

*SPRING 2013 SAMPLER*

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**TEEN**



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Dear Reader,

I am thrilled to present you with the first taste of Soho Teen's debut list, launching in Spring of 2013.

Soho Teen was conceived as a natural complement to Soho Press—in particular, its legendary Soho Crime imprint.

Those of us who have lived and breathed YA for the past couple of decades constantly ask ourselves: What moves teens? (Beyond a talented author, that is.) Romance, for sure. Friendship. Betrayal. Secrets. The tricky balancing act between childhood and adulthood. Life-or-death decisions.

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Soho Teen offers a unique and unapologetic take on that thrill, putting mystery at the front and center of all our titles.

In this debut list, you'll find the paranormal and dystopian. You'll also find hilarity, heartbreak, tragedy, euphoria, reflection, jealousy, love, loss, and gain: the entire spectrum of the teen experience. You'll meet characters you trust at first glance and others who make your blood boil. And you'll always be surprised, thanks to our extraordinarily talented authors.

In addition to a current YA superstar (Joy Preble), two veteran crossover YA/adult thriller bestsellers (Helen Fitzgerald and Michelle Gagnon), a former MTV executive-turned-debut-author (Margaux Frolley), and Oprah Winfrey's very first Book Club Pick (*New York Times* bestseller Jacquelyn Mitchard), we're publishing a charity anthology showcasing the contributions of over 70 of the most recognizable names in YA and children's books, co-edited by none other than Jon Scieszka.

So I'm hoping you're asking yourself right now: *What don't I know? And what will I discover?*

Please dig in and enjoy! For an e-version, please go to [www.soho.com](http://www.soho.com)

Sincerely,

Daniel Ehrenhaft  
Editorial Director



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# Soho Teen Sampler

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SPRING 2013



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## *Things We Saw At Night*

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Jacquelyn Mitchard

(World Publication Rights) January 2013

Like the yearning, doomed young clones in Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, three teenagers with XP (a life-threatening allergy to sunlight) are a species unto themselves. They roam the silent streets, looking for adventure, while others sleep. When they discover Parkour, the stunt-sport of running, climbing and leaping from playground equipment, forest cliffs and tall buildings—risky in daylight and potentially deadly by darkness—they feel truly alive, equal to the “daytimers.”

On a random summer night, while scaling a building like any other, the three happen to peer into an empty apartment and glimpse an older man with a dead girl. The murder's far-reaching tentacles force 16-year-old Alison to face her best friend's double life and treachery among the powerful adults they all depend on. A game of cat-and-mouse ensues that escalates through the underground world of

JACQUELYN MITCHARD

hospital confinement, off-the-grid sports, and forbidden love—and Alison, who can never see the light of day, discovers she's the lone key to stopping a human monster.

JACQUELYN MITCHARD is the #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Deep End of the Ocean*, the very first Oprah Book Club pick, as well as over twenty other critically acclaimed books for adults and teens. A nominee for several National and International Awards, she served on the 2004 Fiction Jury for the National Book Award. She is also a longtime journalist and regular contributor to *Real Simple* and *Parade* magazines. She lives with her husband and their nine children. You can visit her online at [www.jackiemitchard.com](http://www.jackiemitchard.com)

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## Chapter One

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# DARK STARS

“DON’T MOVE and don’t scream, no matter what you see,” Juliet told Rob and me. “Promise? On pain of death?”

“I promise,” I said readily. Rob shot me a glance of pure fury. I stuck my tongue out at him. He smiled, and his smile opened a vein of adrenalin in my lower belly. I forced myself to reply with a chilly deadpan.

What else was I supposed to do?

Juliet was a force of nature. I could ask her why we might scream. I might as well chew on the air. She wouldn’t tell us. She was my best friend—in fact, she was my only real friend—and the total of what I truly knew about her would have filled a teaspoon. She’d probably spent two hundred nights at my house, and I’d spent another hundred at hers. That didn’t matter. I was always guessing at how headstrong she was and how unattainably different from me . . . and we were about to see that proved all over again.

Rob said nothing, just shrugged in the Washington Wizards team jacket his father had given him. It was meant to be comforting, meant to include Rob in a world closed to him. Rob was a natural athlete, especially basketball, but couldn’t play because of what he had, what we *were*. He could never

be exposed to daylight or even the lights in a gym. The jacket was one of thirty or so. His dad got them free from his job, being a sporting-goods buyer. They were actually a kind of mockery. But Rob's dad was such a sweetie that he would never have realized that. So Rob dutifully rotated among the Bucks, the Heat, the Raptors, the Knicks, the Cavs, the Bulls, the Warriors, the Suns and yes . . . even the Wizards.

I was wearing my leather coat and two layers of scarf. It was April 8, but Iron Harbor didn't know it was technically spring. At two in the morning, in the brick passage between the Smile Doctors dentistry and Gitchee Pizza, we could see our breath every time we spoke. The temperature couldn't have been much above freezing.

"I'm going to die," I said. "And be cryogenized. Standing here."

"Such a weenie," Juliet said.

Juliet didn't seem to feel the cold. Ever. In a black bodysuit that Rob was trying hard not to stare at and a black turtleneck sweater that gathered around her knees, she was quickly braiding up her waist-length dark blond hair and looping it into an elastic band. Along the left side of her face, from her cheekbone to her lip, she had stenciled in iridescent face paint a line of these blue stars that glowed in the faint light from the street corner. Face paint! For a Tuesday night among the Nothings of Nowheresville, Minnesota. For the excellent true adventures of three people who had absolutely no lives.

At least, we didn't then.

"I've been called a lot of things," I said. "But never—"

"A weenie? Consider yourself called," Juliet said. "In fact, I have called you a weenie myself."

She had, in fact, called me a weenie—the previous

summer, when I balked at breaking into LaVerne Meyercheck's house. (We always broke into LaVerne Meyercheck's house; LaVerne spent about ten days a year in Iron Harbor and the rest of the time whirling among her houses in Switzerland, Paris and Lake Forest, Illinois). I'd finally followed Juliet inside, but I did *not* try on her daughters' clothes. Juliet took two sweaters, one of them a heather cashmere cardigan. It lay neatly folded on top of two identical sweaters. No one, Juliet insisted, who had a hundred color-coded sweaters could be sure if the moths had eaten one of them, or if the dear old family servant they probably called "Mammy" had given it away to the poor.

I should have taken one of the other heather gray sweaters.

I still hated her when she wore it.

Not that I particularly cared about being called a weenie. None of us had been called anything as bad as what Henry LeBecque had called Juliet last fall. First off, how could any guy with a pulse dump Juliet, no matter what her limitations? He said he couldn't stand being with a girl anymore who basically had to go home every morning and sleep in her coffin. "A wannabe vampire." As if she'd chosen to live the way we did. He paid for that, though, a month later. Just before Halloween, the former librarian, Mrs. Taylor, died at ninety. Torch Mountain Home Cemetery was a place where a lot of kids went to drink. Nobody was thinking about the fact that they would dig old Mrs. Taylor's grave a few nights before they actually buried her, or cover it with a piece of canvas and a blanket of sod. Henry never knew what hit him. His "friends" (loyal allies that they were) took off when they heard Henry scream. He was lucky to have had his cell phone so he could call his mommy to come and get him and explain to her how he ended up pissing himself and

puke and crying, alone in the deep bottom of a new grave in the snow on Halloween night. *He* was a weenie.

Biting my tongue, I watched Juliet stretch and do the preps that were an old habit from the days of being a competitive skier. She patted her hands over her clothing, to make sure nothing was sticking out or unbuttoned. She checked her shoes to make sure the laces were tied. Then she ran off into the darkness.

“Don’t look yet!” she called back at us. “I have to go through this mentally before it happens.”

Rob nudged me as we heard Juliet’s light step on the fire escape, far down the cobbled passageway. The metal was old and rusty, probably a decade out of code. Most public things moved about forty years behind schedule in Iron Harbor. Who would know better than we? For the convenience of the only three teenagers who were out all night, almost every night (and whose parents either were fine with it or couldn’t stop us), most people didn’t even lock their doors in Iron Harbor.

And we could easily get around anybody who dared to try to keep us out.

There was no fire escape, roof terrace, restaurant back entrance, abandoned cabin, unlocked deck door on a lake-side mansion . . . no unused boat, construction site, or gated park that Rob, Juliet and I didn’t know about—even *before* we all got our driver’s licenses the past winter. The three of us had been born within four weeks of each other. What were the odds? December was obviously a very good month for freaks. Now the streets of Iron Harbor—all twenty of them, plus the resorts in the hills around the tiny town—belonged to us.

“What do you think she’s doing?” Rob said.

He noticed me shivering and pulled me close to him.

My heart skittered like some scared little hamster trapped between my ribs and my spine. My lips formed the words, *hold me*. My fingers flickered at the level of my chest in the ASL sign for “I want”: the one we used to teach my little sister how to ask for food when she was two and spoke only baby Chinese. But Rob didn’t see. He never saw. My sign language was from me to myself, a sort of prayer, like the way people cross their fingers behind their backs when they tell a lie.

It wasn’t a lie, though. It was the central truth of my so-called emotional life. Any one of his chance touches branded itself on my bicep in a way I would be able to feel the next morning when I lay in bed, as though I’d been bruised and there was a sort of pleasurable agony in probing the injury. Rob could brush against me and pull the pin on my emotions just like that, then leave me on fire as he walked away. Which was the effect he wanted to have on Juliet, and never would.

Rob hunched down on his heels and started picking at the mortar between the cobblestones.

We waited.

*One, one thousand. Two, one thousand. Three, one thousand. . .*

You can think a lot in three seconds, I’d learned from being in an MRI machine.

My mother knew how I felt about Rob. I never told her. I didn’t have to. My mother should have been a clairvoyant on TV and made us all rich. (“I see an older man, very handsome, a thick head of hair. He’s with a baby. He wants you to know they’re both happy. . . .”) People would have believed her. My mom was sincere and so she got away with a lot more than she should have. She never eavesdropped. It wasn’t necessary. She could see through walls and straight into your skull. She could tell who I was talking to by the tone of my voice and who I was texting by the number of keystrokes on the phone.

Here's a telling example of how my mom operates: About six months ago I got up and brushed my teeth and came down for dinner. There at my place at our butcher block table was this little pink bag. In the bag was a year's supply of birth control pills.

"Well," I said. "Uh, thanks. I was hoping for a fancy digital camera for my next birthday. Which isn't for quite some time. What's the occasion?"

"Just in case," my mother said.

My little sister, Angela, who was nine, started laughing so hard that milk came out her nose. I was sure that my mother sat with her before I came down and said matter-of-factly "Allie's a young woman now" and that sexual feelings were a part of every young woman's process of maturity. Having been adopted at the age of three by a single mom (who happened to have an older biological daughter with a life-threatening disease), Angie was disturbingly wise beyond her years. Either that or just disturbed.

"I hope these have a really long, uh, shelf life or whatever, because I don't have acne and Mr. Right isn't anywhere around," I said. "Or even Mr. Wrong, for that matter."

"I was thinking about Rob Dorn."

"So have I, but he thinks about Juliet."

"Are they . . .?" Angela put her fork down. Spaghetti sauce was way too volatile a condiment for this conversation.

"Most certainly negatori," I said. "Rob has the same chance with Juliet as Howard."

Howard, the custodian, of indeterminate age, had worked at the hospital and clinic since shortly before time began. All of us knew him because he never seemed to really leave. Any time any of us had ever been there, he was either pushing the big rubber dumpster thing through the

halls or lying down inside it, singing some of his favorite religious hits.

“I just thought you should have them,” my mother said.

“Isn’t this the kind of thing you’re supposed to find in *my* drawer? Then start crying and saying your little girl is all grown up?”

My mother sighed. “That would be conventional,” she said.

Right. Conventional was a bad word in our house. I couldn’t decide if she would be happy if I actually took the birth control pills or if I didn’t. So I kept them in my underwear drawer. And of course *I* was the one who almost cried whenever I saw them, because I knew I was the last person on earth who would ever need them.

I stopped thinking about Rob when we heard Juliet’s voice from somewhere in the shadows above us.

“Live once!” she shouted. “Ready?”

“For a year now,” Rob muttered. “What damn stupid thing is she doing now?”

“She’s okay,” I said, and I called softly, “Ready, Juliet!”

“She doesn’t have a light,” he pointed out.

“You don’t know that. She could have had it in a fanny pack under her sweater. She could have had a ping-pong table under there.”

Until recently, my little sister actually assumed that people with XP could see better in the dark, like cats. Which is absurd; we probably see worse since a lot of people with XP damage their eyes with light when they’re little before they even know they have it. We kept headlamps and little Maglites in our backpacks if we had to pick a lock or peer down a ravine or around a dark corner.

“Are you right where I left you?” Juliet called, very far away.

“You have to watch every second of this. You’re my witnesses!”

I called back, “We’re right here!”

One of the things you learn pretty quickly if you live your life at night is that—unless you’re literally standing on someone’s front porch—you can pretty much be as loud as you want. No one will hear you or see you. Definitely, no one will care. We had Juliet’s dad to thank in part for our freedom, of course. Tommy Sirocco was one of the Iron County sheriff’s deputies, and he worked the midnight shift solely because his family’s life was set up around her. Whenever he spotted Rob’s Jeep, Officer Sirocco would quietly turn his squad car away to give us privacy, the only thing we could have.

Rob and I heard a shuffling and loud scraping above. Juliet was making her way across the flat graveled roof of Gitchee Pizza. The Indian name for Lake Superior is Gitchee Gume; that wasn’t just something Longfellow made up for a poem. Hiawatha was real, too, by the way. The second floor of Gitchee Pizza housed the apartment of its owner and founder, Gideon Brave Bear—also a genuine Indian (a Bois Forte Chippewa); he got pissed if you used the term “Native American.” Every kid in town ate at least one meal a week at Gitchee. Fortunately, in addition to being a very good businessman, Gideon was also a very stereotypical drunk, who wouldn’t have heard Juliet if she had been up there on a draft horse pulling a beer wagon. Whatever happened, he would snore through it.

We heard the scraping again, and then a few short taps.

“Juliet!” Rob cried out. “What the hell?”

Then Juliet jumped off the roof.

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Chapter Two

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## ONE GIANT LEAP FOR OUR KIND

For a shattering instant, I thought I was a witness to my best friend's death: a spectacular original suicide, for an audience. It was just the kind of stunt Juliet would pull. My mind slowed down to syrup as I waited for her body to hit the ground between Rob and me. Juliet had always sworn she would die her own way. Not in some bed in the darkened living room of her house, or hooked up to an IV in a sterile hospital . . . or after an overdose with a note pinned to her pillow, which is how many lives end for people like us.

But I wasn't seeing death. I was seeing living.

Juliet launched herself from the roof like a supernatural force, a dark angel. I couldn't see her face. In that moment, she became a whirling constellation. A long line of glow-in-the-dark blue stars, outlined in silver, soared out above our heads between the buildings and went wheeling in space, completing a full circle. Then the stars were gone.

She'd already landed on the opposite roof—hooting in her victory dance—when my brain caught up to my eyeballs.

I had just seen her jump a twelve-foot gap, twenty feet off the ground . . . and perform a front flip in mid-air. She must have shed her sweater. That's why I saw that feverish swirl of glowing stars. She must have stenciled them on her bodysuit, all up one leg and one arm, as well as her face. It wasn't nothing time in Nowheresville. It was elation. It was life. It

was the most enthralling and imaginative feat of daring I had ever seen close up. I'd never felt more connected to her.

Rob fumbled for the switch on his Maglite. The faint beam flickered over the roof. Juliet was punching the air and grinning down at us. I broke my promise, because I screamed. I couldn't help it. I screamed, "Amazing!"

"Shut up, Allie!" Rob hissed.

"What? That was pretty amazing."

"She could have been killed!"

I had to laugh. "What else is new?"

THE THREE of us met in the sandbox. In the sandbox, at night.

You think of a happy child. That child is playing in the sun. She's picking flowers in a field with the sun's rays painting threads of platinum in her hair. She's running with a kite, her chubby legs just a little tanned with the balmy blessings of midsummer. Think about it: even the *Sesame Street* theme song begins with the words, "Sunny day, sweeping the clouds away."

That sunny day would kill us.

We were happy children, I suppose, but we ran to the swings to play when kids our age were listening to bedtime stories. If those kids glanced out at the playground, they sometimes told their parents that they'd seen ghosts of children who lived in our town long ago. We hadn't lived in another time, but we did live in another parallel universe. It was our own country, the night country. We lived there with our parents, many of whom chose to be Persephone and abide in the netherworld for the sake of love.

Having each other was all we had.

We couldn't even remember a time before the three of us were friends.

So we knew, from those playground days, that Juliet would never stop being the one to shave it even closer to the edge than the rest of us. She was always the first to dive naked into the lake off whatever boat we'd liberated and rowed into the darkness—into black water so cold that would freeze the blood in your veins. She was the first one to get a set of lock picks so that we could steal weed from the back room of the guy who hand-loomed ugly ponchos for tourists. We got the weed but we only had one apiece. If you have XP, you can't smoke. Heat damage risk is huge. You can, however, drink. Juliet helped us celebrate the New Year last year by sneaking into the hot tub of a famous New York talk show host's ski chalet, drinking the champagne we'd lifted from one of the twelve cases of Veuve Clicquot in his wine cellar. Soon, we all had our own burglar's tool sets: a cloth case filled with little silver picks that looked like dental instruments, to unlock the equipment instructor's shack at Torch Mountain Lodge and ski down the black diamond run with only the light from the moon.

But there was a flipside to her adventurousness, the side that haunted Rob and me. Juliet was also the only one who took off, for weeks at a time, alone, away from us. First she had a legitimate reason: For four years, from ages eleven to fifteen, she managed to ski competitively. Sunlight be damned, she hurtled down the slopes swathed like a mummy in oversized goggles. But then, a year and a half ago, she'd suddenly stopped. Yet the disappearances continued. Like every month or so, for a few days or a week, we wouldn't hear from her beyond a text saying *C U Soon*.

She always came back though. That was the silent mantra I repeated to myself whenever the absences seemed to reach the breaking point. *Juliet always comes back.*

\* \* \*

JULIET CAME clattering down the fire escape.

“Did you see me? Did you see me?” She was jumping around like one of the Cat Dancers on the pom squad at Iron County High where we were students but never went.

“I saw you!” I said. “What made you do that?”

“What in the world would inspire even you to do something quite that idiotic?” Rob snapped. “That was screwed up, even for you.”

“What do you mean, even for me? Somebody who’s not a wuss?”

Rob’s face reddened. He wasn’t super macho man, but you don’t call a guy a wuss.

“My point is: You don’t even know what you’re doing. People work out for years before they try junk like that.”

“I’ve been practicing it for months!” Juliet’s hair had come loose from its braid and fell about her shoulders. Her face blooming in the cold, she looked like a movie star, the only imperfection a little shadow of a cleft in her chin. But that made her even more gorgeous. When she got mad, her eyes changed color, as though somebody had retouched them to put in the little gold flecks that looked fake. Juliet had no scars. Most people with XP who don’t find out until they are two or three years old have a lot of dark freckles: scary dark scars from sunburn. Rob had some on his back and neck. They found out he had it when he was one, and they were pushing him in his stroller at Disney World. Some lady looked at him. His mom thought she was going to say how cute he was, but instead she screamed, “What did you do to your baby?” Rob’s neck and back, where he wasn’t covered by his little tee shirt, had morphed into an angry field of huge, dripping blisters.

I didn’t have any scars, either. But they found out I had it before I was born. Ironically, my dad is a genetics researcher.

He had a cousin with XP, the fatal allergy to sunlight. (Clinically known as *Xeoroderma Pigmentosum*. Mom says dad refused to use the abbreviation.) So they tested the unborn baby for it. And they found out—yay!—she didn't have it. Then she was born. Surprise! I did have it. Tests aren't always right!

Dad took off.

Surprise! Not really. Lots of dads do. I hadn't seen him since I was four. He existed for me as some very nice handwriting on about six letters a year and a bunch of fat guilt checks that allowed us to own our house and have some nice things. Mom adopted Angela, instead of latching on to some guy, which I completely admired her for, because most XP kids are only children.

What makes XP even stranger is there are seven kinds or variations, and they involve eight genes. Some kinds only affect your eyes and skin. But there are cell changes from exposure to sunlight, too. Juliet and I had Type A, and Rob had Type C, but none of us had the kind that makes a child start out smart and beautiful but lose more and more every year . . . words and steps and drawing and reading just disappearing, like water into dry earth. If you can be grateful about something that's impossible to be grateful for, I was. For my mom, especially. It was the last thing she needed, a daughter who was not only doomed to a life without sunshine, but to lose her mind.

Juliet continued to pirouette before us.

"You've been practicing this alone? What if you hit the ground?" Rob demanded. "What if I did?" Juliet said.

"We wouldn't be here. You'd just lie there on the stone."

"Yeah? And so what? I'd die. Gideon would find me the next morning dead. Somebody's going to find me dead sooner or later anyhow." As the douchebag Henry LeBeque pointed out, one of the truly extra-terrific things about XP

is that you're forced to live like a vampire, except you're not immortal. You don't have superpowers or live forever. Not even for very long. Most people with XP die before they're forty, although in every other way, you're totally normal. Isn't that special? Juliet lived like she was dying. Some XP people do. Others just hide in the dark and wait.

Nobody said anything.

Juliet finally glared at both of us and growled, "I'm getting my sweater." In a flash, she hurtled back up the rickety fire escape to the pizza parlor roof and came stomping back down, clearly outraged at Rob—and me, too, although I hadn't done anything. "Go on and leave. I'll walk home. I'm taking it you're not interested."

"Interested? In what?" I glared at Rob, too. "We're not leaving you."

Juliet lived outside of town, on a sort of old farm. "A cop with a green thumb" was how her dad cheerily described himself. He grew most of their own food, apples and pears and stuff that her mom made into jams that she sold to shops and tourists. Her home was a long, lonely uphill hike from Gitchee's.

"She can do what she wants," Rob said in a toneless voice. He was shaking out the keys to his Jeep, mumbling about going home early. It wasn't even three. We never went home before five. Then he relented. "Get in the car, Juliet. If there's one serial killer passing through on his way to Canada, he'll find you. Although I would feel sorry for him if he did."

Her eyes sparkled in the darkness. "Don't you even want to try it? Don't you want to learn? I have two DVD's and some books. It's the most incredible feeling. Like flying. Like an orgasm while you're flying."

"Sounds good already," I said under my breath. I'd never flown in an airplane or had sex, at least with anybody.

“I can show you how to be safe,” Juliet encouraged.

“Yes, I could absolutely see how safe you were up there,” Rob said.

“Me, too,” I added dryly.

Juliet stopped in the middle of the street, her hands on her hips. “It’s a discipline, Allie. It’s called Parkour. It was invented, like, fifty years ago in France, and it’s based on strength, speed, skill, self-confidence and safety.” She opened her blue eyes wide. “*Safety?* Get it? It’s a way of getting so strong you can move as fast as you want past obstacles or over them or under them without ever being hurt.”

“I’ve seen the videos on YouTube,” Rob said. He was already in the driver’s seat.

“One of the founders said it’s a way of touching the earth and everything on it, being part of it instead of just having it shelter you.” Juliet ran over to Rob’s side of the car. “We have enough shelter, don’t you think?”

“I’ve seen the memorials too.” Rob made air-quotes. “‘He died doing what he loved.’ That’s as stupid as one of those stories how some fourteen-year-old kid’s uncle shoots him while they’re deer hunting and everybody’s okay with it.”

Juliet kept smiling. “Everybody dies,” she said, turning her face so it was out of the light. “But not everybody ever really lives.”

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## Chapter Three

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### REAL LIFE

Within a month, Juliet had converted half of Rob's barn into our Parkour Skill Gym, with mats and parallel bars Rob's father got from his work. I wasn't surprised about how easily Rob caved, and frankly I didn't care. I was alive like Juliet. I would wake up at sunset sick with pain in my belly and shoulders from the endless crunches and handstands. *This is how she must have felt during ski training*, I thought. And when that ended . . . what was she going to do with all that excess energy? Within a few weeks, I could leg-press two hundred pounds and do a handstand on the bars.

The three of us were all over the playground at the little kids' school and the bleachers at the high school. At first, we ran the bleachers sideways, skipping up one row at a time to the top and then going back down, for agility. After we could do that without tripping, we would go all the way to the top and hang and swing our way down the supports. Rob even stopped saying the word "safety" every five minutes. He was in the thick of it, too. I could hear it in his laugh.

We used the little kids' equipment to practice vaults until we were clearing the little merry-go-round touching it with one hand. (In Parkour terms: a *passement*). But while Juliet and Rob mastered the backflip right away, I needed a hundred tries to run up a wall and hurtle back over to a standing position . . . and I never landed like they did. Although I will say in my defense that everything I've ever read says that the

backflip is not really a Parkour move but a showoff move, since the point of Parkour is to get you from one place to another fast, defying obstacles.

After a series of progressively more embarrassing wipe-outs, Juliet said to Rob, “She’s un-teachable. Allie, how did you ever learn to do a backflip off a pier?”

“I can’t *do* a back flip off a pier,” I snapped, with what little breath hadn’t been slammed out of my body.

When I finally mastered it, though, I couldn’t stop. I must have done thirty in one night.

Once in a while, we saw the beam from one of the police cars: Juliet’s dad or one of his friends. They must have thought: *Nice*. What good, clean fun we were having, just playing like the kids we were. Not.

At the beginning, I was bruised every inch. My mom, who—did I tell you?—has always had a problem with boundaries, would walk into my room and say, “What are you guys doing out there? This doesn’t seem prudent, Allie.” Then, I learned to drop and roll, so I would land on the balls of my feet and then tumble to a standing position. It would look to a bystander like I’d whammed myself, but it was a way of actually landing pretty lightly. The feeling of being able to run to the end of a wall twelve feet up and make this controlled dive into mid-air . . . and knowing you weren’t going to twist an ankle or break your collarbone . . . it was like flying. It was like being part of something magical. It was like being on the earth instead of hiding under it—which was what I felt I’d done all my life.

In June, Juliet decided we were ready to try a gap leap to a cat grab and then swing down five stories to a ten-foot turn vault to the ground. She was going to set up a camera with a filter to film us. It would be the first Dark Stars video feat. Dark Stars would be our “tribe,” which is what the Parkour

“tracers” call each other. Juliet had memorized all the Parkour terms in French. I had no interest in the words, so I didn’t use them. I was only interested in the action.

Now we were going to jump off a six-story building under construction, perched on the bluffs above the lake. From there we would land on the roof of an older neighboring five-story building. Then we would “lache” or swing by one arm to the other, from one balcony to the one below it. But the bottom-most balconies were differently built, ten feet down and about five feet to the left or right of the balconies above. There was nothing directly below except open space.

If you missed, you would just hit the grass, thirty feet down. You’d be lucky if you only broke your neck. If you had a lot of momentum, and you kept flying, you’d go over the edge of the cliff and down to the boulders washed by the waves below. I’d assumed that this was the motive behind Juliet’s choice for the Dark Stars on-camera debut: the thrill, so close to the certain death on the rocks of Lake Superior.

It wasn’t that, though.

Maybe it would have been better if I fell. At least, it would have been over.

But we were good by then, a trio again, like we’d been at the sandbox, all those years ago. Strong. Safe. Free.

But Juliet knew we might glimpse something. She’d known all the time. If not that night, then another night. She’d led us to it. Did she actually love Parkour or was that all a set-up for what we saw?

I can’t ask her. I’ll never know.

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Chapter 4

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## JUST BEFORE EVER AFTER

Our transition from the playground to the pit—to the end of an innocence we only saw in retrospect—was abrupt. If you had asked us, Rob and I would have said that we were very mature for our age. People think that, and say it, and we were among those who would have *meant* it, what with a life-threatening illness. But in fact we were, if anything, slow to “grow up.” We thought of drinking booze and smoking weed—and, at least in Juliet’s case, having sex—as big markers of adulthood. We had no idea how sheltered we really were.

