have a tape of the music if you have a tape player."

Jill put her book down and smiled.

"Sure, we keep one down at the barn anyway. Dad listens to it while he cleans stalls and works with the horses." She didn't mention that she often put on whole musical extravaganzas for the horses and Pistol when no one was looking.

The two of them walked toward the barn in silence. Then Ryan spoke.

"You and Mrs. Phillips are pretty tight, huh?" he said out of the blue.

"I guess you could say that," Jill said. "She is sort of like a friend and teacher and shrink all rolled into one."

"Yeah, she's okay, I guess. But my favorite is Mr. Gordon," he said.

Jill stopped and turned toward Ryan.

"You must be joking. Mr. Gordon? He scares me to death. I think he hates me," she said.

"That's not right. He doesn't hate anyone. He's just a little old fashioned and thinks kids should show some respect and love history as much as he does," he said defensively.

"Well, I don't mean to be disrespectful, but I think Mr. Gordon was born in the wrong century. Did you know he plans to be buried in a Confederate uniform?" she asked, but by now they had reached the barn and Ryan was busy rolling back the heavy door.

The barn was empty.

"Dad's probably checking out the walnut grove for blight or parasites or something, so I guess we can practice in here," she said.

She was about to hit the PLAY button when Ryan turned to her and gave her an odd look.

"How do you cope with it?" he asked.

"Cope with what?" she said.

"With your dad being in the Army. What if they send him to the war or something? You'd be all alone. Aren't you scared? Oh, my gosh. I didn't mean to upset you, Jill. That was a stupid thing to say. It's just...I mean...I've thought about it and I think you're pretty brave."



"My dad's the brave one," Jill said quietly. "He's already been over there once...for the first one. Besides, you get used to it. I hardly have nightmares any more, just sometimes, but they're not as regular as they used to be. And I don't watch the news."

"Well, I still think you're brave...especially to take on this project of singing and dancing with a guy with two left feet," he said. Oops. There was the dimple again. Jill hit PLAY.

Suddenly the barn was filled with music and Jill had never felt so good. The two of them warmed up with Jill playing the parts of Huck and Ben while Ryan rehearsed his lines and music as Tom. Then they came to the ballad in the cave where Tom takes Becky's hand and comforts her. It was a really soft, sweet ballad, and Jill thought she would melt when Ryan took her hand and sang about walking on together. Everything was going so great until they came to the end.

Feeling a burst of confidence, Jill decided to try the waltz move she had seen Ryan and Emily do many times, but somehow things went horribly wrong. It was the Hale curse. Her toe caught on a piece of baling twine lying on the barn floor, and she tumbled head first into the pile of hay. Digging her way out of the straw, Jill spat hay out of her mouth and looked up sheepishly at Ryan. He smiled back and was gallantly reaching a hand out to help her up when a burst of giggles from the loft above startled them. Jill's gaze whipped around in time to catch a glimpse of two heads on either side of a video camera pointed directly at her before they disappeared down the back stairs of the loft. It was enough time for Jill to mentally register that the two heads looked amazingly like Theresa, demon Child of the Corn, and her flatulent brother!

All Jill could think of was she had less than forty-eight hours to either snatch that videotape or find a cliff suitable for jumping.

## Murder on Sunday

Jill spent a restless night pondering a host of homicides fit for Justin and his evil little sister Theresa. Even the eight-year-old child would not escape her vengeance because she was no doubt a willing accomplice to her brother's plot to videotape Jill and Ryan and show it during choir class Monday. Jill could just imagine Emily York's face distorted in laughter as she watched Jill sing and attempt to dance those parts that belonged exclusively to her. The whole school would know before lunch and she would be the laughingstock of Wildwood Middle School. And worst of all, Ryan would never speak to her again. He would realize his mistake in befriending the klutzy Army brat and would probably regret saving her from the venomous snake. It was all Justin's fault. Things were going so well until he and his nosy sister had decided to film a little of their own reality TV.

She would show them reality.

First, she considered poison. She was sure her dad had some rat poison in the barn somewhere. She could sneak it into their eggs at breakfast while pretending to borrow some sugar from Justin's mother. But then she had a vision of Justin and Theresa twitching and foaming at the mouth while retching all over the kitchen, which might arouse suspicion of foul play. And she was a handy suspect.

No. Too messy.

