

THE PEGGY SUE BRIDGE

TOBY W. RUSH

THE PEGGY SUE BRIDGE

Unpublished draft
27 October 2020

This edition is for editing and proofreading purposes, and is not for sale. Any distribution without express permission from the author is prohibited.

Toby W. Rush, *The Peggy Sue Bridge*
Copyright © 2020 Toby W. Rush

for Sofie

ACROSS	I
HOWARD'S DREAM	16
THE ANNOUNCEMENT	24
A NEW ROOMMATE	34
SAM'S FIRST DAY	44
GREG.....	54
VISITING LINDA	68
A NAME AND AN ADDRESS	78
MEGAN'S DREAM.....	89
SPARKY'S	95
DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN	103
FLYING.....	112
THE LAUNDROMAT	123
THE TOYS UNDER THE BED	135
THE FOOD DRIVE	144
VICKY'S DREAM.....	157
THANKSGIVING	164
STEPHEN PALMETTI.....	185
HOUSE GUESTS	204

CHARLIE'S DREAM	219
A LUNCH DATE	228
THE NEW PROJECT	241
MARGARET	257
A FELLOW DETECTIVE	271
PHIL'S DREAM	283
THE ACCIDENT	297
ONE YEAR.....	317
MONTGOMERY WARD	331
ROM'S DREAM	350
THE FIRST DATE	361
PROJECT SIGMA.....	379
REUNION	393
LINDA'S DREAM	408
CUSTODY	414
THE SEARCH.....	430
SAM'S DREAM.....	442
BACK.....	449
EPILOGUE.....	465

CHAPTER ONE

ACROSS

Megan Whittaker had just passed the YMCA when she felt a halting chill that drew her attention to the quiet neighborhood around her. She hadn't heard or seen anything, and she didn't believe in ghosts — but she had just felt *something*. Something that felt weirdly familiar, but she couldn't quite place it. After standing for a moment, struggling to grasp the elusive glimmer of *déjà vu*, she continued on her way.

It wouldn't be until later that night, as she lay in her bed, that she would remember when she had felt it before: it had been almost a year ago, as she was walking toward the middle of the Peggy Sue Bridge. It had made her stop then, too, but the plans she had made, and the boy she had made them with, caused her to dismiss the feeling as just nerves.

It didn't make sense as nerves this time, though, and by the next morning she would forget about it once again.

* * *

“Guys, wait up!”

Sam was panting as he ran to catch up with his brothers, his backpack flopping from shoulder to shoulder with the

weight of the unopened G.I. Joe snowmobile inside. *I wish Jacob let me open it at TG&Y*, he thought. *I could have thrown away the box and it wouldn't be so heavy.*

Jacob, Kyle, and Jacob's friend Scott had now turned the corner behind the Masonic Temple, and Sam felt panicked when he couldn't see them.

"No fair! Wait for me!" As he got closer to the corner, he saw Kyle come back around, his lazy gait hinting that the other boys were waiting around the corner, just out of sight.

"Come on, Sam, hurry up!"

"I'm trying!"

Reunited, the group crossed Canyon Road and walked alongside it as the sun came closer to the high mountain horizon ahead. Their pace was a little less frantic now, and Sam took in the impressive view to his right: one of the huge canyons that separated the townsite's parallel mesas was just a few feet away. Sam peered across at the houses built on the adjacent mesa, and marveled at the sheer rock faces that lurked menacingly beneath the unfenced backyards.

"Hey, let's take Peggy Sue," Scott suggested as they neared a roadway that led down a gentle hill toward the canyon. "It's a lot faster."

Jacob and Kyle both gave a shrug of agreement, and the group veered down the short driveway.

"What's 'Piggy Sue'?" Sam asked, not sure if he heard them correctly. Kyle acted annoyed at the question but Sam was pretty sure he didn't know either.

“*Peggy Sue*. It’s a bridge that goes across the canyon,” Scott responded. “It connects back behind the high school. It’s got a fence around it, but there’s a hole you can go through.”

The thought of a fence quickly tempered Sam’s excitement. He wondered if that meant people weren’t supposed to go on it. He didn’t want to get in trouble, but if the older boys were doing it...

“You guys know why it’s called ‘*Peggy Sue*,’ don’t you?” Scott asked, leading the group past a building nestled at the bottom of the drive and on to a dirt road that turned back along the side of the canyon. “Back in the fifties, there was a girl named *Peggy Sue* who jumped off it and died. One of my sister’s friends in high school said she saw her ghost one night, out on the bridge.”

Thoughts of deadly falls and ghosts were making Sam more and more apprehensive about the shortcut, but after a few minutes the boys arrived at a tall, trussed metal tower that soared thirty or forty feet into the blue sky. High above the four boys, heavy metal cables crisscrossed, attaching the top of the tower to giant bolts fitted into rocks in the ground nearby. At the base of the towers were pipes of various sizes, and everything was spotted with patches of rust and bits of faded graffiti. A newer chain link fence separated the boys from the entire imposing assembly.

The combination of looking up at the tower and the nearness of the canyon made Sam a bit dizzy, and he had to look down to the ground to keep from falling. As he did so,

his eyes fixed on the bridge itself: a narrow walkway that spanned across the huge canyon to the base of another tower far on the other side. The sense of vertigo he felt by looking upward was replaced with a feeling of dread as he saw Scott crawling through a ragged hole in the fence, with Jacob and Kyle standing by, eager to follow.

Sam opened his mouth to say something but no sound came out. He didn't want to make the older boys think he was a wimp—he wanted to be cool like them.

He took a deep breath. Maybe he *could* do it? He looked again at the bridge and saw that it had cables on either side to hold on to. He thought about how it would feel to be able to tell his friends at school not only that he knew about the Peggy Sue Bridge, but that he had *crossed* it.

He walked up to the hole in the fence and waited his turn; Scott and Jacob were both on the other side of the fence, and Kyle was just now climbing through. After making it through, Kyle looked back at Sam with a look that combined a feeling of care, apology, and even a hint of his own fear, and reached out his hand to help Sam climb through.

The boys climbed over the rusty pipes and on to the thick metal grid that formed the walkway. As Sam climbed up, he looked down past his feet, past the large rusty pipe beneath the deck, and to the ground just below. He brought his head back up and saw the other boys starting across: Scott and Jacob were moving across the bridge at casual

pace, and Kyle was following a little more tentatively, holding tight to the guide cables.

Not wanting to fall behind again, Sam began putting one careful foot in front of the other, urging himself to move forward and keeping his eyes on the pipe beneath the walkway. At first, it wasn't too difficult, and it helped to keep his eyes down rather than look ahead at the long span of the bridge leading out into midair. But the ground he could see on either side of the pipe was getting farther and farther away until finally the dirt and pine needles gave way to the bare rock of the cliff's edge. Suddenly, he was looking down at the tops of the pine trees growing on the edge of the canyon floor. He stopped and slowly peered over the side of the bridge, between smaller cables that radiated from either side of the deck, down into the chasm below. His legs weakened and his feet froze.

"Try this," Scott's voice rang out, and the entire bridge shook slightly with the sound of him jumping and landing with a clang on the metal grid. Sam turned to see Kyle stop his advance, tensely holding on to the cables on either side.

From the older boys' laughter it sounded like Jacob was enjoying the result, and they continued bouncing, causing the span to shake slightly and the cables to vibrate in response.

"Stop it," shouted Kyle, his voice shaking.

Sam closed his eyes. He held the cables as tightly as he could and waited, petrified, for Scott and Jacob to stop jumping.

Fortunately, it didn't take long, and soon after the vibrations ceased, Kyle resumed his slow journey. He was fifty feet ahead when Sam finally mustered up enough courage to let loose of the cables, one hand at a time, and creep forward. As he advanced, the shift in perspective reminded him of how high up he was, and his eyes flailed around a bit before grasping onto the advancing figure of his older brother. He fixed his gaze on Kyle's blue jacket and started to move again, this time with a little more resolve. *I'm doing it*, he thought to himself. *Just like the big kids.*

Kyle was much farther ahead now, just past the point where the suspension cables that towered above Sam reached their low point before swooping back upward and meeting the tower on the opposite side. As he walked, Sam's eyes followed them from Kyle's position upward and back into the blue sky above him, and he was again overcome with a sense of dizziness that made his feet heavy and pulled his hands toward the cables beside him. Just as his fingers expected to meet the metal rope, the entire bridge began to shake again.

Scott and Jacob were yanking on the cables that ran along side them, swaying the cables and the deck beneath Sam's feet. While the older boys laughed, Kyle yelped, regained his balance, and then shouted at them with a slightly panicked irritation. But Sam couldn't even speak; his whole body tensed with fear, and he once again shut his eyes and held on tight until the shaking subsided.

It took a minute for Sam to regain the courage to even open his eyes, and he made the mistake of doing so while his chin was still tucked into his chest, so the scene before him was the whole of the canyon below. He yanked his head up, only to see that Scott and Jacob had made it across, and were urging Kyle forward. Kyle, frustrated but determined, was nearly two-thirds of the way across and was increasing speed.

Sam felt a lump in his throat. He knew that if he didn't catch up with them before Kyle reached the other side, the three older boys would continue on, leaving Sam alone to make it the rest of the way across.

Across. Sam thought again of how it would feel to be able to say he had crossed the Peggy Sue Bridge. He took another step and the weight on his back reminded him of the new toy he would be able to open once he got home. Taking a deep breath and locking his eyes once more on Kyle's diminishing form, Sam decided he was going to give it his all. One trembling hand at a time, he let go of the cables that ran alongside him. "Turbo boost," he said quietly but deliberately to himself, and, gritting his teeth and clenching his fists—

He ran. His legs were shaking and his feet were numb with fear, and as he bounded down the walkway, the bridge vibrated in response — but he forced himself to keep going.

But just as he found a rhythm, his right foot caught on a raised edge of one of the walkway's metal sections. He tried to steady his gait to compensate, but the swinging inertia of

his backpack threw him completely off-balance, so he careened, full-speed, toward the metal plating.

CRASH! He landed, and his hands and knees screamed with searing pain. Instinctively, he tried to clamber back up, but the fire in his legs caused him to collapse and roll to the right, where he heard the ripping of fabric and felt the sharp edge of the rusty grid cut the skin on under his shirt. The lowest guide-cable caught his ear, and he tucked his head into his chest while reaching instinctively with his foot for the ground beneath him—realizing too late that the ground was hundreds of feet below. He reached his arms out, then up, but suddenly there was nothing left to hang on to.

He shut his eyes tightly, too petrified to even scream, and waited for the ground to meet him.

Sam came to, eyes still shut tight, not realizing he had even passed out. In fact, he didn't really remember what he was doing for the first ten seconds or so, having felt like he had woken from a sound sleep. If anything, he was surprised to feel the rough ground beneath him, to hear a car driving by some distance away, and to feel the cool air on his cheeks, rather than waking up in his bed at home.

After a short period of confused stillness, he opened his eyes to find he was in a small clearing, surrounded by trees. He was laying on his side, his backpack and jacket still on. Suddenly, he remembered the bridge and his terrifying fall, and quickly sat upright. He remembered the blinding pain in his legs but discovered that they now felt completely fine,

as though he hadn't tripped at all. He felt his side, where he remembered the metal cutting into his skin—his shirt was ripped, but the skin beneath was perfectly fine; there wasn't even a mark.

Kneeling, he spun around and saw a severe drop-off into the canyon to his left, and then, hovering above and about fifty yards behind him, saw the bridge itself.

The relief of having survived his fall unharmed was suddenly replaced with a feeling of panic, as Sam realized that not only was the bridge empty, but as he peered into the distance he could see no one on the opposite side. Had his brothers gone on without him? A lump formed in Sam's stomach as he considered having to cross the bridge again to catch up with them now. He raced through the trees toward the near end of the bridge, hoping perhaps that Jacob, Kyle and Scott had come back across to look for him, and that his accident would be reason enough to not take the frightening shortcut at all. When he reached the tower, though, he saw and heard no one — only the occasional car driving by on the road up the hill.

He waited there for some time, watching and listening for his brothers, as the tears began to come. By the time he decided to walk back up the dirt road the way he had come he was sniffing and sobbing. As the church building they had passed earlier came into view, he was relieved to notice not only a playground behind it—*this must be a safe place for kids*, he thought—but also a man that had just walked out of the front door, heading toward a blue car parked out front.

The man caught sight of Sam, who was still crying, put his briefcase into the back seat of the car, closed the door and walked to meet Sam as he approached.

“What’s the matter there, my friend?” The man had a dark, thick beard and glasses, and wore a small black cap on the top of his head. He had a friendly, concerned face.

“I fell off the bridge,” Sam responded between sobs, “and now I can’t find my brothers and I don’t know how to get home.” Saying it brought Sam’s predicament back into the forefront of his mind, and he started crying even harder than before.

The man’s eyes widened with shock. “Are you hurt? Did — did your *brothers* fall off the bridge too?”

“No, they already crossed it and—and—they didn’t wait for me!” Sam could barely get the words out through his tears.

The man lowered himself to Sam’s level, gave him a handkerchief from his pocket, and put a hand on Sam’s shoulder. His look softened and his face broke into a comforting smile. “Hey, it’s okay, there, my friend. I can help you. My name’s Rabbi Steven. What’s yours?”

“Sam Friedman.” Sam felt better knowing that the man could help him. “Do you know my mom and dad?”

The man smiled broadly. “Friedman, hmm? Well, it sounds like I ought to. What are their names?”

Sam always felt important when saying his mom and dad’s full names. “Brian Friedman and Joy Friedman,” he

recited. "And my brothers are Jacob and Kyle. And Scott was with them, he's Jacob's friend from school."

But Rabbi Steven didn't seem to recognize the names. "Well, why don't we go inside and give them a call, huh?" He stood up and offered his hand. Sam took his hand and walked with him toward the door.

Rabbi Steven led him inside the building where they walked through a lobby and to a closed door, which he unlocked and opened. Flicking on the light switch, he revealed a small office which included, among other things, a small bin of toys in the corner. Just as Sam was about to ask about them, Rabbi Steven spoke.

"Would you like to play with some toys while I call your parents?" Sam went straight for the bin and knelt to look through it; there were books, wooden cars, some worn-out stuffed animals and a plastic drawing slate, the kind that you could erase by peeling the pock-marked cellophane from the gray surface underneath it.

Rabbi Steven sat down behind his desk and pulled a phone book from the small shelf beside him. As Sam was trying out the different cars in the bin, Rabbi Steven flipped through the pages, stopped for a moment and moved his fingers down the page.

"Do you live on 46th Street?" he asked, looking up at Sam over his glasses.

"Yes."

"Ah, well, let's give them a call, shall we?" Rabbi Steven seemed to be talking to the book more than to Sam. He

pulled his phone forward and started dialing, holding the handset between his ear and shoulder. After he finished dialing, he looked over at Sam and smiled. Sam felt better now, knowing that he'd be home again soon, but dreaded what his parents would say if they found out he had fallen off the bridge. And even if he didn't tell them, his shirt was ripped... his mom would be furious no matter what. Thinking about it a little more, he hoped his dad would answer the phone instead of his mom.

After a few seconds, someone on the other end of the line must have picked up, because Rabbi Steven's eyes shifted downward and he began talking. "Hello, may I speak with Brian or Joy Friedman? Yes, hello, Mrs. Friedman. This is Steven Rosenboom at the Jewish Center. Your son Sam is here with me... he said he was lost and he was pretty distressed, but—"

He paused while the person on the other end—Sam's mom, apparently—responded.

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry. No, it's your son *Sam*." He spoke Sam's name more clearly, as though she hadn't heard correctly the first time. Rabbi Steven put his hand over the mouthpiece and looked toward Sam. "It's Sam, right?" he asked, quietly, and Sam nodded.

Rabbi Steven listened closely to the phone, and his dark eyebrows furrowed. He scratched his beard and looked again at the still open phone book in front of him.

"I'm sorry, ma'am, I guess there's been a mistake. And this is Brian and Joy Friedman, yes? On 46th Street?"

Sam looked up. Something didn't seem right. He wondered if Rabbi Steven had called the wrong number.

"Well, I'm very sorry to have bothered you, Mrs. Friedman. Yes, yes, thank you. Yes, you have a very nice day as well." Rabbi Steven hung up the phone with a quizzical expression on his face. "Sam, do you know your phone number?"

Sam rattled it off to Rabbi Steven, who responded with a curious "hmmm" as he looked again at the phone book.

After another moment of looking, he got up. "I tell you what, Sam, would you like to play with these toys out in the lobby out here? There's a lot more room to race those cars."

Sam agreed; the lobby was much larger than the cramped office. Rabbi Steven helped Sam put the toys back into the bin and then lifted it to carry it out. Sam picked up his coat, and then his backpack, suddenly remembering the contents.

"Can I open the toy in my backpack? I bought it at the store today," Sam asked excitedly as he followed Rabbi Steven. They got out to the lobby and Sam set down his coat and backpack and started opening the backpack's zipper.

"What kind of toy did you get?" Rabbi Steven asked with an interested but somewhat distracted look on his face.

Sam pulled the box out. Considering his fall, the box seemed to be in excellent condition.

“How about this... I need to go make another phone call, and then I can come help you put this together. Does that sound good?”

“Sure!” Sam was excited. Sam’s parents hardly ever played toys with him anymore; they were always so busy with work. Kyle would usually help Sam put G.I. Joe toys together: Sam would peel the stickers off the paper and give them to Kyle, because he would get them on a lot straighter than Sam could. But having Rabbi Steven help him would be great. Sam felt like he had made a very good choice in asking Rabbi Steven for help.

As Sam looked at the back of the box, he could hear Rabbi Steven talking on the phone in his office. His voice was quieter, partly because the door was only open a crack, but also because Rabbi Steven was talking pretty quietly into the phone.

“Hi, Steven Rosenboom at the Jewish Center. Yes, I have a lost boy here, his name’s Sam Friedman. He told me his parents’ names and phone number and I called, but they said he didn’t live there—said both their kids were home with them.”

There was a pause, and the rest of the phone conversation consisted mainly of Rabbi Steven saying “yes” or “mm-hmm” until finally he said, “all right then, we’ll be waiting for him here,” said good-bye, and hung up the phone.

The door swung open and Rabbi Steven came out of the office. "Sam, after we get your toy built, how would you like to ride in a police car?"

Sam's eyes widened. "Sure," he responded, excited by the prospect. Rabbi Steven must have dialed the number wrong when he tried to call his parents, Sam guessed, and then he must have called the police to help him. *I guess even grown-ups need help sometimes*, Sam thought to himself.

With the last of the daylight coming in through the windows, Rabbi Steven sat down on the floor next to Sam, and together, in the quiet of the unfamiliar lobby, they began building Sam's new toy.

CHAPTER TWO

HOWARD'S DREAM

"Is someone there?"

He was outside, and it was twilight, but it was hard to make out the shapes against the purple sky. Pine trees around him, that was certain, and familiar. In front of him, a path, and on the path, a form. Silhouetted against the night sky, he could see now it was a woman, wearing a long gown. Standing silently, she gazed out at the dim horizon, unaware of his presence.

Was it today? Was it thirty years ago? Was it far in the future? Time didn't feel as if it existed here. The trees around him could be ancient. The earth could be new. And he—he was ageless. He couldn't feel the limitations of his physical form, his stiff neck, his arthritic knee. He took a slow breath and not only was the air fresh, but the lungs that took it in were clean, pure.

But she had a definite age. She was a young woman, in her prime. The skin of her hands and face were beautiful and clean. Her form was elegant, and even her gown seemed to be sewn from perfect, white linen.

He moved forward noiselessly. Was this *her*?

She looked down at her feet—past her feet. His vision began to cloud again; the night was closing in. She wasn't moving, but somehow *everything* was receding—

Suddenly she was a child. In a brightly lit yard, kids were playing in a sprinkler, toys littered all over. The girl had on an emerald green bathing suit and was squealing as she was being chased by a little boy holding a squirt gun. He strained to see her eyes but she turned away as she darted around a lawn chair to escape her pursuer.

Was this *his* memory? Did he have any right to be here?

A woman's voice called to the children, and they ran to her with delighted voices. What was it that she was saying to them? He turned to see the woman in an apron, bringing treats to the children. They surrounded her, some jumping with excitement, and each in turn got their snack and scattered to enjoy it.

The girl came back toward him, half-running, half skipping, showing what she had gotten: a red popsicle, held out just long enough to see before she popped it back into her mouth, eyes sparkling.

Now it was Christmas, and she was older, maybe nine or ten. Her long brown hair uncombed, crawling around the tree to reach a small gift, done up with glittering red wrapping paper and green ribbon. She stopped just momentarily to admire the bow before pulling the ribbon off and ripping into the paper. Excitedly finding the tiny

jewelry box within, she carefully opened it and squealed with joy. She pulled out a gold chain and, dangling and twisting at the bottom of the loop, a gold heart-shaped locket inlaid with sparkling jewels. Carefully opening the locket, she peered at the pictures inside and smiled broadly.

Jumping up, she twirled around, nearly losing her balance amidst the boxes and wrapping paper scattered on the floor around her. Clutching the necklace, she bounced over to him, her cheeks rosy and her whole face smiling broadly. She leapt toward him and hugged him tightly around his middle. Tentatively, he put his arms around her, feeling her soft hair and flannel pajamas.

He wanted so badly to accept this hug, to hold her tightly. To stay here with her. But was he an impostor here?

As quickly as the visions came, they disappeared. A slumber party. A driving lesson. Here she was walking down the stairs in a beautiful formal gown, her hair done up nicely and dangling earrings tickling her neck. There she was next to him in a darkened theater, the smell of popcorn wafting by as she clutched his arm in response to the on-screen action.

A sterile-looking hospital room, and he looked down at her. She was asleep, only days old—maybe hours. Swaddled tightly in a soft white blanket with light peach-colored stripes, a knitted pink cap on her tiny head. Her perfect skin looked so soft, and he could hear her faint, rapid breathing as she slumbered. Her eyes, closed and relaxed,

darted back and forth underneath her delicate eyelids. What could she be dreaming about?

He felt panicked—this couldn't be *his* memory. He was a thief in the night, stealing this beautiful experience, this heavenly feeling, from—

From whom? Could *anybody* truly lay claim to this? Who can own a memory that everyone has forgotten? Like those first dreams of a brand new baby, do these moments flicker out of existence, out of time, never to be claimed or even discovered?

He looked down at a shopping cart full of groceries. Cardboard trays of canned vegetables, spices, pre-made pie crusts. He pushed the cart down the aisle and toward the checkout lane.

His wife was here. She was older and wiser than when she had been bringing the popsicles to the children, but somehow lacked the weathered joy brought by years of motherhood. She guided the cart toward a lane where the cashier waited for them, smiling, and gave a friendly hello as she began emptying the contents of the cart onto the conveyor belt.

This, *this* was... well, it was *his*. He knew *this* well. How many times had he replayed these moments in his mind? He gazed out through the glass storefront, trying to see her.

Outside, rain was pouring down in sheets from the dark clouds. He gazed as far to the right of the stormy scene as

his eyes could reach, gently pushing against the checkout counter and leaning over it.

Suddenly, she appeared, no sooner or later than it had always been. She wore black slacks and a dark blue coat, the collar pulled over her head to keep it dry. She was running, occasionally splashing in an unseen puddle and bouncing to the side as it sprayed her leg.

As she stepped on the sensor, the doors swung open, allowing the sound of the pelting rain to temporarily drown out the light chatter and the soft overhead music. As she entered, she shook the water from her coat and let it fall back down on her shoulders, finally allowing him a glimpse of her face, her hair, her eyes. The tiny, nondescript earrings with the pale blue jewels. The pea-sized birthmark along her jawline.

Had she been crying? From his vantage point three checkout stands away, during the few short seconds he could see her eyes, they looked wet—almost red. Was it just the rain, or had she been hurt?

Time seemed to slow down as her eyes swept across the front of the store. The idle conversation which continued between his wife and the cashier slowed and faded, the sound of the cash registers echoing into the distance. He could almost feel her field of vision fly across the busy market when her eyes finally locked onto his.

He willed time to stop at this precious moment and it obeyed: he gazed into her blue eyes, searching for her soul. As he had so many times before, he saw weariness, pain,

loss. He looked for the Christmases, the barbecues, the newborn dreams. They were there somewhere, weren't they? She would not have forgotten them—unless she was trying to.

Was she?

He let go of the moment and the store leapt back to life. The look in her eyes changed to a hurried panic—at least, it seemed that way to him—and she quickly turned away; she finished shaking the rain from her coat, but seemed to use the movement as an excuse to hide her eyes from him as she glided back into the aisles of canned food and on toward the back of the store.

Desperate, he forced himself to move. This time, he would follow her. He turned around and pushed through the people—seemingly leaving himself behind at the checkout with his memories. He had to catch her. He ran to the aisle into which she had disappeared and turned the corner—

The noise of the store vanished and he was back in the woods, his eyes once again adjusting from the bright fluorescent lights of the store to the dim silhouettes against the dark and quiet night. He stopped to get his bearings, to bring his mind into the stillness of the woods around him.

He was relieved to see that she was still there, standing on the path before him. She was holding something—no, resting her hands on something before her. He could see now the heart-shaped pendant glinting from its perch on her chest. Her eyes were taking in the night sky that seemed

to surround her, as if she were somehow standing not on the ground but in the sky itself.

He could see her face now, her eyes, and he saw the same sadness and weariness he had seen in the store. She seemed resigned and alone, and his heart ached to help her. He stepped forward as his vision continued to clear and he became aware of his own footfall as it landed on something hard and flat.

It was no path. It was the bridge.

No, he thought. *No, please.*

He raced forward and she looked down. Her fists tightened on the cable in front of her, and she took in a deep, full breath as though she were about to—

“NOOO!!” He ran forward.

She turned to him, her eyes full of every emotion: sadness, surprise, relief, regret.

“Daddy?”

Suddenly, a nightmarish sound screamed from the canyon below. A thousand discordant klaxons, filling the night and piercing their ears. A terrible light from below came flooding upward, bathing the surrounding trees with a fiery orange glow, as though the gates of Hell itself had opened to take her from him. The noise increased, pulsing against his eardrums, as the expression on her face changed into a look of horror. He reached forward, throwing himself at her, pushing through the night with all the energy his soul could muster as she screamed for him.

“Daddy! *Daddy, please!*”

The noise continued to grow as the bridge, the trees, the canyon, the night itself fell away, enveloped in the glow—

RRRRRRRING.

Howard awoke with a jolt, reaching toward the phone on his bedside table to take the handset off the cradle. It was still dark—too dark to see the clock radio, but he knew it couldn’t be morning yet.

“Hello?”

The voice on the other line was hushed but familiar. “Howard, it’s Kirk Roe. I’m so sorry to call at this hour.”

“No, Kirk, it—it’s alright. What’s going on?”

“Someone else jumped.”

Howard didn’t speak for a moment. His mind was still waking up, but he understood what this meant. “Okay, um —” His groggy mind was trying to think about what to ask next, trying to reconcile the situation with the timing of the call and the urgency he could hear in Kirk’s voice.

But as if sensing Howard’s questions, the voice continued on.

“Howard, it’s a seven-year-old boy.”

CHAPTER THREE

THE ANNOUNCEMENT

Megan didn't feel like going to school. But as she lay in bed after turning off her alarm clock, she imagined herself skipping, went through the likely chain of consequences in her mind, and finally realized that it just wasn't worth it.

Grudgingly accepting her situation, she forced herself into the shower, to her closet, and down the stairs. She dreaded this part most of all. "Whoa, Megan, what is this, five days in a row?" "What? You're going again *today*? Call the school board!" It was enough to make her turn around and head right back to bed... almost.

Fortunately for Megan, as she got to the bottom of the stairs, she could see that it was just Vicky sitting in the kitchen, reading a magazine and finishing a glass of juice. Vicky Campbell always seemed to be happy, even bubbly—which, Megan often thought, completely contradicted the reasons why she would live here—but she never gave Megan a hard time. Her optimism made Megan think of her as being naive, but it was convenient at times like this.

Seeing Megan, she looked up with a pleasant, sincere smile. "Good morning!"

Megan could hear voices from the next room. "Is Charlie up yet?" she asked.

“Haven’t seen him, but I think he’s got things to do this morning before work, if you...” Vicky halfway waved her hand as her voice trailed off, and she stalled by taking another sip of juice.

“Yes, I’m going to school,” Megan muttered, releasing Vicky from her awkward pause.

“I’m sure he could give you a ride if you didn’t want to ride the bus.”

Megan definitely didn’t want to ride the bus. It was bad enough being teased about going to school in the first place, but as a sophomore, being forced to get there on the school bus would be beyond miserable.

Megan gathered her breakfast from the refrigerator and cupboard and sat down at the end of the breakfast table next to Vicky. As Megan poured herself a bowl of cereal, Vicky finished her juice and nudged the magazine toward her. It was open to an article about Princess Di, and after setting the milk jug back down, she thumbed backwards through the pages a little to see what else she could find.

Vicky collected her dishes and went to the sink. “Did you hear the phone ring this morning?”

“No,” Megan responded. Megan wasn’t surprised that she hadn’t heard it, since she didn’t have a phone in her room. She sometimes thought it would be nice, but then it didn’t really make a lot of sense for her to have one—who would she call?

“It was around two. Howard must have picked up. I don’t know who it was—we’ll have to ask him when he comes down.”

Megan thought for a moment why someone would have called in the middle of the night, but was interrupted by Charlie trotting down the stairs.

“Morning, ladies!” Charlie Moretti was nineteen, athletic, and good-looking. As with Vicky, his always cheery attitude didn’t match his reason for living there, and when Megan first met him nearly a year ago, she found it somehow unsettling. But being closer in age to her than anyone else there, she had grown to think of him as a big brother.

“Need a ride today, Megan?”

“Yeah,” Megan responded, trying not to look over-excited, but feeling inwardly relieved.

“Cool,” Charlie mentioned, glancing at the clock on the wall. “We’ve got, what, fifteen minutes?”

“Yeah, I think.”

Charlie grabbed a different, smaller carton of milk from the refrigerator, set it on the counter, and reached around Vicky to pull a pop-tart from one of the cupboards.

Carrying the milk in one hand, a pair of shoes in the other, and holding the toaster pastry in his mouth, he breezed over to the table and sat in the seat Vicky had just left. Leaning over toward Megan, Charlie contorted his face.

“BIOLOGY,” he grunted in a strange voice, pop-tart still hanging between his lips, causing Megan to recoil and furrow her brow in a look of irritation. Charlie laughed.

But Charlie was right: it was biology class that was keeping Megan from skipping school. Her teacher, Mr. Connor, had paired the students into lab partnerships, so that each partner’s grade depended partially on the participation of the other. And though Megan didn’t really care either way about her own grade, she hated that she was put into the position of being partially responsible for someone else’s. It wasn’t driven by a sense of altruism: she just didn’t want to be part of anyone else’s equation. She wanted to blend into the background, to not count, to not be noticed, or missed.

Megan saw Charlie flash a knowing smile out of the corner of her eye. Setting his breakfast on the table, he turned in his chair to bend over and put his shoes on. In doing so, he could see into the next room. “Morning, Phil,” he halfway yelled.

“Good morning, Charlie,” came the less energetic—but still friendly—response from around the corner. Megan knew that Phil Anderson, a quiet man on the later side of middle age, was almost certainly eating his oatmeal and grapefruit at the dining room table, watching the television and reading the paper; it had been his routine for as long as Megan had known him. Like Megan, Phil generally kept to himself. Megan respected him for that... but, of course, she would never *tell* him that.

Charlie turned to Vicky, who was putting away the dishes she had just washed. "Vicky, I thought you started day shift this week?"

Vicky was a secretary in the intensive care unit at the hospital, and her schedule sometimes had her working mornings, and sometimes afternoons into the late evenings.

"Swing," Vicky corrected him. "And I don't start until tomorrow. I have today off."

"Ooh, what are you going to do?" Charlie had gotten his shoes on and was now tearing into his unheated pop-tart.

"I don't know, Charlie," she responded with a smile. "I'm sure something will present itself."

The three of them were quiet for a few minutes. Megan was only half-heartedly reading the Princess Di article, and as Vicky finished the dishes and started wiping down the countertops with a paper towel, they heard footsteps on the creaking floor in the next room.

Howard Fenton was a quiet man in his fifties. He always struck Megan as being old-fashioned, both in his dress and his mannerisms: he would always take his hat off when stepping inside, he would stand whenever a woman would sit down at the table, and he would tend to refer to others as "Mr. So-and-so" even when other people were calling the guy by his first name.

But in the grand scheme of things, Howard was the only one of them who wasn't a guest: this was his house. Of course, maybe "guest" wasn't the right word: Howard had always made it clear that they were all welcome here as long

as they wanted to stay. Though the adults didn't talk about it in front of Megan, she knew that the others, the ones who had jobs, helped to pay for utilities, taxes, groceries, and whatever other financial needs came up from time to time.

And it was his position more than anything else that differentiated him from Phil: where Phil was content to leave everyone else alone, Howard felt the need to control things. At least that's how it felt to Megan, and she resented him for it.

Howard walked in from the dining room to the kitchen, but then paused in the doorway next to Charlie. He was ready for work, wearing his tweed jacket and holding his gray hat with a thin black feather stuck in the hatband. Charlie moved his chair a little in anticipation of letting him through into the kitchen, but Howard didn't continue walking through; he stood still, looking around at the three of them in the kitchen. Megan braced herself, thinking at first that he was going to say something about her going to school, but then realized that it wasn't his style. Had it been the other way around—had he walked in to see her planning to skip class—she would have much more likely gotten an earful.

"Officer Roe called me last night," he said, balancing authority with a tinge of sadness. "We will, uh, likely be getting another roommate."

The only audible response to this was from Vicky, who gasped sharply but quietly, but everyone was apparently taken aback by the news—or, rather, the dark truth of what

it meant. A new roommate meant that someone else had jumped from the bridge, and was likely just now realizing the impossibly unexpected consequences of doing so. It was obvious that no one really knew the proper way to respond.

It was a new experience for Megan, since she had been the most recent addition to the group. It had almost been a year since she had moved in, and in a way she was happy to not be the “new girl” anymore. Though, being the youngest person in the house at fifteen, the only one still in school, the only one without a job, she knew that things weren’t going to change for her anytime soon.

Vicky was the first to speak. “Who, Howard?”

“His name is Sam Friedman,” Howard responded slowly, and he swallowed before he continued. “He’s seven years old.”

The already silent kitchen turned deathly still for a moment until Charlie let out a long breath. Vicky was visibly shaken, and set down the towel she had in her hands and walked quickly from the room.

Howard spoke a little more quietly, sensing the emotion. “I’m meeting with Officer Roe later today to get things straightened out. It may be a day or two before he moves in, but I’ll let you know.” He paused for another moment and then went into the living room.

Charlie finished lacing his shoes and started gobbling down his breakfast. His mouth half full, he motioned to Megan, who had dropped all pretense of reading the article and closed the magazine.

“Wow, you’re not going to be the youngster around here anymore.”

Megan didn’t respond, unsure of how to feel.

For the entire day, Megan couldn’t shake the thought of a seven-year-old boy jumping off the bridge. It was hard enough feigning interest in English class even without having something like this to be preoccupied about. It didn’t help that the book being assigned, *The Scarlet Letter*, didn’t pique her interest in the slightest. After that was trigonometry, and Mr. Cohn made it a “work day” for the students, where they just did homework for the entire hour. In a way, Megan appreciated not having to listen to a boring lecture about angles and strange ways to figure out the hypotenuse, but in actuality the lack of class structure made the time pass much more slowly.

After lunch came biology, where the current project was earthworm dissection, but they weren’t even cutting open the tiny things until next week. Today, they were simply working with their lab partners on a diagram of the innards of a worm, which turned out to be pretty easy, so long as you had brought your textbook with you to class and you knew which page the diagram of the worm was on.

Megan hadn’t brought her book to class but her lab partner, Leah, had.

“He’s not going to make us find the nerve cord, is he?” Leah was looking at a tiny strand on the multi-colored diagram in her book, and trying to locate it on the

photocopied worksheet they were working on together. “It looks so small... we’ll never find it.”

Megan looked at the page and sighed. “I don’t know. Seems like he gets a charge out of asking stuff like that.” She was right: in a previous section, which was on fruit flies, the teacher had the students scrambling to determine the sex of the insects, and after trying for fifteen minutes to compare wing length, Megan and Leah had given up and assigned the tiny creatures genders based on “eeny-meeny-meiney mo.”

They finished the worksheet with plenty of extra time, and Megan and Leah had decided to look as though they were still working, for fear that they might otherwise be rewarded with an opportunity to start the dissections early. Soon it was apparent that they weren’t the only ones done—the rest of the class was soon awash with conversation, and none of it was about the earthworm’s multiple hearts.

With about five minutes to go before the bell rang, one of the other students came up to their lab station with a piece of paper. It was Anthony, a boy Megan had had a few classes with since starting high school, but who she had never really gotten to know.

“Honor Society is selling candy for a fundraiser. Wanna buy some?” He had a small half-pink, half-purple box of Nerds that he shook, as if to sweeten the deal.

Megan didn’t have any cash, and Leah wasn’t interested, so they both said, “no, thanks” and Anthony moved on to the next table.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Leah said, after Anthony was out of earshot. “We’re doing a service activity for Key Club tonight after school, and we’re supposed to ask around for people who want to help out. Do you want to come?”

Megan declined; Key Club didn’t really sound like her idea of a fun time. Had someone else asked, she might have responded with her usual curtness, but Leah had always struck Megan as being more genuine and less flighty than other girls her age, and Megan secretly appreciated it.

Anthony was shaking his box at the next lab station, and Megan looked over at what looked like a successful sale: the boys there both gave Anthony a dollar and he gave them each a box in return. She watched Anthony put the money in an envelope that already looked stuffed with bills, and found herself dwelling a little longer on his smile. He turned—nearly catching her in her gaze before she moved her eyes to a spot behind him to avoid being caught—and put the envelope back in the inside pocket of his coat, then walked back over to his desk.

Megan looked down, snapping herself out of the idle trance she had slipped into, and gathered her things as the bell rang.

CHAPTER FOUR

A NEW ROOMMATE

Los Alamos, a town established only some forty years earlier as the secret site of the Manhattan project, had a layout almost as interesting and unique as its history. The high school and westernmost neighborhoods were nestled at the base of mountains which themselves comprised the perimeter of a gigantic long-extinct volcano, the *Valles Caldera*, whose crater was now a huge expanse of grassland in the Jemez Mountains. More than half of the townsite—including the downtown area—extended out to the east of the foothills on long mesas, stretching out like fingers of a hand, with enormous canyons making potential shortcuts either dangerously impractical or downright impossible.

As she often did, Megan walked downtown to the public library after school. The trip was made considerably shorter by following a road that ran along the north edge of the high school and then a winding path down the hill to the Peggy Sue Bridge. Without the bridge, the canyon could not be negotiated without repelling gear, and she had decided long ago not to treat the structure as anything more than it was—a thirty-year-old suspension bridge carrying a high-pressure gas line, and a convenient shortcut for those willing to climb through the cut-open fence. In fact, she had found

her use of the bridge to be a strange but effective sort of catharsis.

She had homework to do, so she found a table in a back corner of the busy library and began working. The prospect of good grades gave her little motivation, but the fact was she had nothing else to do, and at least some of her schoolwork bordered on being interesting. More than anything, it gave her an excuse not to spend the afternoon at Howard's. Having gotten her math homework done in class, she finished her other assignments before too long, and the last glow of daylight was still visible over the mountains when she left to head back to the house.

When she arrived there, she felt a certain nervous energy. She learned immediately that Howard was on his way back with the boy. Charlie had picked up pizza on his way home from work—"What seven-year-old doesn't like pizza?" he had explained—and everyone but Howard was in the living room eating and watching television.

Megan grabbed a slice and sat at the dining room table where she could see the TV while still being by herself. Vicky and Charlie sat next to each other on the sofa, and Phil was in an easy chair nearby. Rom Landis, who Megan guessed had heard about the boy from Howard before he had left for work early that morning, was sitting on the floor near Vicky. Everyone was here, watching what Megan eventually realized was *The A-Team*, laughing together at both the bits of comedy and the over-the-top action sequences. She couldn't remember the last time she had

seen everyone together in the evening, and in a way this new apparent camaraderie bothered her—it was as if they were giving in to what the bridge had taken away from each of them.

Megan finished her piece of pizza and decided to go up to her room. She closed the door behind her and would normally have turned on the radio or put in a cassette, but her curiosity got the best of her and she decided to listen for the front door to open as she laid in her bed. Out of necessity for something else to do to pass the time, she pulled *The Scarlet Letter* from her backpack.

Not too long afterward, she heard the muffled squeak of the screen door, the jostling of the doorknob and the creak of the front door opening as Howard came in, and she opened her own door a crack to listen in.

“There you go, come on in,” Megan could hear Howard saying as he walked into the entryway at the foot of the stairs. “You can put that right there. Now, come this way... Everyone, I’d like you to meet Sam.”

There was a general commotion of voices from the living room. Megan could hear Charlie’s most distinctly.

“Hey there, buddy! I’m Charlie!”

Megan strained to listen for an answer but couldn’t hear one.

“Whoa, cool,” Charlie went on, apparently responding to the boy’s quiet words. “That’s awesome. These are my friends, Phil, Rom and Vicky.”

Megan heard each of the others say hello, but she still couldn't hear Sam. She figured he was likely hiding behind Howard's leg, cowering from this room full of strangers. She had felt the same way a year earlier, not out of fear, but out of a desire to be alone.

"Hey, Sam, do you like pizza?" She heard Charlie's voice move a little closer as he listed off the different kinds of pizza Sam could choose from. As he walked past the foot of the stairs, she could hear Charlie call her name in a subtle, sing-songy voice, apparently aware of her eavesdropping.

Megan shut her door and went back to her book, reading and re-reading the same paragraph without really paying attention to any of the words.

Around nine o'clock, after Megan had finally given up on the book and moved on to the Princess Di article she had started that morning, there was a creaking of footsteps down the hall, followed by three heavy knocks.

"What," she said, in a resigned voice.

The door opened and Howard stepped just inside the door. "Megan, Vicky is taking Sam shopping for clothes tomorrow morning, and I'm going to get him registered at Aspen School so he can start on Thursday."

"Yeah?" She said, not looking up from her magazine. She wanted to say, "so what?" but Howard's uncharacteristically kind voice had caught her a little off-guard.

“Vicky is working swing shift for the rest of the month, so I need you to pick Sam up from school and babysit him in the afternoons.”

Megan’s heart dropped, and she lowered her magazine to look at him. “Are you serious?” She couldn’t believe it.

“Yes, I am.”

Megan had done babysitting before and generally hated it. “How much are you paying me for this?”

Howard pursed his lips but responded calmly. “Megan, everyone else pitches in here. I know you’re in school, and I don’t expect you to have to get a regular job, but—” He paused. “I think you’re at an age where you should be expected to take on some added responsibility.”

Megan was fuming. *Every day?* She felt like her life was collapsing in around her. Her afternoons were *her* time; how dare he take that away from her?

But she also knew that she had little choice in the matter. She had tested Howard’s rules before, staying out past midnight, not helping with chores, and—more recently—skipping school. Howard would take her TV or her stereo and drive her to and from school instead of letting her catch a ride with Charlie. She had run away once, early on, only to realize that she had nowhere else to go—coming back to the house afterward was the most humiliating thing she had ever done. She knew that if she tried to refuse this new demand, he could make her life even more miserable than it already was.

“Fine,” she sighed, rolling over and burying her head in her pillow.

Howard sounded a little defeated, as if he somehow expected Megan to be excited about the news. “Since you have seventh period off, you can head over to Aspen School then. You can take him to a park or something on the way home, if you want. Just keep him safe.” He started to close the door, then stopped. “You should come and meet him, Megan. I don’t think I need to tell you how much he needs a friend right now.”