It began on a Thursday, right before I fell asleep in the morning.

Juliet zinged me a text: *B ready.*

I shot back: ?

*Something new and big We R READY! READY 4 MORE! The CHALLENGE!*

*When?*

*2 morrow!* Juliet replied. And that was all.

Why so soon? I wondered tiredly. Why tonight?

Now, I know what I know. But I didn’t then.

THAT FRIDAY morning, before our epic night of “bouldering” (that’s a Parkour word that supposedly combines the word “building” with “boulder,” from mountain climbing), I had a clinic appointment.

If I had to go to the doctor, it was usually after midnight.

Most of the time, XP doctors and nurses (my mother among them) worked the red-eye shift for obvious reasons. But sometimes, they had to go over your body from head to toe, and it didn't make sense to have people stay to run machines and do hearing tests. All people in the XP Family Study got free care, so we tried to make it easier for those who did the caring. After all, there were people who moved all the way from Wyoming and California to bring their kids to the XP Family Study at the Tabor Clinic. It was the most extensive treatment facility for XP anywhere in the world. It must have been worth the headache of travel to a lackluster ski resort town, because there were single parents who lived in Chicago and commuted hours upon hours several times a week to see their kids.

Dr. Andrew Tabor took care of us, along with his son.

His brother, Dr. Stephen Tabor, was also part of the mission. He was the county medical examiner. He did research for the XP Family Study, too. But his work with XP patients took place after they'd died. He studied the bodies to figure out how to prevent what kills us, which is usually skin cancer, the worst kind. Every year after New Year's Eve, the Tabors had a big party for the XP family, and Dr. Andrew would always give the same toast.

"We're this close. Thirty years ago, my father, Simon, could never have believed how far we would come."

Dr. Simon Tabor, who is easily a hundred and ten years old and still kicking, was the founder of the Tabor Clinic. Why he'd decided to make XP his life's work, none of us knew—nobody in his family had been afflicted. But half the year-round citizens of Iron Harbor worked at the hospital, including my mother. The Tabors also owned about half the town, including the canoe and scuba rental places and some other buildings and the other three restaurants

that aren't Gitchee Pizza. Gideon wouldn't give in, although they've tried to buy him out. Gideon said he wanted to leave Gitchee Pizza to his son, although he doesn't have a son and he's been married four times.

Sometimes, I had to ask myself why, though . . . why this whole community has grown up around the Tabor Clinic.

These families are trying to buy time, basically. Time for what? Time to be with their kids, which is selfish if the kid is suffering. Time for the kid to have a life, which is fine, I guess, until they get old enough to know what XP really means.

People talk about "genetic engineering" and "stem cell research" and "DNA repair" like it'll be available next week at Walmart, at which point we're all going to Hell. But even if the government doesn't block it, or enough people think that God is against it, that stuff takes more time than we have. It takes more than one short lifetime.

Like, ordinarily, people would say to a girl my age: *You have your whole life ahead of you!* Sure, you had to grow up in this no-horse town but someday, you'll remember the huge storms and the loon's lonesome moans and you'll be happy you had that girlhood. And that would all be fine except this is probably it for me. This is my girlhood and my everythinghood. You can't blame us for wanting to *carpe* that *diem* if your diems are numbered.

I went back and forth on this subject. Sometimes, I thought I would be better off if I'd never been born. Sometimes, I thought I would hang on long enough for somebody to find a biological switch that could turn this thing off. There were some adults with XP in Iron Harbor, sure. But not too many. And we didn't see them much.

Juliet and Rob and I were among the older patients.

When my mood was especially black, I'd think of Dennis Ackerman. He was one of my tutors—super cute and the

nicest guy. He taught me math and science, three nights a week. He tutored other kids who couldn't go to regular school, too, who were on chemotherapy or recovering from mono or what have you. But having XP himself, he had a special feeling for us.

Four years earlier, at the age of twenty five, he'd decided he'd had enough.

That morning, my mom came into my room and woke me out of a sound sleep. The look on her face was so awful, in the truest sense, as though she'd seen a vision or something, that I was sure my grandmother was dead. Or that Juliet, who was still skiing competitively as a freestyle jumper, was paralyzed. She told me that Mr. Ackerman was found dead that morning, in his car, by his mom. He had shut the garage and stuffed rags in all the cracks and just let the car run until he fell asleep. I asked if he left a note. My mom said he had, and it said that he knew that this was a lousy thing to do to his mother and his "kids," but he couldn't stand the wait anymore.

I more or less understood that, too. But thanks to Juliet, I had long ago vowed never to go that route. I only wish I'd stayed home that night. By sunrise Saturday, every vow I'd ever made began to lose meaning.

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## *Who Done It?*

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Jon Scieszka

An Anthology to benefit 826NYC  
(Soho IP, All Rights) February 2013

Can you imagine the most cantankerous book editor alive? Mr. Burns meets Stalin, but also worse (appearance and odor-wise) than a gluttonous farm pig? A man who makes no secret of his love of cheese or his disdain of unworthy authors? That man is Herman Mildew.

The anthology opens with an invitation to a party, care of this insufferable monster, where over seventy of the most talented, bestselling, and recognizable names in children's and YA fiction learn that they are suspects in his murder. All must provide alibis in brief first-person entries. The problem is that all of them are liars; all of them are fabulists; and all have something to hide. In the end it's revealed . . . Well, you'll just have to read the anthology.

JON SCIESZKA runs point on the investigation. Confirmed contributors include Dave Eggers (not YA but

still a suspect), Rebecca Stead, Lauren Oliver, Lauren Myracle, Adam Mansbach & Ricardo Cortes (*Go the F\*\*\* to Sleep*), Maureen Johnson, Libba Bray, David Levithan, Gayle Forman, Melissa de la Cruz, Anna Godbersen, Daniel Handler, Pat Carman, MT Anderson, Mo Willems, John Green, Holly Black, and many more . . .

You can visit 826nyc online to learn more about the wonderful work they do at [www.826nyc.org](http://www.826nyc.org)

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**Dearest Friend,**

**You Are Invited To A Gathering!**

WHERE: The Old Abandoned Pickle Factory

WHEN: 8 PM sharp

WHY: Because if you don't attend, I will have to tell the world everything I know about you. (Yes: Everything.)

Your Boss/Superior/Editor,  
Herman Q. Mildew



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## Introductory Interrogation

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Ladies and gentlemen . . . and I use those terms loosely because I know you are all writers and illustrators . . . we have a bit of a situation.

You were all invited to this party tonight because of your relationship with Mr. Herman Q. Mildew.

Some of you were not fond of him. Others of you could not stand him. Most of you completely hated his guts.

Mr. Mildew brought you to this abandoned pickle factory because he had something to tell you, something that he thought might make you very mad. And he wanted to see all of you freak out live and in person.

But that is not going to happen.

You see . . . Mr. Herman Q. Mildew is no longer with us.

He shuffled off this mortal coil, took the long walk off the short pier, has gone to glory, gave up the ghost, cashed in, checked out, kicked the bucket, went bye-bye.

He is now a corpse, a cadaver, dearly departed, a stiff.

The problem?

Each and every one of you had a reason to send Mr. Herman Mildew to the Great Beyond. You are all suspects in his demise. And it is up to me—and the keen reader holding this book—to figure out: Who Done It?

As you well know, Herman Mildew was not a nice man.

He was mean, arrogant, loud, large, obnoxious, cruel to small furry animals, delusional, thoughtless, difficult, vulgar, negative, likely to take the last sip of orange juice

and then put the empty carton back in the refrigerator, intolerant, sneaky, greedy, fond of toenail clippings and strong cheeses, hugely entertained by the misfortune of others, hateful, quick to anger, unforgiving, mean, gaseous, paranoid, belligerent, unreasonable, demanding, smelly, near-sighted . . . in short: an editor. Perhaps even your editor, or the editor of someone you admire.

Some examples of his sadistic behavior, in no particular order:

- He enrolled Dave Eggers in True Romance's Book-of-the-Month Club.
- He drew mustaches on all of Lauren Oliver's author photos.
- He told Mo Willems what he could do with the Pigeon.

ALL THIS is true. So why did you accept this invitation?

Never mind. The more important question is to determine what a quick pat-down of this audience turned up:

- 1 poison-tipped umbrella
- 1 suitcase full of poisonous tree frogs
- 3 throwing stars
- 1 noose, 1 candlestick, and 1 lead pipe
- 2 snakes resembling speckled "friendship" bands
- 1 frozen leg of lamb

*What?*

*Me?*

*Why do I have a piece of piano wire hanging out of my trench coat?*

*Why . . . why . . . not because Mr. Mildew once forced me to play I'm A Little Teapot on the piano in front of hundreds of booksellers. And I wasn't going to use it to strangle anyone in a most fitting way. I have piano wire because . . . because . . . because I was fixing my piano last time I was wearing this coat. I was just replacing the—*

Wait a minute! Our readers and I are running this investigation. We'll ask the questions. And we want answers. We want alibis.

Of course, before you begin, we are bound by law to advise you that you have the right to remain silent.

But who are we kidding?

You are (as mentioned) a bunch of writers and illustrators. You couldn't remain silent if your life depended on it. You would sell your grandmother for an audience.

So tell us your alibi.

Convince us that you did not do in, cut down, rub out, bump off, put away, dispatch, exterminate, eradicate, liquidate, assassinate, fix, drop, croak, or kill the late, unlamented Mr. Herman Mildew.

**Alibis included in sampler:**

Daniel Ehrenhaft

Adam Gidwitz

Sara Shepard

Jennifer E. Smith

Rebecca Stead

Kiersten White

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Confirmed Suspects/Contributors as of 9/12/11

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Dave Eggers	Ned Vizzini
Lemony Snicket	Sarah Mlynowski
Mac Barnett	Anna Godbersen
MT Anderson	Adele Griffin & Lisa Brown
Gordon Korman	Micol Ostow
Pat Carman	David Ostow
Mo Willems	Adam Mansbach & Ricardo
Lauren Myracle	Cortes
Sara Shepard	Elizabeth Craft
Lauren Oliver	Jennifer Belle
Rebecca Stead	Natalie Standiford
Maureen Johnson	Aimee Friedman
David Levithan	Lynn Weingarten
Robin Wasserman	Leslie Margolis
Bennett Madison	F. Bowman Hastie & Tilla-
Judy Blundell	mook Cheddar
Gayle Forman	Maryrose Wood
Melissa de la Cruz	Heather Benedict Terrell
Larry Doyle	Margo Rabb
Jason Pinter	Joanna Hershon
Jennifer E. Smith	Claudia Gabel
Barry Lyga	Alyssa Sheinmel
Michael Northrop	Courtney Sheinmel
Marie Rutkoski	Adam Gidwitz
Kieran Scott	Jen Nielsen
Emily Jenkins a.k.a. E.	Lisa Sandell
Lockhart	Donna Freitas

WHO DONE IT?

Kiersten White  
Sarah Darer Littman  
Jacquelyn Mitchard  
Margaux Froleay  
Joy Preble  
Helen Fitzgerald  
Michelle Gagnon  
Barnabas Miller  
Lisa & Laura Roecker  
Melissa Walker  
Libba Bray

Elizabeth Eulberg  
Jo Knowles  
Mandy Hubbard  
Sarah Beth Durst  
Adrienne Maria Vrettos  
John Green  
Holly Black  
Elizabeth Braswell  
Dan Poblicki  
Jennifer Ziegler  
Daniel Ehrenhaft

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## Daniel Ehrenhaft's Alibi

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- Concerning the discovery of a poorly crafted “voodoo puppet” (Mr. Ehrenhaft’s term) on his person;
- Furthermore bearing the vague likeness of Herman Mildew, a generous term given the artistic quality;
- In addition smothered in Mr. Ehrenhaft’s fingerprints;
- And finally pierced with a plastic spork emblazoned with the brand moniker: *Chilly’s Cold Chili! It’s NOT Gazpacho!*<sup>TM</sup>

FIRST THINGS first: Before this incident, have I ever claimed to be a puppet-maker, puppet-owner, or puppeteer?

No. Well. Sort of. You might have overheard some synonym of “puppet” that I’ve tossed around once or twice. But in answer to any question regarding puppet-related crimes or puppet-related talk, I offer an emphatic *not yes*.

Let’s get to the more important issue: “voodoo.” We can clear that up right away. I don’t recall ever mentioning in casual conversation, “Oh, I also handcraft beautiful dolls in a variety of materials to be used in evil occult practices: among them, voodoo.” If you can find someone who can remember that I said that, I’d laugh. I’d laugh even harder if you can find someone who could claim that I’d ever threatened, “Raid my fridge again, and you’ll meet your demise at the hands of a wondrous figurine imbued with your soul, you Terrible Hot Sauce of All Things Awful. Because I never forget anything.”

Do you have such a witness? If so, please bring him forward. Good luck to you.

Besides, only a very angry person would accuse a guest of raiding his refrigerator. My fridge is a bountiful treasure chest of chilled soups, up-for-grabs to anyone I invite over. Not that I don't stock other food. Like, sour cream, for instance. And cheese. And those yummy little croutons (best served ice-cold!) Granted, I never technically "invited" Mr. Mildew to my home in the first place. The point is: I am a very happy person, unlike this poor murder victim you're hounding me about. So why would I freak out if he devoured the last of my delicious cold chili on a day so hot that all my wax effigies melted? Happy people don't do that.

But back to this supposed "evidence" against me. It might interest you to know that countless credible websites offer incontrovertible evidence that aliens reproduce fingerprints, retinal scans, DNA, scrumptious frozen crudité, and Eternal Bliss—among other incriminating flotsam and jetsam—at a moment's notice. Still, like most members of the mainstream law enforcement community, you deny what's staring you in the face. (A face I'm happy to reproduce in your choice of stunning three-dimensional formats, by the way, once these charges blow over.) Ever been to Roswell, New Mexico? Of course you haven't.

I rest my case. You're not thinking logically.

In fact, I'm feeling so generous right now that I'll leave you with a gift. If you do ever visit Roswell, there's a great chili stand near the crash site. Stick that chili in the freezer for twelve hours, and *then* eat it. When you're stuck in the hot desert, discovering the truth about aliens and lamenting a jerk who's better off dead, you'll thank me.

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Adam Gidwitz's Alibi

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I did not kill Herman Mildew.

The alley was not dark. There was no unmarked steel door under the buzzing, phosphorescent lamp. I did not have to strain my eyes to read the scrawled note I held, nor was the handwriting scratchy and spidery, skittering across the page in ferocious bursts. In the flickering light, I did not read the words:

*My Dearest Adam,*

*Your manuscript has raised a few questions in my mind that I would love to discuss with you. Might it be convenient to meet somewhere? Perhaps the Central Gowanus Sausage Processing plant? Shall we say two? In the morning? There is a door in the alley off of 3rd Street. Would you be kind enough to go in? Up the stairs to level two? Overlooking the grinding vat? Yes? Lovely.*

*Your devoted editor, HM*

I did not examine the steel door, certainly did not reach for the handle, did not find it unlocked—and would never, ever, have leaned against it and pushed. The door did not screech and scrape against the pavement, nor did its eerie echo ricochet down the empty alley. I certainly would never have even considered poking my head into the darkness of the Central Gowanus Sausage Processing plant and, after having cursed his devilish name for the millionth time, made my way into the whirring darkness.

As everyone knows, Herman Mildew is one of the most universally respected, best beloved editors in the business of making books for young people. A single smile from him

in a crowded restaurant will make a man's reputation. Well, hypothetically. If Herman Mildew has ever smiled, I don't believe it has been reported. His authors are devoted to him. One might even say slavishly devoted to him. Which is probably accounted for by the contracts he writes for them, which are modeled—quite explicitly—on 18th century writs of human bondage. There are few editors with so keen an eye and such exacting standards.

And you accuse me of killing a legend, a god, like Herman Mildew?

The interior of the processing plant was not all hulking, shadowy machines. The grinding did not cause the concrete floor to shake, nor did the sounds of gristle getting caught in blades make my heart shudder. I did not scan the gloom for stairs, did not turn and climb them with tight knees and white lips and dilated pupils. My position was not made obvious to whoever awaited me on the second floor, overlooking the enormous sausage grinder. I was not afraid.

I did not nearly jump out of my skin when, huddled by the railing, I glimpsed a bent, sinister, shadowy form.

I did not say, "Mildew?"

The bent shape did not approach. It was not carrying an accordion file exactly the size of my manuscript. And when it stepped into a square of moonlight that shone through a skylight in the roof . . . it definitely, absolutely, without any doubt whatsoever, did NOT possess the leering evil face of Herman Mildew.

"Hello, Adam," the man who was not there and certainly was not Herman Mildew did not say.

My face did not contort as if I had just eaten a fistful of rancid meat.

Herman Mildew did not continue towards me, with his free arm outstretched. I did not freeze, did not panic, did

not *not* know what was happening. As he did not put his arm around my neck, I did not stiffen. Nor did I hear with an acute awareness animal meat being processed in the black void below.

He did not pull my head down to his goblin-like level, did not raise my manuscript until it was just below my nose, and did not ferociously say: “Sniff.”

“What?” I did not reply.

“I said sniff, Adam.”

I did not sniff.

“Do you smell that?” he did not ask me.

“I don’t know, Herman.”

“Sniff, dammit!” he did not growl. I did not sniff. “Do you smell it now?”

“Yes, Herman.”

“Do you know what that is, Adam?”

“No, Herman.”

“That is the stench of failure. It makes me sick. It is wafting, of course, from the detritus you call a manuscript.” He did not bring his pock-marked, cratered, goblin-like face right up to mine, did not grin wickedly, and did not hiss, “You are over, Gidwitz.”

None of the following happened:

I felt a force like a tidal wave build and rise through my heart, my chest, my shoulders, my face. I flung my arms against the bent form of my editor who was intent on ruining my livelihood, my future, my very life. My face was inches, centimeters, millimeters from his. His nostrils were flared, and from his mouth the stench of pickled had-dock salad mixed with the bloody stink of grinding meat below. I held him there. And then Herman Mildew did what Herman Mildew does. What makes him Herman Mildew.

He smirked, and then he said, “Congratulations, Adam. This is the first time you’ve ever created suspense.”

I could have thrown him over the railing. But I didn’t. Because none of the above ever happened.

And then I did not pick up my manuscript, did not slip down the stairs, past the mechanical behemoths, did not listen once more for the sickening sound of a blade caught on gristle—perhaps Herman Mildew’s gristle—and did not push out of the door and into the alley. I certainly did not go straight to a twenty-four hour copy and package shop. I would never have used a public computer to look up the address of a rival publishing company. And I am sick at the disgusting insinuation that I would immediately post my manuscript to that rival publisher—with a note that I was now free from all contractual obligations—and was wondering if they were interested in a love story between a dog and a dinosaur.

Indeed, as this written testimony makes redundantly clear: I could not have, would never have, and could not even *imagine* having killed Herman Mildew.

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Sara Shepard's Alibi

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Okay. I'll admit it. We hooked up once. Though it could have been one of his doppelgangers. You know he has doppelgangers, right? He says they're his henchmen.

They spread bad tidings when he's busy. They dress in grey and do a lot of grunting.

I met him at a knitting class. I had decided to take it because my parents had been bugging me to get out of the house more and write less, and I thought a knitting class would piss them off. They probably hoped I'd join a cult or hang out with the miscreants by the river who set fire to things. They thought it was weird that I wasn't into people my own age, that I'd applied for an AARP card despite the fact that I wasn't eligible. "Stop hanging out with your seventy-year-old Chinese dentist!" they said. "Go volunteer! Go to a cocktail party!"

He had been the only man there. He was very good at knitting socks. His fingers could *fly*. He made me a pair in the first hour. They were more like Chinese finger cuffs than socks, per se, but I was still touched. When our instructor, Gladys—who'd brought her three Bedlington Terriers to the class and whose said Bedlingtons menacingly positioned themselves around her chair—announced a ten-minute break, he and I made eyes at each other over the coffee tureen and the Krispy Kremes. I told him I was planning on making a fisherman's sweater. He told me he was going to knit a giant spider web that could capture human prey. I asked him about his intriguing cologne. He told me it was pickle juice. He also said he liked my peg.

We made out in the back alley. The lamb-like Bedlingtons watched us through the window.

I'd wondered if he'd ever kissed a girl before, because he devoured me like he was slurping up a pot of Greek yogurt. But when we pulled away from each other, I was in love.

"Can I call you sometime?" I asked him.

"I don't really do the phone," he said.

I gave him my number. I floated through my front door when the class was over. I tasted that kiss again and again, the pickles and the donut glaze and a slight tinge of shoe polish, which he'd told me he sometimes used to blacken his teeth. In the course of four days, I knitted him seven pairs of argyle knee socks. I opened jars of pickles just to sniff the vinegar. I made the stupid mistake of sitting by the phone and waiting for him to call. Which, of course, he didn't.

*I don't really do the phone*, he'd told me. I'd thought it was some kind of line.

I saw him once more after that, at the abandoned pickle factory. He pretended not to know me. He said that it was one of his doppelgangers who'd gone to the knitting class, not him. But I knew. I saw an errant strand of yarn sticking to his wool pant leg. I saw the double-pointed needles sticking out of his pocket. Funny how getting your heart broken feels rotten no matter who does the breaking, whether it's a camp counselor who only danced with you because he was temporarily blinded, or a convenience store clerk who kissed you because he thought you were that *other* one-legged girl, or a grouchy old editor named Herman Mildew who should've known a good thing when he saw it.

Admittedly, I did think about killing him for a while. Hanging him by looped-together threads of Suri alpaca. Strangling him with a skein of cashmere. Suffocating him with one of the socks I'd made for him. My parents got in

touch, worried again because I was locking myself away again. “You’ve got to get over this,” they urged. “You can still live a productive life.” But they were talking about something different. They didn’t think I had the capacity for love.

I would never kill him, though. I loved him too much to hurt him. I wasn’t the one who did this. I was in my bedroom that night. *Every* night. I can guarantee you I was sitting on my bed when it happened, thinking that if I just smiled more, it would make everyone’s lives so much easier. Or I was lying on my floor, thinking about pickle juice and what the drivers through the alley must have thought when they noticed a peg-legged girl and rotund man kissing. Kissing.

I was hysterical and broken and never sure I’d be whole again, but I wasn’t and am not a murderer. Ask my parents. Ask anyone. It’s true.

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Jennifer E. Smith's Alibi

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The first thing you should know is this: I've known Herman Mildew since I was a kid. He was my cousin's best friend's sister's uncle. So, in some ways, it feels like he's been around forever.

I'm not saying that's how I got this gig or anything.

I'm only saying that we go way back.

When I was six, I sent him my very first short story. It was about a rabbit who learns his mother is a duck, and after being an outcast for awhile, is eventually accepted by both the ducks and the rabbits. At our family's annual Christmas gathering—which Herman attended as a guest of his niece's brother's best friend's cousin—he handed me back the pages, which were so covered in red ink, it looked like someone had been murdered quite nearby.

At the very bottom, he'd written five simple words: Ducks don't have bunnies, dummy.

*Of course*, I thought. I have to write what's real.

So the next time I saw him, at my cousin's best friend's sister's uncle's annual Easter brunch, I tapped him on the shoulder. He was, as usual, hovering near the food table, munching on pickles smothered with stinky cheese. He tipped his warty nose at me and narrowed his eyes.

"Here," I said, turning over my pages with the hopeful heart of a newly-minted writer. This time, the story was real. No silly tales of ducks and rabbits. Instead, I'd written about the time I got lost in a grocery store and managed to knock over an entire display of baked beans.

A few weeks later, I found an envelope in the mail. Inside

were the pages, once again covered in red ink. At the very bottom, Herman had written only this: Avoid baked beans, idiot.

I took his words to heart, and by the next year, when I was eight years old, I was finally prepared to present him with my best story yet. This one was about a young writer who meets a famous editor at a Christmas party, and I'd painted Herman in the best possible light you could ever paint someone like Herman, leaving out the parts about how his sweaters were always too small and his feet smelled like moldy bananas. I didn't even mention how he always spit pickle seeds at me across the buffet table whenever I tried to talk to him at these events.

Usually, it took a few tries to get him to actually take my stories. First, he would make little paper airplanes out of each page and send them sailing all over the room. Then, when I'd run around collecting them—pulling them out of people's eggnog glasses or the bowl of cranberry sauce—I would tuck them in his coat, and he would proceed to roll them up and pelt them at other kids as if they were snowballs. It would always go on like this for quite awhile, until, eventually, he'd get bored and stuff them into his pocket. When they finally came back to me in the mail, they'd always be covered in food stains and torn at the edges, but smoothed out just enough to appease the US Postal Service.

But this one Christmas, as I wandered around the party looking for Herman—stopping politely to say hello to people like his niece's brother's best friend—I couldn't find him anywhere. It wasn't until I rounded the corner near the front hallway that I saw something that still haunts me to this day.

There, in our living room, was Herman Mildew. He was sitting cross-legged on the blue carpet beside our Christmas tree. And where before there had been piles and piles of

beautifully packaged gifts, now there was nothing but a sea of wrapping paper.

Herman looked up when I walked in, but there wasn't an ounce of guilt in his beady eyes. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised. He was wearing a tie meant for my dad, and the pair of mittens I'd saved up to buy for my mom. His coat pockets were bulging with other things: a small radio and a model car, golf balls and tubes of lipstick, and even a row of chocolate snowmen, who peeked out over the top with their wide, unblinking gazes.

My eyes met Herman's across the room, and a smirk appeared on his face. He glanced around at the debris, noticing one last unwrapped present. Even from the doorway, I could see that it was meant for me.

"My favorite," Herman said as he tore it open, before he even knew what it was. As it turned out, it was the jump rope I'd been hoping for; it had purple handles and a sparkly rope and was tied neatly in a bow.

"That's mine," I said, and Herman grinned a Grinchy grin.

"Consider it payment," he said, "for suffering through your stories."

And with that, he stood up—pockets clinking—and swept by me, moving straight past the other guests as if nothing had happened, and right to the buffet table, where he positioned himself beside the sour pickles, looking quite pleased with himself.

Right then, right there, as I watched him make off with my Christmas loot, I made two promises to myself.

First, that I'd one day write the best short story the world has ever seen about a duck-raised rabbit who comes into uncomfortably close contact with a can of baked beans (see my award-winning, highly-acclaimed, gigantic bestseller, "Rabbit Stew").

And secondly, that I'd one day get back at Herman Q. Mildew.

But I swear to you, tonight was not that night.

Yes, it's true, I did have a piece of rope with me. But no, it was not a noose.

It was just a gift.

After all, I know how much Herman Mildew loves jump ropes.

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Rebecca Stead's Alibi

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Here's the thing: I liked him.

He taught me so much. Yes, he could be rude, cheap, and maybe occasionally malicious, but I believe that some of life's most important teachers are "difficult people," or so-called "enormous jerks." I think it must be the burden of knowing *so much more* than others and trying to share that knowledge (with other, less-knowing people) in the sometimes-rather-short time they are granted on Earth, that makes them so testy.

I don't mind unpleasant teachers, personally. All I ask is to learn.

For instance:

My AP pre-calculus teacher, Mr. Huffish, was not a nice man in the opinion of most people. He freely and imaginatively insulted the intelligence of his students, and always handed back our tests in grade order, from the highest grade in the class to the lowest. When I took the polynomial-functions quiz with a fever of 104 (no complaints; I am not a complainer), I was the very last person to be handed my paper the following Monday—along with a few words about how girls should not attempt higher math.

I happen to remember that Douglas Fine, a known cheat who had a perfect score on that quiz, laughed. But did I hold any of this against Mr. Huffish? Never. Why? Because he was a gifted teacher. No one was more saddened than I when he died just before graduation, apparently after eating something bad.

