

*Ellie and her mom have just moved to New Jersey. Initially, Ellie feels as though her whole world was left behind in Florida. A chance encounter starts a friendship that gradually becomes the closest friendship she's ever had.*

## **Discovering True Friendship**

By Kristopher Paul

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Print ISBN: 978-1-958877-86-9

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-352-0

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Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., Trenton, Georgia.

Printed on acid-free paper.

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2022

First Edition

## Chapter 1: Ellie Moves into Her New House

“Mom, I don’t understand why we have to move to a new town,” Ellie grumbled, from the backseat of her mother’s car, as they drove along in the direction of their new house. It was the month of August and the sun was burning hotly that morning. Ellie’s clothes felt like they were sticking to her skin because she was so sweaty from the oppressive heat. She enjoyed summer, but not so much on days that got this hot.

“Ellie, I’ve already told you, accepting my new job promotion required me to transfer to a different branch of the company I work for. This new job is going to mean a lot more money for us. It hasn’t been easy for me since your father and I got divorced,” said Ellie’s mom. Ellie’s mom and dad had been divorced since the previous February. It hadn’t been a nasty divorce caused by one of them “seeing” someone else on the sly. It was just the culmination of years and years of not being able to agree on anything. Ellie still loved her dad very much and intended on writing to him back in Florida as much as she could. Her mother had even agreed to allow her to stay with her dad for several weeks next summer. Her dad had come up with the idea. She was just glad that her parents were still able to be civil with one another despite being divorced. Ellie and her mom were moving to New Jersey, and her mom would commute to New York City to work at her new job. Most of their belongings had already been moved into their new house by professional movers. All that was left were a few odds and ends packed in cardboard boxes that were currently in the trunk of the blue sedan they were riding in now. Her mom had thought a road trip would be an excellent chance for them to spend some time together. Ellie was tired of spending so much time riding around, cramped up in her mom’s car. She’d opted to sit in the backseat with Thomas, their pet cat. Thomas was

quietly lying in the pet carrier they'd had to put him in when they started the trip from their apartment in Florida. They hadn't advertised that they had a cat with them when they'd checked into a motel the night before. Ellie's mom had done her best to vacuum up all the cat litter that had spilled over and onto the carpet in their motel room when Thomas had used his little litterbox the night before while Ellie and her mom were watching television. Being stuck so close to Thomas's litterbox hadn't been much fun. Her mom had practically used an entire can of air freshener in an attempt to make amends for the offensive odor that Thomas had left in their motel room. Ellie understood how Thomas must have felt being stuck in his pet carrier. She couldn't wait to get to their new house, just so she could get out from the backseat and stretch her legs that were sore from inactivity.

"Come on, Kiddo, give me a smile," Ellie's mom said, looking back at Ellie in the rear-view mirror. Ellie flashed her mom a quick, forced smile.

"I think you're really going to like living in New Jersey. I was thinking we could spend our next Christmas together in New York City. New York City looks spectacular around Christmastime. We could go ice skating at the Rockefeller Center and see the enormous Christmas tree. Wouldn't that be fun?" Ellie's mom asked, glancing into the rear-view mirror to see Ellie's reaction.

"I think that would probably be a lot of fun," Ellie responded. Her mind wasn't focused on how she would spend next Christmas. She would be starting ninth grade soon at a new school with students she'd never met before. She wasn't looking forward to it. All her closest friends were back in Florida, which might as well have been another country. She was already beginning to miss her friends. She was proud of her mom for being so determined to succeed by climbing the corporate ladder, but she wasn't happy about having to leave everything she'd ever known going back as far as she could remember. She'd been born in the state of Florida, and she'd

always thought that was where she would continue to live after she completed her college education someday. She felt like her whole life was being upturned by her mom's new job promotion. She pushed her right index finger through the metal bars of the door to Thomas's pet carrier, so she could stroke his nose. She could hear the faint sound of Thomas purring as he pressed his head against her finger. He gave her finger a playful nip and she recoiled her finger in surprise. *You're the only friend I have now, Thomas*, she thought silently. She sighed and stared out the window next to her on her left. She sat and watched as the houses seemed to float past her window. The houses seemed to be more upscale than what the houses had been in her old neighborhood.