Megan rolled back over on her bed, a mixture of anger and frustration brewing inside her. Her mind swirled with ways she could try to get out of it. *I may have to do it*, she finally concluded, *but I don’t have to like it. Or him.*

Soon afterward, she heard more footsteps coming up the stairs, and a faster, shave-and-a-haircut knock at her door.

“Yeah?” she said, in a mildly irritated sort of voice.

Charlie opened the door and came in, holding hands with the house’s newest resident.

“Sam, this is Megan.” Charlie shot her a glance—a caring look and knowing smirk that showed he understood exactly what she was going through. “Megan, meet Sam Friedman.”

Sam had thick brown hair and beautiful, tired blue eyes. He wore a pair of jeans, a little red polo shirt with a few stains on the front, and an unzipped blue windbreaker with a plastic “junior policeman” badge pinned on it below his left shoulder. On his back was a worn-out green backpack, and the hand that wasn’t holding on to Charlie’s was

clutching a plastic toy—it looked to Megan like a small white army toy.

“Hello,” he said faintly, looking at Megan.

Megan felt a little sorry for him, but was still angry with Howard. “Hi,” she said, curtly.

Charlie let go of Sam’s hand. “I need to go down and get the mattress,” he said. “Sam here’s going to be my bunkbed buddy.” Charlie patted Sam’s shoulder and Sam looked up at him, giving a feeble smile. Charlie then darted back down the stairs.

“Do you have any toys?” Sam timidly asked, standing uncomfortably in place but looking slowly around the room.

“Not really,” Megan responded coolly. “Just a TV, I guess.”

Sam looked over at the small TV sitting atop Megan’s dresser at the end of her bed. “I don’t have a TV in my bedroom.”

Don’t have one? she thought. *You mean you didn’t have one.* She wondered if Howard or anyone else had explained to him what had happened—why he couldn’t go home. *He has a right to know,* she thought. She just wasn’t sure if she had the energy or interest to be the one to do it.

“What were you doing downstairs?” she asked idly, absentmindedly trying to fill the uncomfortable silence.

“I had pizza and we watched *The A-Team*,” he answered. “It’s one of my favorite shows. Oh, and *Knight Rider*. Mostly I like shows with cars.” Megan could tell he was trying hard

to seem older, and felt another pang of sympathy, which she tried to push back down.

“What’s that toy you have?”

“It’s a Polar Battle Bear from G.I. Joe. It’s a cartoon.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out three plastic action figures. “These are G.I. Joe guys”—he put the snowmobile under his arm so he could show each one individually—“This one is Flash, and this is Breaker, and this is Snow Job—he drives this snowmobile.” He paused to turn one of the figure’s heads forward. “The police officer gave these to me.”

“So you got to hang out at the police station, huh?” A glimmer of memory from Megan’s own experience flashed in her mind.

“Yeah, and I got to ride in a police car too, four times, and one time I got to talk on the walkie-talkie.” He yawned, and Megan could see his eyes glazing over a little.

There was some commotion in the stairway and Megan got up and looked out her door. Charlie was pulling a twin mattress up the stairs, and had a wrapped set of sheets under his arm.

“Here we go,” he said as he maneuvered the mattress into the hallway and pulled it down the hall. “Sam, you want to help me get your bed made? You ever sleep on a top bunk, man?”

Sam perked up and followed the mattress down the hall. Megan followed, too, and helped get the sheets put on. Charlie opened a package of new blue pajamas with various

construction vehicles on them, and she helped Sam get changed. The boy was nearly asleep before he hit his pillow, and after Charlie tucked him in, he and Megan sat on the floor in the dark hallway lit only slightly by the bedside lamp in Megan's room.

"Did you ask him why he jumped off the bridge?" Megan asked him in a hushed voice.

Charlie smiled. "That seems like kind of a heavy thing to ask a second grader, don't you think?"

"Well, he did it, he ought to have a reason, don't you think?"

"Maybe he was trying to fly, like Rom?"

"Rom was a druggie. Sam's seven."

"I dunno, Megan, maybe he didn't mean to jump? Maybe it was an accident?"

"You know that's not how it works. You have to jump."

"We don't *really* know how it works at all. Not even Howard does."

Megan scoffed. "That's what *he* says. How do you know Howard isn't responsible for it happening in the first place?" Though Howard was as a physicist at the Lab, she didn't *really* think the bridge was his doing—but the bitterness she still felt about being forced into babysitting was coloring her words.

Charlie sat quietly for a moment. "How's school?"

Megan gave him an icy look. "Shut up."

"You say you hate it, but I don't know a lot of people who get their homework done on a daily basis."

"It's just to keep the teachers off my back."

"And you're acing all your classes, aren't you?"

Megan pursed her lips. "How do you know?"

Charlie let out a quiet chuckle. "You're just not the type of person who likes to fail."

"Well, getting my homework done is probably going to change now that I'm being forced into slave labor."

"What do you mean?"

"Howard says I have to babysit him." She glanced toward the room. "*I* get to pick him up every day from school," she said in a mockingly cheery voice, dripping with sarcasm.

"That doesn't sound too bad," Charlie reasoned, pulling at strands in the carpet in front of him.

"Do *you* want to do it?" Megan asked, only half-joking.

CHAPTER FIVE

SAM'S FIRST DAY

For a moment when Megan woke up the next morning, she had forgotten that Sam had arrived. She was reminded of it almost immediately afterward, though, when she could hear Charlie's cheery "big brother" voice in his room next door. It continued to be painfully apparent when she went across the hall to take a shower, and had to wait until Vicky had finished helping Sam take a bath.

By the time Megan had gotten her turn in the shower and finished getting ready, she was already running behind. She grabbed one of the Charlie's toaster pastries and listened in to the plans being made in the next room.

"We'll need to get school stuff, too, Howard—and a winter coat and boots." It was Vicky's voice.

"Okay, why don't you take this"—there was a pause, and Megan figured money was changing hands—"and let me know what it all comes to. Keep your receipts."

"Of course. And Megan will be home by three o'clock, right?"

"I think she just came down—Megan?" he called, soon appearing from around the corner. "You are going to be home by three, right?"

"Yeah, whatever," Megan replied, not looking up.

Megan peeked in and saw Sam sitting at the dining room table in his pajamas, eating cereal and watching cartoons amidst the hubbub of Howard and Vicky discussing her shopping trip, Phil gathering papers, and Rom on the phone animatedly talking with someone. Sam looked a little lost, his hair freshly combed and still wet from the bath, but not sad; he seemed content in his own little world.

“Megan, let’s go!” Charlie called, and Megan grabbed her backpack and ran out to the car.

Megan came close to skipping out on her responsibility after her last class; she very nearly turned to go downtown. She decided at the last minute to follow through on what she had promised, however, more because she didn’t want to cause problems for Vicky than out of obedience to Howard.

She got there just a few minutes after 3:00, and Vicky was dressed in her scrubs and ready to leave as soon as Megan arrived. She quickly briefed Megan on how she and Sam had spent the day—shopping for clothes, school supplies, and a few toys—then back to the house for a lunch of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

After Vicky left, Megan peeked into the living room to see Sam on the floor with a coloring book and a new box of crayons. The television was on, tuned to some cartoon.

“I need to turn this down so I can do my homework,” Megan said, as she turned the small dial as far down as it would go without clicking off.

“Okay,” Sam responded distractedly.

Megan sat down at the dining room table and pulled out her history textbook and a worksheet. She began reading and filling in the worksheet as she read, and the only other sound in the quiet house was the subtle scratching of crayons on paper and Sam's occasional humming.

After a while, as she was just finishing the history worksheet, Sam popped up next to her, startling her.

"Is that your backyard?" He pointed toward the large window.

"Yeah," Megan responded. It wasn't a huge yard, but Megan knew it pretty well, having had to mow it every few weeks over the course of the summer. It had a few trees, one that grew right next to the back porch, and another one toward the back that Megan often thought would be good for climbing.

"Can I go out and play in it?"

"Did Vicky get you a jacket?"

"Yeah," he answered excitedly, "and gloves, and boots, and a hat." He darted over to the sofa in the living room, where Vicky had laid out the new clothes they had gotten. He was already scrambling into his jacket by the time Megan had walked across the room. "The gloves are too big for me, but Vicky said I would grow into them."

Megan helped him zip up the jacket. He was excited to wear the hat and gloves, which were unnecessary in the warm New Mexico autumn, and after putting them on she could see what Sam meant: the gloves made his little hands look huge.

“Will you come out and play with me?”

“No, I have to work on my homework.”

“Okay.”

She opened the rarely-used back door, which required moving a box of Howard’s papers, and Sam ran out back excitedly. She opened the curtains on the large living room window so she could keep an eye on him and went back to her homework.

Megan continued working, periodically looking up to check on Sam. First he just bounded around the perimeter of the yard, checking out the different adjacent yards, one of which contained an old, sun-baked swing set that looked forgotten by children who had long grown out of it. Something then caught his eye closer to the center of the yard—a bug or something equally small—and he squatted down to inspect it, watching it and sometimes poking at it for several long minutes. Soon he resumed his search and turned up an old Nerf football, a large chunk missing from the side, that had likely been thrown over from one of the adjoining yards. He began tossing it up in the air as high as he could—no more than ten feet or so—and tried, completely unsuccessfully, to catch it as it came down.

After a while, Megan had moved to the sofa and was attempting to once again start *The Scarlet Letter* as Sam knocked on the back door, unable to manipulate the hard-to-turn doorknob himself. Megan got up to let him back in.

“Where are your gloves?”

“Oh,” he exclaimed, running back out to the porch to retrieve them. “They kept falling off my hands!”

He came inside and squirmed out of his coat and hat.

“Can I have a snack?”

Megan looked at the clock: it was a little after four. “Did Howard or Vicky say what dinner was going to be tonight?” It seemed weird for Megan to ask this, since everyone usually just fended for themselves for meals. But Sam wasn’t old enough to make his own food—Megan wondered how Howard was planning to handle that. She hoped she wasn’t going to get roped into being a cook as well as a babysitter.

“No,” Sam replied. He looked thoughtful for a moment and followed as Megan got up to go into the kitchen. “Are they the mom and dad?”

“Howard and Vicky?” Megan choked on a laugh of surprise at what sounded like such a ridiculous concept.

“No,” she said, opening the refrigerator.

“Oh, I thought—”

Megan pulled out a couple of apples. “Howard owns this house, and Vicky is just one of the people who lives here.”

“Why does she live here?”

Megan eyed him for a moment, trying to decide how to answer.

“Because she jumped off the Peggy Sue Bridge, like you did.” Megan gave Sam one of the apples and sat down at the kitchen table to start eating it.

“Did it make her mom and dad forget about her, too?”

Megan's heart skipped a beat to hear him say it. *So they did tell him*, she thought. She wondered if it was Officer Roe; she couldn't imagine that Howard would have the courage to do it.

"Yeah, that's what happens."

Sam sat down at the table and looked vacantly at the apple in his hand. "Did everybody that lives here fall off of the bridge so their moms and dads would forget about them?"

"Everyone except Howard."

Sam thought for a moment, continuing to hold his apple without eating it.

"Why did *you* jump?" She let the words out of her mouth before she had a chance to second-guess herself.

"Huh?"

"Why did you jump off the bridge?"

"I didn't mean to. I fell off when I was running to catch up with my brothers."

"What?"

"I was trying to catch up to my brothers."

"So you *jumped*?"

"No! I tripped and fell off, but I didn't get hurt. But I don't remember it very well."

Megan didn't know what to say. She didn't know everything about why everyone jumped, but she knew they all *jumped*—at least, thinking about it now, she was pretty sure they all did. It wasn't something that was talked about, at least not around her.

And in her mind, that's how it all made sense: you jump off the bridge, and you forfeit your right to choose what happens next. You expect death, of course; heaven, hell, eternal nothingness... so why should you complain when you wake up, alive and well, in a world that has forgotten you? You *chose* to give up control.

But Sam didn't fit in to all this. What did he have to be punished for? It was bad enough when she thought he had chosen to jump—even then, she thought it flew in the face of cosmic justice. How could a little kid be held accountable for something like that? But this, *this* was even worse. To take everything away from a little boy—family, friends, home, favorite toys—because he tripped and fell? It made her feel sick to her stomach.

“Did you fall off too?”

Megan hesitated for a moment. She didn't want to lie to him.

“No, I jumped off.”

“Why?”

“Because I—”

She wanted to be honest with him, the way that she wished everyone would be honest with her, but the words sounded so harsh, so violent in a room with an innocent seven-year-old boy.

Because I was stupid and I didn't care, she thought.

“You'll understand when you're older,” she said, resignedly.

She finished her apple and got up to throw away the core as the front door opened and Phil walked in, wearing his bright red Metzger's Hardware vest. Seeing Megan and Sam in the kitchen, he spoke a quiet but friendly "hello," and went immediately upstairs.

"What's his name again?" Sam asked, watching him slowly ascend the steps.

"Phil."

"Did he jump off too?"

"Yeah, a long time ago. He was the first one."

"Why?"

"I don't know—never asked him. Charlie says it was because of stress." She felt like answering his questions to make up for copping out before.

"What's stress?" Sam was finished with his apple, but was finding tiny bites around the stem.

"It's when things just get to be too much for you, I guess. Like you have too many things to do."

"Hmm." Sam ducked his head to look up the stairs from his vantage point in the kitchen. "Where does he live?"

"Here," Megan answered, feeling a little irritated that she had to keep explaining it. "His bedroom is on the other side from mine and Charlie's."

The house had originally been a duplex, one of hundreds built by the government to house scientists when Los Alamos was still a secret city. Howard had long ago removed the shared wall on the bottom landing of the stairs and added a doorway between the two living rooms, creating a

single big unit. Vicky's, Megan's and Charlie's rooms were on the side above the kitchen, and Howard, Rom and Phil had bedrooms on the other side. The opposite kitchen had been repurposed into a storage room, and the other living room had Rom's computer and video games and Charlie's weightlifting stuff, making it sort of a rumpus room.

Sam got up and started heading up the stairs, as if to follow Phil. Megan didn't realize at first what he was doing, but when he got to the landing and walked through the doorway to the other side, she got up and hurried after him.

"Sam, wait, no—"

Sam stopped and turned around, a confused look on his face.

"You need to stay down here. Phil—um, likes to be by himself."

"Why?"

"I don't know, he just does," Megan answered, again growing tired of the constant questions. "You know, the people who live here kind of leave each other alone."

The explanation didn't really seem to register in Sam's mind, but he came back down the stairs anyway. "Do you want to play toys with me?"

"Don't you want to watch cartoons some more?"

"Not really. Could we play G.I. Joe?"

Megan sighed. Looking up at the clock, she realized she still had half an hour before Howard and the others came home.

She wondered just how long she was going to have to babysit this kid, how many questions she was going to have to answer, how many times she was going to have to pretend to enjoy playing with little plastic army men.

“Okay, just for a little bit,” she said, resigning to her fate.

Excited at the answer, Sam ran up to Charlie’s room and, a few seconds later, came bouncing down the stairs with the snowmobile and action figures he had come home with the night before.

“You can have the snowmobile first,” he offered, with a glint of joy in his eye. It was the first time Megan had seen a little bit of happiness break through Sam’s dullish, tired and lost expression.

“Okay,” she said, and followed him as he flew the action figures’ imaginary planes into the living room.

CHAPTER SIX

GREG

Because I was stupid and I didn't care.

It had been a Tuesday afternoon nearly a year ago, a day of no significance, beyond the plans Megan had been making for the two weeks leading up to it. She had chosen the day at random, and likely wouldn't have planned it at all if it weren't the fact that she needed to coordinate it with Greg.

Greg, her boyfriend, her partner in crime. She was bored of their little rebellions—lighting bottle rockets at the park, carving anarchy symbols into wet concrete—and wanted to do something drastic. Something to shock her out of the boredom and depression that had been governing her life.

Her parents didn't care. Sure, they *said* they loved her, but to her it was as if they always kept their distance, like they had written her off long ago. Greg cared, though, and the time she spent with him were the best parts of her otherwise dreary days.

Her parents really liked Greg, which she found irritating, because he seemed different around them: congenial, well-behaved, like the boyfriend they undoubtedly wanted her to have. Not the rebel she liked him to be.

The real Greg had agreed to her plan: they would jump together, face death alongside one another. They would climb over the cables that lined the walkway of the bridge and turn around, letting go and falling backwards into the canyon and into the waiting arms of whatever came next.

There were times, in the week leading up to the scheduled day, that Greg made subtle, almost untraceable forays into talking her out of it. He would give her little nudges here and there, like suggesting they wait until after the Survivor concert in Albuquerque the following March, or bringing up another form of rebellion like climbing the water tower out on Barranca Mesa. Megan would brush them off, of course, and carry on with the plan, and he would smile and go along.

Then the day came, and though he didn't say anything, she could see the fear on his face as they stepped out onto the bridge and walked out to the middle. They reached the center, and she climbed over the cables, determined to make it as casual and meaningless as possible—no glorious last words, no grand gestures. As she did so, he stood and watched her and something in the expression on his face changed significantly: like he had not intended to go through with it at all until that very moment. He looked at her with a new look—something dark inside of him that she had been seeking for a long, long time. But now that it was here, it didn't seem like *him* at all.

As she took her position, he resolutely followed, placing himself beside her, both of them holding on to the cables,

neither of them looking behind them to the canyon floor far below.

“One... two... three,” she counted, and let go.

She fell backward, intent on casting her eyes up to the darkening blue sky as she fell, but distracted by the sight of Greg, still holding fast to the cables, looking down at her in horror—

And then he was gone, and as she fell she saw only the bridge and the sky.

She wrested her mind from the daydreamed memory and looked out over the sunlight-speckled water of Ashley Pond, an oasis which sat in the sunken center of a park in the midst of downtown Los Alamos. Today was Sam’s first day in his new class. Megan ordinarily wouldn’t have cared about it, but it also meant that Howard wanted her to be waiting for Sam when the bell rang.

What Megan found particularly infuriating, though, was the fact that Howard himself was taking time off work to meet Sam as he came out, but still expected Megan to be there to walk the boy home.

Why doesn’t he just take the rest of the day off and take Sam home himself, she thought. *He obviously doesn’t trust me to do it right.*

Megan was mad enough about it that she had skipped her morning classes—partly because she was so worked up about Howard and partly just out of unrefined spite. When she got to Ashley Pond, she had pulled out *The Scarlet Letter*

and read it for a little while, having become mildly interested in the book. It was after five or six pages that she realized the irony of reading it while simultaneously skipping the class for which it was assigned. She put the book away almost out of embarrassment, choosing instead to lay in the sun, alone with her thoughts—thoughts that, with Sam's questions from the previous day still echoing in her mind, had turned to that fateful Tuesday afternoon on the bridge.

She walked back to the high school in time for Biology, only to find out that Mr. Connor was sick and the substitute just played a film about cell division, something they had learned weeks ago. Irritated that she could have skipped the whole day without anyone even noticing, she sat through the class anyway, and when the lights came back on she grabbed her backpack and headed toward Aspen School.

She got there about ten minutes early, and sat on a railing out in front of the school to wait. After just a few minutes, Howard's black pickup truck pulled up. Expecting him to say at least *something* to acknowledge her showing up as promised, she was caught off-guard when his tone of voice was anything but complimentary.

"Where were you this morning?" he demanded, looking angry.

Megan was dumbfounded. "What?" she responded, defensively and innocently. Howard had dropped Sam off with Rom and Vicky; he had said nothing to her about

needing to be there with them. *Besides, she thought, he knows I have a class that starts at—*

“Ah, crap,” she muttered, resignedly, when she realized what he was talking about.

“Mrs. Donnelly called me out of a *meeting* to ask why you weren’t in math class. Megan, what is the matter with you?”

Megan just pursed her lips and looked away. She wasn’t going to bother to lie about it.

“I swear, Megan, you—” He stopped mid-sentence and fumed. “No TV for a week.”

“Fine,” she mumbled. *Whatever, she thought. He can take it—there’s nothing worth watching anyway.*

Kids came streaming out in all directions from the classroom doors, many running toward the school buses that had lined up in the parking lot behind them. Howard looked carefully for Sam in the sea of faces.

After a minute, Megan saw him, walking out from one of the far classroom doors alongside another boy. They seemed to be talking, and as they neared the buses, Sam’s companion waved goodbye and boarded one of them. Sam looked around with a slightly confused look on his face, then saw Howard waving his hand high in the air, and came walking over.

“How did it go, Sam?”

“Good.”

“Who was that walking with you?”

“Oh, that was Daniel. He’s my new friend.”

Howard smiled, something Megan hadn't seen very often. "That's great, Sam."

"He said he has an Atari at his house and I could come over and play with him sometime if my Mom said it was okay, but I told him that my mom doesn't remember me anymore."

Megan looked at Howard and felt a touch of devious satisfaction as the smile left his face. "Oh, is that right?" he said, hesitantly.

Sam continued. "I told him that I could ask you, though, and he said that would be okay."

Relief came over Howard's face. "Ah, well, that's fine then. You know, Rom has a video game he would probably let you play."

"Really?"

"Yeah, you can ask him tonight." The buses started pulling away and Howard checked his watch. "I need to go back to work, Sam. Megan's going to walk home with you and watch you this afternoon. In fact, she's going to meet you here every day after school, just like today."

Megan rolled her eyes.

"Okay," Sam said, distracted by the buses' air brakes, and Howard got back in his truck. Suddenly, Sam looked up, wide-eyed. "Wait, I'll be right back!"

He darted off in the same direction he had come, running while scanning the ground around him.

Megan got up, walking toward him as he ran. "Sam, *what?*"

Suddenly, the boy stopped, ran a few feet to his left, and picked something up. He then looked around again, and ran a little further on to pick up something else, and turned to run back toward Megan.

“My gloves,” he called out as he got near. “they keep falling off my hands.”

“It’s because they’re huge on you! We need to just get you different ones.”

“But I like these!”

They walked out of the parking lot. “We don’t have to go back to the house,” Megan said. For the trouble it caused with Howard, skipping most of school had one benefit: she had no homework. “Do you want to go downtown instead?”

“Sure,” Sam said with a shrug.

They walked out of the neighborhood and into the adjacent wooded area. “So...” she began, “we could get there a lot quicker if we take Peggy Sue.”

Sam’s face had a confused expression for a moment, but it was soon replaced by one of concern. “Peggy Sue bridge?” he answered quickly, a note of panic in his voice. “No, I—I really don’t want to.”

“I could go with you and hold your hand.”

Sam was already on the verge of panicked tears. “No, please! It’s too scary!”

Megan sighed. Going around the long way would add twenty or thirty minutes to their trip. *At least we should be able to catch a ride home with Charlie*, she thought.

“All right, let’s go.”

The walk did take a while: they walked past the high school just before the last bell rang, and then continued down Canyon Road past the Jewish Center.

Megan had Sam wait outside as she quickly ducked into the restaurant where Charlie worked to ask him for a ride back after his shift. She came out to Sam peeking inside the door, and walked on despite his pleas to stay for a while at the busy restaurant.

Finally they arrived at the Mari-Mac shopping center, a cluster of stores at the eastern end of the town's business district, and Sam lit up when Megan told him they were going to TG&Y. Though he talked incessantly as they crossed the parking lots about going to the toy section, as they went in he became immediately infatuated with a fabric turkey decoration that hung from a display near the entrance.

"Is it almost Thanksgiving?" he asked, holding the decoration and not looking back at Megan.

"Yeah, I guess so." Megan hadn't really thought about it, but realized that Thanksgiving was two weeks away.

Sam turned around. "We should get this!"

"They never really decorate for Thanksgiving at Howard's house."

"We should! It's fun!"

Megan couldn't think of where to put the decoration even if they got it. "I don't know..."

"Please?" Sam's eyes caught another, smaller turkey made of wood, wearing a pilgrim-style hat and spectacles. "Or this

one! And I can make some more decorations with the construction paper Vicky got for me!”

Megan didn't feel like arguing about it, and figured that Howard would pay her back for it if it was for the house. “Okay,” she shrugged.

Sam followed as Megan went back to the clothing department. She didn't have anything in mind that she needed, but she wanted to look anyway, if only to assert her independence from her new tagalong.

Having Sam there with her made her usual wandering and browsing much more difficult to do, so Megan decided to move toward the health and beauty department. The path to get there, however, took them through the toy section, and Sam pleaded with her to let him go down the brightly-colored aisles. Megan was going to have them keep walking, but as they went by an aisle full of Star Wars toys, she saw someone that made her decide to let Sam stop and look awhile.

Linda Mondragon had worked at the store for as long as Megan had known her; they had first been introduced by Charlie shortly after Megan moved in. Linda had jumped from Peggy Sue years ago, and had lived with Howard for a short time, but left and was now living on her own in an apartment near Mari-Mac. In Megan's mind, Linda's life sounded fantastic: being independent, answering to no one but herself.

As they walked by, Linda was going through and reorganizing a display of various action figures. “Oh, hey,

Linda,” Megan said in a voice she tried to make sound nonchalant.

Linda turned around. She had dark brown hair that reached just past her shoulders in permed curls. She had a young, pretty face but an expression that seemed to mix boredom and irritation.

“Hi, Megan,” she responded, and looked at Sam, who was eagerly eyeing a toy Millennium Falcon. “Who is this?”

“Oh, this is Sam. He’s someone I’m babysitting.” Megan didn’t feel like shifting the center of attention to Sam’s story. Though the idea usually seemed impossibly remote, she couldn’t help daydream about Linda offering to let Megan live with her instead of Howard. She had wanted to bring up the possibility in a casual way, and the few times she had caught Linda alone, she had tried—unsuccessfully—to steer the conversation in that direction.

“Oh, good for you. How old is he?” Linda was fully distracted from her display now, and was watching Sam down the aisle as he pulled a box from the shelf to inspect it.

“He’s seven,” Megan responded, feeling a little frustrated that Sam had stolen Linda’s attention without even realizing it. “So, anyway—”

“Megan, can I get this?” Sam interrupted, bringing over a large box that contained a Jabba’s Palace play set.

“What?” said Megan, growing more irritated. “No, this is like twenty dollars!”

“Please?”

“No, Sam!”

Megan gave the box back to Sam and tried to resume her conversation with Linda, who had now gone back to the store display she had been working on.

Just then, the quiet overhead music paused, and a voice came over the intercom. “Linda, to your register, please.”

“Well, I got to go. Nice to meet you, Sam.” Linda hung up the action figure in her hand and hurried out of the aisle.

On Monday afternoon, Mr. Connor was back for biology, and everyone was at their lab stations as he was coming around the room with dissection trays. Megan was sitting, staring off into space, as Ashley, the girl in the station behind Megan, leaned over, eyes sparkling, and faced Leah.

“So, how did it go?” she said, smiling broadly.

Leah looked up, blushing slightly. “Oh, it was great... he took me to The Blue Window and then we just walked to Ashley Pond. But it was really sweet.”

“That’s so awesome! So do you... you know, *like* him?”

“Yeah, he’s nice! He wants to take me to Santa Fe next weekend, but I’m going to have to ask my parents.”

Ashley made a little squealing sound which Megan found annoying. She turned back to her lab station and then immediately turned her head back around. “We should go doubles sometime!”

“Yeah, that’d be nice.” Leah was still blushing a little, and went back to writing what looked like a letter on blue notebook paper.

Megan looked up after she was satisfied that Ashley was no longer listening. Partly to allow Leah the chance to tell her more about her date, and partly out of genuine curiosity, Megan couldn't help but ask. "Who did you go out with?"

Leah smiled. "Um, Greg Ruehl. He's a junior... do you know him?"

Megan's heart fell into her stomach. Greg, her ex-boyfriend. Yes, she knew him. Weeks after he had vanished before her eyes as she fell backward into the abyss, she had seen him again in a high school hallway—but with not even a glimmer of recognition, not even the faintest spark of a memory of their time together.

She had come to terms with losing the only person who understood her, even though she still saw him nearly every day. Or at least she thought she had come to terms with it; she realized now that she had been protecting herself from him, taking a different route to history every day to avoid him on his route to Spanish, making sure to sit on the other side of the cafeteria from his usual spot near the DECA store at lunch time.

"Um, yeah, I think I've had a class with him before. He seems... nice."

Leah and Greg? she thought. *How could they possibly be right for each other?* Leah was so saccharine and innocent—so unlike Megan. And Greg and Megan were so alike: smart, devious, rebellious.

Of course, why would either of them worry about Megan's feelings? In this life, Greg barely knew her. Still, it

hurt to think of Greg and Leah together. She imagined how kind and selfless he probably was with her—she remembered how he always had been so to Megan.

“I need to go to the bathroom,” Megan told Leah, who, having gone back to her letter, looked up with a smile and nodded.

She didn’t really need to go, but the room had started to close in on her, and she needed to get out.

“Hey, uh... Megan?”

Megan turned around. She had just closed her locker, having gotten her jacket and backpack, and was walking toward the door to leave for Aspen School. It was Anthony, from biology class, who jogged a few steps to catch up with her.

“Hey, do you know when Mr. Connor said the lab reports from today were due? I thought he said Friday, but Tim told me he thought it wasn’t until next week.”

“Uh, I thought he said Friday, too.” Megan actually knew for sure that Mr. Connor had made the lab reports due Friday, but she didn’t want to make him think that she was the type to obsess about due dates.

Anthony gave a little laugh. “Yeah, I should know not to listen to Tim.” He remained walking with her as they walked by the auditorium toward the parking lot. “You heading to your next class?”

“No,” she responded. “I have to walk over to Aspen School to pick up a kid I babysit.”

“Oh, yeah? You do a lot of babysitting?”

“No, actually, just this one kid.”

“Oh, okay.” He seemed a little taken aback by Megan’s terseness, which Megan immediately felt bad about.

“So... do you have class in P wing for seventh period?” P wing, where industrial trades like auto shop and drafting were housed, was the only building on the other side of the parking lot.

“No,” Anthony responded a little more excitedly. “My German teacher’s sick, and the sub doesn’t care, so I’m done! I’m heading home.”

“Oh, that’s cool,” Megan responded, trying to sound cheerful, even though she was still reeling from Leah’s news earlier. She felt miserable, and the fact that this opportunity to talk with someone she actually found interesting happened on such an otherwise awful day made her all the more frustrated.

They talked a little about the worms they had poked at earlier before they got to the opposite end of the parking lot and their paths split. “See you in class tomorrow,” Anthony called as he ducked around the rear of the auditorium. Megan watched him walk off while continuing around the parking lot to Diamond Drive, then on to Aspen School.

CHAPTER SEVEN

VISITING LINDA

Megan was irritated when she and Sam got back to the house, as Vicky wasn't even working that day; she didn't see why Vicky couldn't have picked up Sam. She didn't say anything about it to Vicky, who had her sewing machine out on the dining room table amid a spread of fabric and paper patterns. Turning on the television for Sam, Megan went upstairs to her room to quietly fume to herself.

She had a very hard time getting Greg out of her head, and even though she had no claim on him, she couldn't help but think negatively of Leah. Leah had always been such a neutral, unthreatening person, but suddenly Megan felt as if Leah was doing this to her deliberately.

And it wasn't even that she liked Greg anymore. The image of him holding on to the bridge, letting her fall into oblivion without him, had been burned into her memory, and she wasn't anywhere near forgiving him for it. Even though the Greg she knew now had, so far as she knew, never set foot on the bridge; simply the knowledge that he had the capability for that kind of betrayal somewhere deep inside of him made her despise him.

There was a gentle knock on her bedroom door.
"Megan?"

“Yeah?” Megan answered.

Vicky opened the door and stepped inside. “Megan, is everything okay? I heard you come in with Sam and I—well, I didn’t know if something was bothering you.”

“No, I’m fine,” Megan lied, raising her head, but avoiding eye contact.

Vicky sighed, obviously unconvinced. “You know I’m on your side, right? I’m happy to help if there’s anything I can do.”

Megan felt bad turning Vicky down, but what could she do? Split up Leah and Greg? Would that even help?

“Yeah, thanks.”

“Charlie will be home early today, and he was going to go make a grocery run. He said you and Sam could go with him, if you wanted.”

“Okay,” Megan answered. She didn’t relish the idea of having Sam tag along, but Charlie always seemed to make things much more bearable.

“She’s going out with *Greg*? Ugh, Megan, that’s”—Charlie shook his head. “That’s just miserable, isn’t it.”

“Who’s Greg?” asked Sam, who was a step behind them, carrying a single brown paper grocery bag.

“Greg is Megan’s old boyfriend.”

“Are you mad because he’s not your boyfriend anymore?” Sam shifted his hands to get a better grip on his bag.

“Pssssh, no.” Megan rolled her eyes. “Not even close.”

"You're just mad at him for dating someone else," Charlie added with a grin.

"No," she answered with a hint of irritation. "I don't care who he dates."

"Then why are you mad at him?" Sam asked.

"I'm not *mad* at him! It's... complicated." They got to Charlie's car. He set the two bags he was carrying on the roof and fished in his pocket for his keys.

"Is it because you just don't want him to be *anybody's* boyfriend?" Sam offered, earnestly.

Charlie's eyes and grin widened as he looked over to Megan, which made her even more livid. She glared back at him and gave a swift kick to his right shin, causing her to nearly lose her grip on one of the bags she was still holding.

"Hey," Charlie exclaimed, laughing and recoiling. "I didn't say anything!" He lifted the hatchback and backed off quickly as she dropped her bags into the car and moved threateningly toward him.

Having successfully deflected her advance, Charlie grabbed Sam's bag, put it in, and then pulled his own from the roof of the car and did the same. After he seemed to have let his defenses down and was closing the hatchback, Megan punched him hard on his upper arm, causing him to yelp, clutch his shoulder, and spin around.

"You're a *bully*," he said, grinning and laughing. "Hey, let's go see what Linda's up to." He led the way from their parking spot to Central Avenue, where he stopped to wait for a break in traffic.

“Who’s Linda?” Sam asked, keeping up with Charlie.

“She’s the lady we saw the other day in TG&Y,” Megan explained.

Charlie hesitated as an oncoming car approached from the left. “Oh, did she get to meet you, Sam?”

“Not really,” Megan remarked. “We didn’t see her for very long.”

The car went past and they ran across, Charlie holding Sam’s hand until they got to the other side. They walked a short ways down the street and turned down a sidewalk, which ran along one of the Caves—large utilitarian-looking apartment buildings that dated back to shortly after the Manhattan Project.

They stepped inside an entryway and climbed the musty stairs. They stopped at a door and Charlie knocked. After a few seconds, the door opened, and Linda appeared, her carefully done hair and makeup still contradicting her noticeably absent smile.

“*Ay, lindo!*” she exclaimed when she saw Charlie, with a tone of voice that seemed almost happy, but there was no trace of a smile until she saw Sam, which caused an immediate change of expression to one of joyful surprise. She ushered them in and motioned toward her living room. “Sam, do you want some cookies?” she called as she headed to the small adjoining kitchen.

“Sure!” Sam answered, flopping into the sofa.

Linda emerged from the kitchen with a large porcelain jar, and set it down on the coffee table. Sam perked up and

was the first to open the lid and draw out a chocolate chip cookie from within.

Linda looked Sam up and down as he munched his cookie. "Megan, are you babysitting Sam every day?"

Charlie looked at Megan, his eyes squinting slightly, and then turned to Linda. "Linda, you know Sam here is a jumper, right?"

Megan went a little red as Linda looked over to her with a surprised expression. "You didn't tell me that!" she remarked before her eyes darted back to Sam, and the realization seemed to hit her. "Oh," she exclaimed, almost involuntarily, as her hand cupped over her mouth. She gave Charlie a sideways look. "He *jumped*?"

"Fell, actually. Tripped on the grate while he was running."

"Oh, *mi hijito*," Linda said, her hand dropping down to show a look of deep pity. "You shouldn't have been running on the bridge!"

Sam spoke with a mouth half-full of cookie. "I was trying to catch up to my brothers."

Linda looked at Charlie as she began to realize the full scope of Sam's fall. "Oh, that's—oh, Charlie, that means he—oh, how *awful*! And your *fam*—oh, Sam!" She looked at Sam with a deeply sympathetic gaze, then back at Charlie. "Who—where is he staying?"

"He's sleeping in my top bunk," Charlie answered, putting his hand on Sam's shoulder with a smile. "We're roomies."

“Oh, he’s at *Howard’s*?” Linda confirmed, and her face twisted derisively. She turned to look away for a moment, as if she was biting her tongue rather than say what she was thinking. “Charlie, you’re old enough to go, why do you stay there? You’re a grown man now. You could—” she started, but then seemed to stop herself.

“It’s not so bad, Linda,” Charlie responded, seemingly a bit uncomfortable about the subject. He looked around the room as if to find something else to talk about, and his eyes landed on Sam. “Hey, Sam’s in second grade over at Aspen School. You want to tell her about your class, Sam?”

Sam had finished chewing his cookie and licking the chocolate from his fingers. “I’m in Mrs. Nielsen’s class,” he answered in a matter-of-fact voice. “We’re learning about mutt-implication right now.”

Linda didn’t seem to be paying attention. “You want some milk to have with your cookie, Sam? Charlie, come help me get some milk.”

Charlie and Linda got up and went into the kitchen. Megan came to sit on the other side of the sofa from Sam, who then moved over to sit next to her.

“Why does she call everyone funny names?” he asked quietly, looking toward the kitchen.

“It’s Spanish. She does that to people she likes.”

“She called me and Charlie both Spanish.”

“She likes you. And she likes Charlie—she always has.”

“Did Linda and Charlie jump off the bridge too?”

“Yeah, they did. I don’t know why. Charlie told me that Linda did it because she was depressed after her husband went away. Charlie won’t say why he did it; he’s never told anyone.”

“Why doesn’t Linda live at your house?”

“She used to, but it was before I moved in. Before Charlie did, too. Charlie said that she lived there for a little bit but she and Howard got in a big fight. So she moved away, and she’s been living here ever since.” Megan looked around longingly at the small apartment, imagining herself doing the same thing.

“Does she have any friends?”

“Probably. Charlie’s her friend. Vicky comes by sometimes too. Plus the people she works with, and there are probably lots of others.”

There was a short pause before Sam continued. “Are we going to eat turkey and stuffing for Thanksgiving?”

The change of subject threw Megan off completely, and she was speechless for a moment. *Thanksgiving?* She hadn’t even thought about it, other than to help Sam put up the decorations they had bought the previous Thursday. Her last Thanksgiving had been shortly before she jumped, and while she had shared a tense and awkward dinner with her parents, her mind had been on the bridge. Christmas dinner was a blur; she had just moved in with Howard after a prolonged ordeal with social services, and she remembered Howard, Vicky and Phil taking her to the restaurant at the Los Alamos Inn for the holiday meal, after an awkward

morning of unceremonious gift giving: Howard had gotten Megan her TV and stereo, though the presents weren't wrapped, and there hadn't even been a Christmas tree.

Why should this Thanksgiving be any different? In a way, Megan felt as though Sam should go through the same forced coming-of-age as she did.

"I don't know," she finally responded, though she guessed the answer was probably "no."

"Pretty please?"

"I don't care, you can have one if you want to. Ask Howard."

Sam's face lit up as Megan imagined the boy trying to cook a Thanksgiving meal by himself.

"Do you like pumpkin pie?" he continued after a few moments of apparently deep thought.

"Sure." Megan was worried about where this was going. *Either it's going to end in disappointment for him, she thought, or I'm going to get roped into something.*

Charlie and Linda finally emerged from the kitchen with the milk; Megan guessed that the milk had really just been an excuse for Linda to interrogate Charlie about Sam.

"Here you go, buddy," Charlie said as he set a plastic cup of milk on the coffee table in front of Sam. Sam reached for it and began guzzling it. A rivulet of liquid escaped the right side of his mouth as he drank and landed on his shirt.

"Oh, careful, Sam," Linda said, as she got up to retrieve a napkin from a table near the kitchen. She went back over to Sam and wiped the milk from his shirt and cheek. Megan

thought she could see a glimmer of another smile as she tenderly dabbed at the corner of his mouth, and Sam giggled just a little as he recoiled from the tickling napkin.

“Linda, do you want to eat turkey and stuffing with us on Thanksgiving? We’re going to have pumpkin pie, too.”

The room fell silent immediately. Whatever hint of a smile Megan thought she had seen now vanished from her face as her expression changed to one that was either anger or sincere thought—Megan couldn’t tell which.

The silence was broken after a few uncomfortable seconds by Charlie, who laughed nervously, and said, “Sam, I don’t think that Linda—”

“No, Charlie,” Linda interrupted, holding her index finger up in his direction, but still looking at Sam with an expression Megan hadn’t seen on her face before. “Let me think about it.”

Megan lay in bed late that night thinking about the events of the day. Her stomach still turned a bit when she thought of Leah and Greg together. She dreaded seeing her again in class tomorrow, or bumping into him in the halls.

And Linda—and Sam! Was Linda really thinking about coming to the house for Thanksgiving dinner? She hadn’t been anywhere near the house since Megan had lived there; her name was hardly ever mentioned in front of Howard for fear of bringing up mysterious old wounds. How could they even have a Thanksgiving dinner for her to come to, considering the fact that they had never really all sat down

at the same table for a meal? Megan was grateful that Charlie had been there, so she didn't have to shoulder the responsibility for disappointing Sam all by herself.

Megan squirmed sleeplessly for what felt like an hour, her mind bouncing between these two uncomfortable situations, before her thoughts lighted on the one aspect of the day she had, to this point, completely forgotten: Anthony. Thinking back to their short walk together, cosmically unimportant as it was, put her mind at rest for the first time, and she suddenly felt relaxed. Maybe he would talk to her again tomorrow...

As she was just beginning to drift off, she heard floorboards creaking somewhere downstairs. Whoever it was stopped abruptly after just a few seconds, and she heard a voice—Rom's—coming from the living room right below her. He spoke urgently, just slightly breathless, just slightly panicked.

“Howard, I—I think I found her.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

A NAME AND AN ADDRESS

Megan had showered and dressed, and was combing out her hair in her room the next morning when she could hear Howard's heavy footsteps outside her slightly opened door.

"Megan, are you decent?" he asked, knocking faintly.

She grumbled a "yes," and Howard nudged the door open.

He was holding her small television, the power cord dangling beneath. "Can I come in for a minute?" he asked, almost apologetically.

She didn't really answer, somewhat surprised at him apparently bringing back the television he had taken away not twenty-four hours earlier—hadn't he said he was taking it for a week?

He came in, set the television on the floor, and sat, hesitantly and a little awkwardly, on the edge of her bed.

"I wanted to bring this back to you and try this again."

Megan gave him a quizzical, suspicious look.

"Look, I know you've been through a lot," he continued, looking down at his feet. "I, uh..." He seemed stuck, mouthing words that weren't coming out.

She just sat, wondering what he was trying to say.

He looked up. "I don't approve of you skipping class," he said, "but I don't want to just yell at you all the time about it. I want to figure out what you *need*, so I can... *help* you, instead of—well, *this*." He motioned at the previously confiscated television.

Megan wasn't really sure how to respond. What *did* she need? She needed to not have him breathing down her neck about school all the time. She needed her own space. But she knew that if she told him that, he would just tell her all about how that wasn't what she *really* needed.

"It'd be nice to not have to babysit Sam," she responded. She doubted that he would change anything about that situation, but she figured, since he was asking...

"I understand," Howard said, nodding and then looking down again. "I know it's a lot to ask of you," he offered, though Megan didn't really think he believed it. "I don't really know what else to do, though, with everyone's work schedule the way it is."

"Couldn't you, like, hire somebody else to do it? Or put him in daycare or something?"

"Believe it or not, I actually looked into that—it's pretty expensive either way."

Sure, Megan thought to herself. *It's so much cheaper to just force me to do it for free.*

"Look, I'll keep looking for other options for Sam, if you can just help me out for a while—I'd really appreciate it."

Megan turned back around to her mirror. "Whatever," she mumbled.

Howard let out a sigh. "Megan, I'm trying. What do you want me to do?"

"I don't care," she responded without turning around.

Howard sat for a minute, then got up to walk out.

"Please don't skip today," he asked in a resigned tone of voice.