Another example: My boss Ellen at the Ice Cream Depot,

where several of us worked for the summer after high school graduation. She was a model of morality, the number-one most ethical person I've ever encountered, to this day probably. Ice cream shops don't pay particularly well, of course, but it was wrong of me to think that a free cone might be an occasional perk of the job. She was right to charge me double when she found me in the utility closet, eating a single scoop of Koffee Krunch™, no sprinkles. (I had picked out a broken cone on purpose, knowing it would otherwise be thrown out, but that was no excuse.) She was a true credit to the company until she was found in the walk-in freezer on Labor Day, apparently locked in overnight, which wasn't even supposed to be possible.

I was quite shaken, because I had learned such a lot from Ellen. I shuddered to think that it could have been any of us stuck in there, slowly freezing to death. It could have even been Douglas Fine.

And now we come to my truest mentor, my longtime editor, poor Mr. Mildew, who just last week so *effectively* managed to convey his feelings about my new manuscript: "Boring and unoriginal." Three words! How many people are capable of saying so much with so little? I still had much to learn from him. (And I was more than happy to treat for lunch.)

I realize that all of this makes me unusual. Most people have no idea how to accept criticism. They complain endlessly, without any idea of how to move forward. I, on the other hand, am a "doer." Unlike the whiners of the world, I'm *grateful* for what each of these genuinely superior people was willing to share—if anything, I was *extra-fond* of those generous enough to correct me. And since I had no motive (whatsoever) to kill Mr. Mildew, there is obviously no need for an alibi.

Even a fool like me knows that.

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Kiersten White's Alibi

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Ahem. I'm here to offer my alibi.

No, HERE. In front of the line. Quit motioning the people standing behind me forward! I'm next. I don't care if my nose barely comes to the top of the counter. I'm still standing here. Please don't make me jump up and down to get your attention. It's humiliating. No! Person-so-tall-I-can't-quite-see-your-face, don't you *dare* cut in front of me! He was—I am—oh, for the love. Fine. Just a second.

NOW I AM A STANDING ON A FOOTSTOOL. YOU CANNOT IGNORE ME. IT IS MY TURN.

What do you mean, an alibi isn't necessary? Don't you wave dismissively! You demanded *everyone* give an alibi, and I'm here to give mine. It is airtight; if it were a color it would be sparkling white and smell like Jasmine tea. I'm fully prepared to give you a minute-by-minute accounting of my whereabouts during the murder.

I—excuse me? I must be hearing you wrong. Did you say I'm too short to be a suspect? No, no, your exact quote was, "Someone as adorably wee as you couldn't possibly have committed such a heinous crime." You're not even going to interview me just because I'm the size of an average (okay, maybe smaller than average) eleven-year-old? Do you have any idea what eleven-year-olds can do?? Clearly you have forgotten sixth grade entirely.

No, I will not step out of the way so the woman behind me can explain the surgical gloves she has been wearing all evening! Since you're not interviewing me, you probably also don't want to know about what's in my purse. Allow me to

dump it out on the counter for you. Well, on second thought, allow me to ask the person behind me who can actually reach the counter to dump the purse out on my behalf.

See that? It's the hot pink Taser that I did not knock him out with. Oh, and underneath it, the pepper spray that I did not use to stun him before knocking him out. And next to those, the iron knuckles that I use merely as a paperweight, and not to deliver a few key blows to the abdomen in retaliation for one-too-many times being patted on the head by his big sausage pickle fingers. And to your right, those are not the keys to his car (which reeks of despair, past-due checks, and cat pee, and has a conveniently body-sized trunk). No, those are merely clever replicas.

Yes, that is a clothing receipt from a GapKids store. Shut up. It's completely irrelevant. Moving on.

Shouldn't you be writing this down? And shouldn't you also be wondering why no one can account for my whereabouts from the time I arrived until twenty minutes ago? (Though I will inform you I was merely placed in the coat closet by mistake because my coat was too large so they thought no one was in it.) And shouldn't you—wait a minute. Are you humming “Short People Got No Reason to Live” under your breath?

THAT'S IT, MISTER. YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME THAT VERY SMALL PEOPLE CAN BE CAPABLE OF VERY BIG VIOLENCE? You'll never doubt I'm the murderer again! Even though I'm not! But you should at least do me the dignity of suspecting me! YOU. ME. NOW. I'm going to leap over this counter and show you exactly how murderous I can be!

Well, just as soon as someone brings me a stepladder so I can actually climb over the top to strangle you.

Yes, you can interview the next person while we wait.

You're welcome.

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VERDICT

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Very interesting.

Over seventy suspects. Over seventy questionable tales.

What a lazy bunch of fabulators and fabricators, hood-winkers and horn-swogglers, leg-pullers and flim-flam artists, bamboozlers and tricksters, humbugs and four-flushers!

Based on careful reading of all of the evidence, and a close examination of all of your alibis, it has been decided:

**You are all guilty.**

Each and every one of you came here tonight with the express intention of doing in the dear old terrible editor, Mr. Herman Mildew.

**You are also all innocent.**

Because I have just been informed, by this letter, that Mr. Mildew is not deceased, demised, defunct, or in fact dead.

And now that you have all signed your sworn statements, I am at liberty to read this, Mr. Mildew's Not-Last Will and Testament.

Ahem:

*"Dear Authors/Illustrators/Ne'er Do-Wells,*

*Thank you so much for spending your evening here at the Pickle Factory. Oh, and thanks for once actually meeting a deadline, producing both stories and artwork, and so forth.*

*You look shocked. You shouldn't be.*

JON SCIESZKA

*I knew the only way to get anything out of you layabouts would be to invite you someplace fabulous . . . and then make you write for your lives.*

*So that is what I have just done.*

*And you all, as usual, have forgotten to read the fine print.*

*In signing your alibis, you have directed that your works be collected in a book called Who Done It?, and that any monies earned will go to 826NYC.*

*So you have been properly hornswoggled. But at least it was for a good cause. Thank you.*

*Your Not-Dead Editor,  
Herman Q. Mildew*

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## Afterword

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Many times when kids visit 826NYC on a class field trip—no, make that *every* time kids visit 826NYC on a class field trip—a booming voice over the intercom startles them. It is almost inevitably Mr. Mildew (sometimes Mrs. Mildew, on his behalf) demanding fresh books for his publishing company RIGHT NOW!

Mr. Mildew always happens to need the exact same number of new books as there are kids on the field trip.

The staff scrambles to action, suggesting that their visitors help them out by working together to write those books. The kids brainstorm and collaborate on the beginning and middle of a story. Different passing illustrators (who fortunately always happen to be in the room) help by illustrating the beginning and middle.

At the very climactic moment, every visitor is then asked to write and illustrate his or her own ending—to finish individually the books they have all created together.

The unseen Mr. Mildew reads each and every completed version of the work. And he approves or disapproves of each one to the relieved cheers of the entire class. (So far he has always approved.)

So what could be more fitting in composing an anthology to benefit 826NYC than to use the very model of writing-for-a-real-purpose used by 826NYC itself?

Exactly. Nothing.

Mr. Mildew has demanded the goods from over 70 writers and illustrators. Does the Herman Mildew method work? You hold the answer to that question in your hands.



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## *The Shot*

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Helen Fitzgerald

(North American, Translation Publication, and Dramatic Rights)

March 2013

When sixteen-year-old Abigail's mother dies in Scotland—leaving a faded photo, a weirdly cryptic letter, and a one-way ticket to America—she feels nothing. Why should she? Her mother gave her away when she was a baby, leaving her to grow up on a hippie commune and then in ugly foster homes. But the letter is a surprise in more ways than one: Her father isn't dead, as her mother had always maintained, but living in California. What's more, Abigail discovers she has an eighteen-year-old sister, Becky. And Abigail is legally obligated to move in with them.

After struggling to overcome her natural suspicion of anything positive, Abigail grows close to her newfound sister. But less than three months after Abigail moves in, Becky is found dead, the accidental victim of an apparent drug overdose. As Abigail wrestles with her feelings and compiles a "Memory Book" of her sister's short life, she uncovers a

horrifying plot aimed at controlling teen behavior—one that took her sister’s and mother’s lives, with vast global implications.

HELEN FITZGERALD is a highly acclaimed and bestselling UK author, whose five thriller titles have sold over 125,000 copies in the UK and Europe. She worked as a parole officer and social worker for ten years before becoming a full-time writer. *Dead Lovely* is currently in film production, and her first YA, *Amelia O’Donohue is SO not a Virgin*, was published in 2010. You can visit her online at [www.helenfitzgerald.net](http://www.helenfitzgerald.net)

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## Chapter One

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The guy facing Abigail across the desk wasn't her parent and he wasn't her friend. "Sit down, Abi," he said, with a voice that tried to be both. He wasn't a social worker either, more of an unqualified asshole. He did the Saturday night shifts. He slept when he was supposed to be keeping an eye on the residents. Abigail could get him sacked. Maybe she would if he called her Abi again.

"Abigail," she corrected him, settling into the chair. She didn't approve of nicknames. Nicknames were for people who were loved.

"Okay Abigail," he said. "There, are you comfortable?"

"I'm okay," Abigail said.

"I have very bad news, I'm afraid, Abi."

"I told you, it's Abigail," she said through gritted teeth. She wasn't impatient to hear the very bad news. Very bad news bored her, the certainty and regularity of it. It had always been delivered in rooms like this; council issue rooms with vomit-resistant carpet, untidy desks marked with coffee cup rings, and stained ceilings. Always delivered by people like this; faces etched with fake concern that did not disguise the shopping lists being written in their heads.

The Dunoon social work office, for example, had the same Samaritan's poster on the wall with the same suicide hotline number: "The children's home you're going to is in beautiful countryside," the phony social worker had promised nine-year-old Abigail.

And at the Ardrossan Assessment Center, age fourteen, the same orange files were piled on top of the desk. “The residential school has an excellent reputation,” another phony face had promised, “and it’s in the city. Won’t that be an adventure?”

Here she was, in another ugly room, waiting for another piece of ugly news. Unqualified asshole touched the orange file in front of him before saying what he had to say.

“ABIGAIL THOM” was written on top of the file in thick black pen. Underneath it was a long number: 50837. She was child number fifty-thousand-eight-hundred-and-thirty seven, she supposed. This was her number. Her file. Her crappy paper life, written by people who jotted as they spoke to her, who refused to let her see what they had written, and then went home at night, stopping first for their shopping. She looked at the file as he touched it. One day, she would like to read what was inside. It was her life after all. What gave them the right to know while she didn’t?

“Your mother died last night,” he said.

Abigail heard the words, but all she could focus on was the coffee mug. “Glasgow City of Culture 1990” was etched on it.

“This is very difficult to take in, I know.” He paused before repeating the news. “Did you hear me? Your mother died last night.”

“Oh.” Abigail had whimpered accidentally. She didn’t like giving anything away. She swallowed, sat upright, and attempted to merge the whimper into something disarming and matter-of-fact, thus: “Oh. Well thank you for telling me. Is that all?”

Unqualified asshole *was* disarmed. He had obviously been hoping for a big scene. He’d probably assumed she’d throw herself at him and cry into his thin bony shoulders.

He was probably looking forward to going home and telling his roommate (no way did he have a girlfriend) that he had consoled a sixteen-year-old orphan, that he had held her tight while she sobbed; that he, and only he, had *helped* today.

“Um, well actually, the nurse said your mother left something for you . . . at the Western Infirmary. Do you want me to take you there to pick it up?”

“No,” Abigail said. “I know where it is.”

THE HOSPITAL was a five minute walk from New Life Hostel, the building she'd been forced to call home this last year. Six bedrooms, twelve residents. Abigail thought of it as No Life Hostel. And while the residents were known as *Homeless Young Adults* or *Care Leavers* or *The Looked After*, Abigail preferred the truth to euphemisms: *Unloved Nobodies*.

She'd been an unloved nobody since nine, when Nieve died. Whoever Abigail's dead mom was, she'd abandoned her when she was just three weeks old, leaving her in the care of a middle-aged hippy who lived on a commune, smoked pot, and played guitar. Lovely Nieve. Kind and caring and giving and all Abigail had known and all she had needed.

Her home with Nieve had been unconventional—they lived on an anti-nuclear camp in Western Scotland. US nuclear submarines were based in the area, and a community had taken root to try and get them out. Nieve's bright pink caravan had “Out Nukes!” painted in black on the side. There were bunk beds at one end of the caravan. Abigail had the top bunk, with a wee window overlooking the Holy Loch. So it was unconventional, yes, but Nieve was wonderful and it was *home*. Nieve always made Scotch broth which simmered on the gas cooker. Abigail and the other children picked mushrooms in the autumn, sat by bonfires at night,

told stories, walked to school together. Adults did the same except for the school part; they spent the school days plotting to make the world a better and a safer and a more just place. Funny: Abigail couldn't remember anything beyond the first names of her childhood mates. Serena. Malcolm. Sunday, the baby. Who knows where they were now, what they'd become?

Not long after Abigail's ninth birthday, Nieve was diagnosed with cancer. Within a month, she was dead.

After Nieve's death, Abigail was visited by two men in jeans and driven away in a battered Ford Fiesta. They were social workers, they told her. They were taking her to a place called "care". She had no idea what they meant, but as she sat in the Dunoon social work office an hour later among dirty coffee mugs, orange files and Samaritan's posters, she knew it wasn't a good thing. She didn't even get to go to Nieve's funeral, a Humanist service to be held near Tighnabruaich. That night the people in the commune were going to begin the celebration of Nieve's life by painting her cardboard coffin. Abigail regretted this more than anything: that she hadn't been allowed to participate. She was going to paint two birds, flying free in clear blue sky. Nieve had always told her they were birds, the two of them. The social workers said she couldn't go back to the commune ever again. They told her there were drugs on the commune; that it was in her "best interest" to stay away from there.

So began seven years of being "looked after" in eight different establishments. Seven years of being examined and documented by early shift workers, late shift workers, night shift workers, field workers, adoption and fostering workers, and blah, blah, blah. Mumbo Jumbo: all of it and all of them. What was it that the Bible said? "Seven lean years?" Maybe the Bible wasn't a total load of shit.

Her first social worker—one of the men in the Ford Fiesta—was Jason McVie. Long haired and laid back, like the men she had known on the anti-nuclear commune. Abigail felt comfortable with him. He gave her compassion and time. He valued her opinions. He stood up for her when care workers accused her of stealing money from the staff office (she hadn't). Jason took her shopping when she had nothing to wear to the school dance. Abigail cared about Jason.

After two years on the job, Jason went off sick and then left to work in a bar in Majorca. He was sad when he said goodbye. He would never forget her, he said.

Three years later, Abigail bumped into him at Central Station in Glasgow. He had cut his hair short. He was pushing a buggy with a baby in it. His baby. Abigail raced up to him, excited. He looked as though he tried hard, but he could not remember her name. All he could offer was a vacant smile.

She never got close to anyone after that. And after several requests to visit her friends on the commune, she gave up asking, and never saw any of them again.

Abigail hurried from the office. She had to figure out what to do. Should she go now? The hospital was close, located in the same posh, trendy part of Glasgow. Both The Western Infirmary and No Life were beautiful Victorian buildings that disguised the misery within. Ironic that her mother had been so near when she'd died. Or was it ironic? Abigail had no idea where her mother had been living or what she'd been doing. All she knew was that sixteen years ago, her mother had arrived at Nieve's protest camp one rainy Tuesday evening, and begged the kind hippie to take her newborn baby. "Keep her safe," was all she'd said, according to Nieve. "Don't tell her anything about me. And never try to contact me."

“She was a good woman,” Nieve had told her more than once, “but she wasn’t able to look after you. Please don’t ask me anything else.”

At first Abigail didn’t need to know more than that because she was happy, and loved. But for some reason, on her ninth birthday, she decided she wanted to know what her mother looked like.

“Please! As a birthday present?”

“I’m sorry, darling, I can’t tell you anything. I promised.”

“Nieve, just a description. *Please*. I deserve that.”

Reluctantly, Nieve took the key that was always attached to the silver chain around her neck, unlocked the “chest of special things” she kept at the end of her bed and gave Abigail a photograph. In the small framed shot, colorful protesters marched in Glasgow’s George Square, holding placards that read NO NUKES!

“That’s me at the very front, and that’s her, there, the pretty one, third from the left in the second row. See? In orange and red? Same hair as you?”

Abigail scrunched her eyes to look at the tiny red and orange protester that was her mother, apparently.

“She has the same slim build as you, see!” Nieve said. “Thank God for small favors.”

Nine-year-old Abigail could only confirm that the woman in the photo was indeed slim and that her features were regular which meant there was a possibility that she was pretty.

Abigail took the photo from Nieve and carried it with her everywhere from that day onwards. At the moment, it was in the inside pocket of her grey Nike backpack. Apart from Nieve’s silver chain with the key on it, which Abigail always wore around her neck, it was the only memento she had of anything remotely family. But the one thing that had always

stuck with Abigail: Nieve was already dying then. And she probably knew it.

MOMENTS LATER, Abigail found herself sitting on her stiff, institutional twin bed. She hopped up and slammed the door of the bedroom she shared with a freshly arrived Romanian girl named Camelia. Her fingers did not tremble as she removed the photo from her backpack. She touched the frame, turned it around, opened it, and retrieved the small piece of paper she'd hidden there several years ago. It was a photocopy of the photo, with her mother's face enlarged and enlarged, and then cut out. She made the copy in the office of her fourth children's home while the care workers were dealing with a fight in the girls' bathrooms.

It was a blur, the zoomed cut-out of her mother's face.

Her mother was a blur. An after-image. That was the truth she clung to.

And now her mother was dead.

Abigail grabbed her coat from the hall. In the living room adjacent, Camelia was watching *Arachnophobia* on television. Abigail winced at the thick hairy spider leg on screen, and then at the even uglier scene on the sofa, where Camelia sat nervously.

*She should be nervous*, Abigail thought with dread. Dirt poor, and with a mother in desperate need of medical help, Camelia had posted somewhere that she was hoping to get a job and make enough money to support her family back in Romania. And suddenly she had a "boyfriend," Billy, who had paid for her ticket, picked her up at the airport, then dumped her at the hostel with an "I'll be back shortly." Camelia had been waiting on the sofa for Billy ever since. She looked out the window every ten minutes and at the clock on her phone every two.

Billy was very well known in the hostel. He was twenty seven years old, with the stocky physique of a rugby player and the slang of a boy from the wrong side of town. No-one ever called him a pimp, but he was. No-one ever called him a human trafficker, but he was. Abigail had shared bedrooms with two of Billy's previous "girlfriends." One had died of an overdose. One was still selling herself on Glasgow Green. Billy's strategy was to meet girls on the Internet, or directly in the hostel—rootless Romanians and homeless Scottish girls were perfect little earners. He would get them hooked on the gear and then send them to work on the streets. He tried this routine with Abigail shortly after she moved into No Life Hostel, offering her a hit for free, but she told him to go fuck himself.

Abigail stared at Camelia as the poor girl fidgeted and bit her nails. This wasn't her problem.

OUTSIDE IT was raining: surprise, surprise. God she hated this city.

"My mother is dead," Abigail said out loud as she walked along her leafy street, wondering if this might make her feel something, anything. It didn't. Maybe she'd really immunized herself against feeling anything years ago.

"My mother is dead," Abigail said again. She sloshed past the Kelvingrove Art Gallery. Apparently the man who designed this beautiful red sandstone building had killed himself afterwards. They'd made it the wrong way around, rumor had it.

Nonsense, obviously, as both sides were identical. If he'd killed himself, it wasn't because of the building. It was because he wanted to. And at the end of the day, who wouldn't want to?

Abigail was still numb. Why *would* she feel anything?

All she knew about her mother was that she wore red and orange in a protest march once, and she dumped her kid on a kind-hearted woman who wanted to change the world but died nine years later instead.

“So she’s dead,” Abigail said out loud. “So what? Who gives a shit?”

Glasgow dripped onto Abigail as she walked the three blocks from her hostel to the hospital. It was a typical summer’s night: light, but overcast and drizzly. The rain coated her with memories. When she was thirteen, she’d asked the residential workers if she could have a picnic in Queen’s Park. Not only did it rain, but one of her nobody friends slashed another of her nobody friends with the birthday cake knife. The whole gathering ended up waiting in Accident and Emergency for four hours. And in her second last year at the residential school, she asked if she could take chemistry *and* physics. The timetables clashed, they said. Surprising they had the subjects at all, considering some of the pupils her age were still reading *Spot the Dog*. In the principal’s office she argued calmly at first, and then not so calmly, and then called the principal a bloody idiot. As a result, she was banned from taking either subject. That night, she waited till it was dark, jumped out the dormitory window, and ran as far away as her legs would take her. The police found her a day later, sitting among the shattered glass of a vandalized bus shelter, drenched from the rain, and starving.

*Will I die here?* she wondered as she walked, wet, in the rain, as her mother had? Like her mother, would she be burnt in a crematorium overlooked by sad decaying high-rises? And would the wet clumps of her body ash be tossed to concrete?

Probably.

Glasgow University bore down on her with wise, unseen eyes. She had never been inside but often she'd watched from the sidewalk as students strolled along stone-pillared open-air corridors. Straight-shouldered and purposeful, the students were part of the sandstone columns, manicured walkways and important looking doorways. She wasn't. Now she could see their silhouettes in the cozy dorm windows; now the grand spire of the university loomed over her from Gilmorehill as if declaring: "You will never come to me. You are just another abandoned Glaswegian. You are a care-leaver, a homeless teenager, and now, an orphan. You think you're clever? Well you're not. You will never read inside me."

She turned away, staring at the wet ground, dodging puddles, wondering if her mother's body would still be at the hospital, and if she would be required to look at it.

"MY NAME is Abigail Thom. My mother, Sophie Thom, died here last night. Apparently she left something for me."

The receptionist tapped away at the computer before directing her up the stairs to the second floor and then to the nurses' station in Ward B. There Abigail repeated the above sentence, word for word.

"Can you spell that?" asked the pinched-faced nurse.

"Of course I can," Abigail dryly quipped.

The nurse didn't find this funny. She was Scottish, after all. Scots didn't find funny things funny. Scots liked to be miserable. Why else did they play the bagpipes? Why else did they drink and smoke themselves into early graves? Why else did they pledge undying love to crap soccer teams that failed at everything but religious bigotry?

"A-B-I-G . . ." she started

"Not you, your mother."

"Oh. D-E-A-D."

The nurse had typed three of the four letters into her computer before raising her eyebrows and looking up from above her cheap glasses. "I'm very busy."

"It's Sophie. S-O-P-H-I-E."

"Last name?"

"Thom. T-H-O-M."

"Just a moment," the nurse said, leaving the desk in the middle of the ward to enter an office several feet to the left.

Abigail looked around her. Ten beds lined either side of the room, curtains in between, some drawn, some not. The beds were all occupied. All the women looked the same: withered, yellow, and 173 years old. Her mother had probably been in one of those beds. Which one, Abigail wondered?

"Follow me," the nurse said.

The smell of antiseptic was even stronger in a private room than in the ward. Perhaps they doused the dead's rooms with an extra bottle. There was a window at one end overlooking the murky River Clyde and its ominous ship-building cranes. There was a single bed, a single bedside cabinet, a single buzzing fluorescent light, and a sheet-covered body.

As if in a dream, Abigail walked to the top of the bed, lifted the sheet, and looked down at the face. She felt a flicker of the faintest recognition from the photo she'd always carried with her. But this woman was old, a stranger. Her eyes were closed. Her lashes were thick and black, without mascara. Her eyebrows were full, nicely shaped. Abigail looked more closely. Her mother had plucked a little, yes, but not much. No need. *Hmm*, Abigail thought, *so that's where my tiny pinned-back ears come from*. Had she tattooed lip-liner onto her lips? They were full, and defined at the edges. Not thin British lips at all. Exactly like Abigail's, in fact.

She'd imagined meeting her mother many times. Never like this. Was she beautiful? Can a dead face be beautiful? Her hair was a still a lovely, raven black. But mostly, she was dead, and, no, dead cannot be beautiful.

After gazing at the face for another ten seconds or so, Abigail turned and walked towards the door.

"Wait!" the nurse called, replacing the sheet. "She left you something, remember?"

Abigail stopped but didn't turn around. The nurse retrieved a plastic bag from the bedside cabinet, and handed it to her.

"Thank you," Abigail choked out. And then she was hurtling through the corridor and down the stairs so that she had to lean against the brick wall of the hospital and get her breath back when she finally got outside. Her breath came in heavy gasps.

It was an old, thinning Tesco supermarket bag. There was something square and heavy inside.

Calming herself, she walked down the hill and across the road into the park. The rain had stopped, but she didn't notice. Climbing over a fence into the woodland by the river, she found a spot under a tree and emptied the Tesco bag of its contents: a thick padded package about twenty centimeters square. Abigail laid the plastic bag on the wet grass, sat down on it, and examined the package. It was inscribed with a thick, black marker.

*For my daughter Abigail Thom: URGENT!!!*

She picked at the sticky brown tape and tore it off.

Money. British pounds, lots of them, bundle after bundle after bundle of twenties. One of the bundles of money fell to the ground. Abigail's heart fluttered. She glanced around the shadowy park, afraid that someone may have seen her,

picked up the bundle on the ground, stood up, and put all the money in the supermarket bag. She scrambled closer to the river and knelt in the mud, no longer worried about getting dirty. The park was deserted. She was alone. She unfolded the typed letter which had come with the package.

Inside the letter was an American Airlines e-ticket. She put the ticket aside and began.

*Dear Abigail,*

*I don't know where to start so I won't tell you the beginning, I'll just tell you the end. There are five things I want you to know:*

- 1. Your father is alive. His name is Grahame Johnstone. He lives in Los Angeles. I was going to wait until you turned eighteen to tell you about him but I will be dead. Very soon, I think. I only told your father about you yesterday, the 18th July. For everyone's sake, you need to know him.*
- 2. You have an older sister called Becky. Please show her this letter. Please tell her I love her, as I love you, that I still remember her beautiful face, and that I have thought about you both every day. She was an inquisitive and determined baby. Ask for her help.*
- 3. The ticket in this envelope is a one way ticket to Los Angeles. Your father is expecting you. He will collect you from the airport. He is a clever man, Abigail.*
- 4. I saved this money for you and Becky. £25,000 each. Use it to be happy, use it to be free.*
- 5. No matter what you and Becky think of me now, I know with all my heart that you will feel differently one day. I do love you Abigail. I have always loved you.*

Her mother signed a squiggle at the bottom of the letter. A signature, in black pen. No wonder she typed the letter, Abigail thought. Her mother's handwriting was terrible, almost illegible. And her spelling! She must have been very

sick to get her own name wrong. It looked more like *Stophie Them* than *Sophie Thom*.

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## Chapter Two

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For a very long time, Abigail sat alone by the river. She read the letter once, twice—over and over. Every time she read it, she had a different reaction.

Her mother loved her.

Her mother was a junkie, or a drunk.

Her mother made no sense.

Her mother was dead.

Her mother was crazy.

Her mother was a liar.

Her mother had obviously NEVER loved her.

THE E-TICKET was American Airlines flight no. 3846, leaving Glasgow Airport at 10 pm.

*Tomorrow.*

Abigail looked at her watch. It was 9:30 pm. She grabbed the bag full of money with her free hand, gently clutching the ticket and the letter to her chest. She scurried up the riverbank, through the woods, jumped the fence, and ran all the way through the park and along Argyll Street to the hostel.

The care-worker was talking to a friend on his mobile as he answered the door. “Oh hi, Abi,” he said, immediately returning to his conversation. His concern about her bereavement had obviously run its course, or he’d

forgotten. She didn't have time to argue with him about her name. She ran into her room, slammed the door shut, and sat on the bed to get her head together. Could she trust her mother? This letter? Did she really have a father and a sister in Los Angeles? She shook her head in disbelief. The other single bed in the room was unmade, the cheap nylon sheet stained from years of use. Staff didn't bother nagging residents to wash their sheets or make their beds here, but Abigail didn't need to be nagged; she washed her linen once a week and made her bed first thing every morning. The window was painted shut and so filthy she could hardly see through it. There were no pictures or posters on the wall, only the marks where previous residents had placed theirs.

