

**Excerpt from “Absolutely Truly”  
by Heather Vogel Frederick**

**PROLOGUE**

A week before the January thaw finally arrived in February, I found myself hanging like a bat from a rafter inside a church steeple, face to face with a bell made by Paul Revere.

If you'd have told me a month ago that I'd find myself in this position, I would have said you were crazy.

But then, a month ago my life was completely different. A month ago, my career as a middle school private eye hadn't begun.

And by the way, it didn't begin inside a steeple. Absolutely truly not.

It began the day my report card made it home before I did.

## CHAPTER 1

“What is THIS supposed to mean?” my father demanded as I followed my brother through the front door, our arms full of boxes. My father stalked across the entry hall, waving a slip of paper at me with his good hand.

Hatcher flashed me a sympathetic look and vanished upstairs. I didn’t blame him; I’d have done the same thing in his place. No one wants to face the wrath of Lieutenant Colonel Jericho T. Lovejoy.

“An F+ in Pre-Algebra?” The chill in my father’s voice could have single-handedly reversed global warming. “F *plus*, Truly?”

Yes, that’s really my name. It’s a family thing.

“Does that mean you almost passed, or that you failed spectacularly?” My father pinned me with one of his signature glares.

I hadn’t counted on this—I thought it would take at least a week for mail from Texas to reach the East Coast. And I’d counted on being able to snag this particular envelope from the mailbox before anyone else spotted it.

“Um,” I said.

“This is unacceptable, young lady.”

Silence is the best strategy when my father gets like this.

“I don’t understand it,” he continued, pacing back and forth. “Not one bit. Lovejoys can do anything! We’re naturally good at math.”

Actually, there’s a whole long list of things I can’t do and that I’m not good at. Usually, though, math isn’t one of them. It’s one of my favorite subjects, in fact. But

how was I supposed to concentrate on stupid pre-algebra when my world had been turned upside down? The F+ wasn't my fault, it was his, and I said so under my breath.

My father stopped mid-pace. "What was that?"

"Nothing, sir," I mumbled.

My father isn't one of those hyper-military dads—when we lived on the base in Colorado, I had a friend whose father used to do actual room inspections for her and her brother every Saturday morning in full dress uniform, white gloves and all; still, all of us Lovejoy kids have been trained to add "sir" to the end of our sentences when we're talking to our dad, especially when we want to be on his good side.

And with a math grade like mine, that was definitely the side I wanted to be on.

My father grabbed his coat from off the banister. I resisted the urge to offer some help as he swung it awkwardly around his shoulders. No point adding fuel to the fire. "Wait until your mother hears about this."

That wasn't a conversation I was looking forward to. When my father's mad, at least everything's out in the open and you know where you stand. With my mother, whenever one of us messes up she just looks at us sorrowfully and shakes her head, like we're the biggest disappointment in the history of the world. Which I probably am.

"Finish unpacking the car," my father said. "I'm heading back to the bookstore. And don't forget, you and Hatcher have Kitchen Patrol tonight."

And with that he left, slamming the door behind him.

I slumped down on the hall bench and banged my forehead against one of the boxes I was holding. It was so unfair! The math grade, the move—everything! Why couldn't we have just stayed in Texas?

This time, there wasn't even the prospect of moving someplace decent again in a year or two, either. This time, I was stuck. Forever. In population you've-got-to-be-kidding-me Pumpkin Falls, New Hampshire.

## CHAPTER 2

Bumpkin Falls would be a better name for it, I thought bitterly. I still couldn't believe we'd traded Austin for this peanut-sized blip on a map. And a very cold blip, too. Winter lasts six months out of the year in Pumpkin Falls, and the likelihood of anything interesting ever happening was about the same as me sprouting wings. The nearest mall was an hour away. The town didn't even have a movie theater. It did have a swimming pool, at least. That was some consolation.

I stacked the boxes on the bench, carrying the one labeled *Truly's Bird Books* over to the bottom of the stairs. I'd take it up to my room later. "Hatcher!" I yelled. "Get yourself down here on the double! Dad wants to us to finish unloading!"

I could hear my brother rattling around up there, and wondered what he was doing. Usually, the first thing that happens when we move into a new house, which is often since Dad is in the Army, is that Hatcher and Danny run inside to stake out their territory. Mom always lets them, because they're the oldest, I guess. This time, though, there was no territory to stake out. We all knew this particular house like the back of our hands, and Mom and Dad had decided our room assignments back in Texas.