Megan didn't, though she desperately wanted to avoid biology. As it turned out, it was nowhere near as bad as she had anticipated; Leah didn't say anything about Greg, and Ashley, who was so excited about it the day before, had flitted off to some other group of girls for the latest gossip.

Megan was more aware of Anthony, whose lab station she now realized was on the other side of the classroom, but their paths didn't happen to cross either in class or afterward.

She arrived at Aspen School a little early, and sat on a swing while she waited for the bell to ring. The buses had just begun to pull into the parking lot, and several moms and even a few dads were hovering out front of the school, likely there to scoop up the youngest of the students and take them home. Megan watched a particular mom with shoulder-length light brown hair and a carefully made-up face with a timid smile. Megan imagined for a moment that it was Sam's mom, and pictured Sam running out to her, backpack swinging from one shoulder to another, clutching some art project made with construction paper, beans and glue.

The thought gave her a quick shiver of sadness, and she forced herself to think of something else.

Before long, the bell rang, and Megan scanned the crowd of kids for Sam's tousled brown hair. She soon saw him emerge from the classroom door; he caught her eye, waved, and ran toward her.

"Sam, do you want to go to a park for a little while?"

"Sure," he responded, eyes brightening.

Megan led Sam down the street to a cul-de-sac with a small playground tucked in among the trees.

"I have to go do something, but you can play here for a little bit and I'll be right back, okay?"

"Okay," Sam answered excitedly, practically ignoring her last several words as he locked his gaze on a slide and sprinted into the play area.

Satisfied that he was engaged, Megan turned around and walked briskly back up the road, taking a different turn than they had taken to get there. She walked until she reached what appeared to be an old white milk truck, long since taken out of regular use, parked on the street.

She ducked behind the truck in such a way that she could see a gray and white house across the street without being seen, and checked her watch.

In a few minutes, a white sedan came down the road to park by the curb in front of the house. The engine shut off right away, and after a few moments a thirty-something woman got out. She had a slender build, dark blonde hair, and wore a long floral-print skirt with a beige top. She

checked through her purse for something, closed the car door, walked up to the house and rang the doorbell.

Within a minute, the door opened. "Hi there, Tammy, come on in!" Megan could hear young kids playing in the background as the two women exchanged pleasantries, and after a few moments the visitor was inside and the door was closed once again.

Megan emerged from behind the truck and crossed the street, trying to remain unobtrusive while craning her neck to catch a glimpse through the front windows, but it was no use; they were all covered with curtains. She snuck around the corner of the house just as the front door opened again. Megan heard the clicking of dress shoes as the lady who had answered the door, bundled in an expensive-looking coat and carrying a large purse, walked to a blue Pontiac parked in the driveway. Within a minute she had driven away.

Satisfied that the woman was out of sight, Megan walked back up to the road and to the white car parked there. She had seen her here before, and had eventually realized that it was every other Tuesday that she came. Feeling a little emboldened today, she decided to walk over and peer in the passenger-side window to see if there was anything worth finding. The contents of the back seat were the same as they had been on previous visits: an open duffel bag with what looked like workout clothes inside, a few paperback novels and some faded receipts.

In the front seat, though, was a manila folder, something that hadn't been there before. The folder was closed, so

Megan couldn't see the contents. She looked quickly around and behind her and pulled the door handle, but exhaled sharply when she realized that it was locked, and a quick glance across to the driver's side confirmed that the other door was locked as well.

Leaning closer to the glass, though, she realized that she could make out the name on the folder's tab:

Fitzgerald, Tamara—DOB 11/17/49

Megan's heart skipped a beat. It was supposed to read Tamara Whittaker, not Tamara Fitzgerald. Fitzgerald was her maiden name.

Oh man, she thought to herself. Her knees went weak as she realized what must have happened.

She and Dad divorced.

Megan had made it halfway back to the playground when she heard someone yelling, almost screaming. She soon realized it was Sam—she had never heard him so loud before and barely recognized the voice—and broke into a run.

Sam was there, but he wasn't hurt or in danger; he was shouting as loud as he could out over the canyon. From the edge of the play area, Megan could see for miles, but the people whose attention Sam was trying to get were a little closer than that: there were two teenage boys crossing the

Peggy Sue bridge, which connected the two sides of the canyon before them.

“Sam, they can’t hear you,” Megan interrupted, not even able to understand what Sam was saying through the panic of his screams. As she came to his side, she could see that Sam was in tears.

“Megan, if they fall off the bridge, it will make their moms and dads forget all about them,” he urgently exclaimed, his voice almost hoarse, and struggling to get the words out between heaving sobs.

“Oh, Sam, they’re not going to fall! Look, they’re being really careful.” She pointed to the two boys, who were slowly making their way across the bridge, almost three-quarters of the way to the far side. She squatted down next to him as he watched them through teary eyes.

Megan watched with him as the boys finally reached the other side of the bridge. After making it through the fence, the boys walked up the dirt road toward the Jewish Center, and Megan and Sam watched them until they were out of sight.

“Sam, you’re the only one I’ve ever known who has fallen off by accident, and that was only because you were running. Everyone else jumped off because they *wanted* to.”

Sam looked up, and Megan was worried that he was going to ask a deeper question than she was prepared to answer.

“I’m sorry I was running,” he responded, tears visibly welling up in his red eyes.

Megan looked down. "It's okay, Sam."

"What's up, girl?" Charlie walked into the living room where Megan was sitting on the sofa. She had been absorbed in *The Scarlet Letter* and lost track of the time, and as she looked up, she thought it strange that Charlie was the first one back from work—usually he ended up working later into the evening, coming home after the restaurant's dinner rush.

"What are you doing back so early?" she asked, looking around as if she had just woken up.

"Gabe needed extra hours, so he was there today," he responded. "I'm not going to complain about that. Where's Sam?"

Megan sat up and realized that she didn't know where he was. "Is he in your bedroom?"

"Nah," Charlie answered, walking into the kitchen. "I was just up there. He wasn't in your room either."

Megan got up and walked down the hallway, thinking perhaps Sam was messing with Rom's video games or computer. The room was dark, though, and there was no sign of Sam. She walked over toward the stairs that went up to Howard, Rom and Phil's bedrooms, and wondered for a moment. There was no reason he should be up there, but he didn't seem to be anywhere else in the house.

She climbed the stairs into the dark hallway, and saw the doors to Rom's and Howard's rooms were closed, as they

normally were. But at the far end of the hallway, Phil's door was sitting open.

Megan walked in, trying to remember if she had ever actually been inside Phil's room. She had been in this hallway before, since it held one of the only two bathrooms in the house, but she and Charlie had always tacitly understood that the bedrooms were off-limits; really, there was never anything about Howard, Phil or Rom that made them think there was ever anything worth snooping around for in the first place.

Phil's room was very plain, with a military tidiness. The walls were bare with the exception of a tiny mirror and a clock. The windows which looked out over the front yard had curtains made of a heavy beige fabric. There was a dresser, a tall bookshelf, and a desk right by the door. In the middle of the room was a full-sized bed, crisply made and covered with a thinnish light brown bedspread.

It was on the floor on the other side of the bed that Megan found Sam, kneeling and holding a brand new bright red electric guitar that was nearly bigger than he was—and very obviously not his.

“Sam!”

He looked up, surprised at Megan's presence, apparently unaware that he had been trespassing.

“Megan, look at this! Does a rock star live here?” Sam was wide-eyed and breathless.

Megan quickly moved closer. “Where did you get that? We have to put it back!”

Sam's face fell a little. "It was here! I came in to get my car that raced under the bed, and I found it."

"The guitar was under the bed?"

"Yeah, I promise!"

This made absolutely no sense to Megan: among everyone who lived in the house, Phil was the least likely person of all of them to play—let alone own—an electric guitar.

"Sam, you need to get out of here. You're not supposed to go sneaking into other people's rooms!"

Sam untangled himself from the guitar strap. As he stepped out of the way, she put it back underneath the bed. It occurred to her that perhaps it was somebody's Christmas present, but that also didn't make any sense: for one thing, the only Christmas presents exchanged in the house last year were gifts that Howard had gotten for her, the "new girl." And who would it be for? Neither Megan nor Charlie played any instruments, and Sam could barely pick the thing up.

Megan got up, taking a quick curious peek under the bed as she did so, wondering what else might be hidden underneath it. Seeing only a box marked "CANCELLED CHECKS" and a couple pairs of shoes, she looked back over to Sam, who was now over at the desk, his hands in his pockets.

"Wasn't the door closed when you came up here?"

"No," Sam said. "This one wasn't."

Being so methodical, it was unlike Phil to forget to close his door, and Megan debated on whether or not she should close it, or leave it open and pretend she hadn't seen it. As she ushered Sam out of the room, she decided she'd close it; if he somehow found out what had happened, she would just tell him the truth. After all, she hadn't done anything wrong.

She reached in to grab the doorknob, and saw what Sam had been looking at on the desk: a stack of small envelopes. The top one bore a 20¢ stamp with no return address. Across the top in light pencil was written "December." Megan carefully looked through to see that the envelopes beneath had different months, but were all addressed the same:

3275 Pueblo Drive
Los Alamos, NM 87544

Megan slowly closed the door, baffled even more at what had been hidden behind it.

CHAPTER NINE

MEGAN'S DREAM

She was laying on her bed, staring at the ceiling. Before she could even get her bearings she was distracted by a strange sensation: a feeling of faint vertigo, as if the whole house was just slightly moving, just on the edge of perception.

And it was so bright in her room... unusually so. Her white curtains were drawn, but the sunlight flooded into the room with none of the shadows usually cast on to her wall by the tree outside; it was as if there were nothing there but the clear sky and the sun.

She got up on her elbows and looked around. The winds were howling outside, buffeting against the house, which was creaking in response. She felt queasy. She could hear a commotion downstairs. What was going on?

She got up, putting her feet on the floor to try to steady herself, but it didn't help: the house really was rocking back and forth with the wind! She felt panicked and was about to cry out for help—

Suddenly, Charlie burst through the door, breathless but with a look of determination on his face.

"Come on, Megan, it's a storm! We need your help!"

He left the door to the bedroom open and disappeared down the stairs. She got to the door in time to see him turning the corner of the first landing.

She walked out to the hallway, holding to the wall as the room lurched. There was a sudden jolt and she was thrown toward Charlie's room; she caught herself on his doorframe and saw Charlie's window wide open, curtains flailing wildly and papers in the room being blown around. She thought she heard a faint, distant voice just above the roaring winds. She tried to make out what it was saying but couldn't decipher the words, or locate the source.

She regained her balance and hurried down the stairs. There was chaos in the kitchen: Charlie, Vicky, Rom and Howard were frantically emptying the cupboards and hurriedly depositing each item in large crates, each marked with black stenciled letters on every side that read "PUEBLO DRIVE."

She was about to go into the kitchen—not necessarily to help them, but to ask what was going on—when to her right the front door suddenly blew open, scaring her and blowing her down to the ground. As she clambered to get back up, she was confronted not only with the powerful wind that was now blowing directly into her face, but with a realization that made her stiff with fear.

Where there was supposed to be the concrete walkway to the street, there was instead a narrow metal gangway running along the front edge of the house. It was as though the door had just swung open to the side deck of a navy

ship, except that instead of looking out over the ocean, the view was of the open air. As she crawled forward, she peered over and, through the metal grate, could see the canyon floor, at what seemed like thousands of feet below. She looked to her right and could scarcely believe what she was seeing: the house itself was somehow suspended on one side of the bridge, and she could see now that the horrible sounds she was hearing was not only the creaking of the massive building, but of the bridge itself, straining against the immense weight of the structure.

She gasped and pulled herself back in, but just as she was about to close the door, she again heard the voice over the wind, now more intense, coming from somewhere outside. It was Sam! She thrust her head back out the door and looked around, trying to find him. As the wind whistled through the cables, she realized the sound could be coming from around the corner of the house. She got herself up and walked out onto the grate, straining against her fear and holding tightly to the cables, and then made her way around the front of the house to the corner. When she arrived there, she found wooden planks jutting out from the structure itself that led around the back of the house; the ledge was three or four feet wide, but there was no railing. Petrified, but hearing Sam's screams intensify, she carefully crawled the rest of the way to the back corner.

Finally reaching the back side of the house, she scrambled on to the cement of the long back porch. It was

only now that she could tell where Sam was, though she couldn't see him: his cries came from the roof above her.

"Megan! Help me, please!"

She grabbed hold of one of the pillars that held up the roof, took a deep breath, and leaned over the abyss below to look up at where he was. Looking up, the vertigo overtook her and her body was wracked with fear, causing her to fall back toward the house to regain her courage.

"Sam, where are you?"

"I'm up here! I don't want to fall!"

Feeling panicked herself, she thought of Charlie—he could help. She crawled to the back door and reached up to open it, but it was locked. She pounded on the door, yelling for someone to open it, but her pleas were useless against the cacophony around her.

Mustering up her courage once again, she started to make her way back the way she came. As she climbed on to the wooden planks, she heard the creaking of the bridge intensify and looked down the way to the giant metal tower at the end of the bridge. As the winds continued to shake the house, it seemed almost as if the tower was slowly becoming misshapen. Then—

BANG!

She turned to her right to follow the sound. Had a cable broken? Her heart raced as she struggled against the wind that was blowing into her face, and then it happened again.

BANG! BANG!

This time she saw it: two cables snapped, one immediately after another, followed by the whistling of some piece of hardware being catapulted through the air above her. She tried to continue, but her hands and feet were paralyzed with fear. She fought back tears of panic.

Hearing more creaking of metal, she looked back at the tower. As she followed the lines of the tower downward, she saw something else: someone in a black jacket, walking almost casually across the bridge toward the house. As he came closer, he gave a calm, friendly wave, and she suddenly realized who it was.

“Anthony!” She screamed hoarsely, willing him to move faster. She couldn’t understand his casual attitude. *Doesn’t he see what’s happening?*

Without warning a terrifying sound, ten times louder than the ones before, split the air around her and echoed against the canyon walls. One of the main cables had snapped; the entire house immediately listed backward. She scrambled to the front corner of the planking and desperately clung to the end. She could hear Sam’s screams of terror from behind her, and as she turned her head she could see Anthony break into a run toward the house.

But behind him, the tower was buckling under the stress; she could see it visibly shaking as the wind increased.

“Anthony, no! Go back!” He couldn’t hear her, and kept running.

Then the tower snapped in half, and the horrifying ringing of metal took half a second to reach her ears. The

heavy main cables, now free and loose, whipped through the air as everything around her suddenly became weightless.

She woke up to find herself in her bed again, the moonlight casting the familiar shadows through the branches outside her window and down onto her curtains. She lay for a moment, holding her breath, until she was sure the storm had passed, then rolled over and waited for sleep to come in the stillness of her now dark and quiet room.

CHAPTER TEN

SPARKY'S

The rear windows of the public library looked out over the Community Center, a large shopping complex built back in the town's youth. It consisted of a complex of yellowish-tan buildings situated around a large grassy courtyard. The crown jewel was the Roxy Central, a three-screen movie theater that opened to a tall portico at one end of the courtyard; it was flanked to the left by the town's only bowling alley, and to the right by Sparky's, the restaurant where Charlie worked.

Megan had stopped in with Sam after school, finally giving in to the constant pleadings Sam had made since their first sojourn downtown together. They were sitting at one of the tables by the large windows that overlooked the courtyard. It was the afternoon lull, before the dinner rush was due to come in.

Charlie was sitting backwards in a chair facing the booth where Megan and Sam sat, each drinking a soda.

"Why is the clock backwards?" asked Sam, after gazing intently at the small clock on the wall above the door.

"So you can see it in the mirror behind the bar. Go check it out."

Sam got up and walked over to the soda bar to see. He scanned the mirrored wall for a moment until he saw the reflection of the clock, then turned around behind him to see the real thing, and then back again to the mirror.

"Have you had any dreams?" Megan asked Charlie in a hushed voice.

Charlie looked surprised. "No," he responded thoughtfully. "Not since before I jumped, I guess. Why—have you?"

"I had a really weird one last night," she said, looking across the restaurant. "But before that I hadn't had one since I jumped, either."

"What was it about?"

"It was bizarre... like, somehow Howard's house was out there on the bridge? I don't know. It was strange."

Charlie smiled. "Sounds like it."

Sam was spinning a bar stool. Megan watched him for a few moments, lost in thought. Thinking about Charlie's part in the dream made Megan remember about the envelopes on Phil's desk, and the electric guitar. She wasn't completely convinced that the guitar wasn't a gift for Charlie—Phil seemed to have always had a soft spot for him—so she decided not to bring it up, but she couldn't help asking about the envelopes.

"Hey, does Phil know anyone on Pueblo Drive?"

Charlie looked thoughtful. "I don't know... why? Where is Pueblo Drive? Is that out on North Mesa?"

“No, it’s by the high school, in the Denver Steels. I found Sam in Phil’s room yesterday and when I was getting him out, I saw all these envelopes on Phil’s desk addressed to somewhere on Pueblo Drive.”

“I have no idea. He had a wife and kid before he jumped... maybe it has something to do with them?”

That had been Megan’s guess as well, but she didn’t know much about Phil’s past; he never really talked to her, and from what Charlie had told her, Phil had never really opened up to him either.

“You said he jumped because he was stressed out, right?”

“Yeah, Howard told me once. Said he had gotten some big promotion and his job at LASL got a lot more intense, and pretty soon he couldn’t take it any more.”

“So maybe he’s sending money to his wife?”

“Maybe. But she wouldn’t know him now.”

Sam came wandering back to the table, and just as he sat down, the tiny bell attached to the front door announced a new customer. She looked to be a junior or senior in high school; she had long brown hair, and wore a pink sweater. As she moved to sit down at the soda bar, Charlie got up without a word and went behind the counter.

Sam sat down in the seat opposite Megan and took a long sip of his soda. Megan watched as Charlie approached the girl.

“Hey, what can I get for you?”

“Um, can I have a root beer”—she paused a little awkwardly—“um, and a menu?” She gave a polite grin.

"Oh, yeah, sorry!" Charlie almost stumbled over himself as he turned to the end of the counter and retrieved a menu. He stood there for a few seconds as she looked at it, and then remembered the order and turned around to get the root beer.

"Oh my gosh," Megan said under her breath. "This is great!"

"What?" said Sam, playing with his straw.

Megan looked over at Sam, who wasn't paying attention to Charlie at all. "Oh, nothing," she responded, grinning to herself.

She looked back over to the counter, where Charlie had retrieved the root beer and, catching Megan's eye, immediately turned red.

Oh, Charlie, she thought. Mr. Cool has met his match, hasn't he?

Charlie had gone to wiping the bar down, and now went back to the soda machine to get a refill for another customer. As he walked by the girl again on the way down the counter, Megan could see her smile as she continued to read her menu.

"Let's go," Megan said to Sam, getting up. "I don't think I can watch any more of this."

"Of what?" said Sam, slurping the straw in his now empty glass.

"I'll tell you when you're older," Megan responded.

"Let's go down this way," Megan told Sam as they got to the intersection just past the high school. She followed the sidewalk off to the right as it wrapped around behind P wing.

"Does this go to Peggy Sue bridge?" Sam asked, obviously concerned. "I *really* don't want to go on it."

"No," Megan answered. "I mean, it's down here, but it would just take us back to where we were."

"Why are we going this way, then?"

"I'm looking for an address."

"What address?"

"You'll see." The more she had thought about it, the more it made sense that it was Phil's wife from before he jumped. Megan figured his wife would either have some other family from some other man that she married, or that she would live alone. She hadn't really thought about it until Charlie had mentioned it, but found it sobering to consider that Phil's kid would have been unceremoniously wiped from existence.

The Denver Steels were tiny prefabricated houses named for the place and material of their construction, and this neighborhood was definitely one of the poorer ones in the county. Some of the houses were run-down, but at the same time there were several that showed an obvious sense of pride and care in their upkeep; they were painted well, the tiny yards were mowed recently, and the siding, windows and doors were adorned with cute and colorful decorations.

They turned down Pueblo Drive and before long Megan saw the house number she had written on a tiny torn corner of notebook paper: 3275.

The tiny house had a single window on either side of the front door; a small porch area covered the door and the window to the left. It was definitely one of the well-cared for houses on the street, with nicely trimmed grass and freshly cleaned windows. Planters beneath each window held bright red and orange mums. There was a narrow concrete walk from the door to the street, and a driveway that ran along the west side of the house.

Megan had led Sam to the other side of the road. As they had approached the house, they saw someone come around the house from the backyard with a basketball under his arm. He started dribbling and ran a lazy arc around to the apron of the driveway and back again, taking aim and shooting at a self-standing basketball hoop—and missing.

Suddenly, Sam sneezed, causing the boy to turn and notice them. No longer a part of the background, Megan was taken completely aback by the realization that the boy was, in fact, Anthony. Anthony from her biology class, Anthony from her dream.

“Oh, hey, Megan,” Anthony called out, waving. “Is this your brother?”

Megan walked absent-mindedly across the street toward him and Sam followed. “Um, no, this is Sam—he’s just a kid I babysit. What are you doing here?” She stammered, a little dumbfounded by the coincidence.

Anthony chuckled. "This is my house. What are you guys doing?" He poised for another shot and took it, but the ball bounced off the backboard and went off to the right, sending it into the small yard.

Megan tried to regain her cool. "Oh, we're just taking the scenic route home from downtown."

"Nice," Anthony said. "How old are you, Sam?"

"I'm seven."

"Cool."

"How long have you lived here?" Megan continued. She was trying to sound like she was just making small talk while still putting the pieces together about why the house had any meaning to Phil.

Anthony stopped dribbling and held the ball beside him. "We moved here from Albuquerque when I was in sixth grade. So what, three or four years, I guess?."

"Did your dad move here for work?"

"Nah, my dad died when I was little. My mom just got a real good deal on the house, and the schools are good, so..." Anthony seemed to be losing interest in the conversation, and Megan scrambled to try to think of something less intrusive to ask.

Fortunately, Anthony seemed to be doing the same thing. "Sam, you want to try?" He passed the ball to Sam, who Megan now realized had been eyeing it eagerly since they walked up.

"Sure!" Sam answered, taking the ball and trying his best to dribble it.

"So, do you live close by?" Anthony asked, eagerly.

"Oh, over close to Aspen school."

"Really? And you're walking home? That's kind of a long way—you want a ride?"

"You have your license?"

"Yeah, I got it a month ago. I just have to ask my mom."

He went over to the front door and went inside. As Megan watched Sam try without success to get the ball through the hoop, she considered the situation. Had she misread the address on the envelopes? She looked around at the neighboring houses. Was it one of these other places?

Anthony came out, car keys jingling in his hand, and the three of them climbed into Anthony's car. As Megan sat in the passenger seat, Sam squealed with delight from the back.

"Cool! Do you know how to play this?"

Megan looked behind her to see an old, worn out electric guitar laying across the back seat.

C H A P T E R E L E V E N

DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN

Dazed by recent events, Megan found it hard to focus in her classes at school the next day. She spent the better part of math class thinking about her mom, which irritated her... she hated dwelling on someone who had never seemed to think much about her. *Was I the only reason they were staying together?* she wondered.

Biology, of course, caused her thoughts to turn to Anthony. She had been trying to figure out the connection between him and Phil for the better part of the night. Monthly check-sized envelopes... was he sending them money? Anthony couldn't be Phil's son, and Anthony had said that his father died when he was little. Was Phil his uncle? Why else would he be sending so much support to them? Phil worked constantly, and seemed to spend very little on himself. Megan had meant to ask Charlie about it last night, but Charlie had worked late and she never got a chance. *Tonight*, she thought.

And Anthony... even before seeing him at his house, she had found herself thinking about him more and more. Maybe it was the feeling that Leah had betrayed her—even though she had done nothing wrong—that had left a hole in Megan's day. Anthony seemed to have the genuineness that

she appreciated in Leah, and there was something else—something she wasn't quite letting up to the surface of her mind.

She looked over at him sitting at his desk, jotting the occasional note on his paper as Mr. Connor went from one transparency to the next. He was wearing jeans and a long-sleeved blue turtle neck, and she felt a little flushed as she admitted to herself that he was actually really good-looking.

She looked away and sighed, looking down at her nearly blank notebook page and then up at Mr. Connor's overhead projector. They had finished with worms the day before and he was now lecturing about amphibian anatomy, in preparation for dissecting frogs after Thanksgiving.

Thanksgiving. She thought about Sam, about his interest in having a normal Thanksgiving dinner, about his invitation to Linda. *Surely that's not actually going to happen, will it?* she thought. Megan remembered Sam freaking out about the boys crossing the bridge; he was so naive, so helpless, so trusting. He wanted so badly to have a traditional holiday meal, like he was used to having—Megan's heart ached a little to think about his reaction to having Spaghettios or leftover pizza when he had been looking forward to turkey, stuffing and pie.

It was twilight when Megan, Sam and Charlie walked out of the sparse forest and on to the street. They had climbed "LA" Mountain, which was really just a large hill named for the rocks arranged in the shape of the town's

initials and annually whitewashed by the high school's senior class. Sam loved seeing the large pattern of rocks up close, telling Megan and Charlie that his older brothers had come up many times but had never let him tag along.

Megan, who had been up the mountain several times, enjoyed the view more than anything; getting to the clearing that surrounded the painted rocks afforded a vista of the entire townsite and the valleys beyond. The scene somehow took on an added beauty with the smell of winter in the air: the crisp atmosphere, which was cooler up on the mountain and especially out in the clearing, mixed with the hint of smoke from wood stoves and fireplaces burning below. While it wasn't snowing just yet, it felt like with a little more cloud cover it could start at any time.

"This way," called Sam, leading the group down a street to the left. It wasn't the way back to Howard's, but all of the streets in this neighborhood looped back around, so Megan and Charlie followed somewhat absentmindedly.

"Okay, but we need to hold hands," Megan replied, accounting for Sam's tendency to alternately walk far ahead or lag quite a ways behind.

"So, Charles," Megan asked with a mischievous grin, "who was that young lady at Sparky's yesterday?"

Charles looked straight ahead, his face unflinching. "I don't know who you're talking about."

Megan took a step and bumped her hip into his, nearly knocking him off balance and causing him to catch himself so he wouldn't fall. In the process, she pulled away from

Sam such that his hand slipped out of his glove. "Come on, spill," she said to Charlie as she gave the glove back to Sam.

"Sarah," he muttered. "She's... just a girl."

"Whatever," Megan smiled. "I've seen you with 'just girls.' and I don't think she is 'just a girl.'"

Charlie shrugged. "Yeah, I guess she's nice." His attempt to brush it off was unconvincing, and he seemed to tell that Megan wasn't buying it. "Hey, lay off!" he retorted when he saw Megan's broad smile. "Sam here tells me you've got the hots for a boy yourself."

Megan went bright red and shot an icy look at Sam, who didn't seem to be paying attention. Charlie laughed. "Oh, don't shoot the messenger. He just told me you guys got a ride home with a 'rock star' yesterday. Anthony, was it?"

Megan saw the opportunity to change the subject and took it. "You know those envelopes we found on Phil's desk? We checked out the address and it's Anthony's house... he lives there with his mom. He said his dad died when he was a baby."

Charlie looked intrigued. "So you think it's Phil's wife?"

She had, but had dismissed it. "But then, who's Anthony?"

"Maybe she married someone else, and had a kid?"

Megan shook her head. "Didn't Phil jump back in the seventies?"

"Yeah, but when you jump, it's like, you were never born, right? So things can be different as far back as you've been alive. Since Phil never existed, his wife never met him in the

first place, so she could have met someone else and had a kid with him.”

“Well, I think Phil knows Anthony somehow.”

“What do you mean?”

“When we were in his room the other day, Sam found a new guitar under Phil’s bed.”

Charlie looked confused. “Really?”

“Anthony plays guitar. I’m thinking it’s a Christmas present for him.”

Charlie smiled. “Well, you know Phil.”

“No, actually, I don’t. The guy barely ever says two words to me.”

“He’s actually a really nice guy,” Charlie continued. “I mean, he doesn’t talk to me a lot either, but Howard says he’s one of the closest friends he’s ever had.”

“Do *you* think it’s his wife?”

“That’d be my guess.”

“What about his sister?”

Charlie shook his head. “Nah, his sister lives in North Carolina. He flew out there a few times to help her out before you moved in—I guess she’s kind of a mess, not having Phil as a role model growing up.”

“He went all the way out there to help someone who has no idea who he is?”

“I’m telling you, he’s a stand-up guy.”

Megan looked back to see Sam, following fifteen or twenty feet behind. “Catch up, Sam,” she called out to him.

“Charlie, what are we going to do about Thanksgiving?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, he invited Linda, and are we even going to have a dinner together? She wouldn’t actually want to come, right?”

“I haven’t talked to her. What do *you* think we should do?”

“I don’t know. I mean, it’s not up to *me*.”

“Why not?”

“Well, it’s not my house.”

“It’s as much yours as any of ours. I mean, it’s not up to me either.”

Megan felt like Charlie was being intentionally difficult. “What about Howard? Or Vicky?”

“Well, we can ask them what they think. You know Howard; he’ll probably just say we should do whatever we want.”

“To *you*, maybe,” Megan muttered.

Charlie smiled, and started to say something, but stopped. They walked quietly for a moment.

“What do *you* want to do, Megan?”

Megan thought for a second. “I don’t know, maybe it’d be nice. For him, I mean.” She motioned back to Sam while trying to sound detached.

Charlie grinned, and nodded. “Okay.” He turned around and looked for a moment. “Wait, where *is* he?”

Megan turned around; Sam was nowhere to be seen. They turned around and started walking briskly in the opposite direction.

“Sam? Sam! Where’d you go?”

They walked past two or three houses, peering carefully into porches, parked cars and yards. Megan began to feel a sense of panic building inside her, when suddenly Charlie stopped.

“There!”

Charlie pointed at a bush in the front yard of one of the usual cookie-cutter duplexes that was set in away from the curb; Megan could see the blue of Sam’s coat as he crouched between the bush and the sidewalk. Megan and Charlie walked over to him, and Megan was about to tell him off when she saw that he was craning his neck around the bush, gazing at the large, well-lit, living room picture window on the house beyond. Through the glass she could see a family sitting around a coffee table; a man and a woman sitting on a sofa, and two adolescent boys sitting on the floor. They looked to be playing a board game together. The scene had a quiet warmth that seemed to pierce through the night air.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

He answered without turning around, staring intently at the window. “Sorry, I was just looking for a minute, I promise! The policeman said I couldn’t go talk to them but —” He broke his gaze and his expression fell a bit as he looked at Megan. “I was... just looking.”

“Sam—who are they?” Megan asked, knowing the answer in her heart already.

“My family.”

Megan sat in the hallway as Charlie came out of his room and sat down opposite her.

"He's out," he said. "So," he continued, a glint in his eye, "are you going to tell him you like him?"

"Who, Sam?"

"No, Anthony."

Megan felt her face go red. "Shut up!" She didn't know what bothered her more: that Charlie would just assume she liked Anthony, or that she was starting to realize he was actually right about it.

"Come on, why not? Sounds like you two get along pretty well. What, is he like a freak or something?"

Megan folded her arms. "No, it's not that, it's just that, well, he's—" She didn't know how to finish her thought.

"It's because he's not a jumper, right? He can't possibly understand you, he's part of *that* world, not part of this one."

Megan didn't say anything; maybe he was right about that, too?

"Something it took me a while to figure out is that, even with this crazy thing that happened to us, it's all still the same world. We lost a lot when we jumped, but we're still *here*. We're still human."

"Then why don't you ask out what's-her-name—Sarah?"

Charlie looked down and pursed his lips. "That's different."

"How?" Megan retorted.

"It just... is. I can't—" He shook his head.

“Come on, Charlie, I tell you everything. Why won’t you tell me what’s going on with you?”

“Megan, it’s not—you just—” He let out an exasperated sigh. “Just trust me, okay?”

Megan looked at him, dumbfounded.

“It’s late, I’m gonna hit it. I’ll see you in the morning, okay?”

Charlie got up, went into his room, and quietly closed the door. Irritated at Charlie’s unwillingness to share, Megan got up and did the same thing.

C H A P T E R T W E L V E

FLYING

Megan was up early Saturday morning. When she first awoke, she could hear everyone downstairs and felt anxious enough about her plan that she couldn't go back to sleep. She lay awake in bed as the sun rose and finally got herself out of bed and dressed.

She came downstairs to find nearly everyone there: Vicky was washing breakfast dishes in the kitchen, and Charlie was sitting at the breakfast table reading the paper. Howard was in the dining room flipping through a check register, assorted bills scattered in front of him. Megan walked over to the other side of the house to find Sam and Rom sitting on the sofa holding video game controllers. Sam looked at the screen intently, his tongue curled over his upper lip, but the sounds coming from the game did not sound encouraging.

Sam turned around, undeterred by his apparent loss. "Megan, Rom is letting me play his In- uh, Inil—"

"Intellivision," Rom chimed in, chuckling.

"Yeah, And this is *Night Stalker*, and you have to shoot the robots—and there are different color robots!—and there's *Auto Racing*, and that's where you drive a race car all over the town."

Megan couldn't help but smile at Sam's excitement. Rom, who contrasted Sam's pajamas with slacks and a sweater vest over a button-down shirt, turned and smiled at Megan, unable to get a word in edgewise.

Megan walked back to the other side, figuring she would start in the kitchen.

"Vicky," she asked, sighing and steeling herself against the knowing grin that she was sure Charlie had in her peripheral vision. "Do you have any plans for Thanksgiving?"

Vicky stopped, noticeably surprised at the question. "No, I don't think so," she responded, flashing a curious look back at Megan. "Why, do you?"

"Well, *Charlie* and I"—she emphasized his name to force him to participate in the quest—"went to see Linda, and Sam invited her over for Thanksgiving dinner. And, well, she sounded like she might actually—come."

"Really?" Vicky looked surprised. "Wow."

Megan knew that Vicky was closer to Linda than any of them. "Do you think she will?"

"Well, I suppose, maybe. Does Howard know?"

"Not yet," Megan responded. She looked over at the table with a grin. "Charlie said he was going to talk to him here in a few minutes."

Charlie looked up, stupefied. "Oh, *whatever*!"

Vicky laughed. "Well, I think it would be nice, if you all are up for it. We'd need to get some grocery shopping

done.” She looked over at Charlie. “Do you suppose we could get everyone to pitch in on the bill?”

“*I’m* in,” Charlie responded. “I’m sure the other guys would be willing, too, if they don’t have anything else planned.”

Megan felt excited—was it really going together this easily? Of course, she felt comfortable asking Vicky—that was the easy part.

She went over to Charlie and sat down. “Now you should go ask Howard,” she told him under her breath.

“Why don’t you? You’re doing great so far.”

She glared at him, but he didn’t look up. She kicked him under the table, but he just grinned.

She sighed, got up and walked into the dining room where Howard was sitting, still poring over bills.

“Howard,” she said, “do you want to have a Thanksgiving dinner here? Because, I mean, Sam was asking about it.” She figured she’d avoid mentioning Linda, at least not right away.

Howard looked up. “That sounds like a great idea, Megan. Are you thinking about a turkey and everything?”

“Yeah,” Megan answered. “Vicky said she could get the shopping done, and I could help her with the cooking.”

Howard took his reading glasses off and looked visibly impressed. “That... sounds wonderful.”

Megan felt horribly awkward at this point. “Okay,” she remarked, and went back into the kitchen.

Charlie, who had overheard her conversation with Howard, looked up. "Nice going, champ," he remarked quietly, so as to prevent Howard from hearing. Megan balled up her fist and shook it at him.

"You know, I could call her if you want, Megan," Vicky said, moving toward the phone. "I don't think she's working today."

"Um, yeah, that'd be great," Megan responded.

Vicky went over to the phone on the wall by the counter and picked up the handset. Immediately they could hear a screeching come over the phone. Vicky muttered, "Oh, shoot," and quickly hung it back up.

"Sorry, Rom!" she yelled to the other room. "I didn't know you were using it!"

Megan immediately realized what had happened; Rom had a modem, which allowed him to connect his computer over the phone lines to other computers. Megan didn't know why, but he usually only did it at night so as not to tie up the phone line. It wasn't the first time someone had picked up a handset and ruined his connection. Megan had even done it once or twice.

"It's okay," came the response from the other room, polite but obviously frustrated.

"I thought he was playing video games in there with Sam," Megan explained.

Vicky shook her head slightly. "He didn't tell me he was using it this morning. I think maybe it was still connected

from when he was using it last night. He must be trying to load some big file or something.”

Rom came in after a minute and opened the refrigerator.

“Rom, I’m so sorry, I hope that didn’t mess you up,” Vicky said, turning to him.

“No, it’s okay, Vicky, I forgot to tell you I was on. Not your fault.” He seemed a little deflated. “I really just need to get Mountain Bell out here and have them put in a second line.”

“Well, I’m really sorry. You can get right back on if you want; I promise I won’t touch the phone.”

“Don’t worry about it, Vick. I’ll go on tonight. It’ll be fine.”

Having grabbed a can of soda from the refrigerator, Rom left the kitchen and walked back down the hallway. A few minutes later, Sam came into the kitchen, looking bored.

“Hey, Sambo!” Charlie said, turning the page of his newspaper. “Did you have some breakfast, buddy?”

“Yeah,” Sam responded, seeming a little distracted.

“What’s the matter, bud?” Charlie asked.

“Rom said he had to stop playing video games with me. He said I could keep playing if I wanted, but I’m not very good at it. I asked him if he could play a little bit more but he went upstairs ‘cause he said he was very busy.”

“Oh, he probably is,” Vicky said, putting a dirty skillet into the soapy water of the sink. “I’m sure he’ll be able to play them with you again later, though.”

Charlie got up from the table. "Hey, Sam, how about if I play with you?"

Sam brightened up. "Okay!" he exclaimed, and bounded into the other room, followed by Charlie.

Megan sat down at the table. "I guess I'll wait and ask Rom about Thanksgiving later."

"That's probably a good idea. He's probably irritated that I messed up his computer thing, but you know you'll never get him to admit it. I bet he had it set to load it all night, and now he's going to have to start over."

"What do you think he's doing?"

"Oh, uh," she started, then paused. "Probably research."

"For what?"

"I don't know," Vicky answered, unconvincingly.

"Is it something with Howard?" Megan asked, lowering her voice a little. "I thought I heard them talking about something the other night."

Vicky seemed uncomfortable. "Well, it might be something personal, Megan."

Megan hated it when Vicky suddenly switched into her motherly, you're-too-young-to-understand-grown-up-things attitude, and sighed and slumped back in her chair.

"I don't understand why Rom hangs around here anyway. He's got all kinds of money, why doesn't he just find his own place, like Linda?"

"Well, Rom really looks up to Howard."

"Why?" Megan responded, more to herself than to Vicky.

“Did Rom ever tell you about his dad?”

“No.”

Vicky began draining the dirty dishwater and dried her hands. “Really, it’s his story to tell,” she said in a slightly quieter voice. “But he’s not the type to talk about himself. Maybe just don’t let on that I told you.”

“Okay,” Megan responded, her curiosity piqued.

“Rom’s dad was some high-powered executive. Come to think of it, he might have owned his own company. Rom’s brother, Julian, was quite a bit older... he went off to college and got a job with the same company, and I think they both hoped Rom would follow suit.

“Rom didn’t, though... apparently he was really into electronics in high school. He liked doing the computer stuff, and I think that if it weren’t for his dad, he would have been happy just sticking with that.

“The thing is, though, Rom *loved* his dad. Anyway, his dad told him he should go to school and get a degree in business, and that there’d be a job in the company waiting for him when he was finished.

“He didn’t really want to, but he wanted to make his dad proud of him, so he did it. He did okay at school, considering his heart wasn’t really in it, and got his MBA. But when the time finally came to take a job at his dad’s company, he decided to turn him down. He told me once it was the hardest thing he’d ever had to do.”

Megan sat, spellbound. She had never known about any of this. All she had ever heard about Rom was that he was a

drug addict before he jumped, and even that was based on something she had overheard one night.

Vicky continued. "So he decided that he would start a business here in Los Alamos, doing video production. It was what he loved to do, and being able to do it for a living made him happy.

"His dad wasn't real supportive at first, but he finally realized that it was what Rom wanted, so he actually set Rom up with the loans he needed to get things started. Rom did pretty well, hired a staff and rented out some space across from the high school, but he was feeling a lot of pressure from his dad to succeed, and I think that's what made him start using cocaine."

"Isn't that why he jumped?" Megan asked. "Wasn't he, like, always high?"

Vicky frowned. "Everyone's got a reason to jump, Megan. Drugs are never okay, but it was the stress that drove him to them. They cost a lot of money, so he started dipping into the investment money. Since he was draining the accounts, and pretty soon he was spending more time on the drugs than on the business, the business failed—and I think he was so detached from it all that he didn't really realize that everything was going downhill.

"Pretty soon, there he was with all this debt. He sank deeper and deeper, and I think the people he hung out with, they helped him get more drugs, even though he didn't have any money.

“By that point, he was doing different drugs, and the one he was on this one night, I guess it makes people think they can do anything. So he went out onto the bridge, and jumped off.”

“Because he thought he could fly,” Megan said to herself, remembering now what she had overheard months before.

Vicky stopped for a minute and Megan thought she flashed the tiniest smile as she thought. “Do you know what he told me once? He said, ‘Vicky, I *did* fly.’ That’s the thing—after jumping, it was the first time he really felt free. Free from his father’s expectations, free from his debts, and everything.”

“Was he still, you know... *addicted* after he jumped?”

“He was, but he didn’t have any money. And of course, none of the people who had been helping him knew who he was anymore. I think when he tried to go home, his dad had him arrested, so he went to jail—but they released him, since he didn’t have any drugs on him or anything.”

“How did he end up here?”

“He attended a support group at the hospital, and he would eat lunch at the cafeteria on the days he came. We got to talking, and we eventually realized that we were both jumpers. I guess it had been a while since he had jumped—he had already gotten his job at the TV station and everything. He had been sleeping on a couch in the studio while he was looking for a place to live, so I checked with Howard, and well, you know the rest.”

“Is that why he likes Howard so much? Because he took him in?”

“Oh, it’s a lot more than that. I think Rom looks up to Howard the same way he looks up to his father. I know Howard isn’t always the most—emotionally available man, but if you can imagine, it sounds like he’s better than Rom’s dad was.”

Megan sat quietly for a minute or so. She had been in this place almost a year and had never been interested in anyone’s past, figuring that nothing was there worth learning about. They were all jumpers, after all, what more was there? Well, she had asked Charlie about his past, but would just change the subject; it had made her think that the subject matter was off-limits for discussion. It gave her just another reason not to ask anyone else.

Megan went up to her room. *Everybody’s got a reason to jump*, she thought, remembering Vicky’s words. She grabbed her coat, gloves, and hat and decided to go for a walk.

She got to the bridge and started across, as she had done so many times in the past year, but it was the first time she had been to the bridge since her dream. It seemed a little more peaceful than usual today. As she walked across, she saw herself and Greg, dangling off the side of the bridge, ready to accept their fates. She hadn’t let it enter her thoughts before; she had been too angry at the old Greg to give his ghost the satisfaction. But today, she stopped at the spot where she had jumped, and looked over the side.

Gazing down into the canyon, she thought about how truly strange it was: she could jump right now and never touch the trees far below. She could jump and once again no one would know her. All she had to do was jump.

Everybody's got a reason.

She walked to the other side and, instead of climbing through the hole in the fence, she followed the canyon edge until she reached the small clearing where she had found herself after making the jump. She knelt and read the small engraved wooden sign that Rom had affixed to base of the trunk of one of the trees:

DID YOU JUMP?
CALL 662-8253 FOR HELP

For help, she thought. Was it really help? She thought about how she had felt, living with her parents, not feeling like she belonged. And now, how she had wanted to leave Howard's for the same reason. Was it just that she was never happy?

She walked back up to the tower and climbed out through the hole in the fence. She followed the dirt path up Canyon Road to head downtown, but with no plan—or care—for her destination.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE LAUNDROMAT

Megan was passing Pizza Hut and The Sports Bag when something caught her eye across the Community Center parking lot: a familiar white car parked in front of the laundromat. She cut across to get a closer look: was her mom inside?