Then she conceived the idea of forging suicide notes to make it appear that the two siblings had fallen under the spell of some doomsday cult which demanded mass suicide by its members on this particular Sunday when the planets were in bizarre alignment that only occurs every forty-seven years. Jill

*Wardrobe Lady*

was good at forging other people's handwriting because with her father going on TDY (that's temporary duty) so much of the time, she often had to forge his signature on permission slips and grade reports.

But the doomsday scenario seemed a bit complicated to pull off. How would she overcome the brother and sister, then manage to make their demise look like a suicide. What if the police suspected foul play? Again, she was the only suspect handy.

Nerve gas?

No, too risky. She might breathe the awful stuff herself, and Mr. and Mrs. Alexander might get suspicious if she came over sporting a metal canister and wearing her father's gas mask. Besides, she didn't want to take out the parents, just their two twisted children!

Ebola virus?

None available.

Well, then, if murder was out of the question, she guessed the only thing to do was to trick the slippery siblings into turning over that videotape of their own free will. But how?

She thought of money, but after some quick mental calculations, realized the sum of her assets was \$5.35 in cash, some foreign coins, a piece of the Berlin wall, and a videotape of the movie Shrek. Even the likes of Justin and Theresa wouldn't be moved to hand over the precious tape for these pitiful treasures.

Lying there in bed with murder in her heart, listening to the grandfather clock chime only once and Pistol joining the nightly serenade of coyotes, Jill suddenly sat up. She had it!

"Hoohah!" she yelled, then clamped a hand over her mouth. Her father was still snoring lightly next door as an evil smile curled her lips.

*Cindy Reese Payne*

It took a few minutes to work out the details in her mind, but by the time the clock struck two, Jill was sound asleep. Her plan was set. And she owed it all to God and Tom Sawyer!

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A brilliant March sun was already high in the sky when Jill awoke on Sunday later than usual after her night of troubled thoughts. She hopped out of bed, pulled on jeans and a sweatshirt, then took the stairs two at a time.

As she suspected, Dad had left her a note that he was out working by the spring and that there was cereal in the cabinet. He also wrote he'd be back in time to get ready for church, which made Jill smile.

"Perfect," she thought. "That will give me time to prepare."

Wolfing down a bowl of frosted flakes, she dashed into the living room and rummaged through her dad's videotapes until she found one with a blank label. Then she grabbed a large covered picnic basket from the pantry, threw the tape in, carefully filled a small plastic tub with milk, and set out for the barn. Somewhere she had read that snakes were attracted to milk. She was glad she had chosen a sweatshirt because the air was still so nippy she could see her breath.

The next part was the hardest. It would require patience, something Jill had never had an overabundance of. But she knew what she had to do. Once inside the barn, she went straight to work preparing her basket. But first, she closed the barn door and latched it tight. Although Pistol whined and scratched in protest, Jill knew he would spoil everything. So the door remained latched, and eventually Pistol wandered away, in search of a squirrel to chase.

An hour later, Jill emerged from the barn with her covered picnic basket dangling gingerly from one arm, and a huge smile

on her face. She had just enough time to visit the Alexanders before getting dressed for church.

"What'cha got in the basket?" Theresa asked as soon as she saw Jill coming up the path. The second grader had a calico kitten trapped in a stranglehold between her knees while she attempted to tie a pink bow to its tail.

"It's a surprise that I cooked up just this morning for after Sunday school," Jill said, keeping her free hand tight against the lid. "Hey, Theresa, is Justin around?"

"Wouldn't you like to know," said the snotty kitten abuser. "What you really want to know is if RYAN's around. But he's already gone home. His mom came and got him early cause they had to go to his grandma's today."

"Well, Theresa, actually, I was not interested in Ryan today, just thought Justin might want to bring that videotape to Sunday school. Dr. Bartell's class could get a good laugh out of it, and we could have some refreshments afterwards," Jill finished, patting the basket meaningfully.

Theresa's eyes lit up at the prospect of watching Ryan and Jill make fools of themselves instead of listening to Dr. Bartell talk about how Jesus loved his enemies.

"Hang on!" she said, dropping the bowed kitten, who bounded away jerking and batting at the dangling pink ribbon, but altogether glad to be free of its tormentor, bow or not. While Jill waited, she swung the basket gently and hummed a sweet hymn. In a few minutes Theresa reappeared at the front door with a broad smile on her elfish face.

"Justin is taking his shower," she said, "but he told me to tell you that he'll bring the tape if you'll bring whatever is in that basket to share."