I opened the front door and was struck by a blast of icy wind. Shivering, I ran to the minivan for another armload of boxes. Dropping two of them on the sofa in the living room, I took the third into the dining room. We were traveling light this time, most of our furniture headed for storage since we wouldn't be needing it. The stuff here was much nicer than ours, anyway.

I rummaged in the box for placemats. I wouldn't win any brownie points with

Dad if I shirked Kitchen Patrol—Lovejoy shorthand for setting the table, helping with dinner and the dishes.

“Where’ve you been?” I snapped, as my brother finally galumphed down the stairs.

“Didn’t go so well with Dad, huh?”

“Nope.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“Nope.”

If there’s one good thing about Hatcher, it’s that he knows when to leave me alone. He shrugged and vanished out the front door.

Counting out seven placemats and seven napkins, I arranged them around the table. One set for each of my parents, a set each for my two older brothers and my two younger sisters, and a final set for me, smack dab in the center of the Lovejoy lineup.

“Truly-in-the-Middle,” Dad used to call me, back before he turned into Silent Man. He had a nickname for our family back then, too—the Magnificent Seven. The theme song from the old movie used to be the ring tone on his cell phone.

The war changed all that.

Since he came home from Afghanistan, Silent Man doesn’t joke around any more, and there’s no fun ring tone, and he hasn’t once called me “Truly-in-the-Middle” or referred to our family as the Magnificent Seven. I don’t know if we’ll ever be that family again. Magnificent isn’t exactly the word I’d use for us these days.

Six months ago, though, things were different. Six months ago, my life was

perfect.

We were living in Texas, for one thing, instead of Nowheresville, New Hampshire. We'd moved to Austin after school got out in Fort Carson, Colorado at the end of June, so that we could get everything ready for Dad's homecoming. He was set to return from his final tour of duty after Labor Day.

We were giddy the day we moved into the new house. My brothers and sisters and I could hardly believe it—a real, permanent home of our own, at last! And a nice one, too, with a swimming pool out back and a big family room with a fireplace, and enough bathrooms so that us girls didn't have to share with Hatcher and Danny. No more rentals or temporary base housing, no more barely-unpacked-before-we-had-to-pack-everything-up-again lifestyle, no more switching schools every two years, along with teachers and coaches and neighbors and friends.

For the first time in my life I had a bedroom all to myself, and best of all, I was living in the same zip code as my cousin Mackenzie. Mom found us a house just down the street from Aunt Louise and Uncle Teddy's, which was the most awesome thing about moving to Texas as far as I was concerned.

Mackenzie and I were born a week apart, and the two of us have been best friends since we were in diapers. When we were little we actually used to pretend we were twins. Not that anyone would ever mistake us for them. Mackenzie totally has the Gifford genes. She's just over five feet tall and cute as a button, with curly strawberry-blonde hair just like Uncle Teddy's, and just like my mom and my little sister Pippa's.

I, on the other hand, have straight brown Lovejoy hair and am not even

remotely petite. I've always been the tallest one in my class, but this past year, shortly after I turned 12, I shot up to just under six feet. I felt like the picture in *Alice in Wonderland* after she eats the cake and grows that weird long neck and says goodbye to her feet, which she can hardly see anymore because she's such a giant.

I wish I could say goodbye to my feet. They grew right along with me, unfortunately. I wear size 10-1/2 now, and my shoes look like something a clown would wear. Especially next to Mackenzie's.

My cousin is a really good best friend. She knows how much it bothers me to be so tall. My father calls me an Amazon. They were warrior women a zillion years ago, and I guess it makes sense for him to call me that, being a soldier and all, but still, that's a nickname I don't want to get stuck with. Anyway, Mackenzie promised to take me under her wing and introduce me to everyone when school started, so for once I'd be ahead of the curve. I'd be the cousin of cute, perky Mackenzie Gifford, instead of just the freakishly tall new girl.

After our family's move to Texas, Mackenzie and I had the best summer ever. I talked her into trying out with me for the summer swim team, and we rode our bikes to the pool every morning for practice, then hung out for the rest of the day at my house or hers. We had sleepovers and backyard barbecues, and she helped me pick out paint for my new room—a really pretty shade of aqua called “Mermaid.” We went to the movies and shopping and to Amy's for ice cream at least once a week. July and August were heaven.

Then came Black Monday.

That's what mom called it, afterwards.