She approached the window near the door, trying to stay out of sight. The laundromat was full of activity, with a dozen or so people inside. A few were at the washing machines, others were folding clothes at the tables near the dryers.

Megan spotted her mother sitting on the opposite end of the facility. It looked as though she were reading a magazine, but it was hard to see through the glare of the window. Feeling some uncharacteristic curiosity—*is Sam rubbing off on me?* she thought—she decided to go inside.

She went to a dryer full of clothes and stood in front of it, as if to casually check on its progress. How could she find out more about her mom's situation? Oddly enough, she found herself wishing she could just talk to her, and wished she could somehow disguise herself... before realizing that she didn't need to.

She sat a few seats away from her mother and grabbed a worn-out copy of *Better Homes and Gardens*. Her mom didn't seem to react at first, and a few moments afterward placed her own magazine in her lap, took a tissue she had hidden in her hand and used it to blow her nose. Megan was just about to use the opportunity to make some small talk when she noticed that her mom's eyes were red with tears.

Seeing this side of her mom was part nauseating and part mesmerizing, and she tried hard to not stare. But as her mom reached into her purse for another tissue, Megan realized that she wasn't being as inconspicuous as she hoped, because her mom apparently felt the weight of her gaze and looked up at her.

Megan panicked and immediately looked back down to her magazine. As far as Megan knew, it was the first time her mom had ever noticed her since her jump. There had always been a sliver of wonder in Megan's mind about whether or not her mom would somehow recognize her at a moment like this, and the fact that she didn't—she appeared slightly embarrassed as she continued to rummage through her purse—made Megan's new life suddenly more real, as if to confirm that it wasn't all just a year-long dream.

Feeling the reality of the situation made Megan want to get up and run away, but something within her kept her in her seat. She thought about what Charlie had said. *We're still here. We're still human.*

“I’m sorry,” Megan said meekly, lowering both the magazine and the pretense that she didn’t see her mom’s emotional state.

Her mom looked up again, still searching in her purse, apparently with no luck. “Oh, it’s okay,” she responded, her voice breaking.

Megan wished she could help, and then realized that Vicky had sent a small plastic pouch of tissues when they took Sam up the mountain. “Oh, here,” she said, as she reached in to her coat pocket to pull them out.

Her mom set her purse down, and took the pouch with an appreciative look. “Thank you.”

“Is... there anything I can do to help?” Megan offered, trying to hide the fact that her hands were shaking.

“Oh, um,” her mom responded, giving a nervous chuckle, “thanks, I, uh—well, not really, I guess?” She gave an apologetic look to Megan. “Thanks, though.”

“Oh, sure,” Megan said. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to stare.”

Her mom shook her head and looked down. “It’s fine, really.” She looked up again, pausing as if she were deciding whether or not to continue, and finally offered her hand. “I’m Tammy.”

Megan tried to control her own nervousness as she moved to take her mom’s hand. Still, her mother’s touch brought back a flood of emotion. “I’m... Megan,” she responded, her voice nearly breaking.

“That’s a—” her mom seemed to tear up a little and put the tissue up to her face as if to catch herself. “That’s a pretty name.” She looked on the verge of breaking down.

Megan sat her magazine down and cautiously moved to a closer seat. “Hey, it’s okay,” she half-whispered.

“I’m so sorry,” her mom said, grabbing another tissue from the pouch and wiping her eyes again. “It’s... it’s stupid, really”—she gave a polite chuckle amidst her tears—“it’s just—well, it’s my birthday today.” She tried laughing again, but the emotions caught her mid-breath and she resignedly put her face into the tissue.

“It’s okay,” Megan responded under her breath. Her mind was wracked with sudden guilt. *November 17th*, she thought. *How could I have forgotten? And her first birthday after the divorce... no wonder.*

Megan leaned forward. “I’m happy to listen, if you’d like to talk about it.”

The words felt too forced, but Megan’s mom smiled as if to accept the offer. “Oh, it sounds so juvenile, but I’m thirty-five today, and I always thought that by now, I would have... moved forward with my life, I guess. I’ve always wanted to have my own little family, but here I am, sitting in a laundromat, and there’s—there’s no one, you know?”

The explanation left Megan feeling even more confused, and she wondered for a second if this wasn’t even the same woman. “You don’t have a family?” she responded, before realizing how dumb the question sounded.

“Well, there’s my parents up in Denver, but you know what I mean, right?” She dabbed at her eyes with the tissue. “I mean, single life was fun back in college, but when you’re in your thirties, the dating scene is kind of hopeless and depressing.”

Megan’s mind reeled. *Back in college?* She had never *gone* to college—she had met Megan’s dad in high school, they got married after graduation, and she became pregnant with Megan later that summer.

Megan stumbled to figure out what to say. “So... you’ve never been married?” The question made so much more sense in Megan’s mind but after hearing it aloud she realized how insensitive it sounded, and she felt her face go completely red.

Her mom didn’t seem to notice Megan’s embarrassment, but she also seemed to suddenly realize that she had been confiding in a teenager. “No,” she responded quietly, looking across to the clothes dryers. She looked uncomfortable, as if she was trying to find a way to escape the conversation. “You know, I don’t know if I put a dryer sheet in—” She motioned toward the dryer while wiping her eyes. “I’m going to, uh—” She tentatively handed the pouch of tissues back to Megan.

“No, it’s okay, keep ‘em.”

“Oh, thanks. It was very nice talking with you.” Her detachment dissipated and a look of sincerity crossed her face. “You’re a very kind person.” She stood up and gathered

her things. “Thanks again,” she said as she fumbled a little with her purse and walked away.

“No problem,” Megan answered distractedly, feeling confused and exposed, and she got up to leave.

“They *never met?*” Charlie asked incredulously, setting the glass he was drying down on the soda bar.

Megan sat perched on a stool, still taking it in. They were the only ones in the restaurant. “Well, she said she was never married. So if they did meet, they never got married.”

“Okay, but they, uh—well, they *were* married when they had you, right?”

“They were married a year before I was born. After graduating high school. Believe me, I’ve done the math a hundred times.”

Charlie thought for a moment. “Wait, but didn’t you tell me your mom miscarried—?”

“Yeah, twice. But that was *after* I was born. So that wouldn’t have anything to do with it.”

“Hmm... and you’re *sure* she said she had never been married—?”

“Charlie, I’m sure! Before I jumped, they got married in June of 1968. After I jumped, they never got married. You said that the bridge doesn’t change anything from before you were born, right? I was born in June of ‘69!”

“Yeah,” Charlie said. “That doesn’t make sense at all.”

“None of this makes sense. I mean, the whole thing! When I jumped off that bridge, I was supposed to *die*, Charlie. We all were!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.”

The conversation was cut short by the jingle of the bells attached the door. Sarah came up to the counter and sat a few seats away from Megan. She smiled politely at Megan, and then turned to Charlie with a sparkle in her eye. “Hi, Charlie,” she said, taking off her coat.

“Hey, Sarah,” Charlie responded, much less nervous than he had been several days earlier. “Sarah, this is my friend Megan. Megan, Sarah.”

“Hi,” Megan said, giving Sarah a curt smile.

“Nice to meet you, Megan,” Sarah answered, and then she turned back to Charlie with a warm expression. “Can I get a cream soda?”

“Coming right up.”

Sarah got up again. “I’ll be right back for that,” she said, walking toward the bathroom.

“Oh, she’s totally *gaga* for you.” Megan remarked quietly as soon as the restroom door closed.

“Shut up, she’s not.”

“Are you serious? You can’t see it? She’s all starry-eyed!”

“Knock it off, Megan!”

“Charlie, if you like her, ask her out! She’s obviously going to say yes!”

Charlie, who had just produced a can of soda from the refrigerator, slammed the door shut and turned around.

“Megan, I swear, why don’t you mind your *own* business for a change?” He was genuinely angry, and it took Megan completely by surprise; she had never seen him lose his cool like this before. Crestfallen and a little scared, she pulled her coat on, muttered a shocked apology, and left.

That night, Megan stayed in her room, waiting until she could hear Charlie put Sam to bed. Hoping he would come talk to her about what had happened, she waited quietly, but soon heard him cross the hall from the bathroom and close the door to his room. After she heard the creak of his bed, she got up and walked down the hall, moving slowly past Charlie’s closed door. Hearing no movement from within, she turned toward Vicky’s bedroom. “Vicky?” she asked quietly, giving a gentle knock and listening carefully for an answer.

“Come on in, Megan.” Megan opened the door and stepped inside. Vicky was in her nightgown, sitting on her bed with a book in her lap and Bill Murray and Jim Belushi on her small black-and-white television. “You can turn that off, if you want,” she said as Megan entered.

“Are you sure? I don’t want to interrupt.”

“Go ahead. I wasn’t really watching it.”

Megan turned the dial until it clicked off and sat at the edge of the bed, struggling to figure out what to say.

Vicky spoke first, sensing Megan’s difficulty. “I noticed you were avoiding Charlie tonight—is everything all right?”

“I don’t know. There’s this girl that I *know* he likes, and it’s obvious she likes him back, but I brought it up to him today and he, like, totally bit my head off. I’ve... never seen him like that before.”

Vicky thought for a moment. “Maybe there’s more to it than you know?”

“Does he talk to you about his past?”

“A little,” she responded. “I know he was a quarterback in high school.”

“Yeah, he told me that, too. I guess, I mean, well—”

“He’s never told me why he jumped, if that’s what you’re wondering.”

“Yeah,” Megan said quietly, looking at her feet. “I don’t understand why he won’t talk about it with me, after everything I’ve shared with him.”

“The choice to take your own life—it’s such a personal thing. You’ve been there, Megan. *You* know the journey that led you to the bridge. It can be a much harder thing for some people to share that than it is for others.”

Vicky picked up a bookmark next to her and put it in her book, closing it. “For as tough and confident as Charlie is, we don’t know what he’s struggling with under the surface. Maybe he’ll be ready to share that sometime, or maybe he won’t. For what it’s worth, Megan, if he does decide to tell someone, I think it’s pretty obvious that you’d be the first to know.”

Megan mumbled an assent. It felt good to think that Charlie considered her to be such a good friend, but after he

snapped at her earlier she didn't feel much like she fit the role.

Her thoughts turned to her mother. She had wanted to talk to Charlie more about it in the restaurant, but Sarah's arrival had halted the conversation.

"Did you ever want to have a kid?"

The question seemed to catch Vicky off-guard, and she didn't answer at first. Megan worried that she had overstepped her bounds once again. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

But Vicky shook her head. "No, no, it's okay. I *did* want to be a mom, Megan. More than anything." She seemed to be holding back a little emotion as she spoke. "But sometimes you have to change your plans. I also wanted to be a doctor, and since marriage wasn't even looking likely, I started saving for medical school by working as a secretary at the hospital. And that's when I met Shaun, and we fell in love, and, well—the doctor thing didn't end up working out.

"But we got married, and started working on a family, which is what I wanted in the first place! That's when I found out I was infertile. It was the darkest time of my life. I felt useless as a person, I couldn't be a mom, I couldn't be a doctor..." Her voice trailed off.

Vicky paused for a moment and took a deep breath. "I would have loved to be a mom. I would gladly set aside every penny I've saved up if it meant having a child of my own. But... I've made my peace with that. Working in the ICU has made me realize how much I want to go to nursing

school. I'm saving up for it, and although it's going to take me a lot longer this time around, I'm okay with that. I'm a wiser person now, to be sure."

"Having Sam here," Megan said, "it's kind of like having a kid, though, right?"

"Maybe a little bit," Vicky responded. "I mean, Sam is such a special kid, and I love him, but when it comes down to it, he's not really... mine. He'll always think of someone else as mom."

Megan nodded, and the two sat for a minute, both lost in thought. Finally, Vicky turned to Megan.

"Why do you ask?"

"I talked to my mom today," Megan responded softly.

Vicky's eyes widened. "Really? Oh, Megan—"

Megan didn't wait for Vicky to finish. "And I found out that she and my dad never got married."

"Oh, you mean before—?"

"No, they *were* married before I jumped. They got married before I was born. But in *this* world, where I was never born—they never got married. I don't think they ever even met."

"You're—you're sure?"

"Yeah."

"Megan, that's..."

"It's impossible, right? I mean, when you jump off the bridge, it's just like you were never born. But my parents had been married for a *year* before they had me. Me jumping off the bridge shouldn't have changed *that*, right?"

“But... it *did*, Megan.” Vicky seemed almost excited.

“How?”

Vicky had a fire in her eyes. “I mean, it *did*! You never being born... it affected things that happened in the *past*!”

“Yeah, but *how*? It would mean that I was somehow the reason they got together in the first place, even before my mom got pregnant.”

“Yes,” Vicky responded, almost reverently. “That’s *exactly* what it means.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE TOYS UNDER THE BED

The next day was Sunday. Sam was watching cartoons when Megan came downstairs. She avoided the kitchen, where Vicky and Charlie were talking, and went instead to see Rom, who was sitting at his computer.

“Morning, Megan.”

“Hey,” Megan said, sitting on the sofa. “What are you working on?” It was hard not to see Rom differently after what Vicky had told her.

Rom’s chair squeaked as he swiveled toward her, surprised at her interest. “Ah, well, I’m going through messages people have posted.” He motioned to the screen as he was explaining, and then stopped, with a sudden dawning realization. “Oh—did you need to use the phone? I can disconnect if you need me to—”

“Oh, no—it’s fine,” Megan replied. “You don’t have to do that—” Her voice trailed off as her attention turned to the telephone handset, which was cradled on a small device next to the base of the telephone. “What kind of messages?”

“Oh, it’s a BBS — er, a bulletin board system. People can post messages that can be seen by anyone who connects to the server.” Rom spoke cautiously, watching Megan’s

reaction. “Most of the messages are like, ‘how’s the weather’ or that sort of thing. Like ham radio operators, I guess.”

Megan tried to see what was written on the screen, but it looked to be a jumble of green text on a black background; she caught the words “stock index” and “call to shareholders” before looking away, not wanting to be caught staring.

“Um, so do you have any plans for Thursday?”

Rom looked at her for a moment, almost as if he wasn’t sure if he had heard her correctly. “Thanksgiving?”

“Yeah.”

“Uh, no, I don’t think so. Why?”

“Well, Sam had asked if we could have a Thanksgiving dinner, so I’m trying to see if anyone else would be interested. Vicky said she could be in charge of the kitchen.”

“Oh, well, if *that’s* the case,” Rom responded, with a relaxed smile. “I’m not going to turn down a table full of Vicky’s cooking.”

“There’s a chance that Linda might be here, too.”

“Whoa, really?” His voice subtly dropped in volume. “What did Howard say about that?”

Megan shifted uncomfortably in her seat. “I... don’t think he knows that Linda might come.”

“Well, that’s going to be interesting, for sure.”

“Do you think he’ll be mad about it?”

“Oh, no. *She* was the one who left. I think he still wishes he could help her.”

“Yeah? So... what exactly did happen between them?”

A tiny hint of panic flickered in Rom's eyes. "Oh—he hasn't told you?"

"No," Megan responded, sitting forward.

Rom bit his lip. "Ahh, I probably shouldn't say anything about it."

"I'm not going to tell anyone, I promise!"

Rom looked like he might cave for a minute, but then shook his head. "If she's willing to come, that's huge. I'm sure he'd love to see her."

Megan sighed and flopped back in frustration. "Well, she said she'd think about it. I was thinking of going over there today with Sam to see if she's decided one way or the other."

"Great," Rom said, turning back and typing something on the computer, which caused the text to roll upward, replaced by more of the same. "So everyone else is going to be there, too?"

"I've talked with everyone except Phil."

"He's upstairs right now, if you want to go ask him."

"Do you think he'd be interested?"

"Sure, why not?"

Megan had so rarely talked with Phil, and she felt hesitant barging into his room. "I don't know... it feels weird. I hardly know him."

Rom smiled and looked at her. "He's just quiet. I'm sure he'll want to come."

"Do you know him pretty well?"

"Yeah, I guess. I mean, he's told me about his family and stuff."

“Like what?”

“Well, he had a wife and a kid. I think the kid was his wife’s from a previous marriage, so he’s still around. He keeps tabs on them... still brags about his kid.”

Megan was speechless. *His step-son*, she thought. *Why didn’t I think of that?*

Rom seemed a little confused by Megan’s sudden submerging into thought, and turned back toward her. “But... really, you should go ask him about Thanksgiving,” he said, hesitantly. “He’ll be cool with it, I bet.”

“Oh—yeah, okay, I will.”

Megan went upstairs. She knocked quietly on Phil’s door, hoping a little bit that he was asleep or something and wouldn’t answer.

She remembered Sam’s discovery. *Of course he’s getting him a new guitar, Anthony’s his step-son.*

There was the sound of papers being shuffled, a drawer opening and then closing, and then he opened the door.

“Good morning, Megan,” he said, kindly. He had been sitting at his desk, though the desk itself was empty.

“Hi, uh, Phil... I’m sorry to interrupt.”

“Oh, you aren’t interrupting. How are you?”

“Fine. I wanted to see if you want, um, to see if you have any plans for Thanksgiving?”

“Hmm, I don’t think so, but let me check.” He pulled a small planner from his shirt pocket and flipped through the pages. He stopped at one page and looked for a moment.

“No, I don’t have anything. Metzger’s is closed, of course. Why do you ask?”

“Well, we’re thinking of having a Thanksgiving dinner—it’s something Sam was asking about.”

“Oh, that sounds very nice. I’ll be there.”

By the time Megan and Sam got to the top of the steps of Linda’s apartment building, Sam couldn’t hold still, and urgently shifted from one foot to the other.

“Hurry, Megan, I really have to go potty bad!”

Megan knocked on Linda’s door, desperately hoping that she was home. To her relief, Linda opened the door and welcomed them in, and Sam darted off down the hallway to the bathroom.

Megan sat down in an easy chair, unsure how to proceed, as Linda went into the kitchen for a snack. She hoped that Sam would bring up the Thanksgiving question, so Megan wouldn’t have to feel like she was pestering Linda about it... especially if she had just told Sam she would think about it as a means of letting him down easy.

“What is Charlie doing today?” Linda asked, producing a plate of snickerdoodles.

Megan took a cookie. “I don’t know. He’s not really happy with me right now.”

“Why not?” Linda asked, sitting down across from her.

“I don’t know. I was trying to help him with something and he got all offended.”

“I’ll bet there’s more to it than that!”

“Well, there’s this girl that he obviously likes, but he won’t admit it. And I can tell she likes him. I just told him he should ask her out, and he got all defensive and mean, and told me to mind my own business.”

“Well, I’m sure he had a good reason,” Linda responded, seemingly distracted, and looking down the hall. The subsequent silence seemed to bring her back to the conversation. “I mean, not a reason to be mean to you. I’m just saying there must be a reason that he doesn’t want to ask her out. Or talk about it.”

Megan sighed. “I guess.”

She wondered what was taking Sam so long; she had heard a toilet flush a few minutes ago and wondered why he hadn’t come out yet.

“Sam?” Megan called out, but there was no response. “I’ll go see what he’s up to.” She got up and walked down the hallway.

The bathroom was empty, though Sam had left the light on. She turned it off and looked further down the hallway to see the open door to Linda’s bedroom. “Sam!” She called urgently, in a half-whisper. “Sam, you shouldn’t be in here!”

The room was very nicely decorated, with a large bed covered in a beautiful lace-topped comforter. Sam was inside the room, his back to the door, rummaging through a small box on the floor beside the bed. Upon hearing Megan’s voice, he spun around.

“Megan, I found some toys! Can I play with them?”

Megan shot back a look of irritation. "You shouldn't be going through Linda's stuff without asking!"

"Can I go ask her?" he replied, unfazed by Megan's urgency.

"Sam," Megan replied as she swooped in to the room toward him. "You need to ask *before* you play with them!" She leaned down to scoop up the toys and put them back into the box. "Why do you keep looking under people's beds? Help me put these away!"

As she collected them, she noticed that they were baby toys. There were rattles, a small stuffed bear, teething rings and a cloth book. The toy Sam had been playing with was a plastic spindle with rings of various sizes and colors. The toys were all brand new—the stuffed bear and one of the rattles were still in their store packaging.

Megan heard the squeak of Linda's chair from the living room, and moved quickly to replace the last of the toys. She pushed the box back under the bed skirt just before Linda came into the room.

"Sam, I told you, you shouldn't be snooping around in Linda's room," she said, loudly, more to inform Linda of the situation than to scold Sam, who had sensed Megan's urgency and was trying to smooth out the bed skirt. She looked up at Linda. "Linda, I'm so sorry! I found him in here looking under your bed."

Linda looked beyond the two at the bed skirt. "Oh, I'm sorry, Sam, I don't have anything for kids in here."

“Actually, there are some toys under the bed, I saw them!” Sam replied innocently, as though Linda herself didn’t know what was stored there.

Megan cringed, curious herself, but simultaneously wanting to defend Linda with some sort of excuse.

“Oh,” Linda replied, obviously unnerved by Sam’s find. “Those are for someone else.”

“Come on, Sam,” Megan said, eager to move on from the uncomfortable situation. “Let’s get some cookies, okay?”

It was as they were returning to the living room in an awkward silence that Megan put the pieces together. *Was Linda pregnant?* No one at Howards’ had said anything about it — Megan wasn’t even aware that Linda was seeing anyone. Was she trying to keep this a secret from the other jumpers? It made sense, considering whatever schism Rom was hinting at, that she wouldn’t want Howard to know. Megan felt a warm satisfaction in being in on it, even if it had been unintentional.

But then another, more discouraging thought came into her mind. With a baby on the way, the already remote possibility of Megan moving in with Linda seemed impossible.

Sam, who was noisily munching on a cookie, suddenly sat upright and began talking before he swallowed the bite of cookie in his mouth. “Linda, are you going to come to our house for Thanksgiving dinner? We’re going to have turkey, and stuffing, and—oh, and pumpkin pie! Vicky said she would let me help do some of the cooking.”

Linda smiled again. "Sam, I would like that very much."

Megan was floored. Even with all the preparations, she really didn't expect Linda to say yes. She assumed that Linda would find some reason not to come.

"Really?" Sam said, excitedly.

"Sure. Do you think Vicky will let me bring some cookies to eat?"

"Yes, yes! I will tell her to make sure there is room on the table for them!" He walked over to Linda and gave her a hug, which at first seemed to catch Linda off-guard, but which she shortly accepted with a tight squeeze and, to Megan's surprise, an eye wet with tears.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE FOOD DRIVE

Thoughts of Thanksgiving lingered all morning the next day as Megan got ready for school. She had avoided Charlie, more or less; she ate her breakfast at the dining room table, wondering—hoping—that Charlie might come in from the kitchen to talk to her.

It didn't happen, though; he rushed off after eating, leaving Megan to realize that she needed to beg Rom for a ride in order to get to school on time.

At the beginning of biology, as she sat doodling on the back cover of her notebook, she looked up to realize that Anthony was walking her direction. She could feel her face flush a little as he approached.

“Hey, Megan.”

“Hey.”

Just as she was moving to sit up straight in her chair, he turned the other direction toward Leah, who was sitting in the desk across the row.

“So, four-thirty, right?”

Leah opened her binder and flipped through a few papers. “Ummm, yeah,” she said, running her finger down the page. “Yes, four-thirty. Is that still gonna work?”

“Yeah, it should be fine,” Anthony responded. “I might be a little late, but it won’t be more than ten minutes or so.”

“Oh, that’s no problem. I’ll be there until six, so it should be just fine.”

“All righty, we’ll see you then.” He walked back toward his desk.

“What are you guys doing?” Megan quietly asked Leah.

“Oh, it’s a canned food drive for Key Club. We’re doing it out in front of Safeway after school.” She seemed to realize Megan’s interest in Anthony, and cracked a slight grin. “You wanna help out?”

Megan chuckled to herself, suddenly realizing how transparent her reaction must have been—but she didn’t care. “Um, sure.”

Megan got to the shopping center early—about four fifteen—and decided to wait on the other side of the parking lot, where she could see the club’s table set up from a distance. She had dodged a bullet at Howard’s; having completely forgotten about watching Sam for the afternoon, she was worried that she would need to drag him along. Fortunately, however, Vicky had the day off and agreed to take care of Sam, especially when Megan told her where she was going—though she neglected to mention the part about Anthony.

From her vantage point, she could see that Leah was there with another girl from school, but there was no sign

yet of Anthony. The two girls sat in folding chairs behind a table decorated with handwritten signs.

Not feeling like making any more small talk than she needed to, Megan ducked into a gift store for a few minutes, trying to busy herself with the southwestern art and Native American knick-knacks on the shelves, but finding herself peering out the window between the hanging *ojos de dios* every few minutes anyway. Finally it was shortly after four-thirty, and though there was no sign of Anthony yet, she decided to cross the parking lot to where the table was set up.

As she approached, Leah stood up. "Hi, Megan, thanks for coming!" The other girl looked up and smiled; Megan had seen her around school, and felt like she should know her name, but didn't.

"The guys should be here pretty soon. We just have to sit here and if people bring cans, we just put them in this box. Sometimes they'll ask for a receipt, and we just give them one of these." She pointed to a stack of papers on the corner of the table sitting under a can of green beans.

"Have there been a lot of people bringing stuff?" Megan asked, eyeing the box on the ground behind the table, which looked to only have four or five cans inside.

"They had a lot of people earlier, I guess, but we've only had, what"—she looked at the other girl—"five or six people come by in the last hour?" She noticed Megan's confusion at the paltry amount of cans in the box. "Oh, when the box

gets full, we take it to the truck over there and start a new box.”

She motioned to the parking lot behind them where a moving van was parked with the rolling rear door sitting open. Inside, Megan could see several stacks of boxes.

“We decided that we’ll make the guys do that, and we’ll just sit here and look pretty,” Leah joked. “They said they’d be here soon.”

Megan assumed—hoped—that “the guys” still included Anthony, and wanted to ask Leah about it, but felt a little self-conscious talking about it in front of the other girl.

Megan pulled up a third folding chair and the three of them sat behind the table for a while; no one was showing up with donations, and Leah and the other girl talked about their Thanksgiving plans. Leah was having her aunt and uncle visit from Phoenix, bringing her young cousins who she hadn’t seen for two years. The other girl was traveling to see her grandparents in Utah. Megan hoped the conversation wouldn’t turn to her, and spent the time trying to think of what to say if it had.

Fortunately, her fears were allayed a few moments later when a familiar car pulled up nearby and Anthony climbed out. He walked over to the table and seemed pleasantly surprised to see Megan.

“Hey, I didn’t know you were in Key Club,” he mentioned, leaning against the table.

“I’m not,” Megan answered. “I just came by to help out.”

“Yeah, me too. Plus, Leah harassed me about it *a lot*.”

Leah was explaining the process to Anthony when a man came up carrying several bags of cans, and so Megan and Carla—Megan had finally learned her name when Anthony said hello to her—unloaded the bags into the box. After emptying the bags, the box was full enough to take to the truck, and Anthony volunteered to take it; after trying to lift it, though, it became clear he needed another person to help.

“I’ll help,” Megan exclaimed, maybe a little too eagerly.

They lugged the heavy carton over to the truck and set it inside, then Anthony scampered up to drag it toward the front with the others. He grabbed an empty box, jumped down, and they walked back toward the table.

About halfway back, a pickup truck drove by and parked a little distance away, and Megan felt a lump form in her stomach. The car’s engine shut off, the door opened, and Greg climbed out.

Anthony noticed Megan’s sudden hesitation and turned to look in Greg’s direction. “Oh, is that Leah’s boyfriend?”

“Yeah,” Megan said, trying to remain casual about it.

“Aw, man, if he’d have shown up a few minutes earlier, you wouldn’t have had to carry that thing.”

“I didn’t mind,” Megan responded.

Greg walked over to the table. Megan winced expectantly as he went up to Leah, but was relieved when they didn’t kiss; Leah’s face lit up when he arrived, and he grabbed the chair Megan had been using, pulling it over so he could sit next to Leah.

Megan realized that she had been very effective in avoiding Greg lately; she hadn't seen him in the halls at school for weeks. As she and Anthony returned to the table, they sat together on a bench close by.

"He seems like a pretty decent guy," Anthony remarked quietly, as if sensing Megan's anxiety about him. "Do you know him?"

"Not really," Megan said. She didn't feel like she was lying. "Do you?"

"He's in my weightlifting class, but I don't really know him. Do you think he's a good match for her?" He motioned to Leah.

"I don't know," Megan responded, a little confused at his questions. "Why?"

"Oh, I don't know," Anthony answered, apologetically. "You just seemed to get all bummed as soon as he showed up. I thought maybe he was an ex-boyfriend or something."

Megan felt her face go bright red. Was she really that easy to read? "No," she responded clumsily. "Not even close."

"Ah, okay, cool." Anthony said. Megan felt incredibly awkward, but he effortlessly diffused the situation. "So how's babysitting going?"

"It's been fine. It's nice to have the day off now and then, though."

"Yeah, I get that." Anthony looked up at the clear sky. "I mowed lawns all summer and I am *so* glad for winter to get

here. Especially considering some of the lawns around here... it's like mowing dirt."

They sat quietly for a minute, and Megan found the silence unbearable; she didn't want him to get bored and join the others' conversation.

"So... what are you doing for Thanksgiving?"

"Oh, me and Mom at home, you know. Turkey dinner and everything. The usual stuff."

"Do you have any family close by?"

"Nah, my grandma and grandpa on my dad's side died a long time ago, and my grandma on my mom's side lives with my aunt and uncle in Virginia. How about you? Any big plans?"

Megan had seen his question coming as soon as her own question had left her mouth. But, strangely enough, she almost wanted him to know—about Thanksgiving, about Sam, about her whole crazy, unbelievable life. Still, she didn't want to scare him off.

"Same thing, pretty much. Turkey and everything."

"Staying here in town?"

"Yeah."

"How about you—do you have any family nearby?"

"No." She felt like she was being curt, but she didn't know how to elaborate.

A man had come up to the table and was asking Leah about something while Megan and Anthony were talking; he left, and Leah turned around.

“This guy has a bunch of cans in his car, and I told him just to pull up to the truck and we can unload them over there. Maybe the four of us can go over and do that, while Carla stays here at the table?”

“Sure,” said Anthony, and he and Megan got up to walk over toward the truck.

“Hi, uh—Megan, right?” Greg said, holding his hand out to shake Megan’s.

Steeling her nerves, Megan shook his hand. As with touching her mother’s hand the other day, she felt a certain imaginary electricity go through her that took her breath away.

“Hi.”

“You’re Leah’s partner in frog surgery, yeah?” he continued. “Looking forward to that?”

“Heh, yeah,” she responded, trying to keep her cool. She could see that Anthony, who was walking on her other side, was listening in; she doubled her focus on acting casual, not wanting to make him wonder any more about her and Greg.

Once again, though, it was Anthony that seemed to come to the rescue without even trying. “So, Greg, what’re you benching now?”

Greg looked down and laughed. “Oh, something like 160, I think. I’m kind of a wimp.”

Anthony smiled. “You and me both. I was doing 175 today, I think. I like doing the lower-body stuff better... the numbers sound so much more impressive.”

Megan couldn’t help but let out an audible laugh.

“*What?*” Anthony responded, incredulously.

“Sorry, just you two nerds talking about ‘benching’.”

“Hey, how do you know *I’m* a nerd?” Greg responded with a nervous chuckle.

“Greg, you *are* a huge nerd,” Leah responded, laughing. “It’s not like it’s hard to figure out.”

They got to the truck and the man with the donations pulled up in his hatchback. It took them ten minutes to unload everything into boxes. Anthony and Megan loaded cans from the car into empty boxes sitting on the floor of the truck, while Leah and Greg, having both climbed up into the truck, carried the filled boxes over to the stacks of boxes that had already been collected.

When they were done, the man with the hatchback thanked them and drove off. As Greg helped Leah down from the truck, he looked at his watch and told her he needed to go. He gave Leah a quick peck on the lips—Megan gritted her teeth as she watched—and he jogged slowly to his car, giving Anthony and Megan a quick goodbye as he left. And just like that, the encounter was done. Megan realized, as she watched Greg drive away, that she had been avoiding him for nearly a year out of fear. *And for what?* she thought.

They walked back to the table to rejoin Carla, and the four of them sat for another half-hour, chatting together about school, music, and life in general. As the sun sank behind the mountains and the cool twilight faded, Megan realized that it was the most content that she had felt since

jumping from the bridge—in fact, as she thought about it further, she couldn't remember a time even from *before* she had jumped that she had felt so much at ease.

What made the time even better was her physical closeness to Anthony as they sat; he had insisted that the three girls sit in the folding chairs, while he sat on the ground, his back leaning against the side of Megan's chair. Were it someone else, she would have slid to the other side of the seat to afford him a little more personal space—but she chose not to, and as his shoulder first occasionally brushed her leg, then eventually relaxed against it, she became drunk on his touch. She breathed in the smell of his hair and the occasional whiff of his cologne, and found herself forgetting everything outside this little, quiet, wonderful moment.

“Well, it's 6:00,” Leah pointed out, pulling her feet out from sitting cross-legged on the chair. “Would you guys help us put the table in the truck?”

“Sure, no problem,” Anthony said as he got up, brushing the dust from the back of his pants.

They folded the table and chairs; Leah and Anthony carried the table to the truck while Carla and Megan carried the chairs. They hoisted everything into the truck and pulled closed the overhead door, which Leah locked with a padlock.

“Thanks so much for helping, guys,” she told them, as she and Carla got into Carla's car.

“Hey, do you need a ride?” Anthony asked.

“Oh, sure, if you don’t mind.”

“It’s no problem at all,” he answered, as they walked to his car.

“That was actually a lot of fun,” Anthony told Megan as they pulled up to Howard’s house. “Maybe I should join Key Club.”

“Yeah, I had fun too,” Megan answered. It was an understatement; in truth, she didn’t want it to end. “Thanks again for the ride.”

“No problem. It’s kind of fun to have the excuse to drive.”

Megan opened the door to get out. “I’ll see you in bio tomorrow.”

“Yeah, right! One more day before break, huh.”

After tonight, Megan would have been fine having school straight through the holiday. “Yeah. Well, have a good night.”

“You too.”

She got out and walked down the path to the porch; Anthony waited until she got inside before driving off, but she turned and watched him through the screen door. As he turned the corner out of view, she closed the front door. She could hear the sounds of the television in the living room.

She went into the kitchen and saw Vicky at the table with a plate of Chinese food. She realized that she had told her she’d be back in by six; it was now a quarter to seven.

“I’m so sorry, Vicky, I lost track of time—”

“Megan,” Vicky responded, smiling, “it’s okay, really. Charlie was home before six and they’ve just been watching TV and having a ball. I wasn’t going anywhere tonight anyway.”

“Oh—thanks for watching him.”

“No problem, Megan.” Her eyes twinkled. She looked down at her food, but Megan could see she was smiling. “You’re *glowing*.”

Megan’s face went red as she tried to fake a look of surprise and confusion.

“Oh, whatever, you don’t have to tell me. I’m just glad you had a nice night. Heaven knows you deserve one. Have some dinner.”

“Thank you,” Megan answered, and she dished up a plate of food. She debated sitting at the table to tell Vicky about her night, but decided it sounded better in her head than if she tried to put it into clumsy words. Instead, she got herself a soda from the refrigerator and took it and the plate up to her room where she turned on her television, ate, and relived the afternoon’s experience in her head.

Late that night, laying in her bed and listening to music in the dark, she decided to open her curtains and look out at the stars above the trees in the backyard. For some reason, her world felt a little bigger tonight, a little less isolated. She thought about Anthony; she had felt a connection with him today, something so much more real than the strange coincidence of Phil’s past. It was a

THE FOOD DRIVE

connection between two souls, two living, breathing people.
She wondered if he had felt it too.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

VICKY'S DREAM

The nurse's station in the ICU was covered with handwritten reminders and faded, dirty memos, affixed with worn scotch tape to the counter, wall and to the desk itself. Open patient charts were scattered across the work area. The monotony of the paperwork was broken only by the occasional picture of a smiling son; a sleeping infant; a family posing in front of a cave; a granddaughter in a cap and gown.

As she turned her attention to the chart she was working on, there was a sudden commotion at the other end of the station: one of the surgeons began to hurriedly brief the nurses about something. She strained to make out what he was saying, though he was only a few steps away.

"Infection," she heard. "Quarantine." "Extreme precautions."

She tried to focus back on her chart, but between the difficulty in reading it and the concern for what the surgeon was saying, she couldn't.

One of the nurses came over to her. "We need you to take vitals from the patient in room four," she told her, handing her a red folder. *We don't use red folders*, she thought. *Why is the folder red?* She wanted to ask before her mind

sluggishly realized what was being asked of her. *Take vitals.* She wasn't a nurse, or even an aide. She was a secretary. She looked back up at the nurse, her confusion so deep that she couldn't even form the words of a question to ask.

Irritated, the nurse continued. "You'll need full protection. Gown, mask, and gloves." She knew. Wash hands before gloving up, wash before leaving the room. Put the protective clothing in the bin marked for incineration. Leave the door closed at all times. She had studied the nurses' procedures carefully.

She got up and went to the hand washing station. She scrubbed, and then donned gloves, a mask, and a gown. Taking the chart, she went to room four.

She opened the door, and saw the patient lying on the bed, covered with the blanket and laying on his side, his back toward her. It felt strange, being entrusted with this, and yet it was what she yearned to do. She stepped into the room and closed the door behind her. A sickening smell met her nose: lotion and antiseptic mixed with something rotten, dying. "Hello," she said. The patient didn't move.

She walked around the bed to the counter and set down the chart and pen. She noticed, on the table by his bed, a syringe; the nurse must have inadvertently forgotten to dispose of it. *Always treat sharps waste as biohazardous*, she recited in her mind. She made a mental note to remove it.

She then turned back to the bed; as she approached him, what she saw horrified her: his head and hands—the only parts of his body not veiled by the mustard-colored blanket

—were covered with terrible sores, which had ravaged the outline of his face. The skin between his sores was yellowish and blotchy; his lips were purple and uneven. He had his eyes closed, but his labored breathing sounded as though he wasn't sleeping; rather, it sounded like he was in extreme pain, and that shutting out the world around him allowed him the concentration to deal with it.

"S-Sir," she said, having trouble staying calm, "I just need to take your temperature, and—"

He still didn't awaken, or make any appearance of hearing her whatsoever. She reached out to touch his shoulder.

As soon as she made contact, he roused with a start, which caused her to jump. He rolled haltingly to his back, pulling the blankets with him a bit and uncovering his left arm, which was similarly diseased.

As he opened his yellow, sickly-looking eyes, she suddenly recognized him, through the sores and the sickness. Her stomach turned, and she stepped back.

"Hello, Vick," he wheezed, putting considerable effort into each word. Her heart pounded.

"Sh-Shaun? What happened to you?" She was shaking, her mouth was dry, and she felt the grip of fear on her neck and lungs.

His bloated lips curled into a smile. "They... tried to take you away from me," he said slowly, deliberately. His breath rattled between words. "They tried to... keep us apart... but

they can't. What we have is—bigger than what they understand. It's... more *powerful*, Vick."

"How did this happen, Shaun?" Her heart ached at the pain he was going through, but she couldn't bring herself to reach over to touch him.

"Come closer."

Her feet felt frozen in place. She tried to speak, but her throat was seizing up.

His smile dissipated. "Come here, Victoria."

She stepped forward, her quivering fingers barely touching the side of the bed. She did not lean down, trying to keep her distance even as her feet brought her nearer.

"These... friends of yours, Vick... *they* did this to me. Now... I don't blame you, honey... you don't understand. You don't need... to worry yourself. But they—" he coughed, sounding as though the inside of his lungs were just as awful-looking as his face. "They will *pay*... for what they've done."

"Shaun," she pleaded, trying to will herself toward the door. "Shaun, let me get the doctors."

"No, Vick. *You'll* take care of me. You're all I need. The doctors... they don't know."

"Please, Shaun. I can't—let me get them."

His face turned rigid again, and there was anger in his eyes. "No, Victoria."

Her eyes were filling with tears as she prepared to run. "Please, please," she whispered, stifling sobs. She braced herself and turned toward the door—

Suddenly, she felt his hand gripping her wrist. He squeezed it tightly, and she could feel the scabs through the thin gloves. She began to scream, but she was petrified with fear.

She looked at him; he had a wild look in his eyes. Her gaze moved from his face to the table—too late, she noticed that the syringe was gone.

She felt the needle pierce her thigh; it burned and her leg buckled with the pain, causing her to fall to her knees beside him. He pulled out the needle and tossed it aside; it slid across the linoleum floor.

“We are... *meant* to be together, my angel! They cannot keep us apart!” He threw the covers off now, swung his legs over the side of the bed, wincing in pain as he did so. He leaned his head behind hers and she could feel his hot, sour, breath on her neck as he spoke quietly into her ear. “We’re going to leave this place. We’re going to go... home, Vick, and you’re”—he hacked, and then caught his breath and held her more tightly—“*you’re* going to take care of me. We’re going to... get better *together*.”

“No,” she cried. “Please, Shaun, no!”

He gripped her arm more tightly, pulling her upward. “Let’s go, Vick.”

She struggled to her feet, feeling his weight on her as she rose. He inhaled sharply as his diseased feet met the floor.

He pushed her to move toward the door. “That’s right,” he grunted through the pain. “We’re going home.” She

moved into the hallway, fiery pain surging through her leg, hoping someone would see her.

Unfortunately, the hallway was vacant; she turned left and limped down the corridor toward the nurses station. She considered breaking free and running for help. *Why can't I run*, she thought. *Why can't I leave him to die?*

The burning in her leg was growing worse with each step. She could feel the disease moving inside of her, spreading into her hip. The pain in her foot was nearly unbearable.

Desperate, she peered inside the next room. She gasped: it was Phil, lying on the bed, ravaged with the same infection. His eyes were closed, and the nurses were frantically trying to awaken him.

"Keep... *walking*," Shaun hissed into her ear. Her whole side screamed with pain. She could hear the EKG flatline in Phil's room, followed by the frantic shouts of someone performing CPR. She wailed through sobs. "Keep walking!" he yelled, prodding her forward.

A gurney burst through the doors at the end of the hallway, flanked by people in full gas masks. They ignored her pleas for help; as they passed, she looked at their patient. It was Charlie, his face diseased almost beyond recognition. "Vicky!" he pleaded, horsely. "Vicky, please, save him!" He weakly reached a gangrenous hand up to her; then wheezed and went into a coughing fit.

"Who?"

“Keep walking,” Shaun spat. She tried to force herself forward as he nearly pushed her over. The pain was overwhelming now, and she began to collapse as his anger intensified.

“Vicky,” came a voice she recognized, but couldn’t place. Where was it coming from? “Vicky! Help me!” It was Sam. She looked around, but couldn’t see him through the pain and the tears.

“Sam?” she called out.

Shaun’s grip tightened. “No! Keep walking!” he seethed. She fell to her knees, unable to bear the pain of standing. “Get *up!*” he yelled, kicking her. The blow knocked her to her side, which burned as the pain radiated out from his attacks.

“Vicky!” The voice was desperate, crying. “Help me!”

“Sam, where are you?” she screamed. Another blow, this one from Shaun’s fist, struck the side of her head.

Everything went dark as the violent attack continued. As she cowered, she felt the air around her change, and the floor pressed against her cheek became sharp, jagged—it was no longer linoleum, but a metal grate. She struggled to remain conscious, but couldn’t hold on as she felt him strike her, again and again, until the pain overtook her.

She awoke in her bed, quiet, dark and still.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

THANKSGIVING

Vicky placed the heavy pan on the rack and pushed it back into the oven.

“Five hours even?” she asked, closing the oven door.

“Yeah, that’s what it says,” Megan answered, looking at the cookbook on the table. “We’re supposed to take off the foil after four hours.”

Vicky leaned back against the counter, relaxing for a moment. “It’s been *so long* since I’ve done a turkey. I hope it turns out.”