Jill wasn't so sure Justin said that last part, but judging by Theresa's chubby cheeks and sticky fingers, she figured the little gremlin would make sure the tape made its way to church if

Cindy Reese Payne

there was the slightest chance of a chocolate chip cookie in it for her.

"Great! It'll be fun," Jill said lightly.

*If Mrs. Forrest could see me now, Jill thought, she wouldn't hesitate to pick me for a starring role. Talk about acting!*

\*\*\*

Cedar Hill Methodist Church had anchored the same street corner opposite the First Baptist Church for almost a century. Its brown bricks sagged in places, and its bell steeple had finally collapsed last year, leading to a big fund-raising campaign to re-roof the church and build a new steeple. The result was that atop this graceful old monument to the past with its regal stained glass windows sat a conspicuous new white frame structure that resembled a fancy outhouse.

Jill loved the old building, though, for it was here that she had said her last good-byes to her mother almost a year ago. The lofty sanctuary had filled with the deep sound of Miss Rosie's pipe organ playing Ellen Hale's favorite hymn "In the Garden" one last time. Jill and her father had sat stunned and drained throughout the service. With faces washed out and ashen from long days and even longer nights at the hospital, they had stood bravely while, one by one, the members of the small congregation had clutched their hands and offered quiet comfort.

A twinge of guilt struck Jill now as she plucked the picnic basket out of the back seat and headed up to the second floor, where Sunday School was held. The poor unsuspecting flock of worshipers gathered in the church basement for adult Sunday School had no idea that they were to be part of Jill's overall plan to retrieve the tape that threatened to ruin her already miserable life. But she reasoned that they would understand. They had

been so kind before. And, besides, they would never have to know she was responsible--if everything went according to plan.

The plan. Yes. It all depended on timing. First, she would have to get through Sunday School.

"Hey, Snake Woman," came the despised voice as she entered the classroom where Justin and the others waited for the consistently tardy Dr. Bartell, their teacher.

Jill plastered a smile on her lips, but her eyes narrowed.

"Very funny, Justin," she said pleasantly, fingering the lid of the picnic basket lovingly. "I guess you can't wait to spread my new nickname around school, huh?" She sat down, carefully placing the basket under her chair.

"What's in the basket? Cookies for afterward?" George Simms asked hopefully. George was a scraggly but likable kid who came to church without his parents. His parents were drunken bums, so Dr. Bartell had made it his mission to fill George up both spiritually and physically whenever possible. Jill knew the good doctor raided the church's food pantry each Sunday to send food home with George.

"Oh, it's a surprise," Jill said, feeling another pang of guilt over deceiving poor George, who would no doubt be looking forward to non-existent baked goods all through Sunday school.

The lesson today was pretty typical. Dr. Bartell opened with a prayer in his whispery voice, and then offered a bit of scripture, after which they discussed all kinds of things totally unrelated to the readings. Today they talked about great movies and whether Dr. Bartell should invest in a plasma TV or not, and about school...

That's when Justin piped up and began to spill his guts about the play and Jill and Ryan and the video.

"Hey, Dr. Bartell, you have to see this," he gushed, producing the videotape from his coat pocket with a triumphant glare in Jill's direction.

Jill's eyed narrowed to tiny slits and her jaw tightened. But once again, she kept her cool.

"I can hardly wait to see it," Jill said sarcastically, knowing Justin would suspect something was up if she acted too enthusiastic about seeing herself made a laughingstock. But just as the tape was popped in, the bell sounded for church.

"Oh, golly, shucks," Jill said, popping out the tape and setting it on top of the VCR, scanning it quickly to see if there was writing on it. She noticed the label was blank. That was good. "Guess we can't watch it today. Maybe next week..."

Dr. Bartell expressed his regret.

"Oh Jill, I was looking so forward to seeing you sing...I know. I have it. Let's leave the tape here, and when the choir gets done with its special today, we can come back up here for our own 'children's church'. We used to do that all the time. Remember, Justin and Theresa, when you were younger. I'm sure Rev. Bishop won't mind if just the five of us slip away. What do you say, guys?"

Jill rolled her eyes, but nodded okay. And it was set. They would attend the first part of the service, but retire to the Sunday School room when the serious preaching started. Justin and George thought it was a great plan. And secretly Jill thought so too.

"And we can eat your surprise while we watch," George said, eyes wide with anticipation. "Can I see?" he put his hand out to open the basket Jill had retrieved from under her chair.