This grotty hell-hole was all she had.

Even if the letter weren't to be trusted, she had to take a chance. She had to get out of here. She would rather be in a crap situation in America than in a crap situation here, right?

So what would she need? Her thick padded jacket? No, not for hot LA. Her books? She chose three from the local library every week, to keep her brain from rotting: two serious, one lighthearted. This week they were *The Principles of Biochemistry*, *The Silence of the Lambs*, and *Funny Physics Problems*. She'd only read one quarter of the first one so far, what with her mother dying and all. She decided to take them to keep busy and distracted on the flight. She grabbed the Nike backpack her last foster parents had given her to "get the hell out of our house!" and shoved the books inside.

What else? Her black *Fly* boots? These were full on winter wear. But she loved them! So much that she just had to put them on in the Schuh store in Buchanan Street and walk out casually. She decided she would wear these, even though it was midsummer, with her skinny dark grey

combats, her light grey “F\*\*\* the Monarchy” t-shirt and her black cropped leather jacket. Her favorite outfit.

She threw some underwear and spare t-shirts and socks in the bag—along with the padded envelope with the money, letter and ticket (buried at the bottom)—and checked the chest of drawers and the one-foot of hanging rail in the wardrobe that she had been allocated. Nothing important there. No personal effects. Nothing sentimental. What was the point in gathering things when she knew she wouldn’t be staying anywhere for any length of time? Abigail’s essentials, her whole world, didn’t even fill the small Nike backpack she had been so rudely bequeathed.

Last, she went to the shared bathroom and added her toothbrush, toothpaste and Fibre Putty hair product.

Despite her chaotic background, or perhaps *because* of it, Abigail was methodical, clean, neat, and diligent. She made a mental list to make sure everything was in order.

The e-ticket definitely read 10 pm tomorrow? Yep, plenty of time.

The length of the flight would be eleven hours. The books would keep her busy.

Was her luggage the right size and weight? Yes.

She read the ticket very carefully and was alarmed when she noticed the warning: “You must fly with a valid passport.”

*Shit.*

Why had her mother not thought about this? Why on earth *would* Abigail have a passport? As if kids who are abandoned by their mothers get to go on skiing holidays in Switzerland in the winter and camps in France in the summer! As if she’d ever had the opportunity to get out of this God-forsaken city, let alone country! Sunnier, wealthier, happier, Edinburgh was only sixty miles away, and she’d never even made it there. Once, the care workers at Netherall House

had organized a trip to Loch Lomond. It sounded exotic. Abigail was excited. It turned out to be a twenty minute drive. In a minivan. Normal schoolchildren in full-sized buses laughed at them en route. The minivan full of “special” children eventually parked in a deserted lot. The ten children got out and threw stones into the lake. It rained. They drove home.

She had been nowhere, done nothing.

Camelia was in the television room. Several other residents were on the frayed red-fabric sofas, watching a twenty-year-old soft-porn show called *Eurotrash*. The teenagers watched the ten-ton television set all day here. Staff never questioned it. It kept them quiet. Hungover from drinking and drug taking, the residents stared, comatose, with blood-shot eyes. Camelia had put makeup and her coat on since Abigail had last seen her, and was standing at the window.

“Camelia, can you come here?” Abigail hissed.

Surprised that someone had spoken to her, Camelia rushed over to the door and followed Abigail into the hall. Unlike the other girls, her eyes were alert. She was new, Thank God: an addictions and misery virgin. She still had hope.

“Have you heard from Billy?” Abigail demanded.

Her English was stilted, but very good. “Billy is coming here to get me.”

“When did he say that?”

She looked at the clock on her phone. “Five hours ago.”

“Do you know where he is?”

“His text say he caught up in a meeting in town.”

“A meeting, right. He’ll be at The Solid Bar,” Abigail said.

Camelia’s eyes brightened. “You take me? You know where it is?”

Abigail said simply, “No, I’m not going to take you to see him. Billy does not love you. He is not your boyfriend.”

“What do you mean? I don’t understand you. Me and Billy, we are together, you understand? He pays for my ticket here—”

“Come to the bedroom,” Abigail interrupted. “Come and talk.”

Closing the door behind them, she sat on the bed opposite Camelia. She tried to sigh, to give a reassuring smile, but her heart was pounding. “When I look at you I see a younger version of me. When I believed people. Please listen to me, Camelia. You’re not the first girl Billy has done this to. He targets girls who have nothing to lose, which is why he’s always hanging around here or bringing girls over from your country. He gets them hooked on heroin. You know what heroin is? Smack? And then he gets them to sell their bodies.”

Camelia’s face was blank. “I know what heroin is. But you are not right. Billy helps me get a job and brings my family over here. My mother is very sick.”

Abigail shook her head as patiently as she could. “He’s not. He’s a bad, bad guy.”

“I heard the other girls say you’re strange. Leave me alone,” Camelia snapped, standing to leave the room.

“Fine. But I’ll take you to see him now if you want.”

THE BUS shelter had no glass and no roof, and the rain had started up again. Camelia’s mood had soured significantly when she and Abigail showed up an hour later at The Solid Bar, dripping wet. The warm wind had turned the rain horizontal, obscuring the view of the red sandstone tenements on Argyll Street and the long dreary queue of shops on Sauchiehall Street.

Billy was sitting with a girl at the back of the long, dark, narrow barroom. If he’d been brought up somewhere different, maybe Billy would have been handsome. The basics

were there, certainly: dark hair, deep brown eyes. Abigail could imagine his Facebook profile pic might seem quite appealing. But he'd grown up in bad, bad Glasgow. It had muddied him, made him ugly. Rock music blared from television screens in the dark corners. The place stank of booze. Billy was rubbing the girl's arm affectionately. He was completely wasted.

Camelia stiffened a little.

"Don't get upset," Abigail whispered as they walked towards him. "What you're learning now might turn out to save your life."

Billy's glassy eyes zeroed in on Abigail. "Well, look who it is, Mother Teresa!" He'd called her this ever since she refused to inject. He blinked and tried to straighten, noticing Camelia. He moved his arm away from the girl at the table. "Hello! What are you doing here?"

Abigail answered for her. "She's been waiting for you. You were supposed to collect her, remember? You were supposed to help her because you love her?"

"Aye, so I am. Sorry I got waylaid, sweetheart."

"I told her everything about you, Billy," Abigail continued evenly. "What you do with your girlfriends. She doesn't believe me."

He sneered. "What you on about?"

Abigail turned her attention to the girl sitting beside Billy. The bags under her eyes matched her thick, badly applied eyeliner. She was a wreck. And she was younger than seventeen. Sixteen, maybe even fifteen.

"Get out of here," Abigail commanded.

The girl took some money from her bra and handed it to Billy, planting a sloppy kiss on his cheek. Then she raised two fingers at Abigail and Camelia. They watched as she staggered out in the rain.

Billy just laughed. “Now get tae fuck, Mother Teresa. I want some time with ma bird.” He ushered Camelia to sit beside him. “C’mere, Amelia.”

“Camelia,” Abigail’s new friend corrected, her voice shaking. “You *bou . . . carule . . . Bagate-as in mormant.*”

Abigail placed herself in front of her in case she was tempted to smash Billy in the face. “He’s not worth it. Go and wait for me at the door. I won’t be long.”

Eyes blazing, Camelia stomped out and turned in the opposite direction from Billy’s latest conquest. Once the door swung shut behind her, Abigail turned back. “I need a passport. It’s urgent. I have to have it by 2 pm tomorrow.”

“Wit!” Billy laughed as he exhaled smoke. “It takes days to get those sorted. And it’s expensive. Talking money, you owe me for that girl. Her ticket cost nearly 200 quid.”

“If you get me the passport, I’ll give you a thousand.”

“Hmm,” Billy took a long drag on his cigarette and said, “Uh-uh, cannae do it for that. No way.”

Abigail turned and reached into her bag, shakily counting out £2000 with only her back as protection, making sure that Billy could not see the other wads of cash. “This is all I have,” she said. “2K, if you get it to me by two. I’ll meet you here.”

He stubbed out his cigarette, looked at the cash, smiled, and then extended his hand to shake Abigail’s. She did not reciprocate. Instead she divided the money into two piles, pushed one towards him and said, “Half now, half tomorrow. Here. Two o’clock.”

With that, she strode from the bar and took Camelia’s arm, hurrying back to the bus stop in the pouring rain.

THE HOSTEL was empty when they returned, except for a night shift worker Abigail had never met before. He

was reading her orange file. He put it down nervously, embarrassed to be caught.

“Hello,” he said, extending a hand—and this one she did shake. “I’m Arthur.” He was new to the world of social work, obviously. He wanted to talk to them, get all their gory details. “You want a cup of tea, girls?”

Abigail recognized the look of morbid fascination on his middle-class face. Beneath it was a dollop of fear.

“No thanks Arthur. Bath and bed,” she said, taking Camelia’s hand and escorting her to the downstairs bathroom.

“By the way, what did you call Billy back there?” Abigail whispered.

“A Bou— a castrated bull. I told him he’s an ass and I want to put him in an early grave. I want to do this so much. You cannot understand how much I want to do this.”

Abigail squeezed Camelia’s fingers and let go. “He’ll do it himself honey. Another two years tops. Save yourself the bother.”

Camelia swallowed, blinking back tears.

“It’s a big day tomorrow. We’re going to get a good night’s sleep,” Abigail went on, scrubbing the iron bath of its brown stains and clearing hair clumps and soap bits before running the water. “Have a good soak. I’ll use the one upstairs.”

“Big day for you, yes,” Camelia said. “But what am I going to do? You’re going to go home. But I can’t. I have no money . . .” She began to tremble. She wiped tears from her eyes and wept.

The bath was full. Abigail turned off the taps. “Don’t cry. Get in. I’ve got money. I can get you home. You dodged a bullet, missus. You’re gonna get out of this place. Everything’s going to be fine.”

It wasn’t a lie. At least, not for now.

ABIGAIL DIDN'T sleep. Of course she didn't. Her thoughts raced: her mother was dead; she was leaving her country; she had a father, a sister . . . If she ever fell asleep, and woke again, would it all be a dream? Or part of the same old nightmare? She made lists in her head. She'd arranged to get the passport at 2 pm, but didn't really need it till later. She'd given this time to be careful. Billy wasn't known for his punctuality. So tomorrow, she'd have several hours to do the things she now realized she needed to do.

AS SOON as the sun rose, Abigail didn't allow Camelia out of her sight. After breakfast, she escorted Camelia to the travel agency, where she bought a one-way ticket to Romania. After that, she took Camelia with her to the hospital, explaining about her mother's death and the ticket to America. The room smelt the same, looked the same, but the bed was bare and empty. As Abigail stood looking at the place where her dead mother had lain, a nurse came in.

"Excuse me, it's not visiting hours. Can I help you?"

"A woman called Sophie Thom died in this room. I forgot to ask about the ashes. Is she being cremated?"

"Sophie. Yes. In fact . . ." The nurse looked at her watch. "Her funeral is happening now, at Lambhill Crematorium. If you hurry . . ."

"Right, thanks." On her way out, Abigail turned and asked, "By the way, what did she die of exactly?"

"I'm sorry but I'm not authorized."

"Come on, I'm her daughter. Did she kill herself? Or was it drink, or drugs?"

"You're Abigail?"

"Yes."

“She told me about you and Becky.”

“What did she tell you?”

“Strange things. She was delirious towards the end.”

“Tell me what she said.” Abigail only now realized that she still was blocking Camelia’s exit with her arm.

“She kept saying, ‘It’s all up to the girls now. My golden girls. All up to them.’”

Abigail stiffened. “Delirious or just crazy? Tell me, please, how did she die?”

“It was cancer. Your mother had breast cancer. She was very brave.”

*Cancer?* Abigail tried to process the word. A normal way to die. Shitty, but normal. And subject to all sorts of factors and change. So what was with the urgency and the suspicious cash and the exact timetable mentioned in the letter?

“You’d better hurry,” the nurse said, checking her watch again.

THE TAXI driver was pleased with the tip. Funny how money made everything so easy. Abigail had paid him double to step on it. He called a cheery thanks as the two girls jumped out of the car and ran inside the crematorium.

Hearing music, Abigail opened the door on the left of the foyer. The room was packed with wailing grievors. A family member was reading his eulogy. At the foot of the coffin, was a picture of a teenage boy. Wrong room. She ran out again, and pushed the other door. Camelia hadn’t uttered so much as a peep since Abigail had dragged her from No Home. Part of her was relieved and not all that surprised. Another part wanted to know what this very sad Romanian immigrant thought of all this madness . . .

There were no grievors in here. Just a coffin that was slowly disappearing through a purple velvet curtain toward

an abyss of flickering flames. One man sat at the back, a tear running down his cheek. He was around forty, blonde.

Abigail sat in the front row. Camelia slid in beside her.

“Goodbye, mother, whoever you were,” Abigail whispered. Her voice caught. This was all happening too fast, too fast . . .

The coffin disappeared into its furnace.

Once the coffin was gone, the minister turned off the classical music on the cheap old fashioned CD player, picked up his bible, and walked out without so much as a sideways glance. There were no flowers, no pictures, and only one other griever. *Sure*, Abigail thought, *funerals are supposed to be depressing, but this one takes the biscuit.*

Abigail turned to the blonde man. But he was already halfway out the back door.

“Excuse me!” she yelled, racing after him.

By the time she got outside, he’d taken the taxi she’d just departed. The back of his blonde head disappeared down the long driveway. Camelia must have seen the disappointment and sadness on her face, because she reached for Abigail’s arm.

*Screw this.* With a strange detachment, Abigail marched back into the crematorium and asked the woman at reception if she could make arrangements to have her mother’s ashes sent to her new address. She didn’t know her new address yet, nor did she know what she’d do with the ashes, but it had occurred to her the previous night that she should probably find a way to get them in case it was important to her newly discovered sister.

The receptionist tapped on the computer. “I’m sorry. The next of kin has already requested the urn.”

“Next of kin? Who?”

“I’m afraid I can’t give you that information.”

“She was my mother!” Abigail almost yelled. “How can you not give me that information?”

“If she was your mother,” the receptionist said through gritted teeth that were asking to be knocked out, “then how could you not already know?”

Abigail’s jaw dropped. Fortunately, Camelia dragged her away from the desk and out the door before she could say a word. “Come on,” Camelia murmured. “We go. Leave it. It’s nearly two o’clock.”

THE TAXI reached The Solid Bar at ten past two. Abigail’s nerves had once again frozen into their standard unfeeling position. “Wait for me here and leave the meter running,” she instructed Camelia, then dashed out and headed inside.

Billy was drinking a pint at the same seat as yesterday and wore the same Glasgow underworld uniform, labels displayed for the world to see (Jeans: Diesel; T-shirt: Calvin Klein; Overall Message to the Universe: Unoriginal.). It was obvious that he hadn’t washed. He probably hadn’t slept since she’d last seen him either; his sockets were so dark and so deep his eyes had almost disappeared into his head. His greasy hair stuck up at the back. His cheek scar was red, irritated.

Billy took a passport out of his pocket and slammed it on the table, trying to smile as if pleased. But he was jittery, haggard. Abigail reached for it.

“Uh-uh. Other half first,” Billy snapped, leaving his hand on top of the passport.

“Once I’ve looked at it,” Abigail said, snatching it from his grasp and opening it.

For a split-second, she was almost tempted to laugh. She found herself squinting at a thirty-two-year-old red-haired woman called Alina Beklea. “What? Who? That’s not me.”

“Course it’s not, ya numpty. Ya think I could get one with you in one day? Anyway, you didn’t give me a photograph.”

“You didn’t ask for one.”

“I’m supposed to think of everything?”

“But . . . I look *nothing* like this.”

“I dunno, dye your hair, scowl a bit more than usual, put thick makeup on and a baggy dress, and way-hay Alina!”

“I have a ticket to LA in my name! Abigail Thom. This says Alina Beklea.”

“Change your flight.” He stubbed out his smoke and scowled. “Gimme time to get your photo and sort a passport with you on it.”

“My father is meeting me there—”

“You got any more money?”

Abigail tensed. “Maybe.”

“Then, little miss goody-goody, *maybe* you should buy another plane ticket in the name of Alina Beklea.”

Abigail sighed, took the money out of her pocket, and counted out £300.

“Good idea. That’s what I’ll do. Consider the second half of your fee significantly reduced.” She slammed the money down at the bar, then turned and ran.

“Oy! Get back here,” Billy yelled. “That’s not right. I know where you’re going, Mother Teresa. I know where you’re ending up . . .”

With Nike bag and passport in hand, Abigail lurched to a stop at the taxi window and tapped the glass. “Just gotta get something from the chemist,” she gasped to Camelia. “I’ll be two secs.”

She knew Billy was too wasted to chase her, but she still stole an anxious glance over her shoulder as she raced over to Central Station. The glass-roofed hall was buzzing with pigeons and chatter. Hundreds of people stood in front of

the timetable board, staring like zombies as they waited for their platform number to appear. The chemist was open. *Hair Dye . . . Hair Dye . . .* of a thousand different types; Abigail chose one that matched the color in the photograph, trying to ignore the ridiculous exotic names like *Sandstorm Sunrise* or *Fiery Dreamweaver*. Then she sprinted across the road and jumped back in the taxi.

She had less than seven hours to make her flight.

ARTHUR, THE new guy, was back on duty when they arrived.

"Hi, girls. We're making pancakes. Do you want to help?"

"No thanks," Abigail said as calmly as possible. Her palms were clammy. "I'm dying my hair red. Think it'll suit me?"

"I think it will," he said with a smile.

She tried to smile back. He was helping in the kitchen. He was polite. He was motivated. No doubt all of that positivity would be sucked out of him within a year.

Camelia lay on her bed while Abigail waited for the dye to take hold. She had everything she needed now, except a ticket in the right name. She'd have to go to the airport earlier.

What time was it? 4 pm already.

Suddenly, it dawned on Abigail that she didn't have everything she needed. There was one other thing she wanted to take with her.

Raising a finger to her lips, she tiptoed out of the room and scurried into the office. Five orange files were strewn across the desk. Flicking through them, one eye on the door (everyone was still making pancakes), she found hers, grabbed it, and ran back to her bedroom.

"What's that?" Camelia asked.

"Nothing," Abigail said, wrapping the orange file in a

plastic bag and putting it into her backpack. Still, she had to smile. *Now* she had everything she needed.

The alarm on Camelia's mobile phone went off. Her color was ready.

"HERE, LET me do your makeup," Camelia said as they stared into her cracked Russian-made compact. "You have such pretty face." She dabbed tiny on tiny dots of foundation and smoothing them with her soft fingers.

Even in her panicked state (while her hair was the same color as Alina Beklea's, she did *not* look thirty-two-years old) Abigail smiled at Camelia's reflection. No-one had ever done this for her before. It felt wonderful.

"Why don't you wear lip gloss?" Camelia asked, applying thick goo to her lips. "Go mwah! Like this." Abigail made the kissing noise requested in the mirror. Camelia laughed. "Are you loving yourself?"

"Wow," Abigail said, surprised at the transformation.

"But now, we have to make you ugly and old." Camelia was gentle and methodical as she worked her magic: using mascara, eyeliner, too much (green!) eye-shadow, bright pink lipstick and three more coats of foundation.

"Now look!"

*Blimey.* Abigail checked herself one last time. She was old and ugly . . . just like the woman in the photo. She resisted the urge to jump up and hug Camelia.

It was nearly 6 pm. Time to get going.

The hall was empty and all the doors were closed, so noone would see her go.

*Thank God for small favors.* It was one of Nieve's favorite phrases. Abigail hated goodbyes. She stopped at the whiteboard in the hall. It was littered with photocopied pages of house rules, health and safety information, helpline

numbers, leaflets about leaving care, employment agencies and drug counseling. She found the only clear spot, two inches by two inches, and wrote in tiny writing with the black marker, “Bye everyone. I’ve gone to America. Keep safe. Abigail. X”

“Let’s go,” she said to Camelia.

Luggage in hand, the girls walked along the empty hall, and out the door. A taxi was waiting just outside. It was the first bit of good luck they’d had. Thank God for small favors, indeed.

“I WANT you to take this,” Abigail said, counting out £20,000 of the money her mother had left her in the backseat.

Camelia didn’t respond. She blinked at the pile of cash several times, then turned her head back to the window. “No. I can’t.”

“Take it.”

“Why?”

“I don’t want it.”

“Save your mum’s life. And your own. Use it to be happy and free, whatever that means.”

Camelia shook her head. Abigail didn’t prod. Finally, she tore her gaze back to the worn leather upholstery and ran her finger along the top bundle of money. Looking up at Abigail, she smiled. “Thank you,” she choked out. She reached to place her hand on Abigail’s hand. “Thank you so—”

Abigail withdrew. From instinct. Swallowing, she turned and opened her own window. She stuck her head out as the taxi made its way along the overpass that cut the gray city in half. She felt the Scottish wind on her face—for the last time, she hoped. She sighed at the River Clyde and the

new monstrosities that had been built alongside it, designed to rejuvenate, but just adding to the city's scars. Glasgow was just like Billy. Unhealthy, angry, unhappy, scarred with wounds from lip to ear.

She breathed in the city air as they hurtled along the motorway, passing nothing notable along the way, lots and lots and lots more of non-notable nothing.

“Good riddance, Glasgow!” Abigail yelled from her taxi window. “Good riddance, shithole of the world! Good riddance!”

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## *Strangelets*

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Michelle Gagnon

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On a day like any other, six smarter-than-most teens wake up in the same hospital after having experienced a strange traumatic event that they can't quite remember . . . other than being forcibly sucked into an abyss. Somebody or something seems to be pulling the strings. With individual clocks ticking—and with each guarding an individual secret—they band together and conspire to piece together the whole of what happened.

Soon they discover that the hospital is a facsimile, and that the one adult they'd assumed they could trust is also hiding something. Their only hope is to escape their false world, and to find out why they've each been trapped.

MICHELLE GAGNON is a veteran thriller writer and International Mystery Book Association bestseller, whose novels have been published in numerous countries and include *The Tunnels*, *Boneyard*, *The Gatekeeper*, and *Kidnap*

MICHELLE GAGNON

✂ *Ransom*. She has also worked as a bartender, freelance journalist, and model. Her first YA trilogy, *Don't Turn Around*, debuts with HarperCollins in May 2012. You can visit her online at [www.michellegagnon.com](http://www.michellegagnon.com)

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## Part One: AWAKENING

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## Chapter One

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### *PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA, U.S.A.*

Sophie Page felt herself getting closer. Every inhale drew farther apart from the previous until she could measure the gaps between them. She could almost picture the breaths strung like beads on a necklace, stretching far into the distance, growing more isolated from one another as they approached the horizon. Her heartbeat followed suit, its thump slowing until she felt only an occasional tap against her ribcage.

It was easier than she'd expected, letting go. Sophie was vaguely aware of her parents standing on either side of the hospital bed, gripping her hands tightly, as if they alone could tether her to the earth. Her younger sister, Nora, sobbed quietly at the foot of the bed. The whisper of sneakers on linoleum came and went as silent nurses flitted around like moths, doing their best to be unobtrusive.

They'd offered her a priest, but she'd turned them down. It seemed hypocritical when she hadn't been in a church in years. She'd allowed her parents to tuck Soup, the bedraggled stuffed cat she'd slept with as a child, in bed beside her. But they all knew that was more for their sake than hers. Sophie hadn't thought about Soup in years—at least, not until she'd been confined to a bed for what remained of her life.

Sophie drew a sudden, sharp breath. She hadn't known exactly what to expect. In the past few weeks, as her inevitable demise approached, she'd developed a voracious appetite for stories of near-death experiences. Apparently people saw everything from angels to a bright light to nothingness. Some were exotic: a Lakota chief claimed that he rose above the clouds and saw a circular hoop surrounding the world, its edges vanishing into infinity. Others were more mundane, like the Calcutta man who found himself in a large government office, where a panel of faceless people berated him for showing up early, then sent him back into his body.

She figured she should have *something* to look forward to. Anything was preferable to her present: endless rounds of chemotherapy and countless awkward discussions in doctor's offices where various experts tried to explain why her lymphoma wasn't responding to treatment. A steady stream of hospital beds until she finally landed in this one, in the hospice. Would she see anything at all? The secrets of the universe revealed? Another strange bureaucracy? Or just a blinding flash, then nothing.

Whatever she'd expected, it hadn't been this.

Her parents stiffened, though she could still feel their grasp. Her sister had also frozen mid-sob, as if someone had snapped a photo. The walls suddenly seemed to bow out, expanding. Like the hospice room had suddenly come to life and sucked in a huge breath of air. And at the foot of her bed was . . . a circle. Technicolor? No. Not bright enough. Not light, exactly, but not dark, either. Sophie was transfixed by it. Every color imaginable, whirling in a dizzying gyre. It started as small as a pinhole, rapidly increasing in size until it was the size of a loaf of bread, then a car. As it grew, it drew the contents of the room inexorably inward.

Sophie wanted to call out to her family and ask if they were seeing it, too, and maybe knew what it was. But she was as immobilized as they were, heavy—and this was it, she realized. This was how she was going to die.

An overwhelming calm and peace descended on her. Sophie relaxed, letting her mind spin along with the gyre, touching lightly on memories. All felt rich and crucial somehow . . . The time she ran away from home after a silly fight and Mom found her hiding behind the local ice cream store . . . When Nora was first brought home from the hospital and Sophie couldn't believe this red-faced screaming tiny thing was her sister (*Aren't babies supposed to be cute?*) . . . Dad swinging her up on his shoulders, so she could reach the apples dangling just out of reach on the branches above. Funny: She hadn't had the heart to tell him that apple picking was boring.

Sophie didn't have any regrets, not really. It would have been nice to have lived longer: a real life, a full one. But she'd had plenty of time to come to terms with the fact that she'd never go to college. Never know what it felt like to fall in love. Never marry or have kids of her own to take apple picking or fight with and make up with. She *was* ready. The gyre reached the tip of her toes. A peculiar heat came off it, as if it were a living thing lapping at her heels. Sophie smiled one last time and closed her eyes, letting it take her.

*Galway City, County Galway, Ireland*

Declan Murphy tripped and nearly went flying. At the last moment he regained his footing and tore forward, feeling the hardness of pavement through his worn trainers.

He chanced a glance over his shoulder. The two arseholes were still after him. They looked winded—they were old, probably thirty—but seemed to be closing the gap. And

they looked damned pissed to boot.

“Bloody hell,” Declan muttered to himself. *All this fuss over a box.* He tucked it more securely under his arm and kept running.

He had no idea what was inside. Based on the doggedness of his shite pursuers, it was probably more valuable than he’d thought. As Declan rounded the corner, his mind spun through possible escape routes. Usually, he’d have at least three mapped out in advance. But this had been a one-off, a job taken on a lark from a random guy in a pub. Not the sort of thing he’d usually do. Problem was, he’d had in mind to buy something nice for Katie, her birthday coming up and all. And she’d made him swear that any gift he gave her was bought, not stolen. So when the stranger offered a hundred euros up front, another hundred on delivery, Declan agreed. After all, the man said he was only claiming what was rightfully his in the first place. And it was a house job. Not a bank or a business. The study window was never locked—no one would even be home, he assured Declan.

*In and out, easy,* the bloke claimed. *Quickest two hundred quid he would ever make.*

Except, of course, there *had* been someone. Two someones, in fact—they’d entered the room as he was slipping back out the window. By the time Declan reached the corner they were nearly on him, proving to be in surprisingly good running shape for a couple of middle-aged bastards. But now they were losing steam.

The house was located in Salthill, the nicer section of Galway—and an area Declan wasn’t familiar with. He should have known, he chided himself. His mum always said not to trust lads from Salthill. So he shouldn’t have been surprised when he darted right and hit an alleyway, rather than the water he was expecting. And the alley dead-ended in a solid

brick wall. He'd made a right hames of it, sure enough. Either that or the fool in the pub had set him up.