“I’m sure it will,” Megan said, getting up from her chair. “What’s next?”

“Well, the dough for the rolls should be next, I think, but if I’m doing the math right, we really don’t need to start that for a few more hours.” Vicky took a sip of her coffee. “I think I’m going to go get a shower.”

Vicky set down her cup and went upstairs. Megan had been up early and had already showered; in spite of herself, she was genuinely excited for the event. In a way, she was frustrated; this had all started out being for Sam, and he seemed to be relatively unaffected, taking it as though it were par for the course, with no appreciation for what a huge change it was for everyone else in the house.

In fact, Sam was watching cartoons in the living room, eating a bowl of cereal. He still had his pajamas on, and Megan thought about helping him get dressed, but realized that his clothes were in Charlie's room—and Charlie was still asleep in his bed.

She grabbed the jug of milk, a box of cereal, a bowl and spoon and set them on the kitchen table. Then, thinking about it for a minute, she decided instead to move out to the dining room table, in case Charlie came down.

Not long after she poured her cereal, she could hear someone come into the kitchen. It was Phil, and before long he came out to the dining room with a newspaper and a cup of coffee.

"Oh," he mentioned, surprised at Megan's presence. "I'm—I'm sorry, I can go sit in the kitchen—"

"No, it's okay," she answered, mouth slightly full and motioning to a chair with her spoon. "It's totally fine. I can move, if you want."

Phil seemed to almost chuckle to himself. "I guess there's room for both of us," he said with a bit of smile. He set his coffee and paper down first, then went back into the kitchen and returned with the sugar bowl. He sat down, put a few spoonfuls of sugar into his cup and stirred it, then opened the paper and began to read it.

They sat and ate most of their meal in silence. Phil was absorbed in his reading, and Megan was half-heartedly paying attention to the cartoons Sam was watching—but

her attention kept wandering to Phil, trying to picture him as the father figure she now knew he once was.

“Phil, did you have a family before you jumped?”

Phil looked up. “Yes... why do you ask?” He didn’t seem offended, but asked in earnest.

“Oh, uh... just wondering.”

“My step-son—I think he’s in the class above yours. You’re a freshman, right?”

“I’m a sophomore.”

“Oh, you are? Well, then, I guess he’s in your class, then. Uh, Anthony Clark... do you know him?”

“Oh, yeah,” Megan answered, trying to remain convincing. “I think I do.”

The conversation died, and Phil went back to his reading. Megan felt like a pest trying to restart the discussion, but did so anyway.

“Have you... ever thought about talking to them?”

“Oh, no, I really don’t think that would be a good idea.”

Megan was thrown off by how quickly he shut the idea down. “Why not?”

“This is probably something you should talk to Howard about.”

Megan fumed at the insinuation: *He’s not my dad*, she wanted to scream back, but she held it in.

“Oh, I have,” she lied. “I guess I wanted to hear your point of view.”

Phil looked thoughtful for a moment. “When I jumped, I *chose* the consequences that would follow. For as

unexpected as those consequences were, I knew that they would mean separation from my family, and I have to accept that.”

“But—you don’t have to be separated from them. What if the bridge is giving you a second chance?”

“I’m a stranger to them now. I have no place in their life.” He went back to his reading, as though he were declaring an end to the questioning.

Megan sat, slack-jawed. *But he isn’t accepting the separation, he’s buying Anthony a guitar, she thought. And maybe even sending them money every month.* She wanted to ask him, to make him confront his hypocrisy... but she wasn’t supposed to know about any of it.

She uttered a feeble “yeah,” picked up her dishes and went back into the kitchen. As she was washing out her bowl, she saw Charlie come down the stairs. He paused in the doorway of the kitchen, but then went into the living room.

“Sambo! You ready for turkey and football today?” he exclaimed from the other room.

“Yeah,” Sam responded, excitedly. “What teams are playing?”

“Detroit and Green Bay are first—they’re on in a little bit. Then it’s Dallas and New England.”

“Is it the Dallas Cowboys?”

“That’s right.”

“Awesome,” Sam responded. “That’s one of my favorite football teams.”

“Hey, me too, buddy! Do you think they’ll win today?”

“Yeah,” Sam replied, spiritedly. Then his voice became a little less confident. “Do *you* think they’ll win?”

Charlie laughed. “Against the Patriots? Psssh. Dallas is gonna rock, my man.”

“Oh yeah!” Sam exclaimed.

Megan walked into the hallway. “Sam, do you want me to help you get dressed?” she asked, standing at the bottom of the stairs.

“Okay,” Sam answered.

“Come on, then.”

She chose clothes from his drawers in Charlie’s room and sent him into the bathroom to change, brush his teeth and wash up.

“Are you mad at Charlie?” he asked.

Megan was sitting in the hallway outside the bathroom door, facing the closed door of her bedroom. “No,” she answered, looking at her feet. “More like the other way around.”

“He’s mad at you?” Sam asked, his mouth full of toothpaste.

“Something like that.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, Sam.”

“Well, maybe he stopped being mad at you.”

Megan didn’t respond; she knew the conversation wasn’t going anywhere, and didn’t see any benefit to discussing it with a seven-year-old.

“Is Linda coming to eat turkey with us?”

“As far as I know,” Megan answered. “Vicky said she’d be here around two o’clock.”

“How many minutes is that?”

Megan turned and looked at the small clock in the bathroom—it was just after nine. “Five hours.”

“Are you going to watch football with us?”

“I don’t know.” Megan really had no interest in watching it, whether Charlie was there or not.

Sam finished up and bounded downstairs to rejoin Charlie. Megan went into her room to find a way to pass the time until Vicky was ready to continue in the kitchen.

Her mind wandered, imagining what her mother was doing for Thanksgiving. All this time, she had assumed that her parents were enjoying life without her; she imagined them going on cruises, visiting Europe, throwing parties. To find out that they weren’t even together—that they had never *been* together—made Megan think back through all the holidays that had past since she had jumped, knowing now that her mother could have been alone for all of them.

Soon her thoughts drifted toward Anthony. He had said that he and his mother were spending Thanksgiving at home. Megan felt sad that it would be just the two of them, but as she thought about it, she realized Anthony was probably perfectly okay with it. In fact, Megan almost felt—jealous? There was something about Anthony’s situation that felt right, something there that Megan longed for herself.

She turned over and lay on her stomach, and saw *The Scarlet Letter* laying on her desk. She sighed, picked it up, and started reading the next chapter.

Soon, Vicky and Megan went down to the kitchen to make the dough for the rolls. As the dough was set aside to rise, Megan began peeling and cutting potatoes. By noon, the house was filled both with the smells of roasting turkey and bread dough and the sounds of Charlie, Sam, Rom and Phil in the living room watching the football game.

“Where’s Howard?” Megan asked, sitting at the table while Vicky kneaded the flour-covered dough.

“I think he’s over in the other room, reading a book or something.”

“Wonder why he doesn’t watch the game with the others?”

“Not really his style, I guess,” Vicky responded, sprinkling some more flour onto the table. “You know him... he’s always been kind of a loner.”

“I know,” Megan answered. “That’s something I’ve never understood— why would someone like him decide to take in jumpers?”

“Well, really, Megan, where would you be without him?”

“No, no, I know, but—I mean, I’m grateful for that and everything, but—why? Why did he ever start doing this? He has no connection to the bridge. He never jumped—” Megan stopped, wondering for a moment if she had it wrong this whole time. “...right?”

“No, he never jumped. Really, it was Phil who sought him out. After Phil jumped, I mean. He and Howard were friends before he jumped.”

“Whoa, really? But—oh, Howard didn’t remember Phil, because—oh, wow.”

“Yeah. You know, jumping changes everything around you, but it doesn’t change who you are, so I’m sure it wasn’t hard for Howard and Phil to rekindle their friendship. And Howard has always been so giving, and he was just coming off of the divorce and the house was empty... it made sense to let Phil move in, since Phil had nothing.”

“So it was just Phil and him being friends that got Howard involved in all of this? He really doesn’t have any connection with the bridge?”

Vicky stood up straight and took a break from kneading, but looked down for a moment before answering. “No,” she answered slowly, almost hesitantly. “No connection.” She didn’t seem completely convinced, but Megan didn’t know how to probe the question.

“So then how did *you* end up here?” Megan asked as Vicky went back to kneading.

“Oh, it was Phil. He was looking for his wife, and he came to the women’s shelter I was staying at in Española. He’d check back every week or so, since there was a lot of turnover there—women moving in and out all the time. And, I mean, the people who ran the place weren’t real excited about having this strange guy come in, obsessively looking for his wife... for a lot of those girls, it looked like

the type of relationship they were trying to escape from. I thought he was sweet, so I'd go and meet with him over lunch now and then to try to help him out."

Accepting the separation, Megan thought. *Whatever*. "How did he know you were a jumper, though?"

"Actually, I figured out *he* was one first. Really, this person looking for his family but his family doesn't know anything about him, it makes sense in hindsight. But I think at the time I was just so alone, looking for anyone else who had gone through what I did, that I was ready to believe it."

"And then he invited you to stay here?"

"Well, the thing is," Vicky continued, a little more hesitantly. She stopped mid-knead and looked up at Megan. "I kind of thought he *liked* me, you know?"

Megan's eyes widened. "Did you—"

Vicky blushed and rolled her eyes a bit. "I don't know, I thought he was cute! I mean," she said, her voice dropping a little, "don't you think he looks a little like Sean Connery?"

Megan covered her mouth, stifling a laugh, though not very well.

"Oh, go right ahead, laugh all you want. It was a long time ago." She continued kneading. "But he did introduce me to Howard, and they invited me to live here. I felt weird at first, living with two guys, but I had my own bathroom and everything, and they were clear on the other side of the house. Plus, I could be back in Los Alamos, and it was so much better than staying at the women's shelter."

Megan looked down at her knees. "Do you ever think of leaving?"

"No, not really," Vicky answered. "I've got it very good here. I get to be with people like you. And it's been nice, the last little while, having you open up and ask about the rest of us. We've always tried to respect your privacy, but we've also been waiting for you to really join us, you know?"

Megan shifted in her seat, not sure she wanted to admit, even to herself, that anything had changed.

Vicky seemed to notice her discomfort. "I know you're not all that excited about being here, but like I said, where would you be without Howard to help you out?"

"I guess I wondered for a long time if I could go and live with Linda, but..." Megan let her voice trail off, unsure of how to finish the sentence. *Surely she's told Vicky about her pregnancy*, she thought. *They talk all the time.*

However, Vicky didn't seem to catch on. "I know it's frustrating, having to respect Howard's authority, but it's for the best. I mean, before you jumped, wasn't it the same way with your parents?"

"Not really," Megan answered, thinking back. "They actually let me get away with a lot."

Vicky looked up, a tiny twinkle in her eye. "Okay, so how did that work out for you?"

Megan gave a little laugh to be polite, but she actually felt irritated by the question, as if Vicky were blaming *her* for her parent's inadequacies.

“Have you given any more thought to what you found out from your mom?”

“Huh?”

“About how she and your dad never met?”

“Oh, yeah,” Megan responded, thinking about it. “I guess it still doesn’t really make sense to me.”

“Maybe you just need to think about it a little differently,” Vicky said, forming the dough into a ball and putting it into a bowl with a dull thud. “I mean, it seems almost like... destiny to me.”

“I don’t know,” Megan responded. “It could just mean that the bridge affects things differently than we thought.”

Vicky wrinkled her nose. “Well, if that’s what you choose to believe. I guess I prefer a more optimistic approach.” She went to the sink to wash her hands. “The fact is, we don’t know how the bridge works. And when there’s no facts to prove you otherwise, why not choose the happier option?”

“Believing doesn’t make it real, though.”

Vicky dried her hands and looked at Megan with a smirk. “*Disbelieving* doesn’t make it false.”

The time leading up to dinner seemed to drag along. With Charlie among the crowd in the living room watching the game, she felt trapped in the kitchen, but she didn’t mind too much; it was weirdly fun to help Vicky with the cooking.

Howard finally come downstairs and joined the football crowd for a little while. He was dressed like he was going to

work, wearing a shirt, tie and slacks, and he seemed a little more fidgety than usual. Megan supposed that he was nervous about Linda visiting, and in a way, she felt bad about putting him in an awkward position. But when he popped into the kitchen to ask about when Linda was due, he seemed almost excited about her arrival. At least, that's what Megan thought; she hadn't ever really seen him excited before, so she had nothing to compare it to.

Vicky took the turkey out of the oven at one-thirty, and put the rolls in right afterward. Vicky asked Phil to carve the bird—she said she had never liked using the electric knife—and he did so, slowly and methodically, at the kitchen table while Megan watched.

Before long there was a knock on the door. Vicky and Megan both looked at each other.

“Why don't you let her in, Megan.”

Megan took a breath and went over to the front door. She opened it, and there stood Linda, wearing a red blouse, a black skirt, small ruby earrings and a matching necklace. Megan had never seen her dressed so nicely.

“Come on in,” Megan said, stepping back to let her inside. She carried a faded green Tupperware container filled with cookies, which she handed to Megan.

“Thank you,” Linda responded, and stepped inside.

Megan set the cookies on the countertop just inside the kitchen. “I can hang up your jacket. Most of the guys are watching the game, and Vicky and Phil are finishing up in the kitchen.”

“Hi, Linda,” Vicky said as she turned to see her. They gave each other a polite hug. “You look very nice! Is that a new blouse?”

“Oh, I’ve had it for a year or so but I never wear it.” She looked down and picked something off one of the sleeves. “I should wear it more often, I guess.”

“Hello, Linda,” Phil said, the electric knife in one hand and a carving fork in the other. “You’re looking very well.”

“Thank you, Phil,” she said stiffly, though the attempt to be civil seemed to be genuine. She turned back to Vicky. “Everything smells delicious. Is there something I can help with?”

“Oh, let’s see... if you can cut that cucumber, then we can toss the salad. Megan, I guess you could start setting the table, if you don’t mind.”

Megan took a stack of plates out to the dining room table. She went back for napkins, then silverware, then glasses. By the time she was done, Vicky was ready for her to start bringing out food: two platters of turkey, stuffing, salad, mashed potatoes, gravy, sweet potatoes, cranberry sauce, and a basket of rolls.

Once the feast was spread, Vicky took off her apron and stepped into the living room. “I think we’re ready, guys.”

Everyone seemed hesitant as they approached the table except Sam, who broke up the awkward processional by pushing through and finding a seat in the middle of the table. “Yum!” he exclaimed, as he sat enthusiastically and

looked up at Charlie. "Charlie, will you sit by me?" he asked, pulling out the chair to his right.

Charlie smiled. "Sure, buddy."

Sam turned to point at the chair to his left. "Megan, you can sit here."

"Okay," Megan said, slightly relieved that she was being told where to sit rather than have to negotiate it herself.

Rom grabbed the end chair near Charlie, Linda and Vicky took their seats across from Charlie and Sam, and Howard sat down at the end of the table by Megan.

Phil brought in glasses of wine and sparkling grape juice; Rom took them and began passing them around the table until there was one at each place.

Finally, Phil came in to sit in the last empty seat between Howard and Vicky, and there was a moment of quiet as everyone took in the enormity of the event.

Howard spoke first. "Well, Linda, it's very good to have you here with us."

Linda nodded gently. Her silence didn't come across to Megan as a slight; on the contrary, it was as if Linda was simply being sensitive to the unexpected reverence of the moment.

"Well, if we're ready," Howard said, taking his wine glass in his hand. "I'd like to offer a toast, if I may. To Vicky and Megan, for working all morning to prepare this delicious food."

"Hear, hear," said Rom.

“To Sam,” Howard continued, “who came up with this wonderful idea. To Linda, for joining us today. And for each and every one of you; I am fortunate to count you among my friends.”

The clinking of glasses that followed was extended by Sam, who wanted to make sure to touch glasses with everyone around the table, no matter how far away. As he was reaching toward Phil, Rom raised his glass.

“And to Howard, who has opened up his home to us all these years.”

There was a general mumble of agreement around the table, and a few more clinks; then, everyone took a sip of their drink and the platters of food were passed around the table.

Megan put some turkey on her plate, and then on Sam’s. She then lifted the platter and passed it over Sam’s plate.

“Here you go, Charlie,” she said in the kindest tone she could muster. Charlie took the platter with a polite-sounding mumble, looking more at the plate than at her.

Vicky spoke as she spooned mashed potatoes onto her plate. “Linda, how is work going?”

“Ah,” Linda responded, a slight bit of exasperation in her voice, “switching over to Christmas. I’ll be glad when it’s done, but then it will be on to something else, I’m sure.”

“Lots more customers yet?” asked Charlie.

“A little. It’ll get busier from here until the season’s over, though.”

Sam had begun eating his turkey as Megan was adding cranberry sauce to his plate. "Does Santa come to this house?"

"Well, I can't imagine why he would pass us by, since you're here, Sam," Howard answered. "It seems to me that you've been a really good boy."

"What do you want for Christmas, Sam?" asked Rom, passing the turkey platter to Linda.

"A G.I. Joe Hovercraft," Sam answered, his mouth full of turkey. "And Optimus Prime!"

Vicky smiled. "What's Octimus Prime?"

"He's a Transformer! He can be a robot, or he can turn into a truck! There's a cartoon about them."

"Oh, wow," Vicky responded, with an exaggerated but sincere look of interest.

Phil spoke up. "You still have that old Christmas tree, don't you, Howard? We'll have to pull it out and set it up this year." There were several nods of agreement as most everyone had begun eating.

The conversation remained pleasant, with Vicky prompting everyone in turn to talk about what had been keeping them busy lately. Rom talked about technology improvements being made at the public access television channel where he worked part-time. Charlie spoke about the restaurant losing three dishwashers in the last four months, and how they were still desperately looking for someone else to fill the position.

Neither Vicky nor Phil had too much to say about their jobs, and Howard, to no one's surprise, couldn't elaborate on the classified work he was doing at the lab, but did talk about recent events in co-worker's families: a friend's recent trip to Australia, his supervisor recently welcoming another granddaughter into the world.

When it came to Megan's turn, she opted not to include any details on Anthony, partly because she didn't feel like telling everyone, and partly because she wasn't sure if there was really anything to report. She instead offered up descriptions of biology class, about the worms and the upcoming frog dissections. Most everyone chuckled, recalling their own experiences in high school dissection labs, although Megan thought for a moment that Rom looked a little queasy as he was eating his potatoes, so she decided to skip any further details.

At one point, when at one end of the table Rom and Linda were having a conversation with Charlie about movies they had seen, and Howard, Phil and Vicky were caught up in talking politics, Megan sat back in amazement at the entire scene. It didn't look like a group of people who had been thrown together by a tragic, bizarre commonality: it looked like a group of friends.

It wasn't until Vicky was offering more wine to the adults that Megan noticed something strange: Linda was drinking wine, and in fact took Vicky up on her offer for a second glass. *Aren't you not supposed to drink when you're pregnant?* Megan thought to herself.

Soon bellies were full and chairs began to be emptied. Charlie had gone back to the football game, and Sam had brought some toys to the living room to play on the floor. Linda and Vicky were taking half-full bowls and platters back into the kitchen and were clearing the table of plates. Rom, Phil, Howard and Megan remained at the table, leaning back in their chairs, talking about this and that while Megan listened in.

The phone rang in the kitchen, and Rom got up to answer. After a few seconds, Megan could hear him ask Vicky to hang up the handset in the kitchen so he could take the call over by his computer.

Megan took the interruption as an opportunity to get up herself, and decided—buoyed by the success of the afternoon's event—to go sit in the living room. She thought if she joined Charlie in watching the game, that perhaps they could end the silent feud and go back to the way things were.

She looked at him as she walked by, but at the instant he could have shot her a returning glance, something on the television made him clutch his fist and lean forward, only to fall backward with a frustrated shout when the on-screen play obviously didn't go as planned.

No problem, she thought, figuring if she sat down, the ball would be in his court.

Before the game reached a commercial, however, Rom came back into the room and returned to the table, this time sitting in the chair Megan had been using at dinner.

“Howard, that was Douglas Yarborough in Albuquerque,” he started in, obviously excited. “He said he might be able to unseal the record if we can go down there tomorrow.”

Howard seemed very interested in what Rom was saying, but appeared to feel a little self-conscious about it, and his face became flush when Linda re-entered the room to stack some more empty plates.

Rom continued, excitedly. “What do you think, Howard? We could take off first thing, if you’re up for it. I think this could really be her, Howard. After all this time!”

Howard was looking at Rom with a strained expression on his face, trying to subtly shake his head in an effort to keep him from saying anything else, but Rom just responded with a confused expression.

Linda, who was reaching over the table to get Charlie’s dinner plate, seemed to have a sudden realization about what Rom was talking about, and stood up straight, looking directly at Howard.

“You’re *still looking for her?*” She looked suddenly shocked and livid. “Howard, are you?”

Howard straightened up immediately. “Well, now, Linda, it’s just that—”

“I can’t believe it!” Linda exclaimed. “Vicky said you had changed, and I believed her. But you *haven’t*, have you?” She set the plates down on the table with enough force to make Phil jump. “And to think, with Sam here, and you’re still

obsessed with this ridiculous idea? I can't believe it, Howard! *She doesn't exist!* When are *you* going to *realize* that?"

The tumult had captured everyone's attention; Charlie had sunk into the sofa a little, as if to hide behind it, but Sam stood up, undoubtedly curious about the yelling. Vicky had come in to the dining room behind Linda and was posturing herself to talk Linda down from her anger. Rom sat motionless, his earlier look of smug excitement now replaced with one of terror.

Howard tried to speak again. "Linda, it's not like that at all—"

"Don't even bother, Howard. I've heard it all before," Linda continued, taking her apron off and tossing it on the back of the sofa.

Suddenly, Sam turned and ran toward the back door, winding through furniture and squeezing behind Howard's chair. Megan was struck by the determined look on his face, as if he were executing a trained escape. Charlie, seeing the commotion, followed after him. Megan turned to look outside to see Sam scamper up the tree by the back fence.

"Linda," Howard replied feebly.

She went into the hallway, Vicky following her with a frantically apologetic look on her face. She opened the closet door and pulled out her jacket, then turned once more to look at Howard, now standing.

"You have so much *here*, Howard! Why can't you see it? And—*Sam!*" Her expression changed, as if she was caught by an idea. "If you can't be here for *him*, then—"

She shook her head, turned, walked down the hallway, opened the front door and left. Vicky followed her out, and after the door closed behind them, Megan could hear Vicky calling to Linda as she walked, trying to help her calm down.

For a moment, the only sound beside Vicky's pleas outside was the voice of the commentators coming from the television set.

"Oh, Howard, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean—" Rom said, timidly breaking the sudden pause.

"Rom, it's not your fault," Howard interrupted, resignedly. He sighed and dropped his head slightly. "When Vicky comes back in, would you tell her thank you for me, for making all this delicious food?" He walked behind Rom's chair and went down the hallway. "I'm going to go upstairs for a bit."

Dejected, Rom got up after a moment and went back to the other room. Megan couldn't tell for sure, but it looked as though he were on the verge of tears.

Phil looked over at Megan, a look of disappointment on his face. "I'm sorry you had to see all that, Megan." He got up, picked up the plates that Linda had been collecting, and went into the kitchen.

"Yeah, me too," Megan muttered to herself. She looked around at the now suddenly empty living room, sighed deeply, went upstairs into her room, and closed her door.

C H A P T E R E I G H T E E N

STEPHEN PALMETTI

Megan didn't sleep well that night. She stayed up for a long time reliving in her mind what had happened at dinner. She kicked herself for feeling so optimistic about the whole affair. *Of course it was going to happen that way*, she thought. Why should she have expected anything else?

Still, though, what Linda had said to Howard—about him being obsessed with finding “her”—made Megan wonder. Though Howard had never really said anything about it, she had heard Rom talking to him about searching for someone on several occasions. Rom was always careful to not mention any names, and even then Howard would usually get a little nervous and try to change the subject.

Thinking back to the times she had heard them talk about it, Megan realized that she had always just assumed that they were talking about Howard's ex-wife. But for Linda to say she didn't exist—that didn't seem to make sense. Relaxation finally came when her thoughts turned to an almost forgotten memory of her mother taking her to the Tastee-Freez for ice cream on Friday afternoons after school when she was little, when her entire world felt more colorful and more vibrant. In those days, she recalled, going downtown felt like a special trip into the world's main

street. TG&Y might as well have been Macy's in New York, and throwing bread crumbs to the ducks at Ashley Pond was like a trip to Disneyland.

She stayed there, sitting with her mother at a table in the tiny ice cream shop, feeling her closeness, and finally slipped into a comfortable sleep.

"Megan? You awake?"

The voice in the hallway was Charlie's. Megan opened her eyes at once to see the sunlight pouring in through her window.

"Yeah?" she replied, her voice cracking a little.

"I need to take off. Sam's downstairs."

It was the first time Charlie had spoken to her in days.

"Uh, okay." She looked at the clock; it was shortly after ten.

A few moments later, she could hear the front door open and close, followed by the sound of his car starting and then driving off.

She got up, dressed, and went downstairs to find Sam in the living room. The television was tuned to some bowling tournament which Sam was obviously not watching; he was laying on his side, ear to the ground, playing with toy cars.

He saw her come in and sat up. "Megan, can I go outside? Charlie said I could go after you got up."

"Sure," Megan replied. "Get a coat."

Sam scooped up the cars and went to the closet. He pulled out his coat and then went out the front, letting the

screen door slam behind him. Megan turned off the television and went into the kitchen to get something to eat.

She wondered for a moment where everyone had gone, and then she recalled that Vicky had agreed to work a double shift today in order to have Thanksgiving off. She figured the rest of them were at work, too, until she had finished eating. It was only then that she remembered that Howard and Rom had gone to Albuquerque in response to the phone call Rom had received the day before.

Thinking about the call, the mysterious “she” that Howard and Rom were off looking for, and tempted by the unusually empty house, Megan was suddenly overcome with curiosity. She felt like the universe owed her some answers, and Howard’s room, which had never even remotely interested her before, today seemed like a treasure-trove of secrets.

She peered out the window and saw Sam in the yard, navigating his cars through the inch-high jungle of withering grass. Seeing that he was occupied, she walked up to the landing and stopped, straining her ears to make sure no one else was in the house. Confirming that everything was quiet, she gingerly stepped up to the hallway leading to Howard’s bedroom.

She walked nervously past Rom’s room and on to Howard’s, leaning close to the door to make sure no one was inside. She knew he wasn’t here, but in her paranoia she still

imagined him inside. Very carefully, she turned the doorknob and pushed the door open.

The room was dark, the thick curtains filtering out most of the sunlight. The bed was cleanly made and everything else was sparse and tidy. After a quick glance around she opened the door further, and she let out the air she hadn't realized she was holding in her lungs.

There was a desk under the window, and she walked to it, looking for a clue. On the wall above was a shadow box with a few pale blue and brown butterflies mounted inside. The top of the desk was nearly empty, save for a lamp, a clock, an empty notepad and a tiny picture.

Megan picked up the picture and looked closely: it was Howard's wedding photo. Howard—or, at least, a much younger version of him—was wearing a suit and had his arm around the waist of a beautiful bride holding a modestly-sized bouquet of flowers. They were both smiling genuinely, a light in their eyes which seemed to pour out of the old, worn, black and white photograph. While the man was unmistakably Howard, on a certain level Megan didn't recognize him; the man in the photo was confident, happy, in control of his own life. The Howard she knew, the one sitting at the dining room table the previous evening while Linda stormed off, looked pale and beaten down in comparison. She hesitated, gazing at the picture—she had never seen him smile like that.

His bride looked gorgeous. She was the picture of health and vitality; of happiness, and love.

Megan carefully replaced the picture. She felt awful, setting it back on this lonely, sterile desk in this dark room, curious about what Howard thought about when he looked at it. She wondered if Howard's wife had left for the same reason Linda had. *Why?* she thought. *What would be important enough to sacrifice what he had in this picture?*

She started opening the drawers in an effort to find out, but found nothing useful. One drawer was filled with cancelled checks. Another was shoe polish, brushes and rags. The long one in the center held pencils, pens, paper clips and a ruler, and another looked to contain old tax forms.

Remembering her situation, she looked up, walked to the door and listened carefully through the silent house; the only sound she could hear was Sam's voice from the front yard, mimicking the squealing of tires and the screeching of brakes as he played.

She walked over to Howard's closet, hoping to find something there, but she was stunned at how bare it was. There were clothes, shoes and ties, but none of the usual buildup of clutter that every other closet in the world seemed to have.

She was about ready to give up on finding anything when a box caught her eye just inside the closet door. It was a cardboard box covered with a woodgrain pattern, and it had a white labeling area marked "F-G" in thick black marker, but lazily scribbled out with a ball-point pen.

She stopped again, checking for any sounds, and pulled the box out. It felt about half-full. She brought it out of the closet to the floor just outside, shielded from the open bedroom door by Howard's bed. Her hands shaking a little, she took a quiet breath and pulled off the lid.

Inside she found an assortment of papers and newspaper clippings. The page on top of the pile was a lined paper carefully ripped from a spiral notebook. On it, in Howard's handwriting, were written several dates and addresses. One was for "Bag & Save, 4901 McLeod Street NE." Megan figured that was in Albuquerque. There was a date next to it: "5-19-70." Several names and phone numbers, all of which looked like Albuquerque numbers based on the prefixes. One of them had the word "manager" written next to it, but was crossed out with different-colored ink.

Taking out the sheet of paper, she found a yellowed newspaper clipping with tiny pinholes in the corners, as though it had been tacked to a bulletin board. Glancing up at the bedroom door first, Megan then looked back at the article and began to read.

MAN'S CLAIM: 'I JUMPED, SURVIVED'

LOS ALAMOS—Police say a man taken into custody on Thursday claims to have jumped from the "Peggy Sue" bridge over Acid Canyon and survived the nearly 150-foot fall.

The man, who identified himself as Stephen Palmetti, 34, of White Rock, told

police that he was a long-time resident of the area and a LASL employee.

Police, however, say that neither LASL nor The Zia Company has any record of him working for either employer. Palmetti was carrying no identification.

Officers apprehended Palmetti after a White Rock resident reported the man trespassing in a neighbor's backyard.

"We were notified that he was looking through windows of a rental property on Todd Loop," LAPD Officer Kirk Roe said.

No damage was found to the home, and there was no evidence of an attempt to break in. The home was unoccupied at the time.

When officers arrived at the scene, Palmetti claimed that he lived at the residence, but that his possessions were missing. Police later contacted the owners of the home, who said they did not know Palmetti and had never seen him before.

Asked about the man's alleged fall from the bridge, Roe stated that Palmetti was given a medical screening and showed no physical injury.

"He told us that he had attempted suicide by jumping from the center of the bridge, but had lost consciousness during the fall and woke up uninjured," Roe said.

Palmetti was not intoxicated but drug use has not been ruled out.

The “Peggy Sue” Bridge, which reaches from a point northeast of the Los Alamos Jewish Center to a point west of the 2700 block of Orange Street, carries a natural gas line across Acid Canyon and is not open for pedestrian use.

Megan hungrily rescanned the article. She had never heard any mention of anyone else who had jumped, and the name didn’t sound familiar at all. She looked at the handwritten date at the top of the clipping: “Oct. 28, 1971.” Thirteen years ago: was that before Phil had jumped? Was this person the first?

She looked at the box, wondering if there were any clues as to where Palmetti was now, but her curiosity had barely had a chance to swell when she saw the next news clipping in the box, this one smaller, less prominent, as though it had been shoved in a corner of some back page of the newspaper somewhere.

AREA MAN FOUND DEAD

LOS ALAMOS—Police found a man dead in his apartment on Monday after neighbors reported foul smells coming through the door into the hallway.

Police estimate Stephen Palmetti, 34, of Los Alamos, had apparently shot himself in the head with a handgun between one to two weeks prior to his body being discovered.

THE PEGGY SUE BRIDGE

Palmetti had been taken into custody by police last October for trespassing, having claimed at the time that he had survived a suicide attempt by jumping from the “Peggy Sue” bridge north of Canyon Road.

Police are working to identify and contact family members as an investigation continues.

Megan’s mind struggled to fill in the many blanks. Did Howard know this man? Did Phil? This second article had a date written in the same handwriting, in pencil instead of pen: “Feb. 29, 1972.” She looked at the first paragraph. *Dead in his apartment.* His own apartment. Howard hadn’t opened his boarding house for lost souls yet, she figured. Was Howard still married at the time? Did he even know about the bridge yet?

She looked back into the box. One more newspaper clipping, this one smaller still than the other two:

STEPHEN PALMETTI

Stephen R. Palmetti, 34, died on or about February 18, 1972, at his home in Los Alamos, New Mexico.

A private memorial service was held outside the Los Alamos County Police Station on Wednesday. Mr. Palmetti was interred at Guaje Pines Cemetery.

Palmetti has no known survivors.

He died alone, she thought. The only people who even bothered with a funeral were the officers who had arrested him after he jumped. She reread the short obituary. No mention of where he was born, how he lived his life, what he had done. Of course he had *had* a family—but that was before he jumped. The bridge had taken all of it away from him. *If he had died when he jumped off the bridge, she thought, almost angrily, at least he would have had a decent obituary.*

The rest of the contents of the box were three faded notebooks. The first two contained page after page of dense-looking equations. On every few pages she found a diagram of sorts, some of which were graphs reminiscent of math homework. One page bore what looked like a simple drawing of the Peggy Sue bridge and the canyon floor below it; there were measurements and calculations surrounding the drawing and filling in the spaces within it. As she flipped through, the pages flopped open to a green, folded topographical map kept between the pages; Megan opened it partway and saw the familiar arrangement of mesas and canyons that outlined her hometown. The bridge was marked in a bold red ink line; it was surrounded by carefully calculated curves that looked like the diagrams of magnetic fields she had seen in textbooks and filmstrips.

She scooped up the third notebook and flipped through it idly, expecting to see the same sort of equations, but it was empty. Surprised, she looked back at the front page. Taped inside the front cover was a piece of tracing paper with what looked like a police sketch of a woman. The out-

of-proportion face was framed with dark hair that fell just below the jawline; the drawing showed what looked like the hood of a sweatshirt cradled lazily on the woman's shoulders. The only thing that looked overtly remarkable was a carefully shaped dark spot on her left jaw. If anything, the drawing was notable for its lack of life—the eyes glared back at her lazily and soullessly.

The first page of the notebook, opposite the police sketch, had an even stranger drawing. It was the front of a supermarket: four or five checkout aisles, complete with cashiers and various customers walking by. It had an odd quality; amateur, yet meticulously crafted; she felt a pang of guilt in finding it, as though it was never intended to be seen by anyone else. The large storefront windows in the background were empty, and there was a spot to the left where the paper was thinner, darkened from several apparent attempts to capture the figure coming in through the door. The poorly drawn cashiers focused quietly on the various strangely-shaped objects moving toward them on the conveyor, unfazed by the ghost struggling to emerge behind them.

Suddenly, the screen door at the foot of the stairs slammed. Her heart beating loudly, Megan quickly assembled the contents and put them back into the box.

“Megan?” It was Sam's voice, moving into the living room. She put the lid back on the box and slid it back into place in the closet. “Megan? Where are you?” She hurried

noiselessly to the bedroom door as she heard him go up the stairs on the other side.

“Megan?”

She tiptoed down to the landing. “Sam, what’s wrong? What is it?”

Sam came back down the stairs, clutching his toy cars, his face a little red from the cool air outside.

“There’s a police officer outside! It’s the one who let me ride in his police car and, uh”—he was slightly out of breath, excited, and distracted—“can I go get it the police badge he gave me??”

“Yeah, okay.” Megan went down the stairs toward the front door and turned to look outside.

“Hi, Megan. Is Howard here?”

Officer Kirk Roe was waiting on the porch. He was tall, with a lightish brown mustache and blue eyes that looked as though they once had a sparkle to them. Megan knew him well; she had spent more time than she liked to remember sitting in his office as he made phone call after phone call, trying to figure out what to do with her.

“Um, he and Rom went to Albuquerque for the day. It’s just me and Sam.”

“Ah, okay,” Roe replied, looking up the street. Turning back, his face softened a bit. “I, uh, just wanted to see how Sam’s holding up. Look, I didn’t mean to scare him off or anything, I can just call Howard if—”

“Oh,” Megan interrupted, realizing now that Sam must have run inside before Roe had a chance to talk with him. “He just wanted to go get the badge you gave him.”

Roe’s face relaxed and broke into a smile. “Oh, okay. I was wondering why he ran off so quick.”

Sam came bounding down the stairs, his badge in his hand. “Megan, can you put it on me?” he exclaimed, stopping in front of her but having trouble standing still.

“Yeah, okay,” she replied. “Let’s go outside and do it.”

“Hey, Sam, how’s it going?” Roe asked, while Megan pinned the badge to Sam’s shirt. “Are you making some good friends at school?”

“Yeah,” said Sam, looking slightly anxious at the sight of the sharp end of the pin. “And here, too.”

“Oh, yeah? Is Megan taking good care of you?”

“And Charlie is, too. And Rom has video games!”

“Oh, that’s great.”

“There you go,” Megan said after she had gotten the badge pinned to his shirt. She could see now that his squirminess wasn’t just related to the pin; he was trying to subtly hold his hand over his crotch, and was bouncing tensely on one foot. “Sam, do you need to go to the bathroom?”

“Yeah,” Sam responded, seeming to suddenly realize what his own body was telling him. Megan opened the screen door and he dashed in, running toward the living room first and then turning back and up the stairs.

“So he’s adjusting okay, then?” Roe asked with a chuckle, stepping off the porch.

“Yeah, I guess,” Megan responded, looking down. “He and Charlie are best buddies,” she said, a little resentfully.

Roe didn’t respond at first, looking out at the street. Then he turned to her. “How are *you* doing, Megan?”

“Fine,” she sighed. Megan didn’t really feel like going into details. *What does he care?* she thought. She figured he was just trying to make conversation.

Roe took the hint, and Megan was grateful for it; it was something Howard never seemed to be willing to do. She sat down on the edge of the porch, listening to a dog barking a block or so away, and her thoughts drifted back to the box in Howard’s closet, and she suddenly made the connection between Roe and the article.

“Did you know Stephen Palmetti?”

Roe was caught off-guard. For a moment he just looked at her, slightly wide-eyed, looking for words.

“Um,” he stammered, then swallowed. “How did you hear about—”

“I overheard Howard and uh, Phil say his name.” She could feel herself turning red, and looked down. *Stupid*, she thought. *Like he doesn’t know you’re lying. He’s a police officer, for crying out loud.*

Roe looked concerned for a moment. “Is... it something you’ve asked Howard about?”

Megan looked up again. “He never tells me anything,” she answered, irritated. It was true, of course, though of

course she hadn't asked Howard about it yet—she had only discovered Palmetti's existence minutes before. But she knew Howard's response would be some version of “maybe when you're older” and he'd skip right to the interrogation of where she had found Palmetti's name.

“It's just so hard, you know, being in the dark all the time,” she continued, trying not to overplay it, but feeling nonetheless like she was making some progress.

Roe relaxed, giving in easily. “Palmetti was a jumper,” he said, in a quieter, less formal tone. “The first, far as we know.”

“What happened to him?”

“It wasn't too long after I started on the force. We got a call that a man was trespassing at a house in White Rock. They weren't reporting a burglary, just that a man was acting strange, casing the house... but not breaking in.

“When we got there, Palmetti was agitated and confused, saying that he lived there, but that all of his possessions was missing. His patio furniture, his basketball hoop. He said his wife and kids were supposed to be there, but it was like they had moved out and someone else had moved in—even though he had just been there that morning.

“We calmed him down, and he finally told us that he had jumped off Peggy Sue bridge that afternoon—he had tried to kill himself. But then he woke up in the clearing and his car, well, he assumed it had been stolen—so he hitchhiked

his way back to White Rock and found that everything was gone.

“And then he got this real wild look in his eyes and looked up at us and said, ‘Am I dead? Have I died?’ He was white as a sheet.”

“Did you believe him? About him jumping?”

“Well... no.” Roe looked apologetic. “We just assumed he was either drunk or—or high. Really, he might as well have told us that he had just come back from Mars—the bridge story just made no sense.”

Megan first felt betrayed when Roe said this, but then realized that she would likely have thought the same thing if she didn’t know the truth. It had taken some time for her to believe it herself, wondering at first if it was some bizarre, elaborately planned punishment in which her parents had somehow convinced all her friends to participate.

Megan was lost in thought for a moment as Roe appeared to be waiting for a cue to continue. In the silence, Megan heard the toilet flush upstairs. She looked up at Roe, wordlessly urging him to go on.

“Well,” he continued, “we took him into custody. We called the people who owned the house, and they talked to the neighbors—they decided they didn’t want to press charges, especially since he never broke in or anything.

“Of course, Palmetti passed a breathalyzer test, a drug test, and—”

Roe paused for a moment, as if he wasn't sure whether or not to keep going. Then he pursed his lips, almost imperceptibly nodding, and looked at Megan.

"I asked him why he jumped, figuring it was out of stress or something, but he said no, it wasn't. He wouldn't say why, but he made it sound like he was caught up in something... bad. Like his whole family was in danger. We tried to get him to explain what he was talking about, but it just got him worked up, and we didn't get any more answers."

The screen door burst open, and Sam came running out.

"Watch this, um," Sam paused and looked at Roe.

"What's your name again?"

"It's Officer Roe, Sam."

"Watch this, Officer Roe!" Sam continued, not missing a beat, and he flew his cars through the air toward the lawn.

"Yeeeeeee-haw!"

He brought the cars to a landing in the grass and mimicked the screeching of brakes.

"Wow," called out Roe. "Those are some fast cars."

"Yeah, they're police officers. They're going to catch a robber. You can watch if you want." Sam knelt down in the grass and began acting out the scene, more to himself than to his small audience.

Megan seized the opportunity. "So then—what happened to him?"

Roe broke off his gaze at Sam, and looked up the street instead. "The hospital couldn't find anything wrong with him that they considered treatable, and he wasn't a danger

to anyone, so they released him.” He looked down at his hat and picked a piece of lint off the top. “He came back to us, asking what he could do next. I took his case and spent a long time trying to find answers. I knew he had to be from somewhere, he had to have some family, some home. But obviously I got nowhere. We found him an apartment and he worked for a temp agency for a while before hiring on with the county doing road construction. The work was way beneath his skills, but it was all we could find... and he needed the money, since his bank accounts had all vanished.

“Apparently he spent his evenings in the lab library, researching papers and harassing physicists, trying to figure out what was going on. I heard about all that and after a while I started to wonder if he was right about Peggy Sue. I did a little research of my own but I didn’t find anything. I mean, there’s nothing on the records about anyone jumping off Peggy Sue bridge.” He paused for a moment. “But then, there wouldn’t be, you know what I mean?”

Roe looked at his hat once more, fitted it carefully on his head, and took a deep breath. “Stephen Palmetti killed himself a few months later. We didn’t even find him until he hadn’t shown up for work for a few days. Gunshot wound to the head.” Roe stopped, looking down in reverence. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I would never—well, you know—but your heart goes out to him a little, right? He had no one. *No one*, you know?”

He looked up at Megan with a pained expression on his face. She was doing her best to fight back tears and said

nothing, for fear of letting them loose. She must have been doing a good job of it, as Roe's expression changed into an apologetic one, as though realizing that he had just offended her.

"I mean, of *course* you know," he said, shaking his head. "I'm sorry—"

"No, no," Megan interrupted, trying to hide her shaking voice. "No, it's not the same. I've got Charlie. And Vicky, and—and Howard..."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." Roe looked ahead, and Megan wondered if he was holding back tears as well. After a moment, he spoke again. "We had a memorial service for him, there at the police department. I figured someone should do something, and by that time I realized that our search for next of kin was going to come up empty. It wasn't much, but... well, I thought he deserved *something*."

"He did," Megan responded, almost under her breath. "Thank you."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

HOUSE GUESTS

Later that afternoon, Megan was deep into reading *The Scarlet Letter* and Sam was playing video games with Daniel, his friend from school who lived just up the street, when Phil came home from work.