"No!" she screamed, slapping his hand away a little too violently. Dr. Bartell raised his eyebrow and Justin's eyes darted to the basket suspiciously.



"I'm sorry, George. I didn't mean to bite your head off, but I just want it to be a surprise. I spent a lot of time preparing this for you guys and I ...well... I'm not the greatest cook in the world, but I think this is the best surprise I've ever cooked up. You just have to wait a little bit longer," Jill said. And she wasn't really lying. Not exactly.

There was no time to waste as Jill hurried down the steps behind the others. The adults were already congregating in little groups, visiting before taking their seats in their customary pews. And there was the usual laughing and some pleasant exchanges between those who hadn't seen each other since last Sunday. Rev. Bishop was still in the foyer greeting latecomers, and the six or so regular choir members still hadn't made it to their spots behind the pulpit, so no one noticed as Jill disappeared down into the basement and crept up the back stairs to the choir loft. It was a small raised area just behind the pulpit and was partially hidden by a wooden rail, behind which Jill crawled. A bead of sweat popped out on her brow.

Soon Miss Rosie would begin to play the prelude and the choir members would take their places, so she had to hurry. Quickly she opened the lid of her basket and the contents slithered out under one of the choir chairs. She had no time to think about what she was doing, just time to glance up at the picture of Jesus hanging on the back wall and notice that his eyes seemed to be staring straight at her. A Bible verse flitted through her head as she gathered up the now empty basket and crawled back down the stairs to the basement. *Blessed are they that help themselves*, she thought. For theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. That wasn't really it, but it sounded okay to her.

Jill was only slightly out of breath when she took her place beside her father, who smiled down at her and offered her a hymn book. The eyes of Jesus continued to glare at her all during the announcements and the opening prayer. And Jill

watched with keen interest as the choir members stood for the first hymn. Nothing happened. They sang all three verses of "Love Lifted Me" and then sat. Still nothing. Jill looked at the clock on the back wall. Time was running out. Soon the sermon would begin, and she would be doomed.

Miss Rosie began playing "Softly and Tenderly," the cue for several solemn men to move through the pews passing the shiny brass offering plates around.

And that's when it happened.

Just as old Mr. Coleman extended a plate across the pew to blue-haired Mrs. Whitley, one of the choir ladies leaped over the wooden rail, whooping and knocking over the baptismal which spouted water up and over the organ to Miss Rosie's head, drenching her thoroughly and causing her to abandon the organ bench as though she were jumping from a sinking ship.

Poor Mr. Coleman was so startled that the offering plate flew out of his hand and hit a confused Mrs. Whitley on the head, which did no permanent harm, but added considerably to her usual foggy state. In a flash, the normally lifeless choir sprang into action, whooping and dancing about while the whole congregation--with the exception of poor Mrs. Whitley, who was sitting and rubbing her head--leaped to their feet, uttering a collective gasp that shook the rafters.

Jill didn't wait to see the rest. She later heard it referred to by the Baptists as the day the Holy Ghost seized those tired old Methodists across the street. But there was little time to admire her barn snake's handiwork at the moment. She was just glad the milk had enticed him to crawl out of his customary spot under the hay and into her trap this morning. It was a trick she had learned from a website on snake charming. But now there was no time to waste. Jill bounded up the steps to the Sunday school room, grabbed the tape on the VCR, replaced it with the unlabeled one from home, and took off.

*Wardrobe Lady*

Below in the sanctuary all was chaos.

As her father explained between chuckles on the ride home, it seems a little green snake had crawled into the choir loft, probably slithered up from the basement during the night, and it wasn't until all the men--including Rev. Bishop--had chased the thing all through the pews that George Simms finally came up clutching the squirming trophy in his hands. And after that, Rev. Bishop had said a quick benediction and sent everyone home to recover. Poor Mrs. Whitley was still confused, but Dr. Bartell checked her out thoroughly and declared her fit and unharmed. Dad smiled all the way home. And so did Jill, the stolen tape safely tucked into the basket in the back seat. Her diversion had worked.

Tom Sawyer would have been proud.

Jill Hale becomes the Wardrobe Lady because that is the only job left in the eighth grade choir musical Tom Sawyer when she joins the class. A misfit Army brat who has lost her mother to cancer, Jill has a natural singing gift but lacks the confidence to use it until she survives a brush with death and gains the admiration of the coolest boy in eighth grade.

## **Wardrobe Lady**

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