"We're getting really close now," her mom said, excitedly. Ellie glanced forward to see where they were at now. Her mom was driving directly toward a section of large, beautiful homes that were located at the end of a road that ended in a circle. The section of homes were all situated around the circumference of the small circle in the road. She noticed a sign marked "Dead End". She couldn't deny that the small circle of large houses was a very picturesque location. She'd never seen houses built around a circle in the road that looped right back to the road that led into it like the circle of houses she was looking at right now. Her new house as well as the houses closest to her new house had been built with one way in and one way out. Her mom carefully pulled into the driveway of a beautiful home, made of yellowish brick. Ellie saw that their new house had a two-door garage that was attached to their new house. The two-door garage was made of yellowish brick as well.

"Mom, this house seems pretty awesome so far!"

"Isn't it? These houses were first built here in 1998. I think these houses are architectural masterpieces," her mom said. Ellie opened the car door on her left and stepped out. She was extremely grateful to be able to stand and stretch out her legs. She quickly remembered Thomas and she

reached into the backseat and picked up the pet carrier by the handle on top. She followed her mom as her mom walked toward the front door. Her mom fumbled with a set of keys for a few minutes, but finally managed to unlock the polished brass entry knob and deadbolt before turning the entry knob and opening the door. Ellie followed her mom inside and sat Thomas in his pet carrier down on the floor. She opened the door to the pet carrier. Thomas immediately poked his head out and then stepped out the rest of the way to begin an exploration of his new home. Ellie decided she'd follow Thomas and let him be the tour guide. They were standing in a living room that could only be described as grand. All their living room furniture from their apartment was already placed around the room. Thomas first headed in the direction of a kitchen and dining room area. There was a set of patio doors right off the dining room. Thomas walked up to them and peeked out through the glass. Ellie peeked out too. Her eyes were met with the sight of a beautiful back patio. She decided she would use the patio for a reading spot when she felt like reading. All she needed was a reclining patio chair and a small table to set a beverage on while she was reading. Thomas turned away from the patio doors and headed for a staircase. It was amusing to Ellie to watch Thomas's little, light orange body ascend the carpeted staircase with an intense curiosity. When Thomas was a kitten, she'd originally thought his name should be O. J. because his fur had reminded her of orange juice, but she'd finally decided to name him Thomas. She followed Thomas up to an enormous bedroom which had already been claimed by her mom. Her mom's king-size bed and all her bedroom furniture were already placed in the room. Ellie wondered which bedroom *was* hers. Finally, after following Thomas into multiple rooms upstairs, she followed Thomas into a bedroom that had her full-size bed and all her bedroom furniture placed around the room. She realized she'd have to make a few adjustments, but the movers had done a pretty good job overall. Her new bedroom was much smaller than her mom's new bedroom, but it was much larger than the bedroom she'd had in their apartment in Florida. Her new bedroom was even bigger than

the bedroom she'd had in the house where she'd lived with her parents until they got divorced. At least she'd get to see her old bedroom and her old friends when she would go to visit her dad next summer. She decided she was done following Thomas around. She didn't follow after him when he walked through her bedroom door to continue his tour of the house. She sat down on the edge of her bed and laid back. *What was life going to be like now, living in New Jersey? What is there to do around here when you have no friends?* She wondered to herself. She felt sad when she thought of all the slumber parties, trips to the local mall, trips to the ocean, playing truth or dare, and everything else that she'd done with her friends back home. Her friends had been more like sisters to her than simply friends. Her new house being a small castle wasn't going to make adjusting to her new life without having them around any easier. She had absolutely no idea what she was going to do with her time now. Her dad was back in Florida and her mom was going to be spending long hours at her new job. If it wasn't for Thomas, she'd be all alone most of the time. She just hoped she wouldn't become an outcast at school, someone who nobody wanted to get to know and nobody ever talked to. Just then, she noticed something. There was a pull-down door in the one corner of her bedroom ceiling. The pull-down door was painted bright white like the rest of the ceiling, so it was no wonder she hadn't noticed it immediately. *I'll have to check out the attic sometime*, she thought to herself. For right now, she knew she'd better get back downstairs to help her mom before her mom got annoyed with her for not helping to put the remainder of their belongings where she wanted them to go. She also knew her mom would be making lunch for her soon. She found her mom waiting for her in the living room when she walked back downstairs.