"Hello, Megan," Phil mentioned off-handedly, hanging his coat in the hall closet.

"Aren't you home kind of early?"

"Yeah, a bit slow today."

"I thought it was supposed to be the busiest shopping day of the year."

"Not at a hardware store, I don't expect," Phil responded. "Everyone is probably in Santa Fe or Albuquerque. Does Sam have a friend visiting?" Phil called, walking into the kitchen.

"Yeah," Megan responded. She tried to get back into the book but had a hard time focusing on it, absent-mindedly reading the same paragraph over and over. Soon, Phil came out to the table with a plate of Thanksgiving leftovers and the afternoon paper. After he sat down, Megan heard the boys coming down the hall.

"Megan, Daniel wants to know if he can have another snack."

Megan chuckled—Daniel had showed up at the door with the self-reported directive from his mother that he not have too many snacks, and he was now asking for his second in as many hours. Figuring she wasn't making any progress in *The Scarlet Letter* now anyway, Megan got up and walked toward the kitchen when the doorbell rang. Wondering if it was Daniel's mom coming to take him home, she went over to the front door and opened it.

"Hey, Megan." Standing on the other side of the door was Anthony, his hands in the pockets of his light red windbreaker. "How's it goin'?"

Megan froze, in every way completely unprepared for his arrival. It felt so alien to have him here, in this part of her life, but at the same time she was excited. Part of her wanted to bring him in completely, to introduce him into all the craziness of her life and welcome whatever chaotic consequences doing so would create.

"Uh, hi!" she answered, awkwardly trying to recover from the shock.

It wasn't working—he stood for what was likely half a second but what seemed like forever, waiting for her to do something.

"Can I come in?"

"Oh, sure! Sorry," she added with a little nervous chuckle. She pushed the screen door only to realize it was latched, then fumbled with the latch until, red in the face, she got the door open and stepped back to let him in. "How—how are you? How was your Thanksgiving?"

“Oh, it was good. How about yours?”

“Fine! It was really good.” *It had been good, right?* she thought. Suddenly she couldn’t remember anything about it.

Megan realized Sam and Daniel were standing a few steps behind her, eager to see who had been at the door. Sam’s face suddenly lit up as he recognized Anthony.

“Hey, did you bring your guitar?”

Anthony turned to look at Sam, and a smile crossed his lips. “What? Oh, it’s at home. Sorry!”

Sam turned to Daniel with wide eyes. “He’s a rock star. I rode in his car once, and he had a *real electric guitar*.”

Daniel seemed suitably impressed. “Cool!”

Sam turned back to Anthony with a look of dawning realization, and Megan’s heart skipped a beat as she realized what Sam was about to say.

“Hey, you know what, Phil has a—”

With one smooth motion, Megan clapped her hand over Sam’s mouth and simultaneously nudged him back toward the hallway. “Hey, Sam, why don’t you and Daniel go in here...” As she spun him around, she glanced over at the table and was suddenly reminded of Phil’s presence. He sat there, a forkful of stuffing held in midair, his face white with terror and shock as Anthony stepped from the hallway into the living room and into view.

Megan was panicking. “Why don’t you guys go get the video game ready so Anthony can come see you play?” She ushered him down the hallway, Daniel trotting to keep up.

“But—”

“Later!” Megan hissed, now bending down to his ear. “I’ll be in there in a minute!”

She made sure the boys were actually heading down the hallway and turned around to see Anthony, watching the action with a confused look on his face. He was facing her, unaware of a still-petrified Phil sitting at the dining room table behind him.

She swooped toward him and, unthinkingly, grabbed his hand and led him back into the hallway. “Sorry about that,” she said, now completely flustered. “I’ll explain later.”

Eyebrows raised, Anthony gave a tiny shrug. “Okay,” he said, following her into the kitchen.

“I need to get them a snack. Wanna help?”

“Uh, sure. I mean, if it's not a good time—”

“No, it's fine, really!” She figured she could keep Anthony in the kitchen and give Phil time to sneak upstairs, and tried to figure out how to give Phil the signal to do so. She walked to the other end of the kitchen, where the swinging door that opened directly to the dining room was propped open. Glancing sideways through the door as she leaned down to open a cupboard, she saw that he was still there, his chair pushed back from the table, ready to jump up.

“Um, there should be a bowl in here,” she said to Anthony after opening the cupboard and revealing a set of large, mismatched mixing bowls. With one hand reaching inside, she stuck her other hand around the corner of the

cupboard and motioned frantically to Phil, hoping he was still looking her direction.

She clanged the metal bowls unnecessarily to try and create some noise, wondering what in the world she was going to put into a mixing bowl for a snack.

“So, who’s the other kid?” Anthony asked, looking absent-mindedly at Vicky’s schedule on the refrigerator. “Besides Sam, I mean.”

“Oh, he’s a neighbor kid. They go to school together.”

She pulled out a bowl and tried to sneak a glance through the side door; Phil was quietly walking around the table toward the living room. She looked up toward Anthony and had a sudden realization: there were chips on top of the refrigerator.

She walked over and grabbed the bag, rustling the plastic and noisily pretending to have trouble opening it.

“So... Victoria Campbell—is that your... mom?” Anthony asked, still looking at the schedule. The triumphant feeling Megan had after improvising the diversion was replaced with another sense of panic as she struggled to come up with an answer.

“Well, uh, it’s kind of complicated,” she finally stammered, her momentary bravado withering. She knew the truth would scare him away for sure.

Figuring that by now Phil had successfully made his getaway, she dumped the bag of chips into the bowl. “Let me take these in to the boys and then I can explain,” she announced, hoping Phil would hear. She could feel her face

flush as she heard herself making the promise. *At least I'm buying myself a little time to think about it*, she thought.

Walking into the living room, she caught the last glimpse of Phil disappearing around the corner down the hall toward the stairs on the other side. Relaxing a little now, she let out a quiet breath of relief and walked down the hall toward the opposite room, Anthony following behind, where the boys were once again immersed in the video game.

"Here you go, guys," Megan called out to the boys, realizing only now that she was giving them an entire bag of chips.

"Awesome!" "Cool!" The boys set down their controllers and clambered over the back of the sofa to grab the bowl from her.

"Hey, cool game, guys," Anthony remarked, looking at the screen. "Is that an Atari?"

"It's Intev—Intevil—" Sam responded, his mouth full of chips.

"Intellivision," Megan corrected him. "Um, I think," she muttered, realizing how nerdy it made her sound.

"Wow, that's awesome," Anthony replied. "I'll have to play you guys sometime, huh?"

"Yeah! You wanna play with me right now?" Sam answered excitedly.

"Sam, *Daniel's* playing with you right now," Megan reminded him, grateful that she had an excuse to keep

Anthony to herself. "You need to play with *him*. You can play with Anthony some other time."

"Okay," Sam responded, stuffing another handful of chips in his mouth.

"Wow, you're the best babysitter ever," Anthony said with a smirk as they went back down the hallway.

"Whatever," Megan answered. "Wanna go outside?"

"Yeah, sure."

Megan led them around the sofa toward the back door. As Anthony followed, he saw Phil's half-eaten dinner on the table.

"Oh, I didn't mean to interrupt your dinner," Anthony said, hesitating.

"No, no, it's—" Megan responded. "It's not mine. That's, um"—her mind raced to try to think of someone else's name. "Phil's." *Stupid*, she thought.

"Phil?" he responded, with a sudden glimmer of realization. "Oh, that's who Sam was, uh..." he jerked his thumb back toward the boys in the other room.

She gave him a sort of desperate look; he seemed to understand and followed her into the backyard.

She led him over to the tree near the back fence and pulled herself up to sit on a branch a few feet off the ground. Anthony turned and picked up a nearby sprig.

His silence weighed on Megan. "So, Sam's actually, um, my *foster* brother. I mean, I still babysit him, but—he lives here."

“Oh, okay,” Anthony responded with a shrug. He seemed to take the news without argument or judgement. “That’s cool. Uh, Daniel, too?”

“No, he lives up the street.”

“Oh, that’s right. The friend from school,” Anthony said, casually whipping the tree with the sprig in his hand. He continued talking without looking up. “And Phil?” He motioned back toward the dining room with a bob of his head.

“Well... that’s where it gets really complicated.”

“Oh, that’s cool—I... I don’t mean to pry.”

“No, no, it’s okay—”

“Seriously, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to.”

“That’s it—I *do* want to. Just”—Megan stopped and took a deep breath. “Just not *yet*, okay?”

Anthony stopped and looked directly at Megan. “Hey, it’s totally fine. I get it.”

“They’re good people, though, okay?” Megan added, hastily.

“Sure, sure, of course.”

Megan felt so frustrated. The food drive had been so easy, so comfortable. Why couldn’t it be that way now? She looked up at the house; it was weird to see it from the back yard. It reminded her suddenly of her dream. She remembered yelling to Anthony to stay away. *It’s this place*, she thought. *Why did he have to come here?*

She looked back at him, now picking at a piece of hanging bark. *Still, it's so nice to have him here*, she thought. Though it was late November, his presence made the backyard felt a little more verdant.

"Um—" there was so much she wanted to tell him, but she couldn't. "I hope you don't think I'm... weird."

"Nah," Anthony chuckled. "No weirder than me, anyway."

They talked for a short time about school and Anthony's family—Megan felt guilty hearing him go on at length about him and his mom, especially after being so tight-lipped about her own situation. She wanted to ask about Phil's monthly envelopes but never found a good opportunity. Before long, though, Megan heard the five o'clock whistle echo across the townsite and she wondered if Daniel's mom would be coming around soon, looking to take him home for dinner.

She told Anthony that she needed to make Sam something for dinner, hoping silently that he might offer to stay and help, but Anthony mentioned that his mother was expecting him for dinner as well.

"So... I'll see you Monday at school," he said, getting into his car, as Megan stood, arms folded, on the porch. She watched him drive away before going back inside. Compared to the food drive, the afternoon had been cumbersome, awkward—imperfect.

She went back in and went straight to the computer room, where she found the boys in their same position, the metal mixing bowl empty of every last crumb and sitting askew on the sofa cushion between them.

She told the boys it was time to turn the game off, and told Daniel it was time to go. She was met with whines of dissent, but it quickly moved into a discussion of resuming their playtime the following day. Before long Daniel was meandering back up the street toward his house.

Once the coast was clear of visitors, Megan walked gingerly up the stairs to Phil's room, and gently knocked on the door.

"Phil?"

There was a sudden squeaking of furniture from behind the door. "Yes?" he responded, his throat not quite clear.

"I'm so sorry, Phil, I had no idea he was coming today. I would have told you—"

The door opened. Phil looked much better than when she had seen him last; he was calmer, and the color had returned to his face. His desk was a mess of paperwork.

"No, it's okay," he responded calmly. "You didn't tell me that you two were friends."

"No, we're—I mean, well, not until just recently. Really, this is like the fourth or fifth time I've talked to him, I swear."

Phil smiled a little and let out a soft chuckle. "It's okay—I'm not mad."

“Yeah, but I know—I didn’t mean for him to just show up that way, like—I didn’t want you to—”

“Really,” Phil interrupted, almost whispering. “It’s okay.” He cracked a small smile. “He’s a handsome young man, isn’t he? I haven’t seen him up close for a long time.”

Phil sat back down at his desk and began stacking up papers. Megan stood for a moment, lost in thought.

“Don’t you ever think about talking to her?” she blurted out. She was immediately horrified that she had said it, and looked, wide-eyed and apologetic, at Phil.

He didn’t seem to notice her shock, but seemed a little taken aback by the question himself. “You mean—Susan?” He answered, a confused expression on his face.

“Yeah,” Megan answered, her voice shaking. “I mean, do you miss her?”

Phil shook his head. “I’m already closer than I should be,” Phil answered, almost to himself. “When I jumped off that bridge, you know... I gave up my right to be with her.”

Megan gulped. “Phil, I found Sam in here the other day. He found a guitar under your bed. Did you get that... for Anthony?”

Phil stared back without saying anything, and Megan immediately regretted bringing it up. Still, his face showed more shock than anger.

Megan continued sheepishly. “I’m so sorry I found it. I promise I didn’t mean to. But, isn’t that... a way of being with her?”

Phil hesitated a little longer before his expression softened. "I've been sending them money anonymously. I happen to know that they wouldn't be able to afford the rent without it. I've been doing it for years, and so I thought, some Christmas presents wouldn't hurt."

"I think it's really sweet, Phil! He's going to love that guitar—"

"What's he like?" Phil asked quietly, as though he hadn't been hearing her at all.

Megan thought for a minute. "He's... wonderful."

"Yeah?"

Megan slid her back down against the doorframe until she was sitting, hugging her knees against her chest. "He's *so* kind. And so smart, and he—he loves his mom so much, you can tell. They... take care of each other."

Phil sat for a moment, his gaze fixed on the desktop in front of him.

"I do miss her," he uttered, so quietly Megan almost didn't hear.

She looked up at him, tears close to the surface.

"Phil," she said quietly—sweetly. "Go... talk to her."

Phil pursed his lips gently and shook his head.

"You don't have to tell her who you are. Just make something up."

"No, it's not right. I'm already too close."

"Who cares if it's right? You *care* about her, I'm sure she would care about you, just like she did before you jumped. I

mean she *did* care about you, right? The whole idea that it's not right... what if that's just stupid superstition?"

The sound of the front door opening downstairs was followed by the rustling of shopping bags and the jangling of keys. "Hello?" came Vicky's sing-song voice.

Megan looked up at Phil, still in his same position. "Please?" she asked, almost whispering.

Phil didn't respond.

Unlike the day before, dinner went back to the every-man-for-himself affair that had been the rule for so long, other than the fact that everyone partook of leftover turkey, stuffing, potatoes, gravy and pumpkin pie. Vicky served a plate of food up for Sam in the dining room; he pecked at it for a little bit but wasn't very hungry and left before Vicky and Megan had a chance to fix their own plates. They ate together at the kitchen table. Megan didn't feel like bringing up Anthony's visit, still not sure where the two of them stood.

It wasn't until after eight o'clock that Howard and Rom finally came in. Megan was in her room but had left the door ajar so she could hear when they got home. As they walked in, she could hear them talking.

"Howard, it's okay, really! You don't need to pay me back."

"No, I insist."

"Please, let me cover it." Rom sounded apologetic. "It's the least I could do after dragging you down there."

"I'll just leave it here on the table for you, then."

Rom gave a bit of an exasperated sigh, and Megan heard Howard slowly trudge upstairs toward his room.

Megan could hear Rom venting to Vicky. "I've *got* the money. He *knows* I've been saving it up for stuff like this."

"I know, Rom. But you know how he can be."

Their voices lowered in volume, so that Megan had to crane her neck to hear. She lay on her bed, but didn't want to get up, for fear of making noise and giving away that she was listening in.

"So, was it her?"

"No."

"Oh, Rom," came the sympathetic response. "What happened?"

There was a pause.

"I'll... tell you later."

Megan rolled her eyes, let out a sharp sigh of frustration and silently closed her door.

Later that night, she lay in bed, very nearly asleep. The last song on the cassette tape she had been listening to had long since finished, when the complete quiet of the room was pierced by the sound of the tape leader running across the head, the momentary grind of the motor as the cassette reached the end, and the sudden snap of the play button as it popped back up.

But silence was broken again a few moments later by the sound of the front door opening—Charlie was home. She

heard the door close quietly, and then steps coming up the stairs. They weren't his usual bouncy steps, but they were also not the steps of someone trying to quietly tiptoe to his bedroom. They had a heavy slowness to them.

They reached the top stair and, instead of continuing onward, stopped in front of Megan's doorway. She looked up through the room, dimly lit by a nightlight over her desk, and watched the doorknob. For a moment she worried that it wasn't Charlie, that there was someone else in the house, but then realized she had heard the jingle of keys—what kind of burglar would have keys?

She listened carefully. She could hear him breathing. Somehow, she knew—it was Charlie.

She watched the door, quietly frozen in her bed, for nearly a minute, but nothing happened. Then, as suddenly as they had stopped, the footsteps continued down the hallway, entered Charlie's room, and she heard him close the door.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y

CHARLIE'S DREAM

He knew it was late because the stoplight in White Rock was flashing yellow. He turned right, the tires of his pickup truck screeching just a little. He was going a little too fast but it didn't bother him; he was young and free and life was good. Besides, the road was empty; he could see neither oncoming headlights before him nor departing taillights in his rearview mirror.

As he approached the bright lights of TA-18, however, two things caused his foot to subtly lift from the accelerator. The first, of course, was the memory of what had happened here so many years ago. It had been so long since he had taken this route that he had forgotten the feeling of dread that would overtake him as he approached this part of the road. It caused his throat to constrict a little, and his chest felt suddenly heavy. Why *was* he taking this road? He had avoided it for so long...

The other thing was much more present: the trees far ahead seemed to glow with a flickering red and blue light. As he rounded the last turn, he could see, more than a mile ahead, two or three police cars blocking the road.

His first thought was panic—pull a quick U-turn and make a run for it. But—had he even been drinking at all? He

felt fine, and he couldn't remember being at a party. He continued ahead cautiously and stopped just before the roadblock.

Holding his hand up to the glare of the flashing lights, he could see no one. There were no officers outside and no one in the police cars. He briefly entertained the thought of driving around the roadblock, but there did not look to be room between the cars and the barbed-wire fence on either side of the road. He waited for more than a minute and even laid on the horn but, mystifyingly, the officers were nowhere to be found.

Irritated, he turned around and drove back toward White Rock. He would go through Bandelier National Monument instead, which would add considerable time to the trip. *I'll get past Pajarito Acres, though*, he thought, smirking to himself, *and hit the gas*. He knew he could shave more than a few minutes off his drive that way; the road would be absolutely deserted this time of night, even more so than Pajarito Road.

He took the curves south of White Rock as fast as he could take them without losing control, and was headed for the ridge when he could see an orange glow coming from behind the mountains. He strained to catch a clearer view between the passing trees, but he couldn't make anything out. Sensing something was wrong, he sped up through the otherwise dark night.

Then, after rounding the last turn before Jemez Road, he saw it: the first glimmer of flames licking the tops of the

ridge above the townsite. As he accelerated down the straight road moving toward the trees, he tried to keep one eye on the flames; what had been a tiny spark was quickly turning into a raging line of fire consuming more and more of the mountain ridge and beginning to move down the hill toward the town.

Approaching the townsite, the reality and consequences of what he had seen began to sink in. He had just finished sixth grade when the La Mesa Fire burned a huge section of Bandelier. There had been a terrible smell in the air and a hushed fear among the kids that the town would burn down; the adults were careful to not deny it outright, saying only that they would be safe. When the fire was contained and the town was more or less untouched, the general feeling of dread was replaced by a sense of invincibility; of course the town hadn't burned. They were stronger than a forest fire.

Still, even as a kid, he had had his doubts.

Flying down a completely empty Diamond Drive through the flashing yellow lights, he very nearly struck the base of the pedestrian overpass by the high school as he continued to try to keep a close eye on the flames. It was now as if the entire mountain was on fire—the glow of the flames reflected in the windows of the school auditorium. He was sure that it had started to burn houses on the west edge of town by now.

When he finally turned the corner onto 35th street he could feel the heat of the fire bearing down on the townsite,

even through the closed windows of the truck. He pulled up to the house, one wheel lurching up the curb on to the lawn, and saw to his relief that Howard's, Phil's, Rom's and Vicky's cars were all gone. *Surely they must have taken Megan and Sam*, he thought. Planning a few escape routes—the bumpy dirt road down Rendija Canyon would work if he couldn't make it back downtown—he slammed his truck into reverse and was about to step on the gas and take off. But just as he was about to pull away, he turned to take one more glance at the house—and saw movement behind the kitchen window.

Throwing the gearshift into neutral and pulling the brake, he jumped out of the truck and flew into the house to find Megan, panicked and screaming, running toward him.

“It's Sam! He's gone! Charlie, he's gone!”

His already racing heart pounded in his chest. “Do you know where he is?”

She motioned to the living room window, which inexplicably looked out not over the backyard, but Acid Canyon. Stretched across it, gleaming in the orange glow of the oncoming fire, was the bridge. He could just make out the form of a boy crouching, clinging to the guard cables near the center of the span.

“Come on!” he yelled, and he grabbed Megan's hand to lead her out the front door toward his still-running truck. As they ran, however, the ground beneath him suddenly lurched backward, toppling him to his hands and knees. Regaining his composure, he looked to see that Megan had

similarly been knocked over; the ground beneath them was still violently shaking.

Megan looked over toward him, terrified, her eyes darting around as if to look for something to hold on to. “Charlie, what’s going on?”

Flecks of burning soot were peppering his skin as he tried to make sense of the situation. The words “I don’t know” were on the edge of his tongue, but then something happened that made them both forget the question.

They both looked up to see that the orange glow of the mountain was being dwarfed by a huge plume of thick smoke, lit from beneath, bellowing from a point somewhere beyond the smoldering ridge. It was far too heavy, far too sudden to be from the fire; something had exploded in the forest—something gigantic.

Moments, later, the glowing mountain ridge let loose a new terror: splashing streams of molten lava, surging through the forest across the terrible mountainous horizon.

Valles Caldera was erupting.

In a flash they were in his truck, careening down Orange Street toward the western end of the bridge. Aftershocks were bouncing the truck side to side on the road. One tremor had nearly toppled the vehicle sideways. They reached the end of the road and jumped out of the truck into the searing air. As he ran around the front of the truck, he could hear explosions from farther up the hill. What was succumbing to the lava now—the UNM Branch? Anderson’s

Pharmacy? He didn't want to turn to look and see the progress of the coming Armageddon.

Feeling the oppressive heat on their backs as they ran through the trees and along the pathway down the hill, they made their way to the bridge's north tower and scrambled up to the landing. They could see Sam out in the middle, petrified. The din of destruction from behind was far too loud to hear Sam's screams but they could see them, as his panicked face was cast toward the conflagration tumbling down the hill.

Megan dashed onto the bridge first and he followed; as they ran out to Sam he could see a fuller view of the destruction to his right. He stopped, transfixed, as lava came bursting through the trees. It was pushing along a terrible line of debris: cars, dumpsters, metal roofs and electrical boxes which disappeared beneath the surface as the molten rock slowly overtook each in turn. Looking beyond, it was as if the entirety of the Jemez Mountains were in flames, the darkly majestic smoke plume blocking out the night sky.

Megan reached Sam first and scooped him up. She was caught off-balance by Sam's reluctance to let go of the bridge's cables, and it nearly caused her to slip and fall. He came running behind and arrived in time to steady her, though, and she tried to coax him into releasing his grip.

"Sam, let's go! We need to get out of here!"

He could see that Sam now had his eyes shut tight, tears streaming down his smoke-stained face as he let out hoarse

screams of desperation. As Megan continued to plead, he began prying at Sam's fingers, which were tightly wound around the cabling.

"Sam! We need to go!"

He was finally able to loosen one grip, then the other, as Sam's hands turned to clawing at both of them, eyes still tightly closed. He helped Megan wrestle him into a position where he could be carried off the bridge and they turned to move back toward the tower, his truck, and their escape to safety.

It wasn't until they had gone ten or twenty feet that he looked at their destination and saw, to his horror, that the flames had overtaken the forest beyond the tower, reaching down over the path and cutting off their escape. He froze, mesmerized by the sight, and through the trees came the debris being pushed onward by the lava. Burning trees were being pressed forward, knocked over and consumed by the flood of molten rock.

But there, amid the tangled swing-sets and barbecue grills, was his truck. Or, at least, the rear portion of it, being nudged along sideways toward the more severe slope of the hill. He could see its rear passenger tire, aflame, being pushed over the sizzling ground by the debris behind it. The front end was facing away from him, but he couldn't make it out; it seemed to be tangled amongst the twisted metal of some other form—

Then, suddenly, he recognized it. It was *her* car. Crumpled from the force of his truck, it had lost its shape

and had become instead a sarcophagus of twisted iron. Above the impossible noise of everything around him, he could hear the horn blaring. But there was another sound: even over the tumult, he could hear her screams.

“NOOO!”

Feeling the heat of the lava now pouring into the canyon, he lurched forward, but was held back by Sam, who was now clutching his arm, and Megan, who was still holding Sam.

“Charlie, no! It’s too late! Come on, this way!” Megan yelled from behind him, pulling with all her might to draw him back. He strained to peer inside the wrecked car as it slowly overtook burning trees.

“I’ve got to save her,” he grunted. As he continued to pull, he could see in his peripheral vision the flow of lava overtaking the trees below the bridge. The searing heat continued to rise; the skin on his arms and face ached with pain.

Soon, though, the mass of metal had cleared the trees and began to move forward unimpeded; the lava was lapping at the base of the tower now, and he realized that even if he could make it to the end of the bridge there would be no way to reach the tangled vehicles. He stopped, still resisting against the pulls of Sam and Megan, and watched in horror as the wreck reached the edge of the small plateau and, in strange slow motion, tumbled down the rock face into the canyon.

He wanted to scream, but no sound came forth.

“Charlie!”

Megan’s screams of urgency had suddenly turned to a tone of panicked desperation. He swung around, realizing his situation, and started to move toward the other side of the bridge. But just as they began to move, a surge of advancing lava poured down over the hill above the tower, clearing the trees and revealing the awful truth that the entire mesa was now consumed in molten rock. As it moved downward toward the bridge, Megan screamed and dropped to her knees. He stopped and looked around; the last vestiges of uncovered earth were quickly filled, so that the only thing not covered in lava was the bridge itself. Both ends of the bridge were now completely immersed, and the last of the burning trees around them were being scooped up and swallowed by the advancing streams.

He turned to Megan and Sam, fell to his knees, and took them into a protective embrace.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, his mouth burning, as the thick, acrid smoke enveloped them.

A LUNCH DATE

“When do the ducks fly back?”

Megan sat on a bench a few feet away from the murky water of Ashley Pond while Sam tossed bits of torn-up bread onto the surface. He retrieved another piece from the orange-tinted bread bag and threw with all his might toward the middle of the large pond, though the bread flew above him and landed within a foot of the cement sidewalk which surrounded the water.

“I told you, they don’t fly south,” Megan responded, without looking up from her book. “The county puts them in cages for the winter.”

“Do they let them out to swim sometimes?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Can we go see them?”

“I don’t know. Probably not.”

Sam was sitting on his knees now, calling out to the fish to come up and eat the flecks of bread now floating on the surface of the grey water. “Why aren’t they eating it now?”

“I don’t know, maybe they’re not hungry?” Megan turned a page in her book.

Sam got up. "I'm going to go over there and try some more." He pointed to a spot ten or fifteen feet around the mostly-circular perimeter of the pond.

Megan looked up from her book, squinting a little as her eyes adjusted. "Stay close," she admonished, and Sam took off.

Megan took a breath and looked around. It was Saturday, and the grassy slopes which surrounded the water were dotted with people eating lunch or reading books. It was a nice day—warmer than Megan would have expected for late November, but she figured she ought to enjoy it nonetheless. It certainly didn't feel like the beginning of the Christmas season; Megan had decided to allow herself one last embrace of fall before beginning to complain once again about another dry New Mexico Christmas.

She had just returned to *The Scarlet Letter* when Sam came running back, his bread bag empty.

"Can we go see Linda?"

She kept her eyes in the book, not focusing enough to actually read it, but trying to make a point that he was interrupting her again. "I think she's working today," she lied.

"Do you think she would let me play with her toys?"

"Sam, they're *baby* toys."

"Why does she have baby toys?" he responded, distracted by a wrapper in the water about a foot from the sidewalk.

"Probably because she's going to have a baby, I guess."

“When?”

“I don’t know.”

“Can we have some lunch?”

Megan sighed, replaced her bookmark, and closed the book. “What do you want to eat? Sonic is right up there.” She pointed toward the parking lot across the pond.

“I want to go to Sparky’s.”

Megan gritted her teeth—Charlie was working. “Why don’t we eat something here? You want a Happy Meal?”

“No! Let’s go see Charlie! Please?”

Megan sighed. She suddenly wasn’t all that hungry. *I’ll just sit outside*, she thought. “Fine, let’s go.”

It was about one-thirty when they got to the Community Center, and while there was a little more foot traffic than usual amid the little shops that lined the large courtyard area, Sparky’s itself had customers at just a few of its tables.

“I’m going to go check on something,” Megan told Sam as they walked past the large windows of the restaurant. “You go on in.”

Sam ran up to the doors and Megan could hear the tinkling of the bell as he pulled it open. She walked toward the bowling alley across the way, trying to nonchalantly peer in through the windows to see Charlie. As she watched Sam run up to the bar and grab a stool, she heard the clicking of high-heeled shoes on the pavement behind her, coming closer. She would normally not have given it a second

thought, but something told her to turn and look—and she was stunned to see her mother, looking at her watch, walking straight toward the restaurant.

Megan immediately turned her head away, reaching her right hand up as if to rub her temple. She spun around after her mother passed and ducked quickly inside the door of the bowling alley across the portico. As soon as she was inside, she turned to peer back out the window.

The smell of floor wax and shoe disinfectant combined with the sound of balls crashing into pins as Megan watched her mother stop short of the restaurant door and look inside through the adjacent window. It seemed as though she was looking for someone, and as she remained, rocking back and forth in an effort to see beyond the glare of the window, it became apparent that she was not finding whoever it was she was looking for. She stepped back and checked her watch again, backtracked a little bit, then stole a glance around the corner before walking back toward the restaurant and waiting.

She looked completely different than she had in the laundromat; she was in a blue skirt and a matching jacket, lipstick, eyeshadow and jewelry. Megan hadn't seen her in heels for years; it reminded her of the few times that she and her dad decided to indulge themselves by getting a babysitter for Megan and going out to dinner. Megan remembered hating them for being so selfish.

The look on her mother's face now was one of bright optimism, a world away from the tears she had shed during

their last meeting. An older couple walked by toward the movie theater and she gave them a nervous smile. She checked her watch again and walked over once more toward the courtyard, looking both ways down the sidewalk, and then paced back to her original position.

“Hey! Can I help you?”

It was the voice of the man behind the counter in the bowling alley. He was tall and had a bushy mustache and a heavy five o’clock shadow. He wore a faded Star Wars shirt and his veins seemed to stick out from his arms.

“Oh, uh, just waiting for somebody,” came Megan’s response, turning her head around. She was standing next to a wall lined with bowling trophies which bore a printed metal sign that stated “NO LOITERING.”

“Go wait outside,” the man called back in an irritated, sing-song sort of way as he turned back to whatever he had been doing. Megan rolled her eyes and turned back toward the door just as it opened right in front of her—three middle-aged women came in, pardoning themselves as they walked by.

As the last one past, she looked out to see that her mother was gone, though the tinkling bells of Sparky’s closing door made her realize that she had just gone inside. Megan walked quickly back out across the portico toward the restaurant, cupped her hands to the window and peered inside. As soon as her eyes adjusted, she found herself staring straight toward a man seated just on the other side

of the glass. Embarrassed, she stepped back with an apologetic wave.

She walked briskly along the window, turning the corner and peeking in through the windows that faced the courtyard. From there she could see her mom at the bar, waiting while one of Charlie's co-workers was trying to untangle the cord that would allow him to set the telephone on the bar before her.

Curious, Megan looked around the restaurant for Sam and Charlie. She found Sam sitting at a booth near the corner. Sitting across the table from him was not Charlie, but Linda, who appeared to be sharing a basket of fries with him.

She scanned the other tables for Charlie with no success. She looked back at the bar again and saw that the phone was now sitting in front of her mom, who was looking at a small piece of paper while dialing.

"Hey, this is stupid. Why don't you come inside."

Megan's heart stopped as she swung around to see Charlie, who was standing behind her.

"I—uh, I just didn't—"

"Look, I'm sorry, Megan. I totally went off on you the other day and I shouldn't have. I was being selfish and I owe you an apology."

His countenance was a little duller than usual, like he was tired, beaten down.

"Charlie, I'm so sorry. I never meant to be pushy or anything."

"I know. You were just being a friend. I think I knew that all along, it's just—" He paused and looked off to the side. Without bringing his eyes back to meet her, he continued. "There's, like, stuff I'm not really ready to talk about yet."

Megan thought about her conversation with Anthony the day before. "It's okay, Charlie, I totally get it."

Charlie motioned toward the window into the restaurant behind Megan. "Who's the lady?"

Megan turned around to see if she was still on the phone; she was. "That's my mom."

Charlie's eyes widened. "No way!" He moved closer to the window. "Who do you think she's calling?"

"I think she's meeting someone here." She cupped her hand to the glass and looked in; her mom was holding the phone to her ear, but not talking. "She was out here waiting for a while, like she was waiting for someone to show up."

"Oh, so she's probably calling her friend, wondering where she is."

"I don't know," Megan responded. "I think it's a guy. She looks kind of nervous, and she's all dressed up. I think maybe it's, like, a date."

Charlie turned to Megan. "Oh, uh... so—"

"How does it make me feel?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know."

Charlie turned back to the window. “Yeah,” he remarked blankly. “Oh, she’s coming out.” He quickly peered around the corner.

“Shh!” Megan whispered, worried that he would attract attention to them.

“I’m going to go talk to her.” Charlie whispered.

“Charlie, no!”

But as the sound of the bells on the door gave way to the *click-click* of her heels on the portico’s tile floor, he straightened up and walked around the corner. Panicked, Megan looked around for cover, and ducked behind a juniper bush not far from the sidewalk.

At first, she couldn’t see either of them, but they came into view as Charlie caught up to her mother. Charlie had his back to Megan, but she could see her mom’s face; the optimism had faded from it.

She got stood up, thought Megan. She strained to try to hear what was being said between the two of them, but it was drowned out by the rumble of a noisy engine in the nearby parking lot.

The conversation had barely started, however, when Charlie gave a stiff wave and her mom walked off in the opposite direction, her steps decidedly less upbeat than when she had arrived. Charlie glanced around the corner, looking for Megan. She emerged from her hiding place and walked toward him as a smile crept across his face.

“Why were you hiding?” he asked, teasingly.

She ignored him. “What did you say to her?”

"I just said 'hello, how's it going,' no biggie."

"What did *she* say?"

"She said 'hi' back."

The smirk on Charlie's face made it clear that he was toying with her. "Tell me," she asked, irritated, as she got closer.

Charlie laughed. "She didn't say anything! She just walked past."

"I *know* she said more than that, I could see you guys talking."

"Whoa, I should have hired a court reporter. I said she looked real nice today, and—"

"*You were hitting on my mom!?*"

"No!" Charlie looked genuinely surprised. "No, I just said she looked nice! I wasn't trying to hit on her, I swear!"

"What else did she say?"

"Well, I asked her if she was waiting for someone, and she said 'no.' Then she said 'bye,' and she left. That was all, I swear!"

"Hmmpf," Megan said to herself.

"Let's go inside," Charlie said, "and ask Gabe if he overheard anything from her phone call."

Charlie pulled the door open and followed Megan inside. "Gabe," he called, "who was that lady calling?"

"I don't know, she didn't say," came Gabe's response, who just then realized that the phone was still sitting on the bar, and went to pick it up.

“What did she say? Come on, don’t you listen in on other people’s conversations?”

“She didn’t say anything! Whoever she called didn’t pick up.”

“Some help you are!” Charlie retorted, teasingly.

Gabe seemed nonplussed, but after putting the phone away, he quickly grabbed a piece of ice from the bin behind the bar and pelted it at Charlie, hitting him square in the back and causing him to yelp.

“Hey!” Charlie turned and ran toward Gabe, who in turn leapt into the kitchen. Charlie ducked behind the bar, grabbed a handful of ice, and followed him in.

Megan looked around the restaurant and saw Linda and Sam, still sitting at the booth in the corner. She made her way toward them.

Sam was kneeling in the seat, leaning over and grabbing the last few fries out of the basket between them as Megan approached.

“Megan! Sam told me you were here.” Linda remarked. “Where did you go?” she added, in a distinctly motherly mix of concern and accusation.

“Oh, uh, nowhere really... I was just checking something out.”

Linda gave her a look that showed she didn’t buy her answer, but apparently decided to let it go. “You want some more fries? I can get you some more.”

“No, it’s fine, really.”

"I want some more fries!" Sam exclaimed, his mouth still full from the remainders of what was in the basket.

Linda pushed the basket toward Sam. "You go tell Charlie we want some more, okay?" Sam jumped down off the seat, grabbed the basket and trotted over to the bar. "Megan, come sit down." She motioned to the seat Sam had just vacated.

Megan flopped into the cushioned bench and slumped down. Since Thanksgiving dinner, she had been trying to muster up courage to ask Linda about what had happened between her and Howard, and who it was that Howard was looking for, though she had not expected to see her so soon. She decided, however, to seize the opportunity that had presented itself here and now, and opened her mouth to speak—but she was immediately cut off by Linda.

"How are you eating, lately, Megan? Are you eating healthy?"

Megan was completely blindsided by the question. "Uh... yeah, I guess."

"And Sam? He's a growing boy, you know! He needs his vitamins!"

"He's eating fine," she answered, confused by the sudden interrogation. "Vicky cooks for him all the time."

"Is Howard spending time with him?"

"I don't know, Howard's busy at work—"

Linda's eyes widened a little. "Oh, he needs to have quality time! He's not just watching TV all the time, is he?"

"I don't know—"

"He was telling me all about these programs he likes to watch, they sound violent!"

Megan was simultaneously baffled and frustrated by the fact that Linda didn't seem to be listening to her. Figuring that she wasn't listening to the answers she was providing, Megan figured she'd try to switch the subject back to her original idea.

"So, Howard and Rom went to Albuquerque yester—"

"Yes! And Howard just left Sam with you the whole day, didn't he?"

"Well, yeah, but—"

"Megan, have you ever thought about living somewhere else?"

The earlier question about Megan's diet was nothing compared to this one. A few short weeks ago, she would have given anything for an opportunity like this. Now, she wasn't sure what to make of it.

"What?"

Linda leaned in a little. "If Howard is mistreating you—or Sam—you need to tell someone. You know, you can always tell me, and I can get help for you."

"Uh, okay," Megan responded cautiously. She hated being cooped up by his rules, but... *mistreatment?* Howard was never abusive, he provided for everyone's needs. *He's not father of the year*, she thought. But, truthfully, she couldn't think of any way they were mistreated.

She was trying to think of a way to answer Linda when in her peripheral vision she caught the form of someone

jogging by outside. She turned to look, but whoever it was had already turned the corner. When she swiveled around the other direction, she heard the bells on the door ringing as it was quickly pushed open.

In came Rom, dressed even a little nicer than usual, but slightly out of breath.

“Rom!” exclaimed Charlie from behind the soda bar, as Rom caught his eye and smiled. “What’s happenin?”

“Hey, Charlie,” Rom answered, and still panting a little. “Did a woman come by here, about... yay tall,”—he held his hand up about even with his cheek—“and, uh, longish, uh, dark blonde hair?”

“Oh, yeah,” Charlie responded with a chuckle. “You just —” With the realization dawning on him, Charlie froze and looked at Megan, his eyes wide.

“Uh,” he continued, stunned, “you... just missed her.”

CHAPTER TWENTY - TWO

THE NEW PROJECT

Megan and Charlie stared at each other for a moment across the restaurant. Megan had a feeling of quiet dread rising up from her stomach as Rom looked questioningly at Charlie, tracing his gaze over to the booth where Megan and Linda still sat.

“You know,” Linda interjected, looking at her watch, “I need to go to my hair appointment.” She was either unaware of the tenseness of the situation or uninterested in it. She shot a glance at Rom as she got up to leave, which made Megan realize that the hair appointment was likely a convenient excuse. Charlie moved over toward the booth and Rom followed.

“So—she left already?” Rom asked, obviously not understanding the reason for Charlie’s strange reaction.

“Uh, yeah,” Charlie answered, looking furtively at Megan for a reaction.

Megan overcame her speechlessness and rounded on Rom. “How long have you two been going out?” she asked with a hint of aggression in her voice.

“With Tammy?” Rom answered sheepishly. “Uh... we actually went out a couple of times over the summer. She

kind of, well, lost interest, but then she called me a few days ago and asked to see me again.”

“How did you meet her?”

Rom looked again at Charlie for some explanation for the interrogation, but Charlie was keen to hear the answer as well. “Why? Do you... know her?”

Megan let out a sigh of exasperation, put her arms on the table and flopped her head into them. Charlie spoke up.

“It’s her mom.”

Megan lifted her head enough to look up at Rom, who looked confused for a moment. Then the realization seemed to hit him.

“Oh—wha—Oh?” he stammered as the pieces fell into place. “*Oh!* You mean Tammy is your—*really?*” His expression came full circle again, and his face was again contorted with confusion. “She told me she’s never been married, so—oh, wait, you mean—”

“They *were* married, before I jumped,” Megan interrupted, guessing his train of thought. “Somehow me jumping caused them to never get married in the first place.”

Rom dropped into a nearby chair. “Wait, really?”

“Yeah,” Megan responded, pulling herself out of her frustration to take advantage of the opportunity: other than Howard, who didn’t ever seem to want to talk about it, and Phil, who seemed to have given up, Rom was the one who knew the most about how the bridge worked. “Isn’t it not supposed to affect anything before your birth?”

“Well, it’s not like we have a ton of data to go on,” Rom explained thoughtfully, “but as near as we’ve been able to figure, yeah. It just takes you out of the timeline up until the point you wake up in the clearing. But, when you think about it, the choice to start a family, that’s huge, right? Whatever made them decide to have a kid, that disappeared, too.”

It was ten or fifteen seconds before Megan responded to no one in particular. “My mom said she had wanted to have a family since she was a little girl. When I jumped, it had to have... changed her, somehow.”

“She’s never brought up kids with me,” Rom responded. “But it’s not exactly first date discussion material.” He smirked a little at his own wit but he quickly sobered as he saw Megan look at Charlie with a pleading sort of look. Charlie grabbed a chair for himself and faced Rom, who was still dazed. “So, Rom, this thing with, uh, Tammy, right? Is it pretty serious?”

Rom snapped out of his pensiveness and looked first at Charlie and then at Megan. “What? Uh, no. I mean,” he looked at Megan again, apparently trying to read her. “Unless you...?” Megan widened her eyes into a glare and Rom immediately thought better of it. “No, nothing serious! Like I said, we just went out a few times, and...” He furrowed his brow and looked at his watch, then let out a small sigh. “No, it... it doesn’t need to be,” he said, looking a bit regretful.

Charlie looked at Megan, his expression showing a little sympathy for Rom, but Megan didn't want to hear it. *It's my mom*, she thought. At worst, Rom was an ex-druggie and at best, he was a goofy, nerdy roommate, even with the understanding of what he had gone through with his own father. Megan couldn't even let herself imagine him in some sort of strange step-father relationship.

"You *can't* go out with her any more," she told Rom, in no uncertain terms.

"Right, right," Rom replied, defensively. He looked out the window, almost as if to try and see her out there. "Can I just ask"—he looked at Charlie—"was she... mad when she left?"

"Nah," Charlie responded. "She actually seemed pretty disappointed that you didn't show."

"Don't, Charlie!" Megan exclaimed.

"Well, she *was*."

"Rom, you can't see her again! It's just—too weird!"

"No, I—I get it," responded Rom, getting up. "Look, do you want me to call her and tell her, or—"

"I don't care, just end it."

"Sorry, Megan, really, I didn't mean to—uh, you know, I had no idea she was, um..."

Rom's voice faded out again. He was patting his pockets absentmindedly, as if he was missing his keys. Megan put her head back into her arms.

"All right, I'll just, uh, head out, then—Thanks, Charlie. I'll see you guys at home." Rom sounded a little crestfallen, but Megan didn't care.

She sat and fumed, angry at the whole situation, but mostly at her mom. It seemed so foolish, so juvenile, to want to be with Rom, of all people... maybe it was just that Megan couldn't picture her with anyone else but her dad. Whether it was Rom or some complete stranger—it just wasn't right.

Maybe that's what I don't like about it, she thought. I sound just like Phil.