Cursing, he doubled back, only to find the two arse-holes blocking the entrance. Declan's eyes darted around, looking for a fire escape, a dumpster, anything. But he was surrounded on all three sides by solid walls, not so much as a bin lid at hand to toss at them.

His pulse quickened. They could have been best mates, the kind you find at a football match, short-cropped and leather-jacketed and red-faced with beer, shouting obscenities. But their faces were pale, and their eyes dark and sober. Still, Declan forced a cocky grin as they advanced. "Aye, you got me, then." He raised the box with both hands. "You're welcome to it."

*Already got a hundred quid, after all,* he told himself. More than enough to get Katie the necklace he'd had his eye on. A heart with a ruby set in the center, the color just a few shades brighter than her hair. Declan cursed himself. Really would have been so much easier just to lift it. She'd never have to know. Hardly any security to speak of at Hartmann's, at least nothing he couldn't get past.

With no response from the pair, he set the box down and backed away until he reached the rear brick wall. The larger one stooped to retrieve it. He was tall and not as flabby as Declan had initially thought, with black hair. The other bloke was blond, lean and compact like Declan. He stared at Declan, unblinking. Now that they were less than a meter away he saw that they *weren't* so old—late twenties, maybe, or early thirties.

They whispered to each other in hard, low voices. It was a different language; Russian, maybe? They had that Slavic look, as if no matter how much they ate they'd still be hungry.

Declan swallowed. “All good then, eh?” he managed.

The taller one handed the shorter one the box. He opened it without taking his eyes off Declan, checked inside, then nodded brusquely. He strode out of the alley without looking back.

The taller one watched him leave, then turned. Something in his eyes struck Declan to the core, a sort of tired resignation. With slow-motion horror, Declan watched the Russian reach under his T-shirt and pull a pistol from the waistband of his jeans. Declan raised both hands. “Hold up, mate,” he said. “I mean to tell no one, if that’s what you’re worrying about . . .”

The Russian glanced back over his shoulder, clearly checking for witnesses.

Turning, he raised the gun to shoulder height. Time again seemed to slow. The killer’s eyes transformed. They looked bored, sleepy. Somehow that made it even worse . . . like at the end of the day he’d barely remember this. Declan pictured him sitting down to supper, telling the wife, *Aye, I went to the bank and the Tesco, got a pint . . . something else . . . oh, nearly forgot about shooting that sixteen-year-old lad in the head.*

Declan felt his knees start to go, everything inside him rapidly turning to liquid. Katie’s face flashed through his mind, her blue eyes sparkling, the light glinting off her teeth as she laughed . . .

The gunman’s tired eyes suddenly leapt awake like window shades snapping up. Wide open, they reflect a glistening light. He reared back and winced. The gun fired. Declan ducked, terrified, hands instinctively protecting his head. Tiny shards of brick rained down on his skull and fingers from the wall behind.

A miss. Declan had a chance.

“Jay-sus, please,” he pleaded frantically. “I swear on my mother’s life . . .”

But the bloke didn’t seem to have heard him. He was still backing away, his own hands raised. His face was now terrified and curiously illuminated.

Declan frowned. Crazy bastard was acting as if a monster had appeared. He swiveled around. Blinked. There was an enormous hole in the wall below where the bullet had struck: a swirling, glowing whirlpool. In a brick wall. Panic was suddenly replaced by something else . . . Wonderment? Relief? He was reminded of the time he took E with Katie at a dance party; the walls had shimmered then. But he was cold sober now, this had to be something else. It reminded him of those stories they told in church, of true miracles . . . Reverently, Declan reached toward the colors with both hands—

Something yanked hard from the other side, dragging him into the vortex.

### *Rafah, Gaza Strip, Palestinian Territories*

Anat Erez pulled her hair back in a tight knot and covered it with a black cap. She checked back over her shoulder at the line of olive trees, silhouetted at the top of the hill. It had been hard to suppress the feeling that she was being followed. Then again, a certain sensible paranoia wasn’t just healthy; it was mandated.

A single light flickered in the window of the house in front of her. It was little more than a hut: single story cinderblock construction, no porch. A far cry from the three-bedroom house she’d spent the last seventeen years sharing with her family in Tel Aviv. But it was only a way station, Anat reminded herself. She’d be inside for no more than a few minutes anyway.

A cloudless night would have been better, but there wasn't enough time to wait. Another few weeks and Egypt would likely have completed their subterranean barrier. Plus she was due to report back for military service in two days, and escape from the base was virtually impossible. No, this was her last chance to get away. Anat drew a deep breath and approached the door.

She knocked twice, waited a beat, and then rapped again. After a long pause, it creaked open soundlessly. A tiny, wizened woman blinked up at her. Her hair and face were wrapped in a traditional *hijab*, her body shrouded in the flowing black robe favored by Bedouin women. The top of her head barely reached Anat's chest. Anat was quite tall, a meter and three-quarters, but this woman was a dwarf. Without a word she turned and vanished into the depths of the house. Anat followed, holding her breath. They passed through a darkened room—the kitchen judging by the smell, air heavy with the tang of lamb and spices. Anat's stomach growled. She'd been too nervous to eat much at dinner earlier, instead spending the meal covertly gazing at each member of her family, committing their faces to memory. She'd already accepted the fact that she'd probably never see them again. But that hadn't made it easier to eat.

Besides, that was the past. Now, after weeks of planning, she was here. Anat gulped hard and followed the woman into the next room. The small space was lit by a candle set in a wall niche. Even in the flickering half-light, Anat could see that the rug was surprisingly rich and plush in comparison to the starkness of its surroundings. The old woman kicked at it with her heel, exposing the edge of a trapdoor. She jerked her arm at Anat and then at the floor.

Anat bent over and rolled away the rug. The trapdoor was

bigger than she'd expected, roughly four feet by four feet. A large metal latch was set into the wood on one end. At another harsh gesture from the woman, Anat bent double and hauled it open, grunting with the effort.

A flight of cracked concrete stairs descended into the darkness. Anat set her foot down, gauging her weight against the top step as she drew a flashlight out of her backpack's side pouch. The woman tugged at her arm, frowning.

"What's the problem?" Anat asked in halting Arabic. She was stupid for not having tried to master the language, for all sorts of reasons.

The woman's hands flew as she spoke, agitation on her face.

Anat didn't recognize the dialect, but gathered that there was some question about payment. "I already paid the fee," she stammered, hoping she was using the correct term. "By smuggling, last month."

The woman shook her head firmly.

Anat's lips pursed together. She'd been afraid something like this might happen. She'd arranged to cover the cost of her passage into Egypt by smuggling cartons of cigarettes across the border. Not guns, or any sort of weapons—she'd insisted on that, even though Khalid, the smuggler she'd been dealing with, had scoffed at her. Let him scoff. Others may have been corrupted, but there was no way she was bringing anything into Gaza that would then be used against Israel. She'd paid in advance by making three separate trips across the border between Gaza and Tel Aviv. Israelis were rarely harassed in transit. But their documents were noted, and Anat didn't want to leave a trail for anyone to follow. Hence the necessity of a departure underground. The tunnels between Egypt and the Gaza Strip had served as a conduit for everything from food and medicine to rockets and mortars

over the years. Anat repressed a twinge at the thought that she was entering a passage built by Hamas militants intent on the destruction of her people. If she'd finished her military training, there was a good chance she would have faced some of the very artillery that had been shipped through here.

No matter. She buried any anger, pain, and regret. That part of her life was over. This tunnel would lead her to Egypt, and to Hazim. She'd expected Khalid to greet her at the house and escort her through the tunnel. She wondered where he was. Was this old crone a relation? His mother, even? She felt a twinge of annoyance—typical of him to change the plan without consulting her. No matter, she reminded herself. It was a tunnel, after all, there was only one way in and one way out. Anat had come this far. Nothing was going to stop her now—especially not a dwarfish woman who looked like she could barely stand unassisted. At the thought, her stomach settled somewhat.

“I already paid,” Anat said firmly in Hebrew. “And I’m going now.”

Yanking free her arm, she descended. There was a muttered grumble behind her, and the trapdoor slammed—smothering her in pitch blackness. Anat’s throat caught. She froze, then fumbled for the flashlight. She emitted a small gasp of relief when it flared to life.

The beam illuminated the remainder of the stairwell. At the bottom, she could make out a narrow dirt passage, vanishing into another shadowy abyss. It smelled dank and oppressive, like that Byzantine crypt she’d visited on a field trip to Jerusalem, in happier times . . .

Anat swallowed again. She’d never liked close, dark spaces. She was acutely aware of the press of earth overhead. She’d seen stories on the news about tunnels like

these collapsing. Old Israeli cynics, army lifers who wanted to sound brainy, called them “wormholes:” a joke about astronomy and physics she would never find funny. The tunnels really shouldn’t even exist, they said. They offered a theoretical passage to some alternate universe (Egypt certainly qualified), and anything beyond short-term-use was a death sentence. Get stuck in one and you’d vanish in time, like a rat Palestinian smuggler or a bit of stardust.

At the bottom of the stairs Anat waved the beam over roughhewn walls. This tunnel at least appeared to be well constructed, despite its size. She had to tilt her head to keep from brushing the ceiling. This was one of the few times that her height worked against her. If she jutted out her elbows, they’d scrape the walls on either side of her. She swallowed down the claustrophobia and pressed onward.

Trying to distract herself, Anat tried to picture the underground barrier that was being built somewhere close by. After the collapse of the Mubarak regime, the more militant factions of the Egyptian army had begun constructing a wall of bomb-proof steel along the border. The wall was over ten kilometers long, extending 18 meters below the surface. Once completed, this type of escape would no longer be possible. Anat tried to take comfort from that. She couldn’t have afforded to wait, right?

Anat had no idea how far this tunnel went, or where exactly it would emerge. She’d heard that some were nearly 800 meters long. That was all right. Even stooped and stumbling, she could walk that in less than twenty minutes. Steeling herself, she picked up the pace. A street map of Rafah, Egypt, was tucked in her backpack. But she didn’t need it; she’d memorized the fastest route from the tunnel exit to the small hotel where she was supposed to meet Hazim.

That is, if the tunnel ended where she thought it might. Khalid had been a little vague about the exact spot—a *100 meter radius*, he'd promised—or what she could expect to find there.

Something shimmered up ahead, just past the beam of her flashlight. Anat's heart leapt into her throat. The air was suddenly thick with a pungent smell that reminded her of burning plastic. Hazim had also promised that she wouldn't encounter anyone else. The last thing she needed was to run into real smugglers.

Trembling slightly, Anat raised the flashlight beam. She frowned. The tunnel ahead had vanished, the dirt floor dropping into darkness. Was it a pit? Had a section of the floor collapsed, maybe? Or had Khalid betrayed her, sending her to certain death?

"*Kus emek*," she muttered to herself.

Her eyes widened as more of the floor slid into the void. The receding path picked up speed under her flashlight, like a fishing line being reeled in, vanishing rapidly into nothingness. Anat took a step back, then another. Seized by panic, she turned and sprinted back toward the trap door, the flashlight jerking crazily over the rough dirt. Her breath came in tight gasps. Her chest burned.

She'd nearly reached the stairs when she stopped. She had the very disconcerting sensation of being sucked backward. Anat fought to grab hold of something, her nails clawing at the dirt. But she was drawn inexorably toward the encroaching void. She should have known better than to trust a smuggler, she thought. With that, the force swallowed her whole.

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Chapter Two

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*THE HOSPITAL*

Sophie opened her eyes and frowned. Weird. She was still in a hospital bed. Of course, in most near-death experience stories, people woke up just like this. She hadn't expected to be one of them, though. She really thought she'd *died*. But then, she'd always joked that spending eternity in a hospital was her idea of hell. Ironic if she turned out to be right.

If she was still alive, though, they must have moved her. Sophie's frown deepened as the details came into focus. This was not the hospice room where she'd spent the last few weeks of her life. The fake Ficus tree in the corner was gone. The TV had been swapped out for what looked like a big iPad . . . either that or an empty picture frame. And instead of being hooked up to numerous beeping machines—via needles and sticky pads and probes—she was attached to nothing. At least, nowhere she could feel. Why had they moved her? Even weirder, she still wore her own pajamas—anywhere besides a hospice would have insisted on an official gown.

Reflexively she turned her head toward the window. The curtains were drawn, so it must be nighttime. The overhead lights weren't muted the way they usually were. But that explained why her family was gone.

Sophie felt a twinge of annoyance. Kind of strange for them to head home when she was at death's door, wasn't

it? After barely leaving her bedside for weeks? Maybe something in her condition had changed, and she *wasn't* at death's door. But surely she couldn't have improved that much. Unless they'd suddenly developed a miracle cure for her rare brand of terminal lymphoma that afternoon.

She felt alive enough, though: groggy and thirsty and irritated.

Unexpectedly, the thought bothered her. Sophie was ready to be gone. She'd felt *relief* as that void had swallowed her whole. But she must have been dreaming, right? Or maybe this was a *dream*. Great. The last thing she wanted was to face more interminable weeks with her depressed family hovering around maintaining a death watch.

Well, best thing to do when you found yourself stuck in a bad dream: try to get some sleep. Sophie fumbled around for the call button with her right hand. No sign of it. She sighed and tried with her left; sometimes the newer, more incompetent nurses moved it to the wrong side during sponge baths. Not there, either. Crap. There was no way she was going to be able to sleep with fluorescent lights glaring down on her, it was like trying to nod off on the surface of the sun.

"Damn it," she muttered. Her throat was dry. "I can't believe they forgot to turn off the lights—"

Sophie yelped. The room abruptly plunged into darkness. In the wake of the glare, it took a minute for her eyes to adjust. Not pitch black, she realized; there was a faint seam of light around the circumference of the room at ankle height and another at waist level, casting the space in a watery blue glow. Sophie experienced the disarming sensation of having been suddenly submerged. "Weird," she said out loud in a low voice. She'd spent a serious chunk of the years since her diagnosis in various hospital rooms. None had been this fancy.

And as far as she'd seen, no one had entered the room to dim the lights. Something occurred to her. It was a ridiculous thought, but maybe . . .

"Lights!" Sophie called, feeling silly.

She flinched as the lights flared back to life. "Dim lights?" she tried. Sure enough, they faded to a pleasant half-glow. She almost laughed.

"Wow," she muttered. Wherever she was, it was pretty over the top. Dad's health insurance had balked at covering the hospice costs. She had no idea how they were affording this place. And she'd really love to ask someone. She sat up and groped among the blankets for the call button one last time, then peered over both sides of the bed to see if it had fallen and was dangling from its cord.

While hanging over the left hand side of the bed, a strange realization struck her. Slowly, Sophie drew back up to a seated position and held her hands in front of her face, examining them.

It had been at least a week since she'd managed to move so much as a finger, never mind sitting up and hanging off the side of her bed. Yes, the IV drip was gone. But there was no scar where it had been attached. In fact, *nothing* hurt. She'd grown accustomed to the slightest movement sending waves of pain through her, tortuous jolts that were only diminished by the steady pump of morphine. It was almost as though she'd never been ill. Suddenly, Sophie wasn't tired anymore. If anything, she felt like jumping out of bed and turning somersaults down the hall.

But it would probably be a good idea to clear that with a nurse first.

Sophie took a deep breath, then called out, "Hello? Anyone?"

No response.

*Here goes nothing.* One at a time, she eased her legs over the side of the bed. Wiggled her toes, then rolled her ankles. So far, so good. She eased her feet to the floor, clutching the arm rail in case her legs buckled. She hadn't walked in over a month. Her joints and shins felt weak, wobbly, but they held up. She took one shuffling step forward, then another. Inch by inch, she made her way across the room.

By the time she reached the door, Sophie was panting from the unaccustomed exertion. She clung to the handle and leaned against the wall, catching her breath. Summoning her last reserves of strength, she pulled the door open.

More weirdness. The corridor was dark and empty. Sophie braced herself against the frame and squinted in either direction—just a long line of doors. There was no nurses's station in sight. What kind of hospital was this? Besides being a) poorly lit and b) apparently uninterested in monitoring critical patients? She would have expected to find at least a couple of nurses hanging around, not to mention a security guard.

"Hello?" She called out again tentatively. "Anyone here?"

From somewhere behind the walls she heard a muffled exclamation, followed by the quick pounding of heavy footsteps on linoleum. The door beside her suddenly flew open. A tall girl darted out from it, whirled, and spotted her. She was nearly six feet, and looked to be about Sophie's age. Wild black curls tumbled in waves over her shoulders. She couldn't have been a patient; she didn't look sick. She wasn't wearing a hospital gown, either. Or pajamas. She was dressed head to toe in a long-sleeved black shirt, pants, and combat boots.

Spotting Sophie, her black eyes narrowed. Sophie shied back. The girl lunged forward and jabbed a finger into her

chest, barking something in an accusing tone. Sophie wasn't sure what language she was speaking, but it wasn't English. It sounded Middle Eastern. Sophie wanted to step back, but her weak legs trembled too much.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand you," she said meekly, holding up her hands in a shrug of explanation.

The girl made a face and spat, "American?"

"Yes, I'm—"

The girl glared up and down the hall, as if someone who could understand her might be lurking in the shadows. She turned back to Sophie.

"Let me out," she hissed in low, menacing, heavily accented English. "I promise I won't say a word. If the tunnel was built by the CIA, then we're on the same side."

Sophie blinked. *I've accidentally been transferred to a psych ward.* She bit her lip to keep from saying the words out loud. *This is a terrible mistake.*

"Why don't we try to find a nurse," she said in a soothing voice, sincerely hoping that this girl was just insane, not truly dangerous. "I'm sure they'll help us sort this all out." *And get me back where I belong,* she added mentally.

The girl rolled her eyes, made an exasperated noise, and stalked back to her room. With a withering backward glance, she shoved open the door and vanished back inside.

"Great," Sophie muttered. So much for getting help to find the people in charge. She would gladly have traded the fancy room for a competent staff. She considered checking the adjoining wing for a nurses's station, or maybe trying to see if the patients in the other rooms weren't certifiably insane. But an unexpected wave of exhaustion swept over her. Sophie's entire body sagged; she suddenly wasn't sure she'd be able to make it back to her hospital bed, never mind turn somersaults.

With effort, she managed to stumble back into the room. Sophie collapsed on top of the bed, dragged her feet up and flopped over, then closed her eyes. The fatigue was like an anchor dragging her down. She gratefully succumbed to it. If this was a nightmare, fine. If not: also fine. After all, her family would be there when she woke up. They'd be able to explain what was going on.

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## *The Sweet Dead Life*

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Joy Preble

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Sixteen-year-old Casey really doesn't care much about anything except for getting stoned, getting laid (no luck there)—and getting help for his 13-year-old sister, Jenna, who is dying under mysterious circumstances. He's sacrificed his high school career to work two jobs, making up for lack of insurance coverage in Jenna's treatment. (Dad ran away when they were kids; Mom suffers from an inexplicable depression that renders her catatonic at best.) On the day Casey's life hits rock bottom, Jenna has a seizure. Racing to the hospital in their beat-up Prius, Casey gets into an accident. He dies; Jenna doesn't.

In limbo, Casey is given a choice: return to earth as a guardian angel for Jenna, or remain in Paradise. He chooses the former . . . he has to save his sister. But as told in journal entries from Jenna's POV, Casey's miraculous return from the grave comes with a price. His life as an angel is a lot better than his previous life as a mortal: he's a

JOY PREBLE

lot more attractive to girls, for starters. As the two of them fight to keep Jenna alive, they discover that Jenna was being poisoned. And as they work to solve the mystery behind this heinous deed, they discover dark secrets about their parents and the rest of their small suburb—while Casey wrestles with his newfound powers and hard-to-control id.

JOY PREBLE is the author of the highly acclaimed and top-selling *Dreaming Anastasia* series. A former English teacher, Joy grew up in Chicago and is a graduate of Northwestern University. She is now a full time writer and lives with her family in Texas, where she has learned to say “y’all” without any hint of irony. You can visit her online at [www.joypreble.com](http://www.joypreble.com)

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## Jenna's Journal

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*December 3rd*

I found out two things today: One, I think I'm dying. And two, my brother is a perv.

My friend Maggie says that things happen for a reason. This is how Mags thinks: that there's an explanation for everything and you just have to find out what it is. Like the time in second grade when I got the flu and couldn't go on the class trip to Huntsville to see the giant statue of Sam Houston. According to Maggie, the universe spit this out on purpose. Maybe if I'd been there, something bad would have happened, like a pigeon crapping in my hair while I stared up at Sam's enormous head. Someone might have broken into our house, but didn't because they peeked through the window and saw me lying on the couch all feverish, watching *The Price is Right*. Maggie believes the world works like that.

Me? I don't. This drives Mags nuts, but like my dad used to say, "You believe what you believe. Who am I to say you're batshit crazy?"

My father bailed on us when I was eight and we haven't seen him since, but at least he left me words to live by and a colorful vocabulary. Unfortunately, the administration of Ima Hogg Junior High is not a fan of colorful vocabulary. Even though I'm probably dying of some strange disease—I'll get to that in a second—they had no problem assigning

me three days of after school detention for calling my algebra teacher Mr. Collins an asshat. Which he is.

You would think a school named after a woman whose parents had an obvious screw loose in the naming department would be more reasonable. You would think.

So this is what I was going to tell Casey—a.k.a. my perv brother—when I walked into his room. That he was going to have to pick me up at five for the next three afternoons because the state of Texas had cut the budget, and that there was no more late bus for juvenile offenders like me, and that it was way too far to walk in my currently dying condition.

Okay, at that moment I didn't really know I was dying. The doctors (all five of them) have been shifty about actually telling us that there's no cure for what I have. I'm just a thirteen-year-old girl who had to quit track because I can't run even as far as the mailbox anymore without gasping for breath. I've got weird rashes on my feet and funny dark patches on my tongue. My white blood cell count is totally out of whack. I'm always cold and I'm thirsty even though I drink like I'm a camel preparing for a desert trip. And just for grins, my pee has started to look a little green.

Here's what I don't have: Cancer. Diabetes. Scabies. Ebola. Meningitis. Beri beri. Flu. Congestive Heart Failure. Pica. Exploding Head Syndrome. (Yes, it's real. Look it up!)

Anyway, Casey's silver Prius was in the driveway this afternoon when I got home. It's really my mom's car, but Mom isn't exactly driving much these days. She's not paying the bills much either, but that's another story. And here's the thing I've learned about a Prius. If your stoner brother (yes, Casey the perv) leaves it running all night because, in his words, "It's like a fucking stealth-mobile. Really, Jenna, I had no idea it was on," it will likely *not* be able to take either of

you to school the next morning. And if your brother lets his stoner pal Dave borrow it to go get tacos at Jack in the Box at two AM, it's likely to come back with the hood scratched and a huge dent in the front bumper. Not to mention likely to stink like a combination of grease and weed.

"Likely" is a word I toss around a lot when it comes to Casey, because even when he tells the truth—and this is the kicker; he usually does—he sounds like the worst, stupidest liar on the planet.

Dave blamed the accident on the Prius dash display. According to Dave, it's extremely distracting because you can set it to show you when the car is running on battery, so the blinking lights freaked him out and caused him to close his eyes after placing his taco order. This is why he bashed into the drive-through menu. In no way did Dave believe that this incident related to what he had inhaled prior to the taco run.

*Dave to Jack-in-the-Box worker: "Dude. I'm stuck in the menu."*

*Jack-in-the-Box worker: "Dos tacos. That's Spanish for dos tacos."*

I walked in, tossed my backpack on the couch and headed upstairs. Mom's door was closed. No surprise there. I thought about knocking. The thought didn't last long. I could hear whatever was on her TV, a cooking show by the sound of it. Mom hasn't cooked a meal in at least a year, but she's got this thing for the Food Network. "That Paula Deen," she commented the other day, "do you know she used to be afraid to leave the house? Now look at her."

I didn't want to look at Paula Deen. I wanted my mother to snap out of whatever kept *her* inside the house all day. My tongue was covered with dots and my pee had begun to look like dye for green lifesavers. But when your mother is still in the same sweats and T-shirt in which she's spent the last three days and nights, telling her that maybe you've

got some freaky jungle fever probably isn't going to make a difference.

Last week, I proved this theory by showing her my tongue. She cried and told Casey to take me to the dentist. Then cried some more when we reported that: a) The Visa card was rejected and we now owed the dentist \$250 and b) Dr. Kensington had informed me that the tongue was "mysterious."

I climbed the stairs, tired and pissed at Mr. Collins and the Ima Hogg detention policy. My boots felt too heavy for my legs, which was a definite bummer because I loved those boots. They were brown square-toed Ariats that I'd gotten at Bubba's Boot Town. I still had the receipt—not because I planned on returning them, but because it listed the name of the guy who'd sold them to me. I was wearing boots that had been fitted by a salesman sporting a huge Texas-shaped silver belt buckle, whose name tag identified him as Jesus. You don't return boots like that, even if some weird disease is making it hard for you to walk in them.

Casey's door was closed. I knocked. It was probably hard for him to hear me over the sound of Katy Perry singing about wanting to see someone's peacock. So I turned the knob and walked in.

My brother was sitting against the headboard of his bed, his laptop on the comforter next to him, and his right hand down his jeans. He was wearing a MOUNTAIN DEW T-SHIRT with a stain on the front. He was breathing sort of heavily. The state of Texas did not believe in sex education, but we still had cable and high speed Internet. I was not unaware of what he was doing.

"Gross!" I hollered.

It took Casey a few seconds to register my presence. He scowled and yanked his hands out of his pants. If there is

anything worse than being saddled with an unidentifiable disease and three days of detention, it is walking into your brother's room to find him, unzipped, on a porn site. Correction: I had no idea if he was looking at porn since I couldn't see the laptop screen. For all I knew, he was jacking off to pictures of the Grand Canyon. Which might explain his lack of a girlfriend . . .

A pain sliced through my head so hard that I gasped. Tiny white dots hazed my vision. Terrific. *My brother is pleasuring himself to pictures of the Colorado River and I'm the one who's going blind.* I clutched at my temples. Vaguely, above the sound of Katy Perry, now reminiscing about the taste of cherry Chapstick, I heard Casey's voice saying something. The smell of stale marijuana and possibly the remains of a tuna sandwich wafted through my nostrils. I crumpled slowly to the floor. Maybe I'd have fallen faster, but the Ariats made my legs less flexible. Thank you, Jesus.

I hit the carpet with a thud, my cheek pressed against something grossly squishy that I was too distracted to identify. Above me on the bed, Casey screamed. It sounded like, "Jenna, don't break my bong." Or maybe, "Jenna, I'm going to sing a song."

"I think I'm going to puke," I managed. Could heads actually split in two like in a cartoon? Because that's what mine felt like it was about to do.

"Hang on," he said. I felt-more-than-saw him fling himself off the bed. "Lemme get the garbage can."

I lay on Casey's less than clean cream-colored carpet, taking shallow breaths and trying not to vomit. The room had fallen silent. Maybe Casey had turned down the volume. Or else I was going deaf along with everything else. I willed myself not to pass out and—since I had nothing better to do—I scanned the crap under Casey's bed, which seemed to

include a lot of wadded up pieces of Kleenex. A plate with half of what was definitely that tuna sandwich I'd smelled was sitting in the middle of the used tissues.

*Note to self: Spray laptop with Lysol before using.*

"Here." Casey shoved the garbage can at my head. "Can you sit up?"

"Only if your pants are zipped."

"Ha ha. Did you ever hear of knocking?"

"I have three days of after-school detention," I said, because honestly this was why I came in here wasn't it?

I managed to ease myself up off the floor. Casey kneeled next to me holding the garbage can like he was offering me a prize. His hair was sticking up at funny angles and his breath smelled like corn nuts. His eyes looked a little red. He reached up and picked what turned out to be a half-chewed corn nut off my cheek. Then he smoothed my hair back and held it while I vomited into the can.

We peered at the puke when I was done. If I had to color it in a picture, I'd use the forest green crayon.