“What do you think of your new bedroom?”

“I think it's fantastic. I have a cushioned window seat in my bedroom. I think it might be fun to work on my homework while sitting in the window seat,” Ellie said. Her mom smiled brightly.



“I’m just glad that you like your new bedroom. How about helping me put things away and then I’ll make us some grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch,” her mom suggested. Ellie nodded and followed her mom out the front door to get the cardboard boxes from the trunk of her mom’s blue sedan. Ellie helped her mom as they made several trips to grab everything from the trunk. Once they’d gotten everything inside and started unpacking, Ellie’s mom decided it was time for them to take a break and have lunch. Ellie’s mom unpacked a skillet and went to the refrigerator to pull out several sticks of butter, a bag of bread, and some cheddar cheese. She had gone out to do some grocery shopping earlier that morning while Ellie had stayed back and watched television in their motel room.

“I found some strawberries and milk chocolate chips at the grocery store. We can make chocolate covered strawberries for dessert tonight!” Ellie’s mom called from the kitchen while Ellie was sitting on one of the couches in the living room. Ellie’s appetite immediately increased. She absolutely *loved* chocolate covered strawberries. She also loved eating chocolate covered pretzels and even chocolate covered ripple potato chips for dessert. Her mom had a special cooking device with a cooking pan that went on top of a cooking pan that was supposed to rest on the eye of a stove with water inside it for boiling. She’d never used it herself. She just knew the cooking method prevented the chocolate from burning when it was being melted. Her mom was pretty awesome when it came to making desserts. She’d always bake peanut butter blossoms around Christmastime that were absolutely delicious. She wondered if her dad missed her mom’s cooking. The delicious aroma of grilled cheese wafted into her nostrils and she could feel her stomach beginning to rumble. She stood up and walked into the dining room and sat down at the dining room table. Several minutes later, her mom set the skillet down on top of a hot pad on top of the table. She had three sandwiches that had already been cooked sitting on a plate that she brought over. She’d just finished cooking a fourth sandwich.

“Two of those are yours,” her mom informed her.

“Thanks, Mom. Can I eat out on the patio?”

“Sure, I’ll join you.”

“I’m glad the realtor was willing to coordinate with the movers to help the sale go through smoothly. Not all realtors would necessarily be willing to do that, but then it was a pretty big sale for the realtor. It is such a relief to know that almost all our belongings are where they need to be,” Ellie’s mom said, as they sat down on the steps of the patio that led down to the backyard.

“Have you ever mowed grass with a lawnmower before?” Ellie asked, as she gazed out at their new backyard that was full of grass that was beginning to get a little high.

“No. That was something your father always made sure got done. Your grandfather was always the one who mowed when I was your age. In college, I had an apartment and I didn’t have my own yard, so it was never something I had to do in the past. We can flip a coin to decide which one of us gets to mow for the rest of the summer.”

“Let’s not and say we did. I think that’s a chore that should be reserved for grownups.”