"You have to admit, she looked like she really wanted to see him," said Charlie, now moving to the bench opposite Megan.

"Don't start, Charlie!"

"I know! I'm just saying, I've never seen her before, but she had a sparkle in her eyes when she first came in here."

"Yeah, I know," admitted Megan. Charlie was right: she had been glowing, and she looked five or ten years younger than usual.

"Is it just that you don't like Rom?"

"No, of course not!" Megan flopped backward onto the bench. "It's just... I mean, my mom belongs with my dad, doesn't she? I know I messed up *my* life when I jumped, but it shouldn't have messed up *theirs*, too!"

Charlie leaned forward. "You realize how that sounds, right? Of course it was going to mess up their life. Whether or not you actually made it to the bottom of the canyon."

Megan didn't respond. She looked over at the bar; Sam was perched on a bar stool, the empty basket of fries pushed off to the side, and Gabe was folding a dollar bill, origami-like, while Sam watched, wide-eyed.

Charlie looked over toward Sam. "How's *he* doing?" he asked, nodding slightly toward the boy.

Megan shrugged a little. "Fine, I guess. I mean, he's *seven*."

Charlie looked back over to Megan. "Yeah, but still," he said, his expression looking more concerned, "you know, he's been through a lot."

"You hang out with him all the time. How do *you* think he's doing?"

"He never really talks to me," Charlie answered. "I mean, you know, he doesn't really *confide* in me."

"Well, he doesn't with me either," Megan answered honestly.

"What do you think his family's like?"

Megan thought back to seeing Sam's parents and brothers through the back window of their house. They certainly looked the picture of family bliss. *Heaven knows he hasn't found that at Howard's*, Megan thought.

"I don't know," she answered, looking out the window. "He thinks his older brothers are cool, but I get the impression they didn't include him much."

"Yeah, I imagine that's what it's like when you're the youngest."

Megan looked at Charlie. "You were oldest, weren't you?"

"Yeah," Charlie said with a wry smile. "Mikey was the youngest, and we picked on him a *lot*."

"Shame on you!"

Charlie took a defensive posture out of instinct. "Hey, he liked it! We were nice to him, though. He knew we picked on him because we cared."

"That's a pretty lame way to show you care about someone."

"Ehh, you don't get it. If you had any brothers or sisters you'd understand."

"Whatever."

Charlie looked back over at Sam. "I don't know if it hasn't really sunk in, or if he's just putting on a brave face." He sighed. "If I was his age and lost my family, I'd be bawling like a baby."

"Did you?" Megan peeked over at Charlie, trying to keep the conversation casual.

"Did I what?"

"Did you cry after *you* jumped?"

Megan felt cold all of a sudden, and a lump formed in her stomach. She immediately regretted asking, realizing the position she put him in. He had obviously never wanted to talk about his jump before, and they had just made up after the whole issue with Sarah.

To her relief, though, Charlie looked at her and smiled. "Not as much as you did, I bet!" In one motion, he took the

towel from his belt and threw it at her while leaping from the seat and taking off toward the bar.

Rather than follow him, she watched him as he sat in the stool beside Sam, who was now holding the dollar bill which had been shaped into a bow-tie by Gabe. Gabe had procured a safety-pin from behind the bar and gave it to Charlie, who used it to affix the folded bill to Sam's shirt.

He's the best big brother Sam ever had, Megan thought, as she absentmindedly folded up the towel.

Having most everyone home on Sunday freed Megan up to do the other homework she had been putting off since the beginning of Thanksgiving break, and while she would normally have gone to the library to do it, she decided to stay at Howard's, partially because she knew Charlie would be there and she had missed being on talking terms with him. He and Sam spent the better part of the day in the living room watching football while Megan worked in her room, coming down to join them for a mid-afternoon meal of turkey sandwiches.

That evening, Rom and Vicky joined them to watch the Sunday night movie—a *Star Wars* spinoff about Ewoks that Sam had been talking about all weekend. Megan could see that Rom seemed a little down; she couldn't help but feel responsible, but she didn't know what to say to make things better. Imagining him and her mother together—even just as friends—made her feel sick to her stomach, so she tried to put the whole matter out of her mind.

Going back to school the next day felt like returning after a week off, and while Megan generally enjoyed school if for no other reason than she was out of the house, she had especially looked forward to seeing not only Anthony but also Leah, remembering how much she enjoyed spending the afternoon with them before the holiday. As for Anthony, she was eager to pick up where they had unceremoniously left off when he had come over on Friday, hoping that being away from Howard's might bring back the feeling of comfort and closeness that had been missing in the backyard. In fact, the effort she had always spent avoiding Greg during passing periods before was redirected toward looking for Anthony instead.

She got to biology at about the same time as Leah, and as they were settling in Megan asked her about her Thanksgiving. Leah excitedly related stories about her cousins' visit from Phoenix. Megan noted the conspicuous absence of Greg's name, and while before she would have been happy to imagine a messy breakup between the two, she found herself hoping instead that things were still going well for Leah's sake.

As other students were trickling into the classroom, Leah asked Megan about her holiday.

"Oh, it was fine," Megan responded, flippantly. "You know, big meal, lots of leftovers." Leah smiled and didn't seem too concerned about pressing for specifics. Except...

“Did you see Anthony at all?” Her voice had lowered a little and she had a glimmer in her eyes as she leaned in toward Megan.

Megan smiled and felt her face heat up a little. “Yeah, he came over on Friday.”

“What did you guys do?”

“Nothing much, just hung out, really. I had to babysit my foster brother.” Megan worried that Leah was going to ask more about Sam; she had never said anything about him to Leah before.

Fortunately, Leah seemed more interested in Anthony than Sam. “So... do you think he likes you?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Megan responded truthfully. “I guess, maybe?”

Just then Leah sat up a little straighter, as if motioning to end the private conference, looked toward the door, and smiled. In came Anthony, talking with a friend. As he entered the room, he looked around and caught Megan’s eye, smiled broadly, and gave a quick wave as he went to his desk.

“Ohhh, yeah,” Leah said, speaking almost under her breath. “He likes you.”

As everyone had been expecting—or, in fact, dreading, judging by the disgusted looks on some of the other girls’ faces—the next project was frog dissection, and Megan wondered why the room didn’t have the overwhelming smell of formaldehyde that would normally accompany an impending dissection project. It was soon apparent why: as

a precursor to dissection, Mr. Connor was creating groups of four students each to do a presentation on a particular system of the frog's body. While she had dared not even hope for it, owing to a subconscious hesitation to jinx the possibility, she was quietly overjoyed when Mr. Connor combined her and Leah with Anthony and his lab partner, Tim Spencer, for the project.

Mr. Connor gave the word for the groups to schedule a meeting time to work up a plan, and Anthony and Tim came over to the girls' desks.

"Hey, Megan," Anthony said brightly, flashing Megan a warm smile.

"Hey," Megan smiled back, trying to act casual, but having a difficult time disguising her excitement.

Leah, spoke up. "So, you guys wanna meet after school sometime this week?"

Megan was all for this idea: working on a school project was the perfect excuse to get out of babysitting. Tim, however, was shaking his head. "We've got marching band rehearsal Wednesday, Thursday and Friday. I mean, we could do it today or tomorrow, I guess."

"I've got a dentist appointment tomorrow," Anthony said. "I'm getting out of seventh period for it."

"Well, how about today?" Leah asked. Everyone nodded and mumbled approval. "Can we meet in the library, about 3:45?"

"Works for me," Tim responded. Anthony nodded his assent.

“Um, what system do we have?” Megan asked, feeling a little silly; she had tuned Mr. Connor out after hearing that she would be working with Anthony.

Leah smiled. “Muscular,” she answered. Anthony struck a bodybuilder’s pose, stretched his mouth like a frog, and flicked his tongue out as if catching a fly, making both Megan and Leah giggle and causing Tim to roll his eyes.

That afternoon, after calling Howard from the office to tell him she would be unable to pick up Sam, Megan found the others assembled in the library. They were all more than happy to follow the plan Leah had apparently been concocting since biology: they would compare the muscle systems of the frog to those of a human, noting the differences and similarities. “It’s the classic ‘compare and contrast,’” Leah told them. “We could even make a poster.”

Wordlessly agreeing with Megan that having Leah in their group was their ticket to a good grade, Anthony volunteered to find information on human musculature, remembering that his weight lifting teacher had given them some handouts on the topic. Megan volunteered to go with him to his locker in the weight room, knowing full well that the same information was probably in the biology book sitting in her backpack. Tim went to the biology section of the library stacks, and Leah took out a highlighter and began flipping through textbook pages and assorted handouts there at the table.

“Ugh, it smells *so gross!*” Megan exclaimed, holding the collar of her hooded sweatshirt over her nose as she stood in the doorway of the vacant boy’s locker room. “How do you stand it?”

“It’s the smell of manliness,” Anthony responded in a mockingly gruff tone. “I don’t know,” he continued in his usual voice, “I don’t think guys can smell it.” Anthony opened his locker and retrieved a few somewhat crumpled pieces of paper from underneath a set of gym clothes.

Closing the locker again and locking the padlock, he walked back over toward Megan, offering her the papers. She stepped backward and pretended to cringe, a broad smile emerging from behind her jacket collar. Anthony rolled his eyes a little and dropped his outstretched arm, walking past her out the doorway with a look of mock exasperation on his face.

“So... how’s the babysitting business?” Anthony asked as they walked under the covered walkway back toward the library.

“It’s going great today, because I don’t have to do it,” Megan responded with a grin.

“Oh, right,” he responded, evidently just now realizing how the study session had affected Megan’s schedule. He looked at Megan with a concerned look on his face. “You should have said something! I didn’t know you were sacrificing income to be here.”

“Oh, I don’t get paid!”

Anthony's face showed further realization. "Oh, because Sam's your...?"

"Yeah," she responded, releasing him from his obligation to finish the question.

There was a silence between them, and Megan wondered if it felt as uncomfortable to Anthony as it did to her. She struggled to think of something to say to break it that didn't come across as the desperate attempt to fill the void that it actually was.

"Do *you* have a job?" She felt stupid for the way it sounded, like she was an overbearing parent harassing a lazy teenager.

"Not right now," he responded. "I was a paperboy when we lived in Albuquerque, threw the *Albuquerque Journal* for a year. Can't say I miss *that*." He chuckled lightly to himself. "Getting up at 4:15 every morning—definitely my least favorite job ever."

"Where else have you worked?"

"I've mowed lawns for the past few summers. Not much else."

"Yeah?"

"Oh—when I was a kid, I'd go to work with my mom at the grocery store. I helped clean, stock, and break down boxes in the back, because we didn't have a babysitter that my mom could leave me with, and the people at the store were cool about it. After being there for a while—man, it was probably a few years—the manager started paying me.

It was totally under the table, since I was, like, eight or nine, but hey, a job's a job, right?"

They arrived at the library and went inside.

"That was in Albuquerque?" Megan asked.

"Yeah, at the Bag & Save."

The name didn't register at first but after a second the handwritten notes and the weird sketch in Howard's notebook flashed into her mind. She had never been there, but he had said *the* Bag & Save... as if there was only one. Could it be the same store?

It was too late to ask Anthony about it—they had made their way back to the table where Leah and Tim were sitting, open books and papers scattered before them.

She had a hard time focusing on the biology project, thinking instead back to the sketch of the woman's face in Howard's notebook. Did she have something to do with the grocery store?

Soon the group had a general plan sketched out for the project: Tim was going to write up descriptions of each muscle group, Megan would recreate the drawings of the frog anatomy chart from their textbook and the human anatomy chart Anthony had retrieved, which she had convinced herself was better than whatever the textbook had to offer. Leah would assemble everything into a poster, and Anthony would talk through it for the in-class presentation. Anthony told Megan that he'd be happy to help her with the charts, a gesture Megan intended to

accept completely, and they all agreed to meet the following Monday at the same time.

“Hey, uh, do you think I could get a ride home?” Megan asked Anthony, as the two of them were repacking their backpacks.

“Oh, uh, sure,” Anthony responded. “We’ll just need to head over to my place to get my car.”

“Oh, sorry,” she answered, embarrassed. “I forgot you didn’t have your car here. I can walk—”

“No, no, it’s cool—I don’t mind, really.” He hoisted his backpack over his shoulder. “I, uh, have something I need to do over in that part of town anyway.”

“Oh, really? What?”

Now it was Anthony’s turn to go a little red. “I’ll think of something,” he said, looking down and grinning slightly.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - T H R E E

MARGARET

The discussion during the walk to Anthony's house was benign—comparing English classes, for which they had different teachers, and Anthony's elementary school in Albuquerque. Megan offered enough responses to keep Anthony talking, but she was preoccupied with orchestrating a plan once they reached Howard's.

She knew it was probably a long shot, but she wanted to show him the notebook, to see if he could offer any answers about what Howard was looking for. But sneaking into Howard's room would be tricky if not impossible. It was almost five o'clock, and while on an ordinary day, Howard would not be back until five-thirty, today he should be home, having gotten off work early to pick up Sam from school.

But, then, wasn't it Vicky's day off? If *she* was home, Howard may have asked her to pick Sam up, and Howard might still be at work. Still, sneaking by Vicky would be a problem, but at least she wouldn't be hanging around in Howard's room.

As they turned the corner onto Howard's street, Megan's heart sank: parked in the driveway was not only Vicky's

Toyota and Howard's pickup truck, but also Phil's Oldsmobile. Her initial plan of bringing Anthony up to her room would never work: Howard would have a conniption fit if she brought a boy up to her room and closed the door, and Phil would likely pass out if Anthony walked in again. The only option she could see was to have him wait in the car for her. She would need to go in, sneak over to the hallway on the other side and nab the notebook, bring it back down and take it out to Anthony. *I can do this*, she thought.

They pulled up to the house, and she tried to calm her nerves while figuring out what to say. "Can I ask you something really weird?"

Anthony's face looked a little apprehensive. "Uh, sure...?"

"Could you stay here for a minute while I run inside and get something?"

"Uh—sure, okay."

She opened the door and put one leg out on the pavement before stopping and turning back to him. "It, uh, might take a few minutes," she added.

He put the car in neutral and pulled the emergency brake. "Okay."

She got out of the car and jogged to the front door. She opened it, quietly but not overtly secretive, in case someone was standing behind it.

She went inside and heard cartoons coming from the living room television. Sam was laying on the floor in front

of it, his neck craned upward, a trance-like look on his face. She peered around the corner into the kitchen to see Vicky, sitting at the kitchen table, reading a newspaper.

“Hi, Vicky... is Howard around?”

Vicky looked up. “Oh, hi, Megan. He’s upstairs taking a nap.”

“Oh, okay.” Megan felt her heart sink. Not really sure of what to do next, she walked up the first landing and paused. Her brain swimming with disappointment and frustration, it was as if her legs were continuing on with the original plan, and she moved noiselessly up the stairs to the opposite hallway. It wasn’t until she got to the top of the stairs that she realized what she was doing, and though part of her was screaming to turn back around, she looked down the hallway and saw that Howard’s door was open about two feet. She could hear Howard’s snoring coming from within the room.

Was this a sign? Any other time she had been up here and Howard had been in his room, he had had the door closed. It was hard not to see this circumstance as an invitation to do what the logical part of her brain told her was a stupid idea.

Peeking in, she could see Howard laying on his side with his back toward the open closet door. She thought of Anthony sitting outside and the light she was sure he could shed on the contents of the box. With a deep breath and a gulp of determination, she gently pushed open the door a little and tiptoed across the carpet toward the closet, her

eyes remaining fixed on Howard as he slept. As she reached the edge of the bed she lowered herself to her hands and knees and moved the rest of the way toward the open closet door, seeing the box on the floor just inside.

She reached the box and began pulling the lid off the top. This was the most noise she had made yet, clashing against the otherwise silent room and causing her heart to beat faster. Hearing no interruption in Howard's raspy snoring, however, she continued to slowly lift the lid, and soon she was peering over the edge of the box at the newspaper clippings about Palmetti. Seeing the notebooks beneath the articles, she tried to gingerly lift the top two, remembering it was the third one down that contained the sketches. As she pulled it out, though, the top two notebooks slipped out of her hand and fell with an audible thud.

In response to the sudden noise, Howard suddenly stopped snoring, and Megan froze with fear. She looked up at his form on the bed, his back to her, and she crouched lower as she frantically tried to form an escape plan. Could she fit under the bed? If she got low enough, could she creep along the bed and make it to the door without him seeing?

Unable to decide, she cowered silently, staring at the back of his head on the pillow. She imagined his eyes open, ready to twist around and see where the noise had come from, but he didn't move. She watched his shoulders and couldn't even see the movement of his breathing.

Then, as suddenly as the snoring had stopped, Howard took a deep intake of air and the slow rhythm of his breathing resumed, matching the tempo of the more audible snores from moments before. After about ten seconds, Megan carefully replaced the lid of the box, got to her feet and quickly snuck out of the room.

She slipped the notebook beneath the front of her sweatshirt and tiptoed down the stairs to the landing, bending low to see if anyone was at the foot of the stairs. Seeing the entryway empty, she ducked back outside and jumped back into Anthony's still-idling car.

"Um, do you think we could, like, drive down the street a ways?" she asked, envisioning Howard coming down the stairs.

Anthony shrugged. "Sure," he responded, and backed out of the driveway. He turned left, following the street to the now nearly vacant parking lot of Sam's school. He pulled in to a parking place and turned off the engine.

Megan took a deep breath. "So... this is going to sound really, um, really bizarre, but you said you worked at Bag & Save, right?"

Anthony had a confused look on his face, as if expecting her to say something completely different. "Well, yeah..."

Megan looked down at the notebook in her lap. Her hands were shaking a little bit. "There's this really weird drawing in here, and I was wondering if it looks familiar to you..." She flipped the notebook open to the sketch of the grocery checkout area, and showed it to Anthony.

Anthony looked at Megan with a bewildered look. After perusing it for a moment, he spoke.

"Yeah, I guess this looks like the Bag & Save, from what I remember." He still looked baffled. "Did you—*draw* this?"

"No, that's just the thing... I didn't. But you think it looks like the Bag & Save? Like, you recognize it?"

"Well, yeah, I guess it looks like it—who *did* draw this?"

"Well, I—can I show you something else?" She took the notebook and turned it around, showing the police sketch of the woman. "Do you know who *that* is?"

Anthony's expression was blank as he looked at the image. "Should I?"

"I don't know," Megan answered, taking the picture and looking at it herself.

"Wait," Anthony said, reaching for the notebook. Megan handed it back to him eagerly, not wanting to interrupt his thought process. "Maybe... that mark there"—he pointed to the odd bit of shading on the woman's jawline that Megan had assumed to be a random smudge of lead—"that was like a weird birthmark she had..."

He gazed at the picture again, then covered his eyes with his hand and tilted his head back. Megan stayed quiet, giving Anthony wide berth to remember.

"There was someone... Margaret," Anthony said, uncovering his eyes and looking back at the picture. "She used to work there! Like, when I was *really* little!"

"Really?"

“Yeah! Man, I—I had totally forgotten about her.” He was working hard to remember, looking at the picture and then looking away or closing his eyes. “She would give me M&Ms in the break room. I totally forgot about that!”

“Margaret? Do you remember her last name?”

“Nah, I don’t think I ever knew it. My mom might, though.” He looked down at the picture once more and then back to Megan. “Where did you *get* this stuff?”

Megan didn’t feel right keeping Anthony in the dark. “Well, my, uh, dad”—she didn’t know how else to refer to him, but “dad” definitely didn’t sound right now that she had said it—“well, he’s actually not my *real* dad, more like my *stepdad*, but—that’s another story. I kind of... took this from a box in his room—”

Anthony looked a little surprised, and Megan felt her face go hot. “It’s just that he’d been going out, looking for something, somebody, I don’t know—I think it’s her. But I don’t know, because he’s being all secret about it.”

“So you *stole* this from him?” Anthony asked.

“No, I’m going to put it back! But... he never tells me anything. I just—worry about him, you know?” Megan felt awful; that last bit was stretching the truth at best.

Anthony looked at the picture again. “Why do you think he’s looking for her?”

“I don’t know.”

They sat in silence for a moment. Anthony looked lost in thought; Megan felt horrible and exposed.

“Do you want me to go? I can walk home,” Megan asked, looking downward.

“No, no, don’t be silly.”

Anthony gave her back the notebook, started the car and drove back around the corner to Howard’s. He pulled in the driveway once more and turned to Megan.

“Look, I—I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be all judgmental.”

“Nah, you’re right, I don’t know what I was thinking.” She looked at the notebook in her hands with a feeling of hatred.

“Listen, I’ll ask my mom about Margaret. I’m sure she remembers her. I’ll let you know what I find out.”

“That’d be awesome,” Megan responded appreciatively. She looked at Anthony, but his eyes looked beyond her and to her left, squinting a little. She swiveled around to see the front door open; Howard stepped out onto the porch, holding the door open and waiting.

Megan let out a sigh of frustration and then felt a pang of panic as she realized what she had in her hands. Wide-eyed, she looked at Anthony, slipping him the notebook “Can you—take this? Like, give it back to me tomorrow or something?”

Anthony seemed to understand completely. “Yeah, no problem,” he responded quickly. “I got it.”

Megan grabbed her backpack and got out of the car, adrenaline pumping, but determined to not let it show in front of Howard. She waved at Anthony and walked up to the porch, avoiding Howard’s gaze.

"I thought you had a study group," Howard asked, accusingly.

"I did," she answered, passing him to enter the house.

"Then who was *that*?"

Does he not know about the notebook? she thought to herself. Had she really dodged this bullet?

"It's a boy in my study group. He gave me a ride home."

"From where?"

"From *school*," she answered, her voice full of irritation. "We were in the library!" She started up the steps to her room.

"Vicky said you were here a few minutes ago and then left again."

"I had to grab something and run it over to a friend. For our project."

Howard's expression hardened, but she could tell that he was finding no fault in her story. "I don't like the idea of you getting rides home with boys."

"I'm *fifteen*."

"Don't take that tone with me."

She rolled her eyes and continued upstairs. Hesitating at first to see if he was going to continue, she heard him walk into the kitchen and so she climbed the rest of the stairs to her room and closed the door behind her.

Safe at last—or at least as long as Howard didn't notice the notebook missing—Megan dropped her backpack and flopped onto her bed to calm down and catch her breath. She wanted to call Anthony, to ask him more about

Margaret, but she didn't dare do it with Howard in the house.

It was going to be a long evening, she decided.

Anthony found her the next day after first period and handed her the notebook. "My mom didn't remember her last name, either. She said she worked there for five years or so, and left."

Megan felt disappointed; she had been hoping for something she could look up in the phone book.

"But get this, though," Anthony continued. "She thinks that Margaret left for a job at Safeway up here in Los Alamos."

"Seriously?" This was great news; not only was Los Alamos a lot smaller than Albuquerque, but it was a lot closer—all the more reason that Howard would have known her somehow. It made Megan feel like she was closer to an answer. Had she seen Margaret at the grocery store without even knowing it?

Although Sam asked to go visit Charlie after school—Sparky's was quickly becoming Sam's favorite hangout—Megan said they needed to go back to Howard's so she could work on homework. It was only partially true, of course: she could have just as easily gotten it done at the restaurant. The real reason was that she needed to get the notebook put back in the box in Howard's closet before Howard came home.

When they got to the house, Rom and Vicky were both there; Rom was at his computer, and Vicky was folding clothes in the dining room, watching television. She was more than happy to turn the channel for Sam to watch cartoons, and Megan went upstairs to her room. She set down her backpack, pulled out the notebook, and took another look at Margaret's sketch. It looked exactly like the type of police sketches Megan had seen on the evening news when there was some criminal at large. When had Howard seen her? She looked at the other drawing, the scene in the store. Had it been at Bag & Save? If so, why had this chance meeting caused Howard to be obsessing over it years later?

Who *was* Margaret?

Megan quickly flipped through the rest of the notebook to confirm that there were no other drawings or notes in its pages, then closed it and slipped down to the first landing. Hearing Rom's chair squeaking in the other room, she quickly sneaked up the stairs toward Howard's room. Opening the door carefully and finding the room empty, she went over to the closet and opened the door. She looked down to the spot just inside the door and—

The box was gone. She swiveled around quickly, her heart beating faster but there was no sign of the box anywhere; not on the floor, not on the shelves. She looked out in the room and couldn't see it anywhere. She checked on the desk, under the bed, in every corner—it was nowhere.

Panicked, she closed the closet door, made one more search around the room, and walked back down to the landing. Looking down the stairs toward the kitchen-turned-storage room, she half-wondered if Howard had just moved the box down there. She went down the steps and peered around the corner toward the computer room; Rom was there, but his back was turned. She ducked into the storage room, but again she could find no evidence of the box anywhere.

She looked at the notebook in her hands. *I could just leave it here*, she thought. She weighed the possibilities. There were enough other people in the house—including a seven-year-old kid!—that surely she wouldn't be blamed for it. If Howard knew that she had been snooping around in his room, she was sure she would be grounded for months, but how could he have known it was her?

Deciding the best thing to do was to get rid of the evidence, she looked around the storage room for a place to put it. She decided to slide it behind a box of Christmas lights. *Vicky will find it when she starts putting up decorations*, she thought, *it'll be perfect*. She walked over and was just boosting herself up on a wooden footstool when she was startled by a voice from behind her.

"What's that?"

She froze. There was no time to stash the notebook anywhere. She turned around and saw Rom standing in the doorway of the room.

Megan stammered to come up with an excuse, but she was drawing a blank. She just stared back at him, at a complete loss of words, holding up the proof of her theft she had been so close to hiding. “I, uh...” What could she say? Rom had caught her in the act. Surely he, being Howard’s right-hand man, recognized the notebook from the box and knew what it contained.

But the look on his face was not one of recognition but of confusion. “Is that a... notebook?” He stepped toward her. *Does he really not recognize it?* she thought.

Here was an escape, she realized—if he truly did not know what the notebook was, or if he was simply mistaking it for something else, she could go along with it. But before thinking about it, the words were out of her mouth—

“I found it in Howard’s room.”

“Really?” Rom replied, intrigued. “Can I... see it?”

Megan hesitantly handed it over.

Rom opened the notebook, found the sketch of Margaret and gazed at it for a few moments. “Who is this?” he asked, his eyes fixed on the picture.

“Do *you*... not know?” Megan responded, slowly and quietly.

Rom looked up at Megan. She thought she could see a look of sadness and disappointment in his eyes: it was the same look she saw when she told Rom to stay away from her mother.

“Has Howard talked to you about any of this?” he asked, hesitantly.

“No,” Megan answered. “He’s never told me anything. I figured you knew about it. I mean, is that the woman you and him are looking for?” She motioned to the picture, and Rom’s eyes lowered to look at it again.

Rom lightly bit his lip and nodded, almost imperceptibly. “Yeah, we were,” he said, in a near-whisper. He looked back up to her. “This was in his room?”

Megan nodded. “Have you seen it before?”

“No,” Rom replied. “But I know who it is. I don’t understand why he’s never shared this with me.”

“Rom, who *is* it?”

Rom paused for a moment, still looking at the sketch. Without looking up, he answered.

“This is Howard’s daughter.”

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - F O U R

A FELLOW DETECTIVE

“His *daughter*?”

Megan had briefly entertained this possibility, but it seemed more likely a wild idea born of her own imagination than anything else, and hearing Rom say it out loud was a shock.

Rom sat down on a nearby half-upholstered bar stool, still looking at the notebook. His eyes moved to the opposite page, the sketch of the grocery store, and a look of recognition crossed his face once more.

“He’s never said anything about having a daughter,” Megan said, sitting on the stool she had been standing on when Rom came in. “In fact, I could swear I remember him saying he never had kids.”

“Well, not to you, I guess,” Rom responded vaguely, his mind still obviously on the drawing. “Probably didn’t want you to be jealous.”

“*Jealous?*” Megan asked incredulously.

Rom looked up, snapping back into the conversation. “Oh, I mean, because you’re, well, you’re kind of like his...”

“Don’t,” Megan interrupted, with an icy stare. “Is that who you went to Albuquerque to find?” she asked, motioning to the sketch.

The curiosity in Rom's face faded and was replaced by the dull look from before. "I don't know. I *thought* I had found her, or at least I was close. But it didn't work out."

"What made you think it was her?"

Rom took a slow breath before speaking. "Well, around the time Charlie moved in, I got that modem and started connecting the that BBS for work stuff... Anyway, one time Howard asked what I was doing, just curious, you know, and I told him all about it. Then, a day or so later, he asked if I could use the BBS to help him find someone.

"I said, 'Sure, who are you looking for?' And then he tells me about how he and Barbara were shopping in Albuquerque one time, and he saw this girl who just, like, popped out, you know? Like he knew her from somewhere.

"I guess he had just learned about the bridge, and he realized, what if this girl is my daughter, and she jumped?"

"Wait," Megan said. "So he thinks this girl he randomly saw at the grocery store was his daughter?"

"Yeah."

"Just because she... looked weird?"

Rom paused. "Have you ever met anyone from your old life?"

"Well, yeah... I, uh, talked to my mom a few weeks ago."

Rom's face dropped almost imperceptibly at the reminder. "Did she recognize you?"

"No, of course not."

"Hmm," Rom responded, thoughtfully. "Did she seem—I don't know, eager to talk to you? Like, did she seem caught

off-guard by you? Like she was trying to figure out if she knew you from somewhere?”

Megan thought about the encounter in the laundromat. She had thought once or twice about how strange it was that her mom had confided in Megan about her personal life. *But it wasn't like she recognized me*, Megan thought.

“I don't know,” Megan said truthfully.

“It doesn't always happen, apparently. Vicky said she ran into her cousin once, one that she had been real close to before she jumped, and the cousin didn't know her from Adam's off ox. But one time my brother came to town, and we bumped into each other, and it threw him totally off. Like, he was completely at a loss, trying to figure out where he remembered me from.”

“Did he figure it out?” Megan asked intently.

“Nah, they never do. But there's something there, it's weird. Like I said, it doesn't happen every time. Anyway, he asked me if I could use the BBS to help find out who this girl was, or maybe even locate her. I didn't have any real high hopes... I mean, it's really mainly just computer nerds on there, not exactly any real cross-section of the population, if you know what I mean.

“But Howard remembered the exact date it happened, he knew which store it was, the time of day, that sort of thing. He even had the names of some of the other people who had worked there. So I posted the information we had, figuring nothing would come of it.”

“But something did?”

“Not at first—not for a while, really. He’d keep asking, though. I mean, he wasn’t being pushy, but you could tell he was excited by the possibility. I’d never seen him like that. He was always just this serious, emotionless guy. Like the divorce and everything had just sucked the life out of him. But with this, he was like a little kid: excited like I’d never really seen him.

“So, yeah—one day, I dialed into the BBS and there was a message waiting for me from someone who worked for Furr’s down in Texas. It was the headquarters of the company that owns the store where he saw her. He said he might be able to help me out, that he worked in accounting, and he could look up employee records and maybe find her.

“Well, that got Howard excited, but, long story short—well, we kept hitting roadblocks. Like he had a personnel list, but no schedule. Or he gave us contact info for the manager at the time—but it ended up being someone who had quit years before.

“Pretty soon, Howard was just, you know, kind of losing interest in it. Not that he was giving up finding her or anything, but it was like he realized that the whole BBS thing was just a pipe dream. He didn’t say it to me, but I think he felt stupid for getting his hopes up.”

Rom rubbed the outside corner of his right eye with his hand. Megan couldn’t tell if it was because he was tired, or if he was trying to inconspicuously wipe away a tear.

“Well, I kept working, even though he stopped asking me about it. Checking public records, back issues of

business magazines, that sort of thing. A few months ago I actually found the name of the store manager of a nearby store, and contacted him; turns out, he knew the lady who managed the Bag & Save at the time, and so I spent some time trying to get ahold of her—anyway, I was getting closer and closer.

“Then, the other day—after Thanksgiving dinner—I got a phone call from one of my contacts in Social Services in Albuquerque. I had been trying to cross reference my search with the foster care system, but it’s *really* hard to get information from them. Well, we went down and were able to see the records for this person I had been looking for, and it turned out she was on one of my employee lists from the Bag & Save!

“Well, it seemed like a sure thing, so I called her, and said I was in contact with her father and that he wanted to see her again. We were actually able to set up a meeting in the parking lot of the store that afternoon.

“I was so excited on the way over, thinking about how sweet the reunion would be, how much Howard would be surprised that I had kept working on the search, especially after he had sort of backed out. We got there, and there she was, just like she said she would be, looking pretty nervous. But as I was getting out of the car, Howard says, ‘No, that’s not her,’ and just—sits there. Didn’t even get out of the car, or talk to her, or... anything.

“She was nice about it, but she didn’t seem all that convinced either. I decided to ask her, point blank, about

whether or not she jumped from the bridge, thinking that would seal the deal. But she just gave me a real strange look and said she needed to go.”

Rom’s voice was just starting to crack as he finished the sentence, and he tried to casually look down, as though hiding it from Megan. But Megan didn’t need to see any tears to understand how Rom had felt. As they sat, Rom looking back into the soulless eyes of the sketch in the notebook, Megan could suddenly see how much Rom just wanted Howard’s approval, a sign of his appreciation, even an acknowledgement—and she felt awful as she realized how badly it had ended.

“Margaret.”

Rom looked up, his eyes red and misty. “Huh?” he answered, his voice shaky.

“The girl... in the drawing. I think her name is Margaret.”

“How do you know?”

“A friend of mine at school—his mom used to work at the Bag & Save, and he said he recognizes her. That’s why I had the notebook... to ask him about it.”

“Really? Who—who is your friend?”

“Anthony Clark. His mother is Susan.”

“Susan Clark?” Rom wiped his eyes and a look of recognition crossed his face. “I recognize the name. Does she live in Los Alamos?”

“Yeah,” Megan replied. “Rom—she’s Phil’s wife.”

Rom's eyes widened, and he spoke with hushed interest. "Seriously? You mean—Phil knew all along?"

"I don't think so. I mean, when did Howard see her at the store?"

"May of 1970."

"And Phil jumped, when? Mid-seventies?"

"Oh, yeah, that's right." Rom seemed to catch on. "She only worked at the store because she and Phil never got married."

"Right."

Rom looked once more at the notebook, turning to look at the sketch of the store once more. Megan expected him to regain his excitement about solving the mystery, but instead he closed the notebook, the previous dolefulness and resignation returning to his face. He got up and handed the notebook back to her.

Taking the notebook, Megan looked up, baffled at his reaction. "Don't you think we can find her now?"

"You're welcome to try. I don't think Howard is interested in my help. I mean, he'd had this sketch for how long, and never showed it to me..."

"Well, maybe he didn't think it was all that good?" Megan asked imploringly.

"It must be pretty accurate, if your friend recognized it."

"Still, though, we could figure it out together!"

Rom, having already made his way toward the door, stopped and turned halfway around. His hands were in the pockets of his slacks, and his left hand looked like he was

nervously fumbling with the contents. "I don't know, Megan. I've been trying for a long time to help him, but—I don't know. Maybe Phil's right about all this. Maybe we're meant to stay away."

"You don't really think that's true, do you?"

Rom thought for a moment. "I don't know," he answered softly, and went back into the computer room.

Sam had just finished getting his pajamas on and Megan was combing his still-wet hair, sitting on the floor of the hallway with her back to the wall. Charlie sat across and to her left, facing her, with his back against the door of the linen closet.

Megan had just repeated what she had learned from Anthony and Rom earlier that day: about Margaret, about his and Howard's failed trip.

Charlie was shaking his head in amazement. "How crazy is that, that Anthony's mom worked there? I mean, small world, right?"

"Yeah," replied Megan. She wasn't sure what to think: was it a bizarre coincidence, or was there something else at work?

"What did you tell Anthony about the drawing, then?"

"I told him the *truth*," Megan answered a little haughtily, trying to hint to Charlie about not keeping secrets from friends. "I told him I found it in Howard's room."

"And who did you say Howard was?"

Megan blushed. "I told him he's my stepdad," she muttered.

"Okay," Charlie said, smirking. "I guess that's *close* to the truth."

They were quiet for a moment until Sam spoke up. "Is 'stepdad' like 'stepbrother'?"

"Yeah," Charlie answered him. "Do you know what that means?"

"'Step' means you're special."

Charlie looked at Megan with a raised eyebrow. "Well, that's a pretty good way of putting it. Where'd you hear that?"

"My brother. Kyle always says that it means you're special. Is Howard special?"

Megan answered as diplomatically as she could. "He's special because he's not my *real* dad. Just like he's not *your* real dad."

"He's a *special* dad?"

"Sure." Megan imagined what Howard would be like as a dad. It seemed so unlike him, despite the obvious attempts he would make to try to be a father figure to her. Or maybe it was *because* of those awkward attempts, she thought—either way, he wasn't very good at it.

Megan turned her head at the sound of someone climbing the stairs and saw Vicky come around the corner of the second landing. She reached the top of the stairs and walked down the hall as both Megan and Charlie shifted to allow her to step over them and into her room.

“Vicky, was it you that told me that Phil knew Howard before he jumped?” Charlie asked her after she cleared the human obstacle course.

“I don’t know. But yeah, he did, why?”

“Oh, just wondering. We were just talking about... stuff.”

“You kids are so gossipy. If you have something to ask Phil, why don’t you go ask him? The man doesn’t bite, you know.”

Megan *had* thought about asking him, but the air between her and Phil had been uneasy since she had been outside his room, pleading with him to talk to Susan. If anything, it seemed like Phil had been deliberately trying to avoid Megan since then, perhaps worried that she would bring it up again. To add to all the other ways she felt like a horrible person—telling Rom to stop seeing her mother, making Anthony think she was a paranoid freak with the whole notebook thing—she felt like she had stuck her nose, unwelcome, into Phil’s private life. And the more she thought about it, the more she wondered if the only reason she wanted Phil to talk to Susan was so that it would be easier for her to get closer to Anthony.

“Do you think we could find her, Charlie?” Megan asked after Vicky’s door was closed. “You know, Margaret?”

“Do you have any idea where to look for her?”

“Well, she lived in Albuquerque...”

“Yeah, like fifteen years ago. And Albuquerque is a pretty big place, even if she still does live there.”

“Anthony said she moved up to Los Alamos at some point.”

“Do you know her last name? Her maiden name would be Fenton, right? Have you looked in the phone book?”

“Yeah, Howard’s the only listing.”

“So she probably got married or something.”

“Yeah,” Megan responded, deep in thought. “When do you think she would have jumped?”

Charlie let out a long breath. “It could have been *anytime*. I mean, when did he see her in the store? 1970?”

“Yeah.”

“So, anytime before that, right? Late sixties, maybe? Or... fifties? I don’t know, how old is she?”

“I have no idea.”

They sat quietly for a while, Sam’s head drowsily drooping onto Megan’s knee.

After a while, Charlie spoke.

“Why do you want to find her, Megan?”

Megan didn’t answer. It had started because she was tired of being left out of the loop, and knowing that Howard and Rom were keeping something from her felt like the last in a long line of secrets. But what was it now, now that she seemed to be more in the know than either of them? Was it because she wanted to help Howard? Not really. Or Rom? That wasn’t really it either, though she still somehow felt guilty for telling him to stop seeing her mother. *No, it’s something else*, she thought.

It wasn't until she was in bed that night, after they had laid Sam in his bed, after she had told Charlie goodnight, after the lights were off and the house was quiet, that she realized what it was. Thinking about the sketch in the notebook now hidden behind a box in the storage room, about the face that seemed to live only in the memory of a man she didn't really care much about, she realized that somewhere out there, separated from her by space, or time, or even something more unknowable, was someone who she understood.

And, perhaps, someone who would understand her.

Maybe, she thought as she lay awake hours later, I will ask Phil about her.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - F I V E

PHIL'S DREAM

The article on the desk in front of him was familiar. Wasn't this from when the Meson Facility was first coming online? It was hard to focus on the words, the mathematics, the charts included here and there.

Looking up, he saw that he was in his old office at Technical Area 3. Back when he used to work at LASL, back when he was happy. Before things started to fall apart. Before the promotion that had eventually led him to the bridge.

He felt a strange mixture of comfort and dread. Comfort from the coffee cup on his desk. The dusty AM radio, tuned for years to KRSN, quietly broadcasting the news. The picture of Susan, her curly hair showing no signs of grey, holding a three- or four-year-old Anthony in a bright red cap.

Where was the dread coming from?

He turned around to the other desk and the chair was empty, but a jacket was draped over the back. He tried to picture his former officemate, to remember his name, when suddenly the door to the hallway opened and the man came in.

"Ken," he mumbled to himself, just as the name popped into his mind.

But there was something wrong. It wasn't the friendly, easy-going Ken he remembered. He looked pale, and he was sweating. There was no trace of his usual smile, and his movements were erratic, panicked, as he strode immediately to the file cabinet.

"Ken," he spoke, a little more firmly.

Ken was rifling through the open drawer, pulling out a folder here and there and setting it carelessly on his desk, so that after the third or fourth addition to the pile, the subsequent ones began slipping off to the floor, throwing the contents out over the feet of the rolling office chair.

"Ken, what are you looking for?"

"Oh, Phil, uh—hey, how's it going?" he answered with a nervous laugh, as if not originally noticing his presence from a few feet away. "Oh, uh—"

His voice drifted off upon finding the folder he was apparently searching for, gazing at the labelled tab, and then laying it atop the remaining hanging files and taking out the topmost clipped-together stack of papers.

"Say, Phil, you remember this report we filed? Hey, you know, the date's wrong on here, I, uh, we turned this in on the sixth, not the, uh, thirteenth. You know, I'm just going to go ahead and fix that."

"What report? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, you know, right?" He looked as though he was trying very hard to look casual, but his panicked

nervousness was painfully apparent. "Don't worry about it, Phil, I'll take care of it, okay?" He sat down at the typewriter and fumbled in the drawer for a clean sheet of paper.

Standing up, he looked over Ken's shoulder at the packet he had pulled from the file. Looking at the title of the report, he had a moment of recognition.

"Oh, that was the report we did after you got back from the Rochester Conference, right?"

Ken's neck seemed to convulse a little at the mention of the conference, but he nervously tried to continue as though there was nothing wrong. "Nah, man," he smiled, "I, uh, I didn't go that year, remember?" He looked up, with desperation and pleading in his eyes.

"Ken, what's wrong?"

"Look, I'll just get this changed, okay? Type up a new title page so we're in the clear, right? I mean, so it's—so it's correct..." Ken turned back to the typewriter, trying unsuccessfully to feed the paper in with his violently shaking hands.

He grabbed Ken's arm. "Ken, what's going on?"

Ken stopped, then looked around at him, the thin façade finally giving way to an expression of terrible fear.

"Phil, it was Émile Mynatt, at Houches. I—I talked to him, at—at Rochester." He looked up again. "He... he was an informant, Phil! He sold the information to Libya!"

He stood there, trying to take it in. "What information, Ken? It wasn't anything *we* told him, right?"

"I told him, Phil!" A tear rolled down his reddened cheek. "I showed him info from TA-55!"

Technical Area 55, the plutonium facility. Most information pertaining to it required a Q clearance, which he and Ken both held. To talk about this with a foreign national was tantamount to treason, but of course it happened now and then, under the radar, among scientists. People they knew, who they trusted, who would never use it to start a war. Or, worse yet, to end one.

Mynatt. He didn't recognize the name. Houches was the big French research school. It didn't surprise him that Ken knew who it was; he excelled at collaboration.

"Libya? Gaddafi? How did they know?"

Ken was shaking, unable to focus on the typewriter, staring into space as the panic mounted. "Pierce... he said FBI called him. We're being investigated! He asked if any of us had contact with Émile, so I told him no, Phil. But I did, I saw him in Chicago..." His voice trailed off for a moment before his attention went back to the typewriter. The urgency returned to his voice as he turned the platen to feed the paper in. "I just need to change the date on this report... so they see I never went to Chicago, right?"

He put his hand on Ken's shoulder. "Ken, they'll know! They're FBI, Ken! One piece of paper won't fool them!" He crossed the office to the window that overlooked the parking lot. Craning over his desk to see the main entrance a few floors beneath him and to his left, he saw two unfamiliar men in dark suits and stepping out of a black car.