"What have you been eating?" Casey asked. He stared at the puke some more and then at me. I wiped a stray dot of vomit off my Ariats. I had recently cleaned them with some leather cleaner that Jesus had talked me into along with the boots.

"Nothing. Nauseous all day. Oh wait . . . I had an apple slice during nutrition." Nutrition was what Ima Hogg called our fifteen minute break. I guess because we were too old for them to call it recess.

"Oh."

"Yeah," I said. "Take your hand off my head. I know where it's been."

Then I passed out.

When I came to, we both agreed that maybe I was dying.

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Jenna's Journal

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*December 4th*

Spring Creek High School  
Casey Samuels Progress Report  
College Algebra: 52  
Economics Honors: 12  
AP English: 67  
Teen Leadership: 33  
AP Physics: 70  
European History: 0

We dealt with my maybe—possibly? yes? it might be the truth?—dying condition the way we dealt with everything these days: We hoped it would go away. And hoping something will disappear isn't exactly an action-filled activity. I told Casey I would be okay (or at least no worse than I already was) and that he needed to get back in the semi-wrecked Prius and drive on an angle to work. I thought about telling him to keep his hands out of his pants while he was on the road, but I figured he had learned his lesson by having his sister faint dead away in his room after catching him in the act.

Okay, we both knew that wasn't why I passed out. But if it could put a stop to my brother's self-love, I was all for it.

"I'll bring you back something," he said as he helped me back to my own room. "I'll take care of Mom, too," he added before he headed downstairs. "You just rest. Or do your homework or something."

The fainting and the puking had suddenly made me hungry. Or at least the slightly nauseous feeling I'd had all day was gone and I was aware that maybe I should eat.

"Brisket sandwich," I said. "And French fries. But only if Jorge is working the fryer." Jorge Garcia was a genius at making French fries. He was about five foot four and from Guatemala and was the best line cook at BJ's BBQ, where my brother waited tables at least four nights a week. He'd gotten the job through Dave before Dave was fired for toking up in the back when he was supposed to be bussing tables.

True story: Casey's name tag at BJ's doesn't say Casey. It says Dick. When I noticed this and asked him about it here's what he said: *"This way I can say to customers, 'Welcome to BJ's. I'm Dick.'"*

This, ladies and gentlemen, is the boy who shares my gene pool.

As he left my room, a piece of paper fluttered out of the back pocket of his jeans and landed on my floor. I started to yell after him, then saw the words Spring Creek High School and shut my mouth.

After I was sure he was really gone, I picked what turned out to be his progress report off the floor and crawled into bed. Eventually I would have to drag myself downstairs to get my backpack. But at the moment, hunching over my brother's pathetic grades was about all I could manage. My heart started to pound like it had before I'd passed out, but not because I was about to faint again. I blinked a few times. If Mr. Collins saw me right now, I know what he'd say. *"Jenna Samuels. What's up with the crying? Your brother was my best full-back Ima Hogg ever had. But he's a quitter. I put my ass on the line for that boy, talked him up to all the Spring Creek coaches. And what does the little pissant do? Just up and quits the soccer team after his sophomore year. So think twice about wanting to follow in his footsteps young lady."*

I know this because it's exactly what he said to me while waving my less than completed homework in my face. Somehow my lack of desire to slog through five pages of algebra problems made me a slacker. That I already had an A in Algebra—and that Mr. Collins was a shitty teacher who preferred worksheets to actual teaching—didn't seem to affect his thought process. Instead, he simultaneously called me out and dissed my brother. Calling him an asshat was a logical response. But somehow I was the one with three days of ASD. Go figure.

Here's the conversation we didn't have:

*“Hey Asshat Collins, you know what? Casey quit soccer because he's working two jobs. Casey is working two jobs because we have no health insurance and the five doctors who haven't been able to figure out what's wrong with me still want to be paid. Mom hasn't had a paycheck in over a year. Her savings account—which turns out had been sizeable from sources unknown—is currently down to \$875.53, a sum that is less than our mortgage payment. Which hasn't been paid in five months. Oh: And on the nights that Casey isn't at BJ's serving people brisket and ribs and recommending the blackberry cobbler with vanilla ice cream—which by the way I used to love before everything began to taste more or less like sawdust—he delivers Chinese food for Beijing Bistro. Our refrigerator is a sea of take out boxes and Styrofoam containers. And the Prius generally reeks of egg rolls and sweet and sour pork in addition to the weed odor and the grease from Dave's taco habit. So if you and the wife and three little Collins rugrats need some moo shu this weekend, you know who to call. Don't forget to tip.”*

I wiped my eyes with the back of my hand. The throwing up and the almost crying had made me dehydrated. Slowly, I hopped off my bed. When I was sure I wasn't going to smash to the floor, I shuffled my way downstairs and into the kitchen. Even in my condition I was not about to drink

bathroom water. I knew it was the same thing as the stuff that came out of the kitchen faucet but somehow it always tasted funny.

I stood at the sink and chugged two glasses, then found some orange juice in the fridge whose expiration date I didn't bother to check. Still thirsty, I drank that down, too, and then emptied the carton into my glass so I could take it upstairs.

I stepped out of the kitchen at the same exact moment that Mom stepped out of her room. As per usual, she was wearing a pair of old red sweats from Victoria Secret that were way too big and a pink COCKRELL BUTTERFLY EXHIBIT T-SHIRT that I'd gotten at the Science and History Museum when I was maybe eight—shortly before my dad decided that he wanted to be elsewhere. I'd put it in a bag of clothes to give away but somehow it had ended up in her wardrobe. Possibly because it fit her. Her hair was greasy and pulled back into a tail, but she'd put on some blush and eye shadow and lip gloss like she was trying to make an effort, which was definitely not something she'd been doing lately.

I stared at her.

She stared back.

"Casey's gonna bring you something to eat later," I said. It seemed a good enough conversation starter. Better than, *Hey, I'm puking green now*. "Maybe that salad. You know, the one with the chopped meat and eggs and stuff?"

She nodded. Her eyes looked watery. She had managed the eye shadow but not mascara and her eye lashes looked almost non-existent.

"I was thirsty," I added when she didn't respond. "You want something to drink?" I gestured with my shoulder to the kitchen in case she needed a context clue.

"I'm fine," my mother said.

I rocked on the heels of my Ariats, took a long gulp of my remaining juice, and told myself to remain calm. “Really, Mom?”

She was silent. I didn’t want her to be.

“Where’s Daddy?” I suddenly asked. “Do you know?”

I wanted to believe that I had no idea why I said this, seemingly out of nowhere, but I did. I hate being lied to about as much as I hate being judged by people like Mr. Collins, who think they know all there is to know about me because of my brother. (Even if Casey had tidied himself up and changed out of his MOUNTAIN DEW shirt into his much dressier CHICKS DIG NERDS shirt before he left for work.) *Note to self: Casey and I need to have a conversation about the very clear—to me—connection between his fashion sense and his lack of female attention.*

My mother was absolutely not fine. The Samuels family was absolutely not fine.

So here’s the answer I wasn’t expecting: “Maybe.”

I nearly dropped the glass. “Maybe?”

“Yes,” my mother said. “I’ve been calling around. I’ve been online. Maybe.”

What the—Calling around? Online? Was she serious?

“Jenna,” Mom said, fingers knotting around the monarch butterfly in the middle of her T-shirt like she was trying to squash it. “There’s stuff you don’t know.”

“What stuff? Dad stuff? Other stuff? What are you talking about?”

I think she started to tell me. Her mouth was moving and I think she was forming words. “Mom,” I said. The glass of juice dropped from my hand and crashed into the hard wood floor. It shattered into a million pieces. I could see but not hear that my mother was screaming. I started to shake. I was so cold. Unbelievably freezing. What the hell was wrong with me?

“Mommy?” I whispered. My eyes rolled back in my head.

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Jenna's Journal

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*December 5th*

The way my brother tells it, he had just set down the family-sized platter of peach cobbler with Blue Bell French Vanilla ice cream on one of his tables when Bryce, the assistant manager at BJ's, came running over from the front register.

Bryce, in case anyone is interested, is not exactly a lightweight. He's about thirty (although it's hard to tell), lives in a doublewide trailer on his parents' property in the back of Château Hills—a sub-division that absolutely does not contain French mansions—and collects comic books. He's the kind of guy stores like Spencer's are made for. If you ever walked by Spencer's at the mall and wondered, hey, who would really spend eighty bucks on a six foot beer pong table or twenty bucks on The Fartinator, Bryce is your answer. Okay, Casey is that kind of guy, too. But that's not the point here.

The point is that Bryce skid to a lumbering stop in front of the vat of cobbler, gave it a brief but longing glance, and then told Casey that his mother was on the phone. As Casey tells it, Bryce said that he had to leave *immediately* and that Bryce would cover for him, but only just this once.

I guess my having some sort of potentially fatal seizure, just as my mother was about to impart the secret of the century (not that either Bryce or Casey knew the latter part) was only good enough for a one-night reprieve from BJ's. Which is a handy thing to know if I make it to sixteen and am in need of part time employment.

After that, it all got a little crazy, even for us, which is saying something.

Normally, I don't write stuff down that I haven't seen with my own eyes, but as mine were mostly rolled to the back of my head, I'm going to have to believe Casey's version of what came next. And as no one would really believe it anyway, it's the best I can do.

So. According to Casey, he ran to the Prius and headed home. I was still shaking and seizing. It's not like I could have told him that Mom had just admitted that maybe she knew where Dad was. Even if I could have, it's not like he would have stopped to listen.

What he did know was that maybe I hadn't kept my promise about not dying while he was at work—and that bills or no bills, money or no money, he had to get me to the hospital. My mother had conveniently freaked out again and was crying and screaming and rocking back and forth. This was not exactly compatible with squeezing into the back of our beat up but environmentally friendly vehicle. So when we hit the road toward Houston Memorial Hospital Northside, it was just me and my brother and a car that drove like a drunk who couldn't walk a straight line.

"Stay with me, Jenna," Casey said as if quoting dialogue from some sappy Lifetime movie. He reached over and patted me on the shoulder. The Prius angled right, bouncing over those speed bump thingies and onto the shoulder. Casey yanked the wheel. We barreled back into our lane. I had nothing left inside me to puke up, so I dry-heaved a couple of times instead. The lingering aroma of Dave's tacos wasn't helping.

"Not going anywhere," I croaked. "Unless you bash us into the guardrail. Then all bets are off."

Casey grunted. I checked my seatbelt. The hospital exit

was about half a mile away. My vision was going all wonky. Everything was covered in a cloudy haze. I was freezing again—so cold that my teeth started knocking against each other like a bunch of crazed woodpeckers.

“Casey.” My voice was so tiny that I could barely hear myself. “I don’t know if I’m going to make it.”

Through the haze, I looked down at my Ariats. I wondered if maybe I should pipe up and tell him that I wanted to be buried in them. No sense letting Goodwill have my favorite boots. Not that I’m opposed to charitable contributions or anything. But I *loved* these boots. If I was headed to the afterlife, at least I could go in style. I felt certain that Jesus would agree. Especially since he’d made an extra commission from that leather cleaner.

I took one last lingering look at my feet and tried not to dry heave again. Then I blacked out.

Casey says that we made it to our exit and were racing along the feeder road to the hospital about a mile down—just past Woodhaven Cemetery and Houston North Rehab, followed by a strip center that housed a spinal surgery facility with a prosthesis clinic, a Vietnamese noodle house, Café Monterrey Mexican restaurant, and Stacy Carrigan Legal. In the Texas suburbs we like to cover all bases. If the ER or the rehab couldn’t fix you, at least they didn’t have to cart you far. After that, your loved ones could get a bite to eat and chat about who they could sue.

“We’re almost there,” I heard Casey say as I lurched into consciousness again.

And then we drifted to the right. I stared out the window in curious detachment as we clipped the side of a Ford F250 Super Cab coming out of the strip center, lifted into the air, and smacked down into the ditch on the side of the road.

Then we began to tumble. Prius's are stout little things. They do not tumble well.

"Shit!" my brother yelled. He slammed his arm into my stomach like this might keep me from hitting the windshield. "Shit!"

It felt like we flipped for hours. My airbag released. I know this because it smacked me in the chest. Somehow we'd gone airborne again during the tumbling. I was too dizzy to do anything but squeeze my eyes shut. When I opened them, we were right side up in the parking lot, Pho Fun Noodles to our right. Everything in my body felt like it had been smashed or set on fire or both. My left eyelid was swollen. With enormous effort, I turned my head to the left.

In the driver's seat, my brother was very, very still. His CHICKS DIG NERDS T-SHIRT was covered in blood. So was his face, and his hair, and his neck. A huge dark gash ran down his cheek. More blood.

My airbag was still smashed against me, its plasticky burning smell assaulting my nostrils.

Casey's air bag had not deployed.

"Casey!" I screamed. "Casey!" Why wasn't he moving? Why wasn't he talking? Why hadn't the damn air bag done what it was supposed to do? Because Dave had screwed up our car, that's why. Damn Dave and his marijuana habit and his taco obsession and his inability to drive. Except that wasn't all of it. This was my Mom's car. If she'd been driving it like a normal person rather than hiding in the house from something that didn't even make sense, then none of this would have happened.

I have never seen a dead person before except on TV. My expectation had been that the first dead person I would actually encounter would be me. Because that was the other

reason this had happened. My brother was driving *me* to the hospital. And now he wasn't breathing.

Somewhere in the distance I heard a siren. The airbag was pinning me to my seat and I was still hollering Casey's name. I was so weak and so tired and I couldn't even cry.

"You can't be dead," I whispered, my mouth moving against the stinky air bag. "You just can't be dead. I haven't even told you what Mom said. And if you're dead there won't be anyone to pick me up from After School Detention."

Casey didn't answer.

The siren wailed louder. *Ambulance*, I thought.

My airway was still being cut off by the huge white bag, but I felt a single tear drip from my swollen eye. I was dying of causes unknown, and my brother looked like he had just bitten the dust on my behalf. If I hadn't passed out again, I probably would have gotten hysterical.

A bright light roused me, though my eyes remained closed. The ambulance was here. Probably a fire truck, too. Somewhere, I heard music. Instrumental, maybe? Mostly drumming . . . What kind of ER driver cranks the radio? Maybe they'd sent a helicopter. Why was it so bright? Had my eyes been hurt in the accident? I had enough wrong with me already.

I tried to pull my arm out from under the air bag, but I couldn't. Maybe I had dislocated my shoulder. The brightness of the ambulance light kept pressing right through my eyelids.

"Casey?" I forced my eyes open, squinting in a strange flickering strobe-light. It was like last Christmas when our next door neighbors the Gilroys screwed in so many multi-colored bulbs that they blew the power grid to our cul-de-sac. Their gigantic blow up Santa had deflated and bent over in the yard like an arthritic senior citizen. "Casey?"

*Blink.* I saw Casey, illuminated in the glare. *Blink.* He still wasn't moving. *Blink.* He was still covered in blood. *Oh God. Help me. Please. Don't let Casey be dead. And while you're at it—if you're listening—don't let me die, either. I didn't want to be the girl who flipped over in a beat up Prius that stunk of stale cannabis and then died of scabies.*

I knew I didn't have scabies, by the way. But this was a crisis. I needed to call it something.

There was a rushing sound and then something whirring or flapping. Was the helicopter going to land on the damn car?

The light strobed some more—so crazily now that it looked like that last blast of fireworks on the Fourth of July, that moment that they send up everything they've got and the whole sky is filled with popping sounds and sparklers and trails of smoke and you've got this smile on your face a mile wide because it's just that amazing . . .

“Jenna.” I thought I heard my brother say. “Jenna?”

The bright light blinked out.

So did I.

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Jenna's Journal

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*December 5th*

*LATER*

“Jenna!”

An unfamiliar male voice echoed somewhere near my forehead. The bright light was still there. I could feel it through my eyelids. A whoosh of warm, minty breath rushed up my nostrils. I wiggled my toes. Someone had taken off my boots.

“Jenna,” the voice said, “I need you to open your eyes.” The mint breath swirled into my nose again. Whoever he was, he had impeccable dental hygiene.

With effort—now they felt sticky and gluey and like they were filled with sand—I pried my eyes open. A skinny guy in green scrubs smiled at me. He had black hair and a tuft of curly black chest hair poking out from the V of his scrubs and very white teeth.

“You’re a very lucky girl,” he said as I squinted at him. Someone needed to turn down those lights. Was I dead after all? Was he the greeting committee? Did he know that he could wax that chest hair?

“Lucky?” My voice sounded like a rusty hinge. I wished he’d turn that damn light off.

“You’ve been in a car accident, Jenna. Do you remember?”

*Shit.* I sat up. Every inch of my body hollered that this was the wrong thing to do. A pinch of pain shot through my hand. I looked down. An IV was pumping something into my veins. A female voice squawked something with a

code number over the PA system. A cart with various instruments and a couple of bloody cloths sat to my right. An ugly striped curtain rippled as someone walked by outside my little cubicle.

“You’re in the ER, Jenna. At Houston Northside. I’m your doctor.”

Everything came rushing back.

“Casey!” I shouted at chest hair guy. “Where’s Casey?” I looked around wildly. It was just me and Doctor Chest Hair. Where the hell was my brother? What had happened back there in the car? All that flipping. Casey had been lying so still. All that blood. And light. There’d been an eyeball-searing strobe. And the air bag that hadn’t—

“He’s right outside, Jenna.” Doctor Chest Hair smiled. His name tag read Dr. Stuart Espinosa. “Now that you’re awake, I’m sure he’s dying to see you.”

Dying to see me? Was Doctor Chest Hair Espinosa being funny? I’d been in hospitals and doctor’s offices enough lately to know that doctors and nurses had their own quirky little medical humor. I guess it came from being around sick people so much. Or maybe it was just the doctors who had been willing to see me without health insurance. Maybe they thought that saying “dying to see” to a girl in an ER cubicle was a big hoot, more so if she were possibly still expiring from not-scabies and hollering for her brother. My brain flashed to Casey’s face again, to that huge gash on his cheek.

“Casey!”

The curtain swiped open. Casey walked in.

There were some stray flecks of dried blood on his cheeks, but compared to how he’d looked in the car—his face smeared—he was pretty cleaned up. Even the two yellowish zits in the middle of his chin were gone. Maybe they’d been seared off in the crash. His eyebrows were strangely

well-groomed, too. But if he'd been singed, it wouldn't have looked as if he'd gotten a makeover. Maybe Dr. Chest Hair or someone like him had scrubbed Casey's face and plucked a little. Even his eyes looked better: no purple sacks underneath, none of the usual redness. They were clear and sort of sparkly.

"I could hear you all the way out in the waiting room," he said. He leaned over and gave me a gentle hug. His biceps flexed tightly as his arms wrapped around me. Since when did my brother's arms have muscle definition? Maybe carrying those trays of barbeque at BJ's was more of a workout than I thought.

"You're not dead," I told him joyfully.

I had no idea how this was possible. But I was all for it. I was alive. Casey was alive. Doctor Chest Hair Espinosa was alive. It was all good here in the ER. I knew I probably still had not-Ebola. But even *that* wasn't acting up right now.

"Nope, I'm right here." Casey said. He stopped hugging me and straightened. There was an odd look on his face, something beyond: *Hey I'm really sorry I just almost killed my already dying sister because I forgot to adjust for stoner-induced Prius drift.*

Had I just imagined that deep cut on his cheek? I must have hit my head during the accident.

"What happened?" I managed in a rasp. I hoped his answer would be broad enough to cover all bases: the accident, how I got here, his general tidy and improved appearance. "How come you smell so nice?" My brother smelled of something I couldn't quite place: something way better than his usual combo of cheap cologne from CVS Pharmacy, barbeque sauce, stale egg rolls, and pot.

"I do?" Casey's well-groomed brows shot up.

"Yeah. And why—"

“I called Mom,” he interrupted. “Told her you’re okay. She seemed out of it again. But I called a taxi cab for her. She’s on her way.”

I tried to give him the stink-eye, but my face hurt too much to scrunch it up like that. “Since when do you know how to call a cab?” (Let me note for the record that taxis are rare in the Houston suburbs: like finding endangered whooping cranes or something. Maggie called one about a year ago when we wanted to go shopping at the Galleria and her mom refused to take us. The guy showed up in a raggedy SUV with peeling paint and told us it would be fifty bucks each way. His name was Wayne and he had an artificial right leg. We decided to shop local.)

“Cause we’re minors,” he went on. “Cause if I want to get you out of here, she has to sign the release papers.”

Oh. Okay. What wasn’t okay: My brother sounded like a responsible human being. Mom’s catatonic depression had clearly taken its toll on him. My heart flopped in my chest. Maybe I *was* dying. Casey was just doing his best for my last hurrah.

“She knows where we are. She knows you’re okay. She seemed out of it again.”

This didn’t surprise me. Still, things had looked semi-promising right before I’d passed out and she’d called Casey at work. Now she probably didn’t even remember what she’d said about maybe finding Dad. Maybe she’d just made it all up, that stuff about keeping things secret. I guess I’d know soon enough.

The ugly striped curtain parted again. Another guy in green scrubs, with a stethoscope around his neck joined us, followed by a woman in navy cargo pants with a tucked in short-sleeved blue collared shirt—and what looked like a utility belt.

“Hey Amber,” Casey said to her.

*Amber:* I repeated the name to myself. My head began to pound slightly.

Who was this chick? And why was she smiling at my brother like she a) knew him and b) found him likeable?

“I’m Amber Velasco,” she said, as if deflecting the questions I wanted to ask. She tightened the elastic on her dark brown pony tail and smoothed her already smooth looking bangs. Her dark blue eyes gave me the once over. “I’m one of the EMT’s who pulled you from the wreck. You had us scared there, Jenna.” She shot a look at Casey.

He nodded.

Had I woken up in an alternate universe where my brother became instant besties with the hot looking paramedic?

“Huh,” I said. I figured it best to stick to what was important. “Do any of you know where my boots are?”

Casey pointed to the corner of the room. My Ariats were sitting neatly by a gray padded chair that had seen better days. I could see a few blood specks, but they appeared otherwise unscathed. I was sure the leather cleaner would fix them right up. If I ever ran into Jesus again, he would be relieved.

“This is Ed,” Dr. Espinosa piped up. He gestured to the other guy in scrubs, who was a little chunkier and wearing brown clogs and a sour expression. Maybe he was aware of how tacky his footwear looked. “He’s going to need to ask you a few questions while I check on some other patients.”

“And then we’ll be taking you for some more tests,” said Ed. “Now that you’re awake.” His name tag indicated that his full title was Ed Lyons, RN. And according to Registered Nurse Ed “Clogs” Lyon, I had already had some blood work and the results were on their way. Soon he would escort me for X-rays, an EKG, and possibly a CT scan. There had been discussion of an MRI, but the consensus was that they

needed to wait for the results of the X-ray first. (I assumed this meant that they had figured out that the Samuels family was not insured. When you have no money, due diligence becomes statement due, regardless of your personal stand on our national health care system.)

Dr. Espinosa patted me on the shoulder, then made for the other side of the curtain, taking his chest hair with him.

RN Clogs handed me a cup. "We'll need a urine sample, too." He offered a bed pan, and then agreed that I could hobble to the bathroom dragging my IV pole and pee in the cup in the handicapped stall.

"I'll help you," said Amber the EMT. She flashed me a straight-toothed smile and held out two tanned, muscular arms.

"Hell no," I heard myself snap. Seriously: Did she really think I was going to let her come into the bathroom and watch me pee? What was up with this woman, anyway? And why did she keep smiling at Casey? I was not unthankful that she had helped save us, but she was acting like she knew me. She did *not* know me.

"Be nice," my brother said. He was for some reason staring at the ceiling tiles, so I wasn't exactly sure if he was directing the comment to me.

I squinted at Casey some more as Ed hauled me out of bed. My brother's jeans seemed to fit him better. Under his blood-stained CHICKS DIG NERDS T-shirt, his blobby, too-many-Jack-in-the-Box-tacos middle looked surprisingly firm and sort of six-packy. His pale and pasty arms seemed to have acquired a tone that I could only call bronze. And if I was not mistaken, in place of the missing zits, his chin now sported a nicely-styled five o'clock shadow.

None of this made sense at all. Between his two jobs, school (not that he was currently excelling there), and

having to drag me from doctor to doctor and also take care of our mother, Casey had kind of let himself go. I loved my brother, but he was not exactly the poster boy for fitness. His dope habit didn't help, either.

How was it possible that my brother now exhibited not only great hair and skin but also nice abs and a studly posture? These things do not just fall out of the sky like miraculous bird shit. They require work and exercise and a regular regimen of expensive skin care—none of which had happened in the approximately thirteen minutes it had taken us to get to the feeder road that led to the hospital and our unfortunate accident. For a panicky instant, I wondered if I'd slipped into a coma and weeks had passed.

Not to mention the part where I was sure he had been dead. Not one hundred percent positive, but pretty close. My stomach felt kind of knotty. Plus I didn't relish entering a public restroom in my bare feet. I wanted my boots back.

By the time I returned bearing my cup of green-tinged urine, my blood work had come back from the lab. Ed informed me that my electrolytes weren't so hot, but my blood sugar and liver enzymes were normal. He slapped an ice pack on my bruised shoulder and commented that he had never seen anything like my pee before and that I might have to see a specialist.

"She already has," Amber told him.

Casey looked startled. Me, too. He caught me staring at him.

"Amber hung out with me in the waiting room," he said.

ED THE RN began interrogating about my diet. Having now been up close and personal with my pee, he seemed convinced that I was consuming algae or seaweed.

"Are you sure you don't eat sushi?" he kept repeating.

He shifted from one ugly clog to the other as he scribbled on my chart. "Or maybe oysters? Have you had Gulf oysters lately? Personally, I haven't touched them since Hurricane Ike. God only knows what's in the water. And the ones from around Louisiana and Alabama are just as bad. All those lab animals that went loose after Katrina hit New Orleans? Same thing."

I decided that the clogs were making Ed cranky. Just because the Crocs kiosk in the mall was still in business did not mean that one had to shop there. I chose not to share this observation with Ed. Anyone who thought that Gulf oysters could make your pee look like St. Patrick's Day beer was probably not interested in my fashion tips.

At some point, Casey and Amber excused themselves to go wait for Mom in ER lobby. I didn't see why he needed Amber Velasco, EMT, to help him. But if it gave me a break from watching her stare at my brother like he was about to grow a third eye or discover the cure for cancer, I was all for it.

Ed and I carried on without them. He had finished his check list and was clogging toward the curtain when Mom shuffled in, Casey holding her by the elbow. Tears stained her cheeks. She was still dressed in her baggy sweats and the pink tee, and had shoved her feet into an old pair of flip flops. She looked like a homeless woman. Amber, who certainly did *not* look like a homeless woman, trotted behind them.

Mom hunched over me. "Jenna," she said in a papery thin voice. She patted my hand. Her skin was dry and rough and the skin around her thumbnail was red and raw like she'd been picking at it.

"I'm fine," I said. My head gave a throb and for a second I thought I might puke again, but I forced a smile. "Nurse Ed here's taking great care of me."

"Has your daughter consumed Gulf oysters lately?" Ed

asked. He frowned at his clipboard and scuffed a clog on the tile, waiting for Mom to enlighten him.

Instead, she started shaking. “I have to go home!” she wailed. “I have to go home! You take care of your sister, Casey. I can’t be here. I’m sorry . . . .”

She shuffled back through the curtain and vanished.

I closed my eyes. I was absolutely not going to cry in front of Oyster Ed. No freaking way. He wore clogs. He asked dumb questions. He did not merit a cry.

Somehow the papers got signed and permission to do whatever it was they were doing to me was confirmed. Our lack of health insurance was also once again documented. I must have dozed for a few minutes, because suddenly Casey was right beside me again.

“Taxi waited for her,” he said.

I wondered if maybe it was that guy Wayne. He could show Mom his prosthesis and cheer her up.

“He gave us an emergency discount,” Casey added. “Real nice of him.”

