

## Bellows Cave

“A bunch of us are headed for the cave tonight. Wanna come along?” Ryan asked, his voice as casual and confident as an Olympic medal winner’s. Amanda could not believe her ears. Bellows Cave was *the* place to go on a Friday night, and she had so often felt left out as she overheard the popular kids making plans to go there.

“Sure,” Amanda said, unable to blot out the tiny notes of uncertainty and hesitancy she was experiencing. But she recovered in time to ask, “Where should I meet you? And when?”

As Ryan named a time of 8 P.M. and a meeting place near the Lawson barn on old route 70, Amanda’s mind was traveling back to the time four years ago when a high school kid named Jeremy McKinnon had gotten lost in that huge cave with its many rooms and narrow passageways. Rescue workers had searched for hours before they finally pulled him out, shivering and shaken. Jeremy, a small kid who had eased himself through some of the narrower cracks in the cave, soon became separated from the kids he had entered the cave with. After wandering alone for a while, he had lost his footing and descended into a dark space about 20 feet below the ledge he’d been walking on. On the way down, he’d also managed to break his leg. Since that time, there had been large “No Trespassing” signs posted in several places near the entrance to the cave and the private land it sat on. And, for a while, everyone had obeyed them. But earlier this year, the cave had started becoming a favorite hangout once again.



No matter what had happened to Jeremy McKinnon, Amanda really wanted to go to there. She’d never been inside Bellows Cave before, and maybe this was her chance to get Ryan and his friends, who had never been terribly friendly to her before, to notice her. She knew everyone who was sure to be there, including Aisha Lovell, Hannah Jacobsen, Devondra Harris, and Marty Gomez. Maybe if she went there tonight, they’d start treating her like one of their crowd, and she could sit with the popular girls at lunch, and maybe even hang out at Sweet Meadow Mall with them on Saturdays.

As soon as Amanda got home, she began getting ready. She had changed her outfit countless times before she settled on just the right sweatshirt, jeans, and sneakers. Over and over she repeated, like a mantra, "Bats don't hurt anyone; bats don't hurt anyone." Like everyone else at Elkton Middle School, she'd heard plenty about the hundreds of bats that lived in Bellows Cave. Part of the cachet of hanging out at the cave came from telling everyone how the bats didn't bother you at all, or even from mentioning how environmentally important and useful bats are.

At dinner time, Amanda's mom asked what her plans were. At first, Amanda didn't know what to say and was going to act as if she had no plans, but her mother stopped her. "Amanda," she said, "you've changed your clothes six times since you got home. I know you're going somewhere, and you'd better tell me where."

"Carlotta's house" was on the tip of Amanda's tongue, but Amanda couldn't quite spit that lie out. She looked at her mom and said, "Mom, some kids invited me to go to Bellows Cave with them tonight. I *really* want to go. Can I, *please*?"

"You may not," was her mother's quick reply, delivered in the straightforward, no-nonsense way that her mother had of responding to all truly dumb ideas.

"But mom," Amanda pleaded, "everybody who's anybody is going to be there. I promise to get home at whatever time you say. I just want to go for a little while; I just want to say I've been there."

"Amanda," her mom said, her voice softening with the emotions she felt, "you're a good kid for telling me the truth. Nevertheless, you just can't go. It's against the law to trespass on that property, and, as that McKinnon kid demonstrated a few years back, that cave is also a dangerous place to be. Conversation closed."

Sulking and resentful, Amanda sat home that night, and the next, and the next. On Monday, she resolved that she would avoid Ryan at all costs. She was certain he would think she was the worst kind of chicken, and she had no way to defend herself against any wisecracks or innuendoes. But finally, after lunch, she ran smack into him in the hall near Ms. Santorini's homeroom.

"Amanda," he said with a grin, "everybody missed you on Friday! But hey, if that place isn't right for you, how about joining us next Saturday at the mall?"