

Chapter 1: Pancakes for Breakfast

“Charlie!” yelled Mrs. Parker from downstairs in the kitchen. “Are you up yet? You don't want to be late now, do you?”

Charlie pulled the covers around him, burying himself in their warm embrace. Memories tugged at him, drawing him from his sleep. He thought of his father and of his family. Everyone knew the Parker family: Nick and Elizabeth, who were Charlie's parents; Charlie; and his twin sister, Penny. The Parkers came from a respected family that had made Devon Grove their home for generations. The Parkers were the Keepers of the great Talent Tree---or more precisely, his father was, and one day he would be.

His father worked tirelessly to ensure the tree was ready for that one special day a year---today---Talent Day. Talent Day was the biggest day in a kid's entire life. Unlike Christmas, which came every year, you only ever had one Talent Day during your thirteenth year. Charlie had turned thirteen nearly five months ago, and he couldn't wait to get his talent. But it also meant he was one step closer to him taking over his father's position.

He tossed and turned, feeling the weight of future responsibility. He never really wanted to assume his father's role, but he saw little choice. It was expected of him as the next Parker boy. *Perhaps it won't be that bad*, he thought. After all, his favorite pastime was hiking the many trails that surrounded Devon Grove, and caring for the Talent Tree would allow him the freedom to spend hours outside in the sunshine.

Charlie swung his legs over the side of the bed and dropped to the ground, yawning. Last night, before he had gone to bed, he had told his father about the apples he found in the trails and the strange deer. It took him a long time to fall asleep after that; his head had buzzed with excitement about receiving his talent and about his father's reaction to his strange discovery.

“That is not a good sign,” his father had said. “Perhaps it is already too late then. But don't worry, Charlie. I am sure Penny and your apples are waiting for you. Now it's time for bed. I have to get going early to make sure everything is prepared for your big day.” Rubbing his eyes, Charlie ran his fingers through his messy brown hair. *What did his father mean it was not a good sign?* he thought, pulling on some slippers and heading downstairs.

Penny sat at the table, filling her mouth with some of their mom's homemade pancakes, while at the same time describing what sort of talent she was going to get. “I bet it's going to be perfect skin or hair that never needs brushing or maybe even to be able to sing like a angel. That's gotta be it. I can't wait, Mommy. I just can't wait!” Penny babbled, between mouthfuls of pancake. The only time she stopped, Charlie noticed, was to come up for air and take a drink of juice.

“What are you smiling at?” teased Penny. “If you had looked at yourself in the mirror this morning, you might not be smiling anymore.” She poked her tongue out, almost dropping a mouthful of pancakes right onto the floor.

“Not today,” Charlie’s mother interrupted, her shoulder-length, sandy blonde hair tied back in a ponytail. “Today you all have to be on your best behavior. It’s a big day for you both and for your father. Now sit, Charlie. Sit,” she chirped. “Are you excited about Talent Day?”

Charlie nodded in acknowledgment and took a seat at the table. Penny was still talking excitedly about what her talent would be. He slouched back in his chair, stomach grumbling eagerly.

“Here you go, sweetie.” Mrs. Parker ruffled Charlie’s hair as she placed a plate of pancakes, stacked high, in front of him. “Eat up. You have a big day ahead of you. I remember my Talent Day. I was so hungry from standing in that line and waiting for my turn that I almost ate an apple lying on ground, and we all know what happens then!”

Charlie nodded again and said, “Uh-huh,” as he began eating.

“Just remember, Charlie, wait your turn. Don’t worry if all the other kids look like they are getting the good apples. Yours was chosen for you at birth. You are just there to collect it. No matter what you saw yesterday, no one else can take it. It’s your apple.” Mrs. Parker shimmered for a moment, and all of a sudden there were two of her. The first mom headed back to the oven to fetch another skillet of pancakes, tossing them high in the air. The second mom walked to the pantry, retrieved a bottle of maple syrup, and placed it on the table.

“Thanks, Mom,” Charlie said, his stomach rumbling again in anticipation, “but do you really have to do that when we are eating?”

The two Mrs. Parkers merged back together, and she smiled at Charlie, “Oh, Charlie, wait till you have your talent, and we will see how long it takes you to start using it.”

Charlie dug into the pancakes, devouring three or four before even slowing down. Finally, after another two pancakes and a contented sigh, he stopped, stuffed full. He wasn’t a big eater, but then again he wasn’t a big child either. His body was wiry and thin, fit from hours of hiking through the nearby hills and trails. With the occasional freckle across the bridge of his nose, he had a sun-kissed appearance like many of the children in the town who took advantage of the abundant sunshine the seaside community enjoyed.

Pushing his plate away---bare save for a few scraps, soggy with maple syrup---he looked up and stretched. Somewhere between his second and third helping Penny had finished talking about the talent she was *sure she was going to get* and rose from the

table. She kissed her mom on her cheek, her shiny, ashen-blond hair bouncing around her shoulders as she did, before heading upstairs to find her shoes.

Taller than many of the other girls in class, Penny was only slightly shorter than Charlie and got her height from her mother. Unlike her brother, she had never really thought about leaving the small town and was content with hearing the news from elsewhere on the television or from her geography lessons at school. Her family and friends were in Devon Grove, and that was enough for her.

“All done?” Charlie’s mother asked, scooping up the plates before he could even respond. “It’s time for you to get ready for the ceremony. Make sure you brush your teeth, and Charlie...”

“What?”

“Please pick out something nice to wear.”

“But Mom, we have to get going,” Charlie protested.

“You aren’t going in your pajamas, are you?” his mother laughed and pointed up the stairs. “Now go. We won’t be late, I promise.”

Charlie’s face flushed with embarrassment, and he hurried upstairs to his bedroom. Opening the closet door, he began looking for something to wear. His mother’s voice drifted from downstairs, “Your best clothes, remember, Charlie. Everyone will be there.”

“Yes, Mom.”

Charlie pushed aside hangers full of T-shirts, jeans, and sweaters, until he found what he was looking for: a white shirt and black pants. Not what you would call the best clothes, but they were neat, presentable, and most importantly comfortable. Taking the shirt from the hanger, Charlie began changing, pleased with his choice.

A few minutes later, he descended the stairs, two at a time, and entered the living room dressed and ready to go. He had run a comb through his hair, brushed his teeth, and washed his face. Penny, dressed in a white summer dress with flowers along the bottom, was already waiting to leave. She had tied her shoulder-length hair back with a white ribbon that matched her dress and tucked a few stray hairs behind her ear.

“Oh, Charlie,” their mother said, kneeling in front of Charlie and pulling a handkerchief from her pocket, “You have a spot of maple syrup on your cheek. Just for one day, couldn’t you keep yourself presentable?” Squirming, he protested briefly before giving in. Tucking the handkerchief back into her pocket, Mrs. Parker straightened, surveying her work, “Good. Everyone ready?”

With a broad smile, Penny opened the door, and they stepped out to the bright morning sun.