Huh, I thought. Probably not Wayne then.

A LITTLE after one in the morning, Dr. Espinosa returned. He expressed his surprise that I did not have a concussion, pulled out my IV, and released me.

Somewhere in there, Amber convinced him to draw a few more vials of blood.

“He’ll call you tomorrow with the results,” Amber told us as Casey helped me shove my feet back into my Ariats. “In the meantime, get some rest, okay?” She handed us a sack with two turkey sandwiches, two bottles of water, and two individual packs of Chili Cheese Fritos. “And make sure to eat something. You both must be starving.”

This was awfully nice of her and again, weird. Chili

Cheese Fritos were Casey's favorite. Make that weird and sort of one-sided. Wasn't *I* the one dying of not-scabies? And why was she hanging around us, encouraging ER doctors to do more work on my behalf? Didn't she have other people to drag from drifting, crappy Priuses?

"Thanks. I should have—I'll do better next time." Casey's newly-defined bicep bulged as he took the bag. Better at what? Not crashing our car? Amber seemed mildly amused.

"C'mon, Jenna." Casey put his arm around me and helped me walk out to the parking lot. The outside world seemed a lot brighter than I expected it to at one in the morning. My legs were suddenly very tired again, and we stopped a couple of times for me to catch my breath. My brother stroked his hand over my hair. He still smelled very good. That strange look was back on his face.

"Jenna," he said. "I—"

"You're gonna be looking a long time," said a voice from behind us.

What do you know? Amber Velasco, now-verging-on-annoying stalker, strode up to us. "Your car isn't here, remember?"

We did remember. Now. Casey's face flushed a little in the harsh fluorescent glow. Maybe he was embarrassed that he'd totally zoned out. I honestly had no idea what was going through his head—other than possibly uploading pictures of this chick to his hard drive—something that I definitely did not want to think about.

"Your house is only a couple of miles out of my way," Amber said cheerfully. By then I was too exhausted to ask how she knew or how it was that the red Camaro parked a few feet from us was hers. I just let the two of them fold me into the front seat and then closed my eyes for the ride.

\* \* \*

MOM WAS asleep when we got home. I had to admit; I'd harbored a distant fantasy that with Casey's freakish transformation, Mom might have morphed back to normal, too. That got squashed the moment I saw her sprawled on her bed, the TV still on.

Here was the truth: Dad was gone. Mom was never going to be herself again. I might as well accept it. But the truth not only sucked but also confused me. Why *did* Dad disappear, anyway? Five years ago he was a sports reporter for the *Chronicle* and had published a book on the history of Texas BBQ which you could still find in some stores. People like that—people with jobs and families and vacation plans for Disney World—do not just walk out of the house one morning and never come back. They do not leave a note on the kitchen that cryptically says, “Y’all take care. I love you” underneath which they place a certificate for a fajita dinner for four at Manny’s Real Tex Mex in the city. (My father had been working on a new book about Mexican food when he flew the coop.) But my father *had* left. By the time we’d realized that his departure was permanent, the gift certificate to Manny’s had expired.

But that was all part of the past. In the here and now, we had no car.

Casey and I sat at the kitchen table and ate our turkey sandwiches and chips (I let him have both packs) and drank our waters.

My brother kept eyeballing me like I was going to explode or something.

“I never saw that pickup truck,” he said as he polished off the last of his sandwich. “I just wanted to get you to the hospital, Jenna. I swear.” He chugged the rest of his water. I watched him swallow. His neck looked bigger and more muscular. He looked upset, worried . . . and something else I couldn’t name.

“I know,” I said.

My brother wadded up the sandwich sack and tossed it in the general direction of the kitchen counter. Obviously his guilt about almost squashing me while I was already dying of not-scabies had not made him any less of a pig. Which was a relief, in a way. He was still the same old Casey, even if he’d been fixed up at the hospital so well that Amber the weird EMT deserved a medal. Maybe *that’s* why they’d seemed so tight. He was just grateful. And I’d been so sick that I’d exaggerated his decline in my memory . . .

We finished eating and Casey helped me upstairs.

“You want me to sleep in your room?” he asked.

“Um, no.”

He laughed. I noticed that his chipped lower front tooth was no longer chipped.

“Did you file your tooth?” I reached out to touch it and he backed away. Okay then. Casey retreated to his own room.

I was already half-asleep as my head sank into my pillow.

ABOUT FOUR in the morning, something woke me. I realized that I had to pee. I walked into the bathroom. There was noise coming from Casey’s room. Voices. Was he really up at four in the morning listening to Katy Perry again?

It was then that I saw the light glowing through the gap under the door on the other side of the bathroom. (Let me add here that sharing a bathroom with Casey has not been the highlight of my existence. This includes but is not limited to my distaste for the permanent yellow stain at the base of our mutual toilet because my brother seems incapable of aiming into the bowl.)

The voices grew more distinct. There was music, too—the same floaty, droning drum-filled instrumental stuff that I’d

heard when we had the accident. I thought I'd either imagined that or someone was cranking it in the ambulance. But there it was again. And the voices: One was Casey's, of course. The other sounded like . . . Amber.

Okay. *Now* it made sense. He'd figured out what music she dug and now was putting on a little show for himself. I was glad that Casey wasn't dead. More than glad. But my brother uploading a video of Amber (probably some old high school cheerleader thing or something) so he could kick back with some more laptop shenanigans . . . this was where I drew the line. The gross, disturbing line.

I pressed my ear to the door. The white glowy light seeped out onto my bare feet. My toenails sparkled.

"I can't be," I heard Casey say.

"But you are," said the voice that sounded like Amber. "Get used to it."

*Wait.* Was she actually in there with him? No. Impossible. But her voice definitely didn't sound like it was coming through his crap computer speakers. This was totally confusing. My brother was not what one would define as a chick magnet. Was there such a thing as an anti-magnet? If there was, then that was Casey. Guys who think that it is okay to wear a shirt with a Hostess Twinkie on it generally found their romance options limited to their laptops. They did not have middle of the night visits from older women with gainful employment and a uniform.

My heart pounded. I figured I'd give them fair warning.

"Casey," I said. I rapped sharply on the door. "What's all that racket?"

The noise stopped abruptly, like turning off a faucet. The light went dark. I opened the door to Casey's room.

He was sprawled on his back in his bed. Asleep. Alone. I tiptoed around the room a few times to make sure.

I shook my brother awake. “Was your computer on?” I asked him.

“You must have been dreaming,” Casey said. “Do you need me to help you back to your room?”

This wasn’t worth answering. I slammed his door behind me, peed loudly, flushed twice, and flopped back into my bed.

The universe had spit out something.  
I just didn’t know what it was. Not yet.



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## *Escape Theory*

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Margaux Frolely  
(Soho IP, all rights) June 2013

*In Treatment* meets *Pretty Little Liars* at The Keaton Academy, a prestigious California boarding school. Seventeen-year-old Devon always tries her best to do the right thing, even though she would rather be somewhere else. She's an 11th grade peer counselor who works under the supervision of the school's resident "shrink" (a generous term given that he doesn't have an advanced degree) meeting anonymously with students in crisis . . . Everybody on campus seems to have a dark secret or hidden problem, from the scandalous to the hilarious to the truly disturbing.

When an apparent suicide on campus shakes the community—involving a boy with whom she had a fleeting but unrequited romantic entanglement in the 9th grade—Devon uncovers a conspiracy that not only threatens the school's existence, but also exposes the truth about her own past.

MARGAUX FROLEY, a Southern California native and boarding school grad, spent the last few years working her way through the Hollywood ranks to become a television writer on CW's *Privileged*. She then moved to New York to become a development executive at MTV Networks. *Escape Theory* is her first novel. Margaux currently lives in Brooklyn and still hopes to be Roald Dahl when she grows up. You'll be able to visit her soon online at [www.margauxfroley.com](http://www.margauxfroley.com)

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*In Memoriam*

JASON REED HUTCHINS  
1996-2012

JASON REED HUTCHINS, 16, of Marin County, died Tuesday September 4th, 2012 of an apparent suicide at The Keaton School in Santa Cruz, California.

Jason was born March 13, 1996 in San Francisco, California, the son of William Hutchins and Mitzi Barbara Hutchins. Mr. Hutchins is the founder of TerraTech, a Fortune 500 company and innovator in the field of molecular biology.

Jason is survived by his mother and father, older brother Evan, a pre-med student at Stanford University, and grandfather Reed Hutchins of Santa Cruz, California, owner of the Athena Estates Vineyard and Winery. Jason was predeceased by his grandmother, Athena Hutchins.

At the start of his junior year, Jason was on The Keaton School newspaper writing staff, a Varsity soccer player, and an avid surfer at the nearby Kingston Beach Cove. He will be remembered as a loving son, loyal brother, and cherished friend to many.

Services will be held Sunday, September 9th at 11AM at The Keaton School chapel. In lieu of flowers the family requests donations be sent to TerraTech Children's Hospital in Palo Alto, California. A memorial scholarship will be set up in Jason's name at The Keaton School.



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## PROLOGUE

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*September 10, 2010*  
*FRESHMAN YEAR*

*Those Nutter Butters are going to need milk.*

Devon glared at the cookies at the foot of her unfamiliar, stiff twin mattress. The bright red plastic taunted her, daring her to break into the package. It represented yet another problem of living in a dorm room. Milk—the milk required to have on standby when eating Nutter Butters—wasn't just out the door, down the hallway, and past the living room. No, here the milk was across a grassy courtyard, a library, two dorms full of boys, and tucked away in an oak-paneled dining hall.

She swiveled, twisting her toes into her scratchy new bedspread. In spite of her hunger, she tried to focus on the smiling pair of girls she'd been tacking to her wall. In the last photo (taken on her porch of all places) her best friend, Ariel, was holding two fingers up to the camera and beaming while Devon kept her eyes towards her feet. The entire collage had a theme. Ariel: confronting the lens, leading the way; Devon: averting her gaze, content to go along with whatever adventure Ariel had conjured up. All of that was just a Hipstamatic memory now.

Devon frowned again at the Nutter Butters. Her mom had snuck them into her suitcase before she'd left for school four days ago. She re-read the purple post-it: "Share with your new friends, but save one for Derrick!"—scrawled in measured cursive.

The peanut butter cookies *were* a nice gesture. They

were Devon's favorite after all, only because her mom had turned her on to them. The two had a ritual of demolishing a package over an episode of *Grey's Anatomy* and saving just one in case the handsome "Dr. Derrick Shepard" miraculously appeared at their door. Mom subscribed to the "ya never know who you're going to run into" philosophy. Always on the prowl for a classic Leading Man (she wore lipstick for even the quickest errands); always leaving a cookie for a charming stranger that might appear at her doorstep.

Devon stared at the plastic. She never imagined she'd miss being embarrassed of her mom. "The doors Keaton will open for you . . ." the lady-in-waiting-for-Dr.-Shepard had begun on more than one occasion, without ever actually finishing the thought. Devon wasn't sure where those doors led, but she knew she was supposed to walk through them. That wasn't her fault or problem, of course. So her mom couldn't afford some ritzy boarding school when she was a kid. Why did that mean Devon had to be here now? The scholarship was nice and all, but she didn't ask for it. Her mom had applied and set up an interview before Devon had even heard about The Prestigious Totally-Amazing You'll-Be-a Millionaire-By-Thirty Keaton.

To Devon, boarding school was full of *those people*, and she didn't want to be one of *those people* who used seasons as a verb, like "My family summers in the Hamptons" or "We winter in Aspen." She'd spent the summer listing many cogent psychological reasons about why she *shouldn't* attend Keaton, which of course her mom chalked up to being "just an ungrateful teenager." (Couldn't she come up with a more creative phrase to describe her only daughter?) Yes: Devon was thirteen. Yes: She was annoyed that her "mature" body hadn't quite gotten there yet. But yes: she was old enough to be in control of her own life, and her own life

did not involve some upscale mountain penitentiary for the absurdly rich.

*Prison is lonely.*

That was the key theme of every movie, TV show, book, or horrific link about prison . . . It was *lonely*. Next week Ariel would be headed to public school in Piedmont. Ariel, whose confidence and laughter made Devon feel like she belonged anywhere she went, simply because Ariel acted like they belonged everywhere *they* went . . . no awkwardness about cliques or cafeteria seating. No clumsy texting with Mom when a face-to-face interaction with someone demanded real attention. New friends, new crushes on boys, new after school hangouts: it was all part of Ariel's fabulous Ariel-ness.

Couldn't Ariel's ease somehow spill out of the photo? Devon turned to her tiny alarm clock, glowing 10:18. ("Because you won't have the Mom Alarm anymore," her mom had chided.) Twelve minutes until the bell rang and everyone had to be inside their dorms for the night. Twelve minutes until she could stop feeling bad about not socializing and reasonably just crawl into bed and go to sleep, crossing another day off her sentence at Keaton. Twelve minutes until roll call and Devon's dorm head would peek her head inside and check Devon off her list.

Devon Mackintosh: Check.

Where else would she be? Or more importantly, as Ariel would ask, whom would she be with? Keaton was perched above a small beach town. It's not like she could wander over to the nearest shopping mall and catch a late movie with some locals.

When they'd built these rooms Devon suspected that "durability" was the prime objective. The thin gray carpet could probably absorb any dirt, footprint, or stain without

looking any different. The cinderblock walls were painted a glossy white, which made it virtually impossible to stick, pin, nail, or tape anything to the wall. One four by four section of the wall had a framed corkboard attached. Someone must have taken pity on the students and allowed them at least an iota of space to post personal items. But apart from that teeny area of suggested self-expression, Devon's twin bed, lean closet, and rickety desk summed up what she'd been feeling all along: This place was way more white-collar prison than the golden door of opportunity her mom described.

"Knock-knock. Devon?" came a sing-songy voice. The Senior RA, June Chan, poked her head inside Devon's room.

Devon mustered a smile. *Who actually says, "knock-knock" out loud?*

Apparently, June was from Taiwan and spoke Mandarin, Japanese, and English fluently, but to Devon she seemed like an over-eager NFL Cheerleader. When Devon had first arrived, June was there to greet all the girls in the dorm with a neon bright smile and a bouncy ponytail. "Hi, I'm June. Like the month!" Since then Devon had only seen June wearing The Keaton School sweatshirts and sweats, like she was an athlete in training for something. Maybe being at Keaton was the training itself.

Doors slammed in the hall, quickly followed by the kind of high-pitched giggling girls much younger than Devon usually reserved for slumber parties. "Hey, that's my bra, bee-yotch!" echoed through the doorway. More laughter and footsteps. June smiled at the mayhem before turning back to Devon with her sympathetic face.

*Even June, the month, would rather hang out with them.*

"Just checking in on you," June added, sounding concerned yet upbeat all at once.

Devon responded by tacking the next picture of her and Ariel to her wall. Her dorm mates all seemed to have gone to volleyball camp or ski school together. Insta-Friends by the end of the first day. But somehow Devon missed her chance. Her Insta-Friend sponge pellet—the one that would turn her into a perfect friend if you just added water—turned out to be a dud.

“*Clueless* just finished!” June continued in the stony silence. “We’re starting up *Bring It On* if you want to come and join us? It’s the Spring House Pajama Formal. Kind of an annual tradition.”

“Thanks, but I’m cool. Just want to get this done.”

The harder people tried, the less Devon wanted to hang out with them. Maybe that’s why this whole orientation week sucked so much; everyone was trying so hard to be everyone’s friend. It was fake; it would never last; couldn’t they see that? She saw the way the seniors sat in the dining hall in tightly formed cliques, their grim and snickering heads down. No doubt they were all bright and naïve smiles freshman year too.

“Okay, but you’re welcome any time, alright, chica?” June said. She vanished, leaving the door open. Closed doors were frowned upon at Keaton. Devon had read in the rule book (Yes, Keaton had an Official Rule Book) that if a member of the opposite sex visited your room, doors had to remain open at least twelve inches and “four feet” needed to be on the ground. That was Rule #4c if she remembered correctly, only to be surpassed by #5a, where having sex was a punishable offense. Basically it was against the rules to make out with a boy in her room.

Devon wondered if they were going to have to reword that rule in the future. Wouldn’t a boy want to make out with a boy at some point in time? There was apparently no

rule against members of the same sex making out. Lucky guys. Devon, for her part, also wanted to make out with a guy sooner than later. One fumbling, wet kiss last summer in the back booth at Pete's Coffee didn't exactly count. But she was going to change that in high school. She figured there had to be a benefit to co-ed living.

She examined the final photo in the pile: Another one of Ariel and her—tanned and flip-flopped, with fake mustaches. Over the summer Ariel had decided that they should put on fake mustaches and take pictures around town, trying to get shots of people giving them weird looks. Mostly they'd just gotten pictures of themselves, cracking up. Devon wished she could show Ariel the Official Rule Book; *that* would make her laugh.

The bag of Nutter Butters caught Devon's attention again. They still needed milk. *So, go get some*, is what Ariel would have said while sticking a fake mustache to Devon's face. Devon looked back at her clock. 10:21.

It was possible. If she went right now, she could dash up to the dining hall, pour a pitcher of milk, and hurry back in time for curfew. Devon would be everyone's hero with cookies and milk for the next movie. Insta-Friends. June would probably say something like, "Welcome to the party, chica!" *It'd be as easy as that. Right?* Or she could stay in her room eating the cookies alone without milk. Even Devon knew that was not an option. Ariel's voice would call her a loser all night long.

Devon stuffed the cookies into her sweatshirt pocket. If a teacher or a June clone asked what she was up to, it would be good to have the cookies on hand to back up her story. She shoved her feet into her sneakers and ducked out her door without even bothering to consult the mirror first.

On the quad, the wind had picked up. Devon pulled her

sweatshirt hood over her head to keep her hair from flying everywhere. She squinted. The moon was her main source of light. The night had a sharp chill to it. As far as she could tell, the ocean always felt like a storm was coming in. At the bottom of the steep hillside, she could see the faint yellow lights of Kingston's main street. Beyond that the velvety black of the Pacific Ocean merged into the dark sky on the horizon. The salt-scented wind lashed her face, reminding her that time was ticking. *Get the milk and get back to the dorm before curfew.* That's all she had to do in nine . . . no, eight minutes.

The Dining Hall stood at the peak of the hill—its façade of floor-to-ceiling windows a mirror of the night sky.

Funny: one of the supposed perks of Keaton was a view of either the ocean or the valley from every dorm room. It also meant every meal involved walking *uphill*. While her mom had described it as “invigorating,” Devon not only found it annoying; it was now potentially dangerous. She hurried across the wet grass of Raiter Lawn, across the cobblestones in front of the library and toward the boys' dorms.

Shirtless senior boys sat on their balconies, nestled into crappy wicker chairs, surrounded by surfboards, lacrosse gear, and passed down hammocks. The sound of an acoustic guitar drifted from behind a tapestry-covered window above.

Devon kept her head down. She was short, at least— five-foot-three—and she hoped she could pass by undetected. Someone whistled from the balcony above. She didn't look up. According to June, seniors could initiate a water balloon fight anytime during the first week. Devon ran quicker just in case the whistle was a precursor to getting soaked.

She held her breath as she shoved the Dining Hall doors.

*Thank God:* they were open. Her heart thumping, she made her way around the polished wooden tables and

benches, perfectly aligned, glistening in the moonlight, toward the wall dedicated to drink machines. Soda, ice, lemonade, iced tea, and milk; they all buzzed and hummed in the silent hall. Devon found a plastic pitcher next to the water jug and pulled the lever under the low-fat milk. Nothing. She tried the non-fat. Nothing again.

That's when she noticed: The milk machine was on lock-down for the night. Water was her only option. Her Nutter Butter plan was a failure—

“Don't you know they control our diet?” a voice said, cutting through the silence.

Devon jumped. June had warned her and the other girls about avoiding popular make-out spots around campus at night. It was considered “a major *faux pas*” (June's words) to stumble upon a couple secretly making out behind a bush or in an empty classroom. But this was just one voice. Sitting alone in the back of the Dining Hall. Devon squinted, trying to turn the outlines and shadows of a person into someone she recognized. Long, gawky legs with knobby kneecaps stuck out from the figure on the bench . . . a spiky head of hair led to a narrow neck that threatened to topple from the weight of a bulging Adam's apple.

*Jason Hutchins.*

Another freshman. Devon remembered him from orientation. He'd kept bumping the back of Devon's chair. After an annoyed glare, he'd whispered an apology while the Headmaster talked about their class schedules, and Devon just smiled politely, more concerned with not getting caught talking during the lecture.

Jason stood in the darkness. Devon guessed he was easily 6'2", and only thirteen or fourteen. *No wonder he could barely fit in his seat.* He tucked something in his pocket as he walked towards her. Devon caught herself thinking that once he got

over being gangly, he could be kind of hot. Then again, she had to grow out of this flat-chested stage before she might be considered cute (according to Ariel), so who was she to judge.

“Just wanted some milk,” Devon said. Her voice sounded chirpy to herself, and seemed to echo in the empty space. “Didn’t think that would be against the rules.” She tucked her hands into her jeans pockets because she had a bad habit of letting them fidget when she was nervous. Being alone with this boy in this vast, dark, deserted place was definitely making her nervous.

Jason leaned against the wall by the milk machine. He wore cargo shorts that weren’t too baggy and a simple belt where new holes had to be punched to account for his bony hips. His Keaton T-shirt was so worn she could practically see through it, even in the moonlight.

“You think they’d want us to drink milk,” he said in a playful voice. “It’s in their best interest to keep us strong.” He clipped a pen into one of his shorts pockets.

“Their best interest?” Devon managed to reply. She leaned against the counter.

Memories from orientation flooded back to her: Jason was a legacy student, which in theory only meant that he had a sibling or parent who attended Keaton before him. But when the Headmaster asked all the new legacy students to stand up in orientation, Devon understood that being a legacy put you in a special club. It meant you were a bigger piece of the school’s DNA than other students. In her class of seventy, five stood up—and Jason was one of them.

Even June (the month) knew who he was: the prize legacy of the freshman class. His older brother, Evan, had just graduated. Apparently Evan was a perfect Keaton specimen: a star alumnus, chemistry genius, all-star lacrosse player, and

able to pull off legendary pranks. Their father, William, had also attended Keaton. Devon had overheard enough of June's "inside scoop" to know that the new science wing built three years ago existed solely because Jason's dad wanted better chemistry facilities for Evan.

Jason grabbed an apple from the fruit bowl. He threw it up in the air and caught it. "You know, for the organ donations," he said. "That's what we're here for. A big bunch of young, unsuspecting organ donors. Gotta feed the machine somehow. It's in their best interest to keep us healthy."

He took a big bite. He didn't seem to find this interaction strange at all.

Devon put herself in Ariel's shoes. The smart thing to do would be to play along. "Silly me, and here I was thinking they were shaping us into being well-rounded young adults," she forced herself to say.

"Bor-ring," Jason said drawing out the word as long as possible. "That's what they want us to think. Looks much better for the catalogues." Jason examined his apple and took another oversized bite. Some of the apple juice dribbled down his chin and onto his T-shirt. Devon had to look down to hide her smile. Jason had just blown whatever cool image he was trying to create, and yet it was the first time anyone had done anything really human all week.

"You've got it all worked out then. Good thing I ran into you . . . Jason, right?" she asked.

He held Devon's gaze longer than was comfortable. "Yeah, good thing," he said.

Devon instinctively took a small step back. She had seen that look-into-your-soul look before. Last summer, Ariel had forced Devon on a double date with these high school guys that interned at Amoeba Records: Luke and Spencer. Devon was supposed to date Spencer, but he wouldn't stop

talking about “the importance of The Clash in music evolution” and it was hard to pretend to be interested for that long. She remembered that he kept staring into her eyes, willing her to like him back. It was the same look Jason was giving her now. He was definitely flirting with her.

Devon broke away from the stare by brushing her hair out of her eyes. Flirting made her self-conscious. She was too aware of everything she did. Her over-analytical brain crept in. He didn’t ask her name. He almost definitely knew. Now *she* was the lame one for asking the question. It was easier if she just left before she said something else that was embarrassing.

“Well, guess I’m not going to get that milk, so . . . See ya, Jason.” Devon put her empty pitcher down next to the machine. She made a beeline for the doors.

“Hutch. Jason’s . . . whatever . . . Hutch is really more my thing,” Jason-turned-Hutch said after her. Devon turned back, still pretty sure it was better to make her exit now.

“Gotcha, Hutch. Well, good luck with the organs.” She pushed against the door.

“Are those Nutter Butters?” Hutch was still watching her.

The package was sticking out of her pocket. *Great*, Devon thought, *now it looks like I can’t go anywhere without bringing cookies with me.*

“You gonna eat those all by yourself?” Hutch left his apple on the countertop and was rubbing his palms together like a cartoon villain cooking up a plan.

“Why, you want one?” Devon asked. *Save one for Derrick.* How right her mom had been. She made a mental note to thank her mom later. Devon pulled the package out of her pocket.

“Hells yeah.” Hutch was next to her in a heartbeat, reaching for the bag. “Wait, sorry, that was rude of me. You should do the honors.” He pushed the bag back. There was

nothing in Hutch's face that made Devon feel like they had just met or that she needed to be on her guard. He was an Insta-Friend. Not from a sponge pellet, either. She tugged at the plastic, but stopped short of opening it.

"That brings me back to the original problem," Devon started. "You can't do Nutter Butters without milk. It's a thing."

"Oh, it's a thing?" Hutch said, eyebrows raised.

"It's a thing. Like peanut butter and jelly."

"Like spaghetti and meatballs?"

"Yeah." She racked her brains. "Like . . . like—"

"Or like orientation week and sucking?" Hutch interrupted.

Devon laughed. She clamped her hand over her mouth. It wasn't because she was worried they'd get caught. It was because this was the first time she'd laughed since she'd been dropped off at Keaton.

"Let's get some milk then," Hutch said with a mischievous grin.

"The machine is locked," Devon replied. "Think we already established that."

"This *machine* is locked. But where do you think they store the milk? Come on. If it's a *thing*, then we gotta go on a mission." Hutch grabbed her hand and pulled her through the doors. "That's just what was missing tonight. A secret mission."

Devon's thoughts were louder than Hutch's words. Where were they going? His long fingers intertwined with hers. He pulled her along the gravel path outside the dining hall. The wind whipped once again at her hair and face. But Hutch's oversized hand was warm and protective, a shield almost. Which was weird, her over-analytical brain reminded her, because she'd just met him.

Around the corner, behind the dining hall, Hutch lurched to a stop in a gravel driveway. One solitary light glowed a dirty yellow.

“Just in here,” he whispered, squinting.

Devon’s heart thumped. She was instantly aware that few students, freshmen or not, had seen this part of the dining hall before: the service entrance, littered with wooden crates and smelly dumpsters. Hutch pushed on the metal handle of a rusted blue door. It opened right up into the school’s industrial kitchen. No locks here.

Hutch led her inside, only letting go of her hand when she was past the threshold. The door shut silently behind them.

“They don’t lock the kitchen?” Devon murmured.

She tried to make out shapes in the blackness while her brain caught up. How did a package of cookies get her here? Five minutes ago she was alone in her dorm room, and now here she was on a “secret mission” with Hutch, the knobby-kneed guy that had kind of bugged her earlier in the week. Maybe she should give up over-analyzing. Ariel would be proud. This mission was equally stupid and romantic.

“A place that bases everything on an honor system leaves a lot of room for stupidity,” Hutch said, as if answering a question she’d ask at a later date.

Devon reached for the light switch on the wall next to her, but he put his hand over hers.

“No lights. It’ll give away our position,” he whispered in a hoarse voice. Hutch was just inches from her now. The outside light cast a dim glow through the small window above the door. Devon tilted her face up to him and felt his warm breath on her forehead. She could see that his teeth were perfectly aligned. Definitely the result of braces. His light brown eyes were on Devon, flitting between her eyes and lips. His eyelashes were dark, but they barely registered compared to his wide eyebrows. And his lips had that perfect dent in the middle. What would it be like to kiss those lips? Hutch’s hand tightened over hers for an instant, but then he pushed away.