“Just promise me that you won’t spend the rest of the summer moping around the house. I want you to get out of the house and get acquainted with this town. You’ll learn more and more as you get older that you can’t live your life looking backwards. I have lots of fond memories of growing up in the town where I grew up, but I never wanted to spend my whole life living there. We’re not in Florida anymore. This is our home now. You need to start meeting some teenagers your own age and making some new friends. I don’t want you to forget all the good times you had with your old friends. I just want you to try to start making new memories with some new

friends,” her mom said, looking directly into her eyes. Ellie looked away as she ate her first sandwich. She didn’t want to think about making new friends just now. There’d be plenty of time for that once the new school year started. She wasn’t opposed to riding her bike to the business sections of the town and checking out some of the local stores. She thought she’d seen an art store when her mom was driving through a business sector of the town filled with old apartment buildings that had been converted into small hotels, restaurants, candy stores, clothing stores, and all sorts of other small shops. She’d seen a few teenage girls who could have been around her age walking on the sidewalk as they’d driven by. Whether she was seriously interested in making new friends or not, going into town to check out the art store would at least get her mom off her back for the time being. She had always been fascinated by art, but she’d never actually tried to do anything artistic. It had been nearly impossible to find time for things like that when she’d had lots of friends wanting to hang out all the time, but she would have plenty of time to herself now. In many ways, that made her feel far less important. Her friends in Florida had almost made her feel like a celebrity at times. Her mom would frequently have to tell her to get off the telephone, so she could call someone. She was accustomed to getting phone calls several times a day with all the friends she’d had. She’d almost always gone out into public with a group of friends unless she was with one of her parents, or both of them. Being a loner was going to be a major adjustment for her if she didn’t make some new friends. When she was finished eating her second sandwich, she asked her mom if it was okay for her to ride her bike into town and check out the local businesses. Her mom agreed and gave her twenty dollars. Ellie walked out to the garage and fished her bike out from where the movers had piled a lot of the things that had been stored in a rented storage shed after the divorce until her mom had bought this house. She saw her old trampoline and decided she’d have to set it up in her new backyard. Ellie filled up the tires on her bike with the air pump that had been among the pile. She checked the tires to make sure the air wasn’t leaking out. Then she got on her bike and began riding

in the direction that led toward where she'd seen the art store. It was still hot and sunny outside. An elderly couple whom were out walking waved at her. She carefully balanced her bike handle as she held on with one hand and waved back with the other. Several of her neighbors were outside mowing their lawns. They were all men and looked like they were old enough to be retired. So far, there was no indication that there were any people close to her age who were living in her immediate neighborhood. Riding quickly on her bike helped cool her down. She was wearing a baseball cap with the logo of her old softball team to keep the sun out of her eyes. She had to keep the brim of her hat angled slightly downward to prevent her hat from blowing off her head as she pedaled faster and picked up momentum. She kept a watchful eye for oncoming traffic. She pedaled hard for the next half hour until the tall buildings of the business section of the town began to come into view. The congestion of busy traffic slowed her down, but she finally managed to locate the art store she'd seen earlier. There was a hanging sign showing that the store was open through the glass of the door that led inside. She lifted her bike up onto the sidewalk and put down the kickstand to park her bike right off to the side of the small set of concrete steps that led up to the door of the store. She heard the jingle of a bell when she walked inside. The art store was filled with miniature sculptures and lots of paintings. She wondered if the miniature sculptures had been made using armature wire. She'd learned about armature wire the previous school year in art class. Sculptors commonly used it as almost like a skeletal system for clay sculptures. She didn't think she was ready to attempt clay sculpting. She decided she should start by learning to draw and learning to paint. Just then, a red-haired woman came walking out from an area behind the counter that was kept private by a beaded curtain.

“Can I help you?” the woman asked.

“Maybe. I'm just looking around. Do you have painting supplies?” Ellie asked.

“I certainly do. I have an acrylic paint set that comes complete with brushes that is currently on sale. Would you be interested in that?”

“Yes! That would be perfect!” Ellie answered brightly. The woman nodded and lifted a hinged part of the counter so she could walk through and show Ellie where the paint sets were. Ellie decided she liked the woman’s tie-dye T-shirt as the woman led her to where the painting supplies were. The woman was also wearing a lot of jewelry that jangled loudly as she led the way. She led Ellie to an aisle that had an area with painting supplies on the shelves. She quickly pulled down a paint set with an orange sticker on the box showing the original price crossed off with a lower price written over it with a black pen and handed the box to Ellie. Ellie took the box and looked it over carefully.

