

**She  
Taught  
Me  
Everything**

**by Amy Smith Linton**



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*For my favorite skipper*



## Chapter 1: The North Country

STARTING when we were little, my sister made a habit of waking me in the middle of the night.

“Get up!” she’d hiss, the ends of her long hair tickling my face as she leaned over me. “Wake up, sleepyhead! It’s time to go. Right now.” She’d yank the covers away and push a gym bag at me, her voice quiet and urgent in the dark. “Get your things.”

Five minutes later, the time exact by her watch, I’d be in the field behind the house.

She’d examine what I was wearing: blue jeans, a chambray shirt, a windbreaker. She’d ask me about what I had packed. The meager list—my pencils and a sketchbook, a piggy bank, a jack-knife, my birth certificate, some underwear, a sweater, photographs, a flashlight, socks—was never quite right.

“You don’t need the flashlight,” she’d tell me. “And just pick a small sketchbook if you have to bring one at all. It’s not essential. You can always make more pictures.”

Her voice was hushed but full of excitement.

“How much money do you have? Did you remember your birth certificate? What would you eat? Next time make sure to pack something to keep you going, like candy or raisins.”

That was my sister, Vivian Marguerite Jones, at twelve, at fifteen, standing tall in the moonlight, with an army-surplus

rucksack slung over one shoulder. “Alright then, if we had to make a run for it right now—where would you go first?”

I went through the drill again: where we would meet, what we would do if we got separated, if our parents got arrested, if someone were chasing us, if things got really bad.

After a few minutes, I’d tiptoe back up the kitchen stairs while Viv climbed hand-over-hand up the rope she’d rigged out her window. She went up fast, as quiet as smoke.

IN THOSE days before our parents left for good, we stayed in rented farmhouses in Vermont, New Hampshire, New York. We moved often, usually without much warning. Viv and I changed schools at least once a year. We packed up one April and I never finished second grade at all.

My sister and I weren’t permitted to go to sleepovers or birthday parties. We couldn’t invite friends over to visit, and when we moved, we were not allowed to write to anyone.

Viv and I wore homemade gingham dresses to school because our father thought girls should look like girls. We talked funny and we didn’t make friends easily. We rarely had access to television. People thought we were stuck up.

Our parents left us alone in the houses, traveling for weeks at a time for my father’s work. On cold evenings when we were left alone in a creaking old farmhouse, Viv would lead the way down the wooden staircase to the kitchen and tell me to make hot cocoa. She’d check my measurements, police my technique, and remind me to wash the pan before leaving the kitchen. When she was impatient, she’d make the cocoa herself and bring a cup to me.

One night, she stalked into my room unannounced, two mugs steaming in the chilly upstairs air. “Here,” she said, thumping the cocoa down on the dresser next to my bed. She never seemed to spill no matter how she crashed dishes around. She never scalded the milk when it heated, even over a wood stove. On her, a flannel nightgown looked long and elegant.

Viv perched on the sagging mattress and pulled the sketchbook out of my hands. “What if Magda and Jahn don’t

make it back this time?" She always referred to our parents by name.

"They'll come back!" I said, even as I wondered whether her saying so might make disaster strike.

"What if they don't?" she persisted, her eyes squinting to mean little slits. "What if Jahn's truck runs off the road and they get killed dead?"

I felt a prickling deep inside my nose, a panicky burn in the pit of my stomach. I didn't dare to blink in case the tears started.

"Well?" she said. "Figure it out, Nicky."

After a moment she relented, sipping her cocoa and pulling a face at me. "Better to think about it now when it hasn't happened than to be surprised later."

My sister taught me everything I knew back then. She taught me how to tie my shoes and she made sure I finished my homework. When she shook me awake in the middle of the night and said, "It's time to get out of here," I got up and went because it was how she helped me get ready for the world.

## Chapter 2: Sarasota, Florida, October 1993

WHEN the telephone rang in the middle of the night, I knew.

The Tennessee state trooper on the other end said, “Your sister’s been hurt pretty bad.”

In my haste to get to Nashville I didn’t ask a single question.

There had been a car accident. What else did I need to know?

I’d been dreading a call like that my whole life.

Yes, I was Nicola Jones.

Yes, my sister was Dr. Vivian Jones Rowan. Yes, I would come right away. Of course.

I was in Sarasota then, renting a room from some artist friends. A nomadic twenty-six-year-old, I was a successful painter, in my way. I had been painting decorative murals for a couple of years and was in the middle of a big commission with an up-and-coming architect. I had part-time jobs lined up to make the rest of the ends meet for the winter. I’d started a class at New School in Sarasota and a gallery owner had offered me a solo show of watercolors that coming March. I was as settled as I’d ever been.



Scrambling to the airport, trying not to imagine that it was too late already, I never spared a thought for Viv's husband, George. *Dear George*, she always called him. It should have been Dear George on the phone.

George wouldn't have let a stranger call. He should have been the one to tell me that I needed to come to Tennessee. If he were okay, it would have been him on the phone, not the state police.

Each time my thoughts traveled this path, I stopped and tried to think of something else.