The moment over. If it was a moment at all.

“We’re not supposed to be in here,” Devon hissed, still giddy. Her eyes were adjusting to the darkness and the depth of the sterile kitchen came into focus.

Hutch sat on a metal counter opposite. “Supposed to? Devon, Devon, Devon,” he said in a faux-mocking voice. So he *did* know her name. “*Supposed to* is such a loaded little phrase. Do you really want to live your life doing everything you’re *supposed* to do?”

It wasn’t a rhetorical question. Hutch sat on the counter, his long legs dangling. His eyes dug into Devon, forcing an answer out of her.

“No, I guess not,” Devon stammered.

“Good. Because I figure there’s two kinds of people in the world. The ones who do everything that’s laid out for them: the Supposed-tos. Then there’s the people that look above it and do what they want to do. I prefer the latter, but maybe that’s just me. A Not-supposed-to.” Hutch shrugged and hopped off, wringing his hands and tiptoeing towards the industrial fridge that hummed in the corner. “Now . . . how about that milk?”

*Diiiiinnnnngggg!* The school bell echoed across the dark campus.

Devon clutched the cookie package to her chest. *Curfew!* Clarity came fast. What the hell was she thinking? Why did she have to try out her Ariel-like personality so close to curfew? “Um, we have to go, don’t we?” she squeaked out. This wasn’t a rhetorical question, either. The Official Rule Book said that all students have to be inside their designated dorms by 10:30. Official Rule #3b.

But Hutch just shrugged. “If you say so.” He crossed to the door and pushed it—but it didn’t open. “Hmm?”

He pressed the handle and pushed again. And again. He cracked another smile.

“What? Why are you saying ‘hmmm’? We’re supposed to be in our dorms.” Devon blurted out. She could feel the panic rising up along her spine, up the back of her neck and flooding her over-analytical brain.

“You try then,” Hutch said as he stepped aside.

Devon gripped the metal handle and pushed hard against the door. It didn’t budge. “What are we supposed to do? They’re gonna wonder where we are. We have to check in. Rule 3b.” He was immune to panic while all she could do was imagine packing up her dorm room, taking down the pictures she’d just tacked to the wall, her mom’s disappointed silence on the drive back home. Her mom would never forgive her for blowing this opportunity.

“Supposed to. Supposed to. You keep saying that.” Hutch walked back across the kitchen. He stood inside, hands on bony hips, scanning the fridge. The cool air billowed around him like it was whispering dirty secrets about the contents of the shelves.

“Well, yeah, sorry if I’m some annoying rule-abider, but it is boarding school,” Devon fought back the bitchy tone the panic was bringing out in her. “There are rules. And we are breaking at least one, probably more of them right now. Like, does this count as four feet on the ground? I don’t know. And doors aren’t supposed to be closed like this when members of the opposite sex are . . . that’s 4b, I think . . . no, maybe it’s 1b, no, that’s plagiarism. Ah! Point is, this is bad.” Her voice trailed off as Hutch emerged from the fridge clutching an armload of supplies. “What are you doing?”

“Look, someone will be coming around sooner than later. We’ll just flag them down, explain the cookie thing,

it'll be fine. These things happen." Hutch dropped his supplies on the metal counter with a clang.

Devon started to breathe again. Maybe he was right. One of the pillars of Keaton *was* honesty, and they really were just looking for milk. She had the cookies to prove it. "You really think someone will come by?" she asked.

"Sure, they always do. Ten minutes, tops. Your dorm head probably won't even notice if you're late. And you know what we should do in the meantime?" He was already pulling a bowl from a nearby shelf, and then a wooden spoon from a canister. "Finish our mission."

Devon's ears perked up at "our". She had never been an "our" "us" or "we" before with a guy. *Our mission*.

Hutch poured pancake mix into the big bowl.

"Weren't we just getting milk?" Devon asked.

"Oh yeah, change of plans. We're making Nutter Butter pancakes now. Infinitely better, right?" Hutch nodded at Devon, practically agreeing for her.

And yet she couldn't help but go along with it. With him.

"Nutter Butter pancakes? Is that even a thing?" Devon hoisted herself onto the counter next to the ingredients.

"Oh, it's a thing. You've just been too busy doing everything you're *supposed* to do to know about it. I think I'm going to have to illustrate." He straightened, towering over her. "Commence opening Nutter Butters."

Devon broke open the plastic package. "You're lucky you found me. I was going to share these with Spring House."

"Screw Spring House. They won't appreciate these pancakes like I do, Devon." He reached into the package and grabbed a cookie.

Devon picked one out too. "Cheers," she said.

Hutch clinked his cookie against hers. He gave her a wink and took a bite. The two of them chewed, eyes locked. The

only sound was their crunching cookies against the hum of the fridge.

“You know,” Hutch began, his mouth still full of cookie, “there are two kinds of people in this world.”

“The supposed to and the not-supposed tos,” Devon replied trying not to spit cookie bits at Hutch.

“Yeah, those too, but there are another two kinds of people in the world. Those who like peanut butter and those who don’t. And we, Miss Mackintosh, are the same kind of people.” Hutch pulled a measuring cup down that was hanging on the wall next to the stove. “Now be a good organ donor and crack open the Bisquick, will ya?”

“You know what I heard?” Devon asked as she poured the pancake mix into the bowl. “Nutter Butters are particularly good for the organs.”

Hutch lit the gas stove. From the blue light of the burner, Devon caught a glimpse of that perfectly aligned smile.

“Right. See, we’re actually providing a service. Getting our organs nice and healthy for donating.” He cracked an egg into the mixing bowl with a flourish.

A beam of light suddenly broke through the dark kitchen.

“Duck!” he hissed.

Devon jumped off the counter and landed next to Hutch on the floor. They huddled below the table as a flashlight beam swept past the kitchen windows.

“Isn’t that our rescue party?” Devon asked. Her hands started to shake with all the adrenaline coursing through her body. Hutch noticed and wrapped his steady hands around hers, stilling them.

“Except that’s not a teacher. That’s Tino. He’ll go nuts if he catches anyone in his kitchen. Trust me.” He kept his eyes glued to hers and brought her right hand to his cheek. He kissed the inside of her palm and pressed her hand to his

cheek again. She could feel his soft skin peppered with rough patches where he had started shaving. “Looks like someone’s not used to breaking the rules,” he whispered, smiling at her.

She pulled away and looked down at the floor. “No, that’s not it.”

But Hutch tilted her face back up towards him. “It’s okay if it is. It’s kind of cute actually.”

Devon smiled slightly. She let Hutch’s fingers linger under her face.

“I almost forgot,” Hutch murmured. “Never leave evidence behind.” With his free hand he reached up and over onto the table—and slowly, careful not to make the plastic crunch, he brought the bag of Nutter Butters down to their hiding spot.

“My hero,” Devon mouthed. “How would I survive without you?”

“Without me, you and your cookies would be toast,” Hutch whispered a little too loudly.

Devon pressed her lips together, holding back her laughter. Hutch smiled, also on the verge. He shook his head at her. Laughing was not an option. Her chest heaved from the pent-up air trying to escape. Hutch kept his eyes steady and glued to hers, willing her to get through this.

A key slid into the door.

Hutch’s eyebrows wriggled. Devon’s hands started to shake again. Hutch kissed her right palm once more, then held both hands between his and nodded, assuring her that everything was going to be all right.

She believed him.

The key turned, and the lock clicked back into place.

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## Chapter One

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*September 5th, 2012*

*JUNIOR YEAR*

Devon's eye caught the harsh glare of the setting sun. She blinked and looked down, realizing she was rubbing her palm where Hutch had kissed her.

"Devon? Are you sure you can handle this?"

She squinted up at Mr. Robbins. The afternoon sun suffused the wooden blinds behind him, illuminating chaos of his curly brown hair. He scrunched up his cheeks and pushed his black-rimmed glasses further up his nose.

"Devon? If it's too much—"

"No, Mr. Robbins. It's fine. I can handle it," she said.

He leaned back in his chair with a sigh. "I'm glad to hear it."

The backlighting found the details in Mr. Robbins' face: the end-of-day stubble around his chin and upper lip, the wrinkles that were beginning to make a home everywhere, and those ever-present black-rimmed glasses. Devon realized she probably wouldn't recognize him without his eyes framed. "Your fellow students are really going to need you after something like this. We'll start you off tomorrow."

"Whoever you think needs a session, I'm here to help," she said.

"Whom," he corrected her.

"Sorry, whom," she said through gritted teeth.

“You don’t have to do the push-ups this time,” he said with a gracious smile.

“Right. Gotcha. Thanks.” Devon quietly seethed. Mistaking ‘who’ and ‘whom’ in front of Mr. Robbins resulted in him making students do push-ups. Sometimes the whole class would have to do them for one person’s mistake. But Devon had no interest in these Keaton-isms today. And *he* should have known better.

Mr. Robbins leaned back in his chair and studied his fingernails. “Imagine if this program had been around earlier. Maybe Jason would have sought refuge in a peer instead of turning his anger inward . . .”

“Yeah, imagine.” Devon was looking at her palm again.

“I realize we’ve only been through a basic amount of training over the summer, but we’ll do the best we can, hmm?” He gave Devon a tight-lipped smile. It was at once a supportive gesture combined with a silent hint that he’d be watching her.

*What do you mean, “we?” You’re not the one being thrown into the lion’s den,* Devon wanted to say. “Like I said, I’m here to help. That’s what the program is for. So, if we’re good here . . .” She let the words drag out, but Mr. Robbins didn’t get the hint. He was still pondering the mystery of his fingernails. She controlled the urge to roll her eyes.

“You know, if you and Jason were close we can arrange—”

“Hutch. And no, not really. We talked a bit freshman year, but that was like once, ages ago . . . no, I’m fine. These things happen.” Devon pressed her lips firmly together to keep her rising thoughts from spilling out. Those damn Nutter Butters. That night in the kitchen. *Their* night in the kitchen.

“You should get yourself some dinner.” Mr. Robbins started shuffling through papers on his desk.

Devon sprung from her chair. As she swung her worn-in backpack over a shoulder she caught a glimpse of her haggard reflection in a bookcase window. She'd grown a few inches since freshman year. That flat-chested problem had gone away by the time she was a sophomore. She now lived in the Keaton sweats she used to loathe, and kept her hair in a messy ponytail most of the time. It was as if someone had thrown her chipper freshman RA, June (the month) into a washing machine and Devon was what came out, her smile left behind long ago in the spin cycle.

"Thanks," she said on auto-pilot.

"I'll send Matt over to you tomorrow," Mr. Robbins replied without looking up. "Classes will be cancelled, so you can take all the time you think you need. Just remember what we talked about this summer: listen, take notes, and then we'll discuss afterwards, okay?"

"Sounds good."

The next thing she knew, Devon was standing in front of the milk machine in the dining hall. The whispering voices of other students eating dinner, faculty trying to keep their toddlers quiet, and the kitchen staff yelling in the back swirled around her. But none of them mattered to her. They were just noise.

*All I wanted was some milk.*

Devon looked in at her old memory like it was a diorama at a museum. The wax version of her freshman self, sneaking around with a package of Nutter Butters, desperate to make friends. And there was the wax version of him, sitting in the dark of the Dining Hall. Why did he have to be there that night? If he wasn't there she would have just gone back to her dorm without the milk. She would have shared that bag of cookies with the girls in her dorm and watched *Bring it On* for the fourteenth time. She wouldn't know him like she

did. And she wouldn't be feeling this . . . whatever feeling the gnawing pit in her stomach was called. She wouldn't be feeling that. But it did happen. Hutch was there that night in the dark. And despite what had happened over the last two years, however less frequent their conversations became, however much his secret glances at her across the classroom dwindled, she did know him.

A plate clattered to the floor somewhere in the back of the dining hall. She heard applause for the klutz at fault. A few people laughed. *How is anyone laughing right now? Today?* It was like Hutch said; they were just a bunch of organ donors. A bunch of mindless drones cycling through the prep school system and getting spit out on the other end with their fancy college acceptance letters in hand. They were moving parts in the machine. Replaceable parts. But Hutch wasn't replaceable.

Devon hated them. Hated that she was one of them. She had become a part of their machine. The same machine that Hutch had tried so hard not to be a piece of.

The words escaped her lips before she could stop herself.

“ . . . bunch of organ donors.”

The metal milk machine blurred in front of her, morphing into a rippling molten bubble. She reached for a glass, but her hand looked fuzzy. That's when she realized she'd been crying.

*Name: Matt Dolgens*

*Session Date: Sept. 6th*

*Session #1*

*Reason for Session: Best friend to Jason Hutchins*

“I don't know where he got it, if that's what this is all about.”

Matt slouched back across from Devon in the aged

leather armchair. A metal music stand lay on the floor behind Matt's chair, and an out-of-date amplifier collected dust in the corner. Devon was at least able to get two chairs and a poster of a Rorschach ink blot test into the room on Monday in hopes that it would resemble a proper therapy space.

Having spent an intensive summer training session with Mr. Robbins, she knew that creating the right environment was important. "*Why don't you tag one of those practice rooms before the school year gets going,*" he'd suggested. "*Kids feel safe there—it's where they break rules.*" He was however, "*bombarded with work*" when she needed help to drag the leather chair from the school van to her space. She kept hoping that one of the music prodigies on campus wouldn't kick her out of the space that was ostensibly designed for the actual practice of music. Although sound-proof walls were good for therapy too.

It was against school rules (Official Rule #6c) to burn candles, but Devon had a vanilla-scented candle burning to eradicate the musty smell of sweaty musicians and horny students that used this room after hours for making out. The sun beamed through a small window, highlighting the dusty air. She should get a plant in here. Mr. Robbins kept a plant in his office, didn't he? Devon crossed and uncrossed her legs in her unforgiving, hard plastic chair. She wrote in the corner of her notebook page reserved for Matt's sessions, Plant, Pillow.

*Maybe now's the time to pay attention to . . . the "subject." Eye contact!*

"Don't worry, Matt. That's not the point of these sessions. We're here to talk about you and how you're handling Hutch's death," she said.

*Does that sound professional enough? Too professional?*

“Good, ’cause I found out when everyone else did in that assembly. I mean, I saw the ambulance drive up the hill yesterday, and I got that text on the night he . . .” Matt paused. “On the night he killed himself. But I didn’t put it together. ‘I’m sorry?’ He didn’t have anything to be sorry about with me, so I figured it was just a mistake, like he probably meant it for Isla. I didn’t know he sent it to his whole address book.”

“His whole address book? Like, everyone in his phone?” Devon made a note. It was the first time she had heard about Hutch sending a text out on the night he died.

“Yeah, everyone got it. I’m sorry. But by the time anyone put the pieces together it was too late, ya know?”

Was it wrong to be annoyed that she didn’t get that text? *You weren’t even in his phone, Devon. That’s how close you were.* Matt’s shaggy blonde hair was damp and starting to curl up on the ends as it dried. From the fresh red sunburn on his cheeks and deep tan line on his neck, it was clear he’d gone surfing this morning already. Matt and Hutch were regular fixtures on the morning surf van. It was a badge of honor among the Keaton diehards; only *they* would wake up at 6am just to catch a few waves before class.

“I still can’t believe he was out there all night.” Matt shook his head, as if disagreeing with his own memory. “Hutch wasn’t taking Oxy. Not him. When they do one of those toxicology things they’ll know. He just wouldn’t . . .”

“Yes?”

Matt crossed a bare foot over his knee and picked at a callous on the side of his big toe. The bottom of his foot was calloused and embedded with dirt. As Devon stared at his foot she realized she hadn’t seen Matt wear normal shoes since he’d started at Keaton freshman year. He went barefoot everywhere, except when he had to wear cleats for

soccer or lacrosse, and dress shoes for formal assemblies. His calluses were so thick they *were* shoes at this point.

“I mean, maybe he was out there drinking a bit and he fell asleep and the cold got him,” he said, mostly to himself. “I checked the temperatures; it dropped to freezing that night. They rushed this whole suicide decision if you ask me. It just wasn’t him. I would know if he was thinking about . . . He would have told me. I know he would have.”

*Of course he would have; you two were like brothers*, Devon wanted to say. But instead she said: “It’s a shock to lose someone like Hutch. Especially when he seemed to have everything going for him.”

An image flashed through her mind: the mob of students who’d burst into tears yesterday when Headmaster Wyler announced Hutch’s death in a special all-school assembly. Rumors had already been flying around campus after the ambulance and police cars had appeared. For a school of three hundred, any death would send tremors throughout the community, but Hutch’s suicide was almost physical in its shock and impact. Even *teachers* were crying. Hutch was one of those guys everyone knew and everyone couldn’t help but like. Students had formed a cluster around those that were the closest to Hutch. His girlfriend last year, Isla, was at the epicenter while others sobbed together in stairwells or hugged each other in the aisles.

Devon hadn’t cried then. It didn’t register. Especially the suicide part. Matt was right. Hutch and suicide were just two things that you would never put together. Like that comparison module on the SATs: Hutch is to Suicide as Oil is to Water. “I know it’s a hard thing to accept when someone chooses to end their own life,” she went on. “We can only hope that Hutch isn’t in pain anymore.” Devon flashed her

most consoling smile, even though it felt empty and fake. Mr. Robbins had told her that getting the subject to accept a situation was the key to successful therapy—

“Really?” Matt snapped. He tilted his head at her. “That’s what you’re supposed to say to me right now? The ‘he’s in a better place’ crap? It’s not like my dog died, Devon. This is Hutch. I mean, no offense, but why am I talking to *you*? Big Brother trying to keep tabs on us so the suicide doesn’t spread? Before it becomes the cool thing to do? What a load of Keaton BS.” Matt curled his toes until they cracked.

He kind of had a point. Would *she* want to talk to her?

Devon brushed her brown bangs away from her eyes. She tried to gather her thoughts, to remember her training. It was much harder to do this with people you actually knew. This was not one of Mr. Robbins’ practice tests. “*When in doubt say someone’s name. It creates a sense of familiarity. He has to see you as someone he can confide in.*” Even though in the outside world Matt Dolgens would NEVER confide in her, she tried to let him know he could trust her in here.

“Matt,” Devon began, trying to diffuse Matt’s tension. “That’s not what this is about. These sessions are for you. To talk about whatever you want. You lead the conversation. Yes, you’ve been flagged by Dean Leeland as someone to keep an eye on, but that’s just because everyone knows how close you and Hutch are. We’re sorry. I’m just here to help you work through your grief.”

“But I’m required to be here?”

“Yes, although I prefer to think of it as more of an opportunity than a requirement.” (As suggested by Mr. Robbins’s Peer Counselor Pilot Program Training Guide, FAQ #3.) Devon cringed as she heard the textbook answer fly from her mouth so readily.

“Ha! More BS.”

“I know it sounds lame, but it’s true. This program really is here—I mean, *I’m* here, to help you.” She reminded herself not to get defensive. Matt’s reaction was a normal part of the process. “That’s the only goal I have.”

“Please. The only goal you have is kissing Keaton’s ass. Some kid overdoses on their property so they gotta cover *their* ass somehow.” Matt ripped a dangling thread off his jeans and looked at Devon again. “So you get in good with Hutch’s friends, narc us all out, and you get a college rec letter? Must be nice to sell out like that.”

Devon stiffened. At Keaton’s core, everything seemed to revolve around getting into a good college. No surprise that Matt had steered conversation that way. She just hadn’t expected it so soon. Even in grief, Keaton students kept their competitive edge.

“Matt—”

“Next question, Dev. Let’s get this over with.”

She was going to have to change tactics. *Hutch*. Bring it back to Hutch. “Remember when you and Hutch went through Buck initiation?” she inquired gently, eyes on her notepad. “You two showed up at like 3 am at my door in Spring House in your boxers?” She glanced up. “You said you had a mission or something like that.”

“A secret mission. Hutch loved a secret mission.” Matt’s tone softened a little and a smile began forming on his lips. “The seniors made us try to get girls’ underwear, but it was Hutch’s idea to go to your room.”

“You guys got lucky being roommates freshman year. That must have been cool.”

His smile stopped before it could fully take shape. Devon could see the sides of his cheeks getting red, his eyes moistening. She leaned forward in her chair and whispered, “What are you thinking about?”

Matt swallowed back the tears. He said in a calm voice, "Hutch was the first person to call me out on my shit. Freshman year. He called me a spoiled asshole when I wouldn't take out our trash. No one had ever said anything like that to me. I mean, Hutch grew up with money like I did, but I was . . . He knocked me down a peg. I hated him for it at the time, but he got my respect. Not many people here have." His voice took on a dark edge. He seemed to spit the last words at her.

Devon wrote on her notepad: Hutch = reality check.

"What are you writing?" he demanded.

"Just notes for myself to keep track of what we talk about." She looked up.

"But those don't go anywhere, right?" Matt's tears were gone. His gaze was cold.

"Well." She smiled, but she imagined it looking like the uncomfortable kind of smile chimpanzees do when they are nervous. "Don't freak out. I have to record these sessions. It's procedure."

"Are you recording this right now? You know I can lawyer up in a second? None of this is going anywhere without my consent. And I doubt you want to get my dad involved." His voice escalated into a sharp bark with each word until he sounded like a Rottweiler fending off a burglar.

Devon blinked several times. She couldn't try to be his friend. She wasn't supposed to try *anything* that involved a previous connection or relationship. In this room, at this moment, a "subject" was just that: another human being who needed help in a continuous "now." The "now" existed only in this room, and nowhere else. But she also saw something very clearly that she hadn't seen coming: As long as she sat in this chair and did what she was supposed to, Matt was going to see her as the enemy.

Getting his Dad involved wasn't a bluff, either; his family had the means and most certainly kept a lawyer on retainer. Matt's family had created the Dolgens Ski Company; they even sponsored the U.S. Ski Team during the last Olympics. Matt always bragged about expanding into surfboards and how his dad had put him in charge of creating a surf team for the company to sponsor. The rumor around Keaton was that Matt's family was worth about \$50 million.

It was getting stuffy in the practice space. Was the sound-proofing holding all the heat in here too? Sunshine lit up the small window in the corner, turning the room into a mini-greenhouse.

"Matt, they do *not* have the right to know what we talk about in here. I'm not a narc, okay? Give me some credit. You know me." She stood to prop the window open.

"Do I? When was the last time you and I actually had a conversation? Freshman year? On the bus to Freshman Campout? And then Hutch ODs and all of a sudden I'm supposed to pour my heart out to you? Bring up all the sweet memories you want, I'm done talking." Matt straightened his legs, smoothing his jeans out.

"*Make the subject comfortable enough to confide in you.*" It was almost laughable how simple Mr. Robbins' Training Guide made it seem in Section II: How to Set the Correct Tone for the Session. Her over-analytical brain found it interesting that *confide* and *confidence* both involved the Latin verb, *fidere*, which meant to have faith. *He's got to have faith in me. Maybe that should be added to Mr. Robbins' Guide.*

"Fine, you don't have to talk. I can't make you. You just have to stay here for the whole session." Devon tried to keep her face neutral. Smiling seemed inappropriate.

Matt kept looking at the poster behind Devon, refusing to make further eye contact. "So who else are they sending

to you? Me, Isla? I heard Isla's pretty wrecked. Lost it in the Dining Hall in front of everyone. They had to take her to the Health Center to get her to calm down; she was scaring all the freshmen. Guess it makes sense. Isla and Hutch had something special. They lost their . . ." He caught himself before saying too much, drumming his fingers on his knees. "Who else are they making talk to you?"

"That's confidential. It's part of this whole Peer Counseling thing. You guys have complete anonymity. Which, like I said, gives you the freedom to talk about whatever you want." Devon looked out the window as if she didn't care whether Matt spoke or not. She didn't want to appear like she was hanging on his every word. A peek inside Matt Dolgens brain! A guy that most girls in her class wanted to or already had hooked up with. This was uncharted territory. "*Let the subject fill in the silences,*" Mr. Robbins had said. People generally don't like silences. The human instinct is to fill them.

"Isn't that redundant? Isn't anonymity by definition complete?" Matt asked.

"It's not redundant if it's emphatic." Devon pushed back.

"Touché." Matt's foot was tapping in time with his fingers. He stared, unblinking, at the poster.

Devon studied him surreptitiously, pretending to read her notes. It would be easy to assume that Matt was so jittery and wired simply because he didn't like her. That he wanted to be somewhere else. That he was nervous about being in a Keaton "session," or that he resented having to come here in the first place. Or just that he was filled with grief that Hutch was dead. But this is why certain peers signed up for Peer Counseling—because certain peers could hopefully see the difference between one or all of the above and something a little deeper.

Devon sat up straight in her chair and cleared her throat. It was one thing to allow Matt to reveal what was inside; it was another to go on poking and prodding. This could take a wrong turn very easily. Still, she doggedly plowed forward.

“So, what are you taking these days? Adderall? Anything else?” She kept her voice light and curious, careful to avoid sounding like she was accusing him of anything.

Matt leveled his dark green eyes at her, his sun-bleached eyebrows narrowed together. “This is total Amateur Hour, Devon. You’re not my shrink and you’re definitely not a doctor. You’re a sixteen-year-old that took a class or two this summer and you wanna talk about Adderall? Let it go, you’re in over your head.”

It was too late to retreat now. Devon couldn’t let Matt walk all over her. *You’re the one running this session.* “Matt, come on, everyone knows you live on the stuff. And with the way Hutch—”

“It’s got nothing to do with Hutch. I know that he . . .” Matt’s throat grew thick. He swallowed the emotions back down. “It’s got nothing to do with Hutch, okay? Trust me. Isla’s the one with the problem, not Hutch. Why do you think they broke up? Hutch had like some awakening this summer. I mean, the guy started meditating every morning! Suicide was not on his radar, I’m telling you.” His look pushed at her, pleading with her to believe him. “It doesn’t make sense. It just doesn’t make sense. I saw him right before . . .” He buried his head in his hands.

“When was the last time you saw him? It might help to get that off your chest if you tell me.” Devon leaned forward again. She wanted to hold onto his hand, hug him, anything to comfort him—but that wasn’t appropriate. In fact, it could get her expelled. Matt Dolgens, a guy she’d known for two years, was crying over his best friend in front of her.

*Professional detachment is the price of peer counselor admission.* Mr. Robbins had repeated that phrase until she thought she'd puke.

Matt exhaled long and slow. "Tuesday night. He was in my room. We were checking the surf report for Wednesday and he got a call. It pissed him off, I don't know why, but he said he had to deal with it. He said good night, and that was it. I heard him talking on his cell in his room and then he put on some music. He must have snuck out to the Palace after curfew, but I didn't hear it. And then I saw that text the next morning, but it was too late."

"I'm listening." Devon whispered.

"We were . . . Neither of us could wait to get out of here. We had a whole plan. Boulder for college, live in San Francisco after. Surf Maverick's on weekends. He was in. We talked about it. We talked about *life* . . . you know, outside of this place. That's the whole Keaton promise, isn't it? Make friends for life. Well, I did that, and suddenly he's *not* in. There is no plan. It just doesn't make sense." Matt hung his head again.

Devon let him cry for a minute.

"You're right, it doesn't make sense," she agreed.

"And the mess he left me with." Matt shook his head and rubbed his cheeks with the back of his palm. "You're in over your head, Devon."

"That's the second time you've said that. How am I in over my head? I'm here to help you, Matt. Whatever you need to tell me, please tell me. Maybe I can help. What was Hutch into?"

Matt shook his head and looked out the window. "I can tell you this," he offered in a hoarse voice. "Hutch was going to ask you to prom next year. He said, no matter what happened, or who either of you were with, you two were going

to prom together senior year. Random, right?” Matt looked back at her, gauging her reaction. There was the slightest hint of a crooked smile on his lips, like he knew he was pushing one of her buttons.

Devon brushed her bangs out of her eyes and forced her gaze back on her notepad. She wouldn't cry in front of Matt. “Yeah, random,” she replied.

The alarm on her cell phone chimed.

“Our time is up.”



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