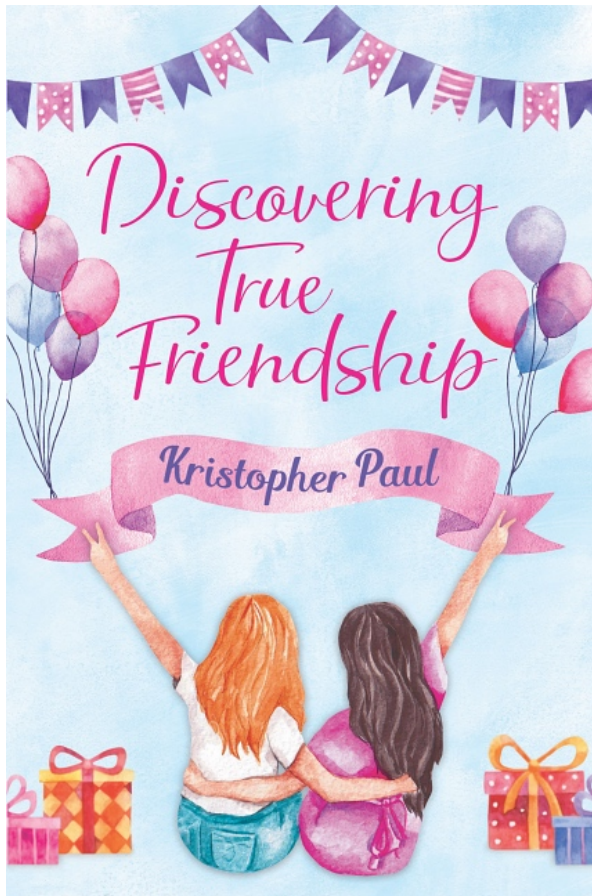
“I definitely want to buy this paint set,” Ellie said, decidedly.

“I operate this store with the intention of making money, but I don’t want to sell you any canvases until you’ve had a chance to get a feel for painting. I recommend starting out by painting on something like cardboard. You could even cut up and use something like the inside of an empty box of cereal. Painting can be really frustrating for beginners.”

“How’d you know I was a beginner?”

“All of the experienced painters who come in here always know exactly what they’re after in the way of painting supplies. You didn’t come in here with the usual authority of an artist who knows exactly what they want that I’m so used to seeing. I figured you were a beginner when you asked me about painting supplies. A typical painter who comes in here always asks for specific colors or a specific type of paintbrush,” the woman explained. The woman turned and walked back toward the counter. Ellie made her way up to the counter and paid for the paint set. She thanked the woman before leaving the art store. She hadn’t anticipated getting her first paint set at a marked down price. She decided to use some of the leftover money to

buy herself some ice cream since it was such a sweltering hot day. She'd seen an ice cream parlor that was advertised as an "old-fashioned ice cream parlor" in the front window. She grabbed her bike and backtracked to where she'd seen the ice cream parlor while riding her bike to the art store. It was busy inside when she walked in. There were two young men and an older woman wearing black leather aprons who were serving everyone ice cream from behind a counter. She noticed there wasn't anyone eating ice cream on an ice cream cone. Everybody was seated around tables eating their ice cream out of fancy-looking metal dishes. She guessed that was all part of the parlor's old-fashioned ice cream eating experience for customers. She saw one of the young men using a metal grater to grate a chocolate bar into chocolate shavings that he poured over several scoops of vanilla ice cream in a metal dish for an elderly woman. The elderly woman had an ear-to-ear grin as she made her way to one of the tables. *That looks absolutely delicious!* Ellie thought, as she watched the woman walk past her. She hurried to where the young man was standing before someone else stepped in line.



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