“Ken,” he breathed, a feeling of panic and dread swelling up inside of him, “we have to go! We need to go now!”

Ken turned to him with a look of renewed horror. “Where?” he whimpered.

Where, indeed—his mind searched the building’s floor plan for an escape route. Each of the entrances to their hallway had a badge checkpoint; would the guards be instructed to keep them from leaving? He looked outside again; the men had not yet reached the front entrance. Perhaps, if they were just now reaching the front badge officer, they still had time before word got to the south entrance on the other end of the building.

“Come on, Ken, we can still make it!” He moved back to Ken, prepared to pull him from his seat if necessary. “Bring the report—and uh, what else? What might incriminate you?”

Ken pulled the paper from the typewriter and stuffed it haphazardly in the folder. “Uh, the...” he ran his fingers nervously through his hair. “Oh! The two reports from last year!” He spun around to the still-open file cabinet and searched quickly through the tabs as Phil moved to the door and peeked out into the hallway, seeing that it was empty.

“Come on, Ken!” he urged. Ken found the files he was looking for and pulled them out. He grabbed the folder next to the typewriter and ran to the door.

They moved as quickly as they could toward the fire door at the end of the hall, keeping their speed just below a run so as to not arouse suspicion from the open-doored

offices they passed. Opening the fire door, they darted down the stairs with much greater speed after confirming that the stairwell was vacant, but stopped to regain their composure before opening the door to the entryway where the officer sat behind the badge checkpoint desk.

"Afternoon, Luís," he said, mustering enough calm as he could.

"Hi, Phil," the guard said, looking up from his magazine. His expression changed a little when he saw the two men. "Anything wrong?"

He became keenly aware now of the sweat dripping from his forehead. "Ah, no," he responded, trying to cover his desperation with a chuckle. "Uh, it's a sauna up there, for some reason."

"Oh yeah?" the guard replied, sitting up. "You want I should call Zia, have 'em look at the system?"

"Oh, yeah, if you wouldn't mind," he replied, seeing the opportunity to keep the FBI from getting a message through by phone. "That'd be great."

Just as Luís reached for the phone, however, it began to ring. He and Ken continued on, trying to keep the terror inside them from bubbling to the surface. They continued down the hall toward the outer door as Luís answered the phone.

"South Checkpoint, this is Luís." A pause. "Who... really? No, they just came through! Yes, hang on just a minute—Phil! Ken!" Luís yelled out. They didn't turn

around, pretending not to hear, and increasing their speed. "*Phil and Ken! Stop!*"

Hearing Luís' change of tone, he knew that they had past the point of no return, and he broke out into a run. *Luís wouldn't actually shoot*, he thought. *Would he?* They reached the door, pushed it open, and started running across the parking lot. In the corner of his eye, he saw fast movement from the direction of the front entrance; he turned to see the two men he had seen from his office window sprinting in their direction. Luís followed, having just made it out the door from which they had just exited.

"Here!" Ken shouted, and he swiveled his head to see Ken pointing at the green sedan immediately ahead of him. He ran behind it to the passenger side and pulled the handle. Finding it locked just as Ken reached the driver's side, he looked back at the two men; they now had guns drawn and were shouting something; he couldn't hear over the panicked sound of Ken fumbling with keys and the thumping of his rapid pulse in his ears. He crouched behind the car, wondering if the steel and glass would offer any protection, wondering what a gunshot wound felt like.

Finally, Ken opened his door and let him in. He slammed the door, still crouching and trying to keep one eye on the men, now some fifty feet away. The engine roared to life and Ken put it into reverse, backing out of the parking spot with a burst of reckless speed. They were both pressed into their seats with the force of striking the car behind them, but

Ken threw the car into gear and squealed the tires as they tore out of the parking lot and into the street.

"No, drive, *drive!*" he shouted to Ken, who was turning in his seat to look for the agents they had left in the parking lot. "Keep your eyes on the road, I'll watch for them!"

"Where do I go?" Ken shouted back, his body shaking. "What do I do now, Phil?"

"Go hole up in the Jemez for a few days, Ken. Take the plate off the car and avoid the police. Call my in-laws in a few days"—he pulled a pen from his shirt pocket and scribbled the phone number on an old receipt he found on the dashboard—"if I'm not there, they'll know how to find me."

The words had come out with an air of confidence but he wasn't convinced of them. Still, Ken seemed to be calmed by them, if only just a little. "What about Jessie and the kids? Should I call them?"

Ken's ex-wife and kids in Texas. No, it was safer to leave them out of it. "Don't call them. The less they know, the better." He wished Susan had the same distance from the situation. But it would be a matter of hours, maybe minutes, before the FBI was at his house, looking for him, questioning his wife.

"What're *you* going to do?" Ken asked, turning into a parking lot to cut through to a different road.

"Drop me off at the corner here. I'll run back home and get Susan and Anthony. We'll head to her parent's or something and then, I don't know—I'll figure something

out. Just get out of here. It's going to be okay." Ken slowed at the red light, turned right through the intersection and stopped alongside the curb.

Opening the passenger door, he looked over at Ken. "It's going to be okay," he repeated, though he wasn't sure himself.

As Ken drove off, he ran across the road and started across the crowded parking lot, looking around for any sign of the agents. He could hear police sirens in the distance—had the FBI brought in the county to help? He crossed West Jemez Road and headed first for the wooded area across the way for cover. Then he realized that a man in a buttoned-down shirt and slacks would look far more conspicuous traipsing through the woods than he would walking along the sidewalk.

It was clear that the quickest way to get to his house before the FBI did was to cross Omega Bridge. Because it was the main link between the townsite and the Lab, it had heavy traffic, and he realized that the FBI could even be watching it. But if he hurried, maybe he would get across before they had a chance to post anyone there...

He got to the bridge and saw nothing out of the ordinary; no parked cars, no police, and the only pedestrian was a woman in her sixties on the sidewalk, walking toward the townsite. He started along the bridge, walking as quickly as he could without looking like the fugitive he had become.

Suddenly, the sound of sirens screamed from the townsite. He froze, scanning Diamond Drive, and as he saw

the police car approach the bridge, he crouched down behind the concrete barrier that protected the sidewalk from the roadway.

The car crossed the bridge beside him, slowing down. He looked down over the canyon below, willing the car to move past, and it did, coming to an apparent halt at the other end of the bridge.

Realizing that a roadblock was being set up, he got to his feet, still bending low, and began continuing on toward the other side of the bridge.

And then, suddenly—
“Daddy!”

He looked up and there, at the other end of the bridge, was Susan. Her beautiful face was etched with fear; she had nothing with her, looking like she had left the house in a panic. Little Anthony was holding her hand, but fighting to break loose and run toward him.

Aware of the police behind him, he motioned frantically for them to stop, to get away. But Anthony, his whole face shining brightly with happiness and anticipation, had now gotten free from his mother and was running toward him with increasing speed. He squealed with delight as he ran, his high voice bouncing with every step.

“No!” He cried, panicking. The police behind him could likely hear. Anthony could fall on the hard sidewalk and be seriously hurt. And if he fell—

He looked around and suddenly it was night. The sounds of the traffic beside him was replaced by the dark and silent

woods, and it was a different bridge. Different, but all too familiar.

Susan remained on the other end, screaming, as the little boy continued toward him, bounding across the metal grating, causing the entire bridge to shake.

“No!” he cried. “Anthony, stop!”

Susan was now moving forward as well, fighting her fear to reach her son. Even with this resolve, her terror kept her feet at a short, halting pace, and kept her gaze locked forward with a steeled look in her teary eyes.

He tried to run now, and step after step, yard after yard, closed the gap between him, his wife and his son until he finally reached Anthony, whose exuberance was now replaced with a realization of his surroundings. As he scooped the boy up, his little hands clamped around his body in fear as he began to cry.

He kept his eyes now on Susan as they neared each other, but was distracted by lights coming down the dirt roadway beyond the tower behind her; several cars pulled up and uniformed men poured out: six, eight, ten or more. All rounding the entrance to the bridge and all holding guns.

He turned around. The other tower was already manned with a similar force.

Susan reached him. She huddled next to him and seemed to be oblivious to the men on either end of the bridge. Instead, she was looking down the canyon, gazing at something intently with a look of shock and surprise on her tear-stained face.

He turned to look just as the sound met his ears: three helicopters coming up the canyon, the crescendo of their engines drowning out the sound of the men. As they drew nearer, floodlights burst forth that blinded him for a moment before he put his hand up to shield his eyes.

"Daddy! I'm scared!"

The tightening of Susan's grip seemed to match the boy's feelings. He looked toward the end of the bridge to see the men slowly making their way toward them. He didn't need to turn to know that the situation was the same on the other end of the bridge.

"What's going to happen, Phil?" Susan yelled over the helicopter rotors. "What are we going to do?"

Slowly, though he knew he couldn't even entertain the thought, he looked down at the canyon floor beneath them.

* * *

Though the dream had woken him well before sunrise, Phil stayed in his room through the breakfast hour, waiting as he heard each of his roommates dress, eat, and leave, until the house was quiet and empty. It had been more than ten years since he had jumped, and not once had he dreamt. When he had finally recognized their absence, he had assumed it was because dreams were one of the many things accessible only to the living.

As he lay in his bed, he tried to quiet his mind to return to that place and time again, wishing it could somehow

continue. He imagined it again and again, hoping that he would slip back into unconsciousness and that his slumber would disconnect the idea from his waking mind and allow him to experience it again.

To feel her touch once more. To feel her breath, her warmth.

At length, he arose, washed and shaved. He called the hardware store to tell them he would not be in today; he so rarely asked for a day off that even at this late hour it was gladly granted. He dressed and went downstairs, but he wasn't hungry; the feeling in his stomach was akin to butterflies of nervousness, but in a way he didn't want to sully this feeling of transfiguration with something as base and carnal as food.

He drove to the store across from the high school first. He had seen the flowers in his mind, and nothing in the displays really matched his imagination; they had roses, to be sure, but was that the wrong message? Were these wildflowers too casual? What *was* he trying to say? At last he resolved to buy the prettiest and most colorful bouquet, prepared to apologize for not knowing which one to choose.

He drove next to her neighborhood, stopping a few houses up the street to collect his bearings. *Megan said to do this*, he thought. *She knows them*. After ten years of silence, surely the dream was an omen. What to say? *When she answers, the words will come*. If not, he would leave and never return.

He opened the car door, carefully took the bouquet from the passenger seat, and stood up. He closed the door gently, took a deep breath, and began walking toward the house. The singing of the birds. The cool air. The sound of his footsteps on the asphalt. The brilliant sunshine.

The stinging in his chest, building now to a stabbing, burning pain. The difficulty in breathing. The darkness creeping in from his peripheral vision and the pounding in his ears.

The flowers fell first, before he dropped to his knees and rolled to his side. He landed on the rough pavement, grasping at his chest, trying to rescue the beautiful bouquet from the ugly road where it now lay, as the terrible blackness completely enveloped him.

THE ACCIDENT

When the doctor finally came out to the waiting room, he immediately went over to Howard and sat down beside him. Megan tried to decipher the look on his face, but either the news was nothing to be concerned about—Megan couldn't imagine that this was the case—or the doctor was so desensitized to this sort of thing that nothing about it fazed him. Worried that it might be the latter, Megan looked instead to Howard's expression for answers.

He had called the school during biology class, and they had summoned her over the PA. She had had no idea what to expect as she walked to the office, half-wondering if she was in trouble again for somehow neglecting Sam.

Walk up to the hospital, the message had said. *Phil's had a heart attack.*

She had tried to call back, but there was no answer at the house. Hoping that Howard had remembered to pull Sam out of school also, she followed his directions and made her way up the two or three blocks to the emergency room.

When she had gotten there, Howard was busy filling out forms. Rom had been there, too, though he had since gone to pick up dinner for everyone. Sam was there, Megan was relieved to see, and had been playing with the worn out

toys, having driven one particular plastic car under every row of seats in the room twice before Megan finally got him to sit next to her and read *Tertle the Turtle*. Now he was busy coloring in a coloring book provided by one of the staff members, pausing for long stretches of time to look up at *The Fall Guy*, which was playing on the television mounted in the corner.

Vicky was still on duty in the ICU on the second floor, but had come down to the ER multiple times in an effort to be close to the action. She had come out to the waiting room once earlier in the evening to talk to them, but had no authority in the operating room and thus little to report.

Megan sat in the seat with her arms wrapped tightly around her knees, her backpack on the floor beside her chair. She knew that the downtime would be better spent catching up on homework, but she couldn't bring herself to focus on it. It all seemed so insignificant and useless.

She looked up at the small clock on the wall; it was almost 7:15.

She looked for any sign of shock or sadness on Howard's face. There was none; he simply listened calmly to the doctor's hushed tones, asking a question here and there.

Megan's mind still reeled at the news Howard had given her. It wasn't much, but it was enough: someone had found him in a neighborhood behind the high school. Sprawled out in the middle of Pueblo Drive.

"Do you know what he was doing there?" Howard had asked Megan. *Yes*, she thought to herself. *Don't you?* She had

always assumed that Howard and Phil told each other everything. Surely Howard knew what Phil had been doing all these years, sending money to his family, arranging for their every need. Was it that Howard was trying to play dumb so as to not let on to Megan what he knew?

But it was what Howard *didn't* know that was tearing Megan apart: that it was all her fault.

That it was she who had put Phil up to this. Phil had everything under control until Megan brought Anthony into the house. Until she begged him to step out of the shadows and go start things over with his wife.

And that it was all such a selfish act. She had wanted Phil to be closer to Susan so that she could be closer to Anthony.

The doctor stood up, still talking with Howard, who remained seated. The conversation still looked to be congenial, even lighthearted. But, really, had she *ever* seen Howard break down before? Could it be that the news was indeed terrible, and Howard was just suppressing his reaction to it behind a veneer of friendly conversation?

Phil's words haunted her now. *When I jumped off that bridge, I gave up my right to be with her.* Was that right? By defying their separation from their past, had they violated some natural law for which Phil was now paying penance? Megan had never attributed the bridge's powers to something supernatural, to something religious. In a town like Los Alamos, she had always assumed it was a scientific

anomaly, something some physicist in the lab somewhere probably understood but never bothered to worry about.

But suddenly she was facing the possibility that she was wrong. She had dismissed Phil's beliefs—that they maintain a monastic seclusion from the outside world—as the superstition of a stodgy old man.

But then he took a leap of faith—*her* leap of faith—and fell.

She caught the movement of someone coming in through the outside doors and turned expectantly to look. Charlie hurried in, dodging a man in a staff uniform who was walking to the exit while looking down at his watch.

“Any news?”

Megan motioned toward Howard and the doctor, who were still talking, the doctor now leaning against the wall as though they had settled into another lengthy topic.

Charlie sat in the next chair over and looked deeply into Megan's eyes. “How are *you* doing?”

Megan didn't know how to answer, so she just shrugged. As always, Charlie seemed to understand, and nodded. “Sambo!” he exclaimed as he turned with a smile to Sam. “Watcha doin’?”

Sam looked up and smiled. Then he put on a deliberate, serious and wide-eyed look. “Phil had a *heart attack*, Charlie,” he stated, as though he was the first to say it.

“The doctors are taking care of him, though, right?” Charlie responded, with an appropriate look of concern on his face.

“Yeah,” Sam said, turning back to his coloring. “My Grandpa had a heart attack once, and he had to go to the hospital too,” he continued without looking up. “But he got mostly better. He said I couldn’t jump on him anymore, though.”

“Yeah, you might have to stop jumping on Phil, too.”

Sam smiled broadly. “I don’t jump on Phil!”

“You *don’t*? Gosh, I jump on him *all the time*!” Charlie teased.

“No you don’t!” Sam laughed.

Howard’s conversation with the doctor wrapped up, and the doctor went back through the doors into the back. Howard got up and walked over to where Megan, Charlie and Sam were.

“Hi, Charlie,” Howard said, before addressing both of them. He took a deep breath. “Phil is in a coma.”

Megan buried her head in her knees, trying hard to keep the tears at bay. Seeing this, Howard continued hastily.

“It’s not necessarily a bad thing—Dr. Harris said that if he weren’t in one already, they’d probably put him in one anyway, so his body has time to heal.”

“So was it pretty bad, then?” Charlie asked.

Howard didn’t answer right away. “There’s no such thing as a good heart attack, I guess. But his heart stopped, and the lack of blood flow to his brain caused the brain tissue to swell up. He said that it’s lucky the neighbor saw it happen and started doing CPR, because Phil would likely have died otherwise.”

Megan gasped, and Charlie put his hand on her leg to comfort her. He continued, looking at Howard. "How do they fix that?"

"They just have to let the swelling go down on it's own. He's too unstable to send to Albuquerque, but really they'd probably end up doing the same thing down there anyway. They got his heart pumping again, but he's on a ventilator because of the coma. The thing is, he could have some significant brain damage, but there's no way to know until he wakes up."

Charlie asked the question Megan wanted to ask, but didn't dare for fear of breaking down.

"Do they know how long that will be?"

"No. Could be a few days, could be a few weeks." he paused for a moment and Megan got the impression that he was having trouble keeping his emotions contained. "Or," he said, his chin just starting to quiver, "there's always the chance that he—won't."

They sat for a few moments in silence as Sam, seemingly oblivious to the conversation, sat coloring and watching TV. Finally, Howard got up.

"Rom should be back in a bit with dinner for everyone, if you want. But you don't have to stay if you want to head back to the house. The doctor is hoping to have him stabilized to the point where he can be sent up to the ICU, but it may be several hours."

"I want to stay," said Megan, who had finally mustered up enough control to speak.

Howard actually smiled a little. "I'm sure that means a lot to Phil."

Rom arrived after a short time with food from McDonald's. Sam lit up at the sight of the Happy Meal toy, a small bag of Lego bricks, but otherwise the meal was subdued. Vicky came out again while they ate—there was nothing new to report on Phil's condition, but she wanted to make sure they were kept up to date. Charlie shared some of his chicken with her and comforted her with an arm on her shoulder as she sat and ate.

Megan looked around at the small group, huddled around a low table and quietly eating. It felt similar to the feeling around the Thanksgiving table, except that they weren't forcing it this time. No one dressed for the occasion, there were no toasts being made, there was no awkward pause. Odd and tragic as it was, it was comfortable.

Of course, she thought, *it's not everyone*. Phil's presence at other times was subtle, when Megan paid attention to him at all, but his absence now was pronounced. And...

"Did anyone call Linda?" Megan asked, quietly.

There was a pause as the group turned to Howard, who was swallowing a bite of his fish sandwich.

"I called her this afternoon," Howard answered. "She asked that I keep her posted on his condition, and wanted to know if there was anything she could do."

"Is there?" Megan asked, not sure herself if she was being sardonic or sincere.

“I asked her to keep him in her prayers.”

After Megan had finished eating, Vicky was nibbling at a chicken nugget when she seemed to stop mid-conversation. Megan followed her line of sight to the door, where two people, a pretty-looking nurse and a thin but muscular man with very short brown hair, walked in from outside. They were talking to one another, the nurse demurely laughing, the man smiling. Though the two weren't holding hands or anything, they were walking too close to each other to be just friends or coworkers. The man seemed to be surveying the room, almost as though he had a chip on his shoulder; when his eyes swept over the corner where Megan and the others sat, she refocused her eyes to the television beyond so she wasn't caught staring.

Megan looked back at Vicky, who was still watching the two. Her expression had changed; she seemed paler and a little distraught.

She looked back at the two people, wondering what was causing Vicky's strange reaction. Was it the man or the woman? As they approached the door that led to the treatment rooms, they took each others' hands, and the woman leaned forward. Rather than warmly accept the affection, however, the man seemed stiff, continuing to look around the room. Finally, he gave her a kiss on the top of her head, squeezed her hands, and began to walk back toward the outside door as she disappeared through the doors into the back. As the man neared the exit, Megan

thought he caught his eyes linger on their group, or at least on someone in it, and caught the hint of a smug smile on his face.

As the man left the ER, Megan secretly looked back at Vicky. Rom, who was sitting next to her, had apparently noticed Vicky's state as well, and appeared to have recognized who was causing her emotional reaction.

"Shaun?" he asked her, in a half-whisper that was obviously meant for only her to hear. Vicky gave a tiny nod of acknowledgement, and Rom gently moved his hand to hers, causing her to break her gaze from the scene, look over to him, and exchange expressions of anxiety and understanding.

After another hour or so, there was still no change in Phil's condition, though Vicky, still shaken from the encounter in the waiting room, was visibly exhausted. Phil was moved to Vicky's floor, where Megan and the others were able to see him for the first time since the previous night. He looked uncomfortable, Megan thought, with the bulky breathing apparatus sticking out of his mouth, a large part of his head bandaged, and the blankets covering him up to his neck. The various machines around him whirled and beeped and Megan wondered if he could somehow hear their subdued talking.

At the behest of her coworkers, Vicky left to go back to the house and get some rest. Megan wanted to stay instead

of going home to put Sam to bed; fortunately, Howard seemed to know her thoughts.

"I can take Sam home, Megan," he offered, while putting on his coat. "Do you want to come with me, or go home with Charlie?"

Megan was taken aback by the show of consideration; she realized Phil's situation must have been weighing on him more than she had thought. "Are you sure it's okay? I mean, I can come with you if it's easier."

"No, it's fine. Just don't stay out too late."

"Thanks, Howard."

Howard turned and gave her a meaningful look. She wasn't quite sure how to interpret it, other than a gesture of respect and caring.

"Good night."

The door closed, and she and Charlie sat quietly amid the rhythms of the medical equipment that, for all Megan knew, were the only things keeping Phil alive. Charlie put his arm around her, and as she put her head on his shoulder the emotions of the day finally overpowered her.

Charlie squeezed a little tighter as she sobbed.

"It's okay," he whispered. "It's what we're all feeling."

"It's *my* fault, Charlie," she cried. "I told him to go see her."

"It was just a random thing, Megan. It could have happened at home."

She straightened up and looked at him through wet eyes. "But you don't know that! What if it's because he shouldn't

have been there? Maybe we're not supposed to try to go back to our old lives!"

"Megan, I know"—Charlie must have been wondering whether or not Phil could hear him as well, because he lowered his voice suddenly—"I know that's what Phil thinks, but like you've always said, it's just superstition, right?"

"I don't know, Charlie. What if something bad is going to happen to me if I keep going with Anthony? Or my mom?" She paused to wipe her nose with a tissue Charlie had given her. "I mean, it's like Phil said, maybe we're not meant to have another chance to be with our families, because *we* made the choice to leave them. We thought we were killing ourselves, so this second chance at life is already more than we deserve! We *chose* to jump off the bridge."

Charlie sat quietly, thoughtfully for a minute before speaking.

"Sam didn't."

They sat for a long time in silence after that, as Megan considered Charlie's words. *He's right*, she thought. *Sam didn't choose this*. But was that a glitch in the cosmic plan? Was he an unfortunate innocent, unknowingly caught in the crossfire?

They sat in silence for a long time, and soon it seemed that the whole wing had become subtly quieter. Lights seemed a little dimmer, and even the constant repetitions of Phil's various machines slowed a little, as if even within his unresponsive condition he was settling into a restful sleep.

Amid the gentle music of the various beeps and rattles, Charlie spoke.

“I was varsity quarterback in high school, and I went to a *lot* of parties. I was pretty good at holding my liquor, too. We’d be at somebody’s house, like, someone on the team, and their parents would be gone and people would just be getting *trashed*. I remember Davey, man, he’d get so sloshed and get so sick, and then he wouldn’t remember a thing about any of it.

“Not me, though. I’d get buzzed, but not, like, messy. I think part of it was knowing when to quit, you know? And it was bad—I swear, the parents would go out but there was so much alcohol in the house, you *know* they were stocking up for the kids to party.”

He paused for a moment, thinking. Megan didn’t say anything, but looked at him to show that she was listening if he wanted to continue. He caught her eye and, seeming to understand, continued.

“There was one night, though—it was in the spring, after the season was done, and we partied at Joe Montoya’s in White Rock. He had whiskey, and man”—he shook his head, not in pride, but in shame—“I was knocking them down one after another. I was stupid. Just—drinking like there was no tomorrow.

“I got drunk that night, and—well, it wasn’t like I was sick, but I was having a hard time. I ignored it though. People started heading out and I got in my truck to go back home. I think I ran the stoplight there in White Rock.

There was no one else on the road that time of night, but still—I really had no business driving, and I should have realized it at that point. At least I should have gone back to Joe’s to sleep it off there.

“I got on Pajarito Road and I remember there were, like, no cars on the road—I think it was after midnight. Used to be, in that situation, I would open it up, and fly around those curves at seventy, eighty miles an hour. But you know, I’ve gone over it and over it in my head, and on that night I’m *sure* I wasn’t going more than five over the limit.

“But even then, I was having a lot of trouble staying on the road. There was twice I caught myself drifting, one time off the shoulder, the other time I was in the oncoming lane. I mean, there were no other cars out, so it was no big deal. Thinking back on it now, it’s a good thing there weren’t any deer out, or I’d have hit one for sure.

“Although,” he continued somberly, “That would have been better, really... if it had been a deer, I mean. I don’t really remember crossing the yellow line the second time. When I saw the headlights of the oncoming car, I thought *they* were the ones driving on the wrong side of the road. My brain was so slow, and my vision was so blurry—by the time I figured it out, it was too late.”

Megan realized she had been holding her breath. It took the sound of Phil’s machines, their constant pulse continuing where Charlie’s voice had dropped off, to remind her to draw in a new lungful of air.

Charlie continued, his voice on the edge of whispering. “I just remember flashes. I know my windshield was shattered, and I remember the smell of antifreeze and—and burnt plastic. I remember seeing the other car, it was a crumpled wreck. It had rolled, I don’t know how many times. It was a little Toyota, but... you couldn’t tell. You couldn’t even tell it was a *car* anymore. The front end of my truck was a mess, but that little car—it didn’t stand a chance.

“I woke up in the hospital the following morning. I had gotten a concussion when my head hit the windshield, and my wrist was broken. My whole body was in pain from the accident. My mom was there in the hospital room when I woke up, and I could see that she had been crying. At first, I was like, ‘Hey, I’m okay, Mom,’ and she said she was glad. But I could tell there was something else wrong.

“I got my bearings and started to remember, and then I realized—I had been drinking. Suddenly, I realized why she was crying. I was going to jail. I asked her what was going to happen to me, and she just said I needed to focus on getting better, that we would worry about that later.

“I knew she was just trying to protect me from it, and so I shut up about it. But the thing is, that still wasn’t why she was crying. I didn’t even realize it for ten minutes or something. I was so wrapped up in my own problems to even care. But then I asked her, ‘Ma, who was in the other car?’

“Two high school students, she said. Girls. One freshman and one sophomore. Said they had been driving home from a friend’s house in White Rock, and had turned back because one of them had forgotten her purse.

“I asked her if they were okay, and she didn’t want to tell me. But I needed to know, and I kept pushing. She broke down crying. She said the older girl had lost a lot of blood, but she was going to make it.” Charlie took a deep, halting breath. “But her friend—her friend was dead before the paramedics arrived.”

“Oh, Charlie,” Megan whispered, shivering and fighting back tears.

“I was released from the hospital the next day, and my parents took out a chunk of their retirement to post bail, so I was able to go home until the trial.” He stopped, and shook his head. “Man... what did they sacrifice for that? And it didn’t feel like home anymore. There was no joy. I could hear my mom crying every night. My brothers avoided me... I think they just didn’t know how to deal with it, you know?

“The trial was months away. So what was I going to do? I didn’t want to go back to school. I just hung out at home... really, I didn’t even do that, because me being there just made everyone else walk on eggshells.

“So I’d go on long walks, find places to hang out. I’d go to the library and read the papers, trying to learn about the girl I’d killed. I was just sick with guilt, you know, trying to find a way to repay that family. But how could I? It would almost be easier if they were angry, or violent—I’d have let

them tear me limb from limb. Maybe that would have taken away the guilt.

“But they weren’t that type. I read in the article that they wanted to forgive me, that from what they understood about me, that they knew I wasn’t the kind of kid who would have normally done that type of thing. They knew it was punishment enough that I would have to live with it the rest of my life. Yeah, they were right. But that wasn’t enough. I just thought about what I had taken away from them. Like, you think about this girl, their pride and joy, all the first steps, and school pictures and best friends, and—it’s all just... gone. In a moment. Because of one stupid kid.

“The guilt kept burning me from the inside out. I wanted to scream, to wake myself up from the nightmare. To tear a hole in the world, burn it all down and start over. It finally got to the point where I knew there was only one thing to do.

“I got up early one morning, before anyone else was up, and left a note on the kitchen counter. Told them how sorry I was. I told them to tell the girl’s family how sorry I was, and that I hoped this would somehow balance things out. I didn’t think how it would affect my parents, other than the fact that I was as good as dead to them already, since the alternative was spending the rest of my life in prison.

“I left the house and walked—actually, after a few minutes, I was worried they’d wake up and try to stop me, so I ran. I got to the bridge just as the sun was peeking out

over the trees, ran out to the middle, and jumped over quickly before I had a chance to change my mind.

“Next thing I know, I was in the clearing. You know how it is... you feel like you’ve been asleep for a long time, but I looked around and the sun was still just coming up. I could see the bridge over there, I saw where I had jumped, and I couldn’t figure out what had happened. So I ran out and tried it again.”

“You jumped *twice?*” Megan asked, flabbergasted.

“Yeah. I was sick with guilt, and... angry. I mean, here I’m trying to kill myself, to atone for what I’d done, and there’s this... *thing* working against me. And, of course, the same thing happened... I woke up in the clearing again, same exact spot.

“That time, I just laid there. I thought maybe if I did, death would somehow come and find me. So I just laid still, looking up at the sky, and it was weird—listening to myself breathing, it felt like something was... different. Like, maybe things were going to somehow be okay. After a while, I turned over, and I saw Rom’s sign. At that point, it didn’t make any sense to me, but I guess it was the first clue I had to what was going on. I remembered the number and headed for home, hoping that maybe no one had woken up and seen my note yet.

“Well, when I got there, the door was locked, and so I walked around to my window, which I would always leave unlocked. But I got there, and not only was it locked, but none of my stuff was in there. It was, like, an exercise room.

I knew something was up because I had been gone maybe half an hour—an hour, tops—and there was no way they could have cleared out all my stuff in that time. It didn't look like anyone had even woken up yet.

“So I sat down and tried to figure out what was going on, and then it occurred to me—what if, somehow, this was exactly what I had hoped would happen? I didn't take the time to figure out why my stuff was gone, I just took off running. I found a phone book, and I found their addresses, and I went first to the older girl's place, the survivor. There it was in the driveway: the car I had hit, but it didn't have a scratch on it. You have to understand, it had been completely totaled, crumpled up like a piece of paper, and yet there it was, like nothing had happened to it.

I ran to the other house and hid across the street, just waiting. After a little while the front door opened and out she came. She was smiling, so full of life. So...”

His voice trailed off, like he was looking for the right word.

They were both quiet for a moment, listening to the machines' rhythms. Charlie looked up at the ceiling and took a deep breath. Perhaps he had been on the verge of tears; Megan hadn't noticed, having been lost in her own thoughts.

Then he continued. “The bridge had given me everything I had asked for. She was alive, the accident had never happened. I had offered my own life as payment for my mistake, and that payment had been accepted. I found a

phone and called the number on the sign, and Vicky came to get me. She explained what was going on, why my family wouldn't recognize me, and she tried to explain it as some scientific thing that nobody understood. But *I* understood. My prayers had been answered."

Megan looked at Phil, watching his chest rise and fall in a strange syncopation with the machines' steady pulse. "Charlie, do you think this is his punishment for trying to go back to his old life?"

"I don't know," Charlie quietly replied, his voice less sure now than it had been moments before. "I've been thinking about that a lot, too. I know you're worried about you and Anthony. I'm worried about me and Sarah."

Megan looked up at Charlie, not understanding. "Sarah? From Sparky's? Why—"

"Sarah—was the girl who died in the accident."

They sat for another ten or fifteen minutes before Megan suggested that they get back to the house. Megan had her jacket on and they were just about to get up when they heard hurried footsteps approaching in the hall.

"Here to see, uh, Phil Anderson?" came a familiar voice as the footsteps came to a halt at the nurse's station across the hall. "Room 315," came the nurse's response. As the visitors approached the door, Megan and Charlie both turned around.

Anthony stepped carefully into the room, followed by his mother. He looked at Megan as if expecting to find her

there. Then his eyes shifted toward Phil's still form in the bed, and he put his hand on his mother's arm.

"It's him, isn't it," he asked Megan. "He's been... taking care of us?"

Caught between fear and determination, Megan nodded. Susan stepped forward, her cheeks wet with tears, and Megan could see she was clutching a small, haggard bouquet of flowers in her hand. She went to Phil's bedside, laid the flowers on the table, sat down in a chair, rested her forehead on the blanket covering Phil's motionless arm, and began to silently weep.

Anthony put his hand on her shoulder to comfort her and looked back at Megan. "Can we stay here for a while?"

"Of course," was all Megan could get out without falling apart, and she and Charlie stepped quietly out of the room.

ONE YEAR

Megan slept that night in fits and starts. She was numb from seeing Anthony until after she was in bed, and it wasn't until then that she felt any twinge of regret for sneaking away as quickly as possible. Had Anthony come back out of the room, looking for her and Charlie, wanting to ask a million questions?

The following day at school seemed to progress with a dense sluggishness. Megan had pondered skipping school—considering what had happened, she half-wondered if Howard would actually excuse her truancy—but realized that going to class was probably the only thing that had any chance of keeping her mind off of Phil.

She still wasn't sure what to do about biology; on one hand, Anthony deserved an explanation; she hated the thought of dodging any more questions. But the idea of being honest with him seemed impossible on so many levels: first and foremost, she was terrified of what might happen if she attempted the same breach Phil had tested. Second, would Anthony even believe her?

Lastly, Megan thought, it wasn't her story to tell. Phil had known and loved Anthony since he was an infant. They were the family *he* had lost, the ones he had supported from

behind the cosmic curtain for so long. *Will he get a chance to tell them?* Megan thought. A cold chill ran through her as she considered it, and she quickly put the idea out of her mind. She wouldn't let herself spend any effort on that particular thought while there was still any hope of Phil waking up.

Sitting in the cafeteria, she finished only half of her sandwich before finally deciding to confront Anthony, if for no other reason than to keep him from thinking she was avoiding him. There was part of her that was hoping he wouldn't show for some reason, but as the hour approached she realized that it would be better to face the conversation rather than postpone it another day.

She tried to arrive early to class to make time to talk, but Anthony rushed in just as Mr. Connor was starting the class. The day's lesson was the furthest thing from Megan's mind, as she continued to look across the class at Anthony. But if he ever turned around to see her, she hadn't noticed it, and when the bell rang at the end of class, she sat frozen in her seat, ready to talk. He got up, flashed her a quick, forced smile, and left.

She was suddenly struck by a pang of nausea. Why had he not come to talk to her? Had she somehow hurt him? As the rest of the class filed out, it became clear to her that maybe it was not Anthony who needed someone to talk to—it was her.

Just before the bell rang to end sixth period, her name was called again over the PA, and she walked quickly to the office, dreading the message that had been left for her.

Preparing herself for the worst, she breathed a sigh of relief to find that the message was from Vicky calling to tell her that Rom would pick up Sam, freeing Megan from her usual responsibility for the afternoon.

Feeling grateful for being released from her duties, Megan exited the doors of Senior Lobby, followed the sidewalk around the gym and then walked up the street to the hospital.

She felt sure that, in the eighteen or so hours since she had last seen him, there would have been some progress in Phil's condition. As she walked through the parking lot of the Episcopal church toward the hospital, she daydreamed that Phil would be alert, watching television or sitting up in bed, reading a newspaper. Crossing Trinity Drive, she scolded herself for letting her imagination run wild, and felt foolish for getting her own hopes up. *Vicky would have told me if he had woken up*, she thought.

When she arrived in the ICU, she was greeted by a tired-looking Vicky sitting at the nurses station, working on paperwork. Vicky invited her back behind the counter, and Megan sat in an office chair next to Vicky's work area.

"How is he?" Megan asked, bracing herself.

"No real change from last night, I'm afraid," Vicky replied, flipping through sheets of paper and making quick notations on each. "I mean, the incisions are looking good, and there doesn't seem to be any signs of infection, so that's good."

Megan was disappointed, but not surprised. "Do you think he'll wake up soon?"

"There's just no way to tell, Megan. He needs to heal, and his body will let him wake up when it's good and ready."

Closing the folder she had been working on, Vicky turned and faced Megan with a concerned, almost stern look on her face. "Megan, did you know that *Susan* came to visit Phil last night?"

Megan was thrown off by the almost accusatory tone of the question. "Yeah," she replied, hesitantly. "She and Anthony came in right when I was leaving."

"What exactly have you told Anthony?"

"I haven't told him anything!" Megan felt a mixture of anxiety and anger rising in her throat. "I mean, I know he's Phil's son, but I know Phil doesn't want him to know, and I—I would never tell his secrets, Vicky, I wouldn't!" Megan kept her voice low but was fighting emotion at the insinuation being made.

"I just know you two are close—"

Megan flopped back into the chair, interrupting Vicky with a pointed sigh. "I don't know if we are or not," she half-heartedly replied. "They came in last night, and I was still in shock from everything that happened, and then Charlie and I just left, and Anthony—well, he didn't even talk to me at school today. I haven't spoken to him since before Phil's heart attack."

Vicky looked pensive for a moment and her expression softened. "It looked like he was going to visit Susan when he

collapsed,” she said, half to Megan and half to herself. “But it’s so unlike Phil. Do you have any idea why he would have done that?”

Megan’s heart was in her throat. “It’s because I told him to,” she responded, looking down.

Vicky responded with a look that was a mixture of confusion and shock. She said nothing, so Megan told her about Anthony’s surprise visit to the house, and Phil’s reaction. She told him about Phil’s monthly checks. She told her about the conversation between her and Phil after Anthony’s visit, how much Phil said he missed Susan, and about Megan’s urging Phil to go see her.

Vicky seemed to understand. “So she knows it’s him who’s sending the money?”

“Yeah,” Megan replied. “I don’t know how she figured it out, except... well, Rom told me how people from your old life can recognize you, like a little? Do you think it’s that?”

“Could be, I guess,” Vicky replied thoughtfully. “But then she had never seen him until she came to the hospital, right?”

“Maybe she saw him when the ambulance picked him up?”

“Yeah, maybe,” she answered.

Vicky looked as though she might say something else, but a nurse, pushing a cart of equipment, called her from another corner of the station.

Megan walked across the hallway to Phil’s room and pushed open the slightly ajar door. Phil was in the same

position he had been the night before, the machines continuing their rhythmic patrol beside him. In contrast to Phil's stillness, the room looked as though it had been lovingly tended to; the flowers Susan had been clutching in her hand were sitting in a vase on the counter, and a quiet radio was playing "Wonderful Christmastime."

Megan sat in the chair and looked at Phil, willing him to wake up. She had hoped for at least some change, but the reality of the situation began to settle in around her. *What if it's years?* she thought. *What if it's never?* The injustice of it—that this poor man would never get to speak to the woman he loved for so long—seemed like a horrible Greek tragedy.

The jangling of keys and the *clip-clop* of heeled shoes coming down the hallway caught her attention, and she listened as the sound drew closer and closer, stopping at the door. She turned around to see Linda peeking into the room. She saw Phil first and reacted with a small gasp muttering something quietly to herself. Her eyes then met Megan's.

"Oh, *bija*, how is he doing?"

Megan had assumed that Linda knew about the coma, so she repeated Vicky's report. "No change since yesterday, but his wounds are healing up."

Linda looked at Phil and somberly shook her head. She was carrying a vase of flowers that she sat down beside Susan's, which appeared withered and pale in comparison.

"And how are you doing, Megan?" Linda walked over to Megan. "This must be very hard on you!"

“Oh, well, it’s pretty hard on all of us, I guess,” Megan responded suspiciously.

“And where is Sam?” Linda looked around the room. “Is he here with you?”

“No, he’s at the house. Rom picked him up from school and he’s watching him this afternoon.”

Linda looked back at Megan with a look of incredulity. “*Rom* is?”

“Yeah.”

“*Ay, ay, ay,*” Linda muttered softly to herself. “Megan, would you like a ride home? I can drive you.”

Megan felt a little affronted at this obvious slight to Rom, whom she might have felt the same way about a month ago, but who now seemed to be a lot more human.

“Uh, it’s okay, I’m fine, really.”

Linda was quiet for a moment, and Megan could tell she was trying to think of another way to convince Megan to go back to the house.

Megan decided to stand her ground. It was almost as if Linda silently understood; she dropped the subject, offered some forced small talk about the weather and hurried off at the earliest opportunity. Megan wondered if she was heading to the house and briefly entertained the idea of calling Rom to warn him before deciding that she was happier not being involved.

She had found the room, with the gentle rhythmic competition between the quiet Christmas carols playing on

the radio and the continuous pulses of Phil's machines, a perfect place to catch up on homework, and had just finished her trigonometry homework to turn in the next day. She opened her small planner to see if she was forgetting anything when she noticed the date.

November 29.

She couldn't believe, after being in school all day and writing the date on innumerable assignments and notebook pages, that she hadn't even thought about it until now.

It had been one year.

The ladder at the western tower rose ten feet or so up from the ground to the deck of the bridge, which afforded a bird's eye view of the surrounding forest. There was a strange peace at the top, a quiet that seemed to have more to do with the cloudless twilit sky than the distance from the traffic on Diamond Drive. Megan thought about stopping there, perching in the relative seclusion of the tower as she had done many times before, but her feet led her out toward the middle. She had crossed so many times to get downtown that the significance of the place had almost begun to wear off; coming to the bridge for the bridge itself, rather than the shortcut it afforded to downtown, seemed strange and perhaps a little silly.

But it had been a year ago that she and Greg climbed the ladder and walked out to the middle to stare death in the face. Thinking back about it now, it seemed to her like two people she barely knew. Greg was someone else now—

or, at least, Megan had begun to come to terms with the fact that he had never really been the person she had wanted him to be. And that girl—that immature girl, who had so little regard for life, and so little understanding of death—where was she now?

Megan found the place where she and Greg had stopped, where they had climbed over the cables. It was easy to find; she had chosen to jump from the exact center of the bridge, where the horizontal guy wires that ran in wide parabolas along either side of the bridge were closest to the middle. She leaned over and looked down to the bottom of the canyon floor, the place where she had expected the rescuers to find their broken and lifeless bodies; the horizon they would never reach, though for two very different reasons.

She stood for several minutes, trying to clear her mind and be in the quiet moment. But that old, nagging thought began tugging at her, and at last, as if in a perverse reverence to the hallowed spot, she let her resistance down long enough to answer it.

What if I jumped right now?

Phil would be at Howard's, eating warmed-up leftovers and watching television from the dining room table. Susan and Anthony would be none the wiser, happy and comfortable in their well-cared-for ignorance. Rom and her mother would be happy, enjoying all the tender excitement of a new relationship. Howard and Vicky would have one less teenager to stress over. And Sam—well, at least Sam would have his own room.

She sat down on the deck of the bridge, her feet dangling from the sides, and watched the sky above the playlot across the way as, one by one, the faint stars slipped into view before her eyes. She had gotten so lost in the silence of the canyon that she didn't notice the sound of oncoming footsteps until they were ten feet away.

Charlie sat down beside her without saying anything. She felt a little embarrassed, exposed in this strange communion with her own past. More than that, though, it irritated her that she was so predictable that he knew right where to find her. And even worse, she couldn't hold back the emotions she felt as she saw herself through his eyes, knowing that her runny nose and halting breaths were giving them away.

"Hey, it's okay," he whispered, putting his arm around her shoulder. She turned, buried her face in the cool fabric of his windbreaker, and cried.

"What if he doesn't wake up?" she asked him, after several minutes of trying to regain enough composure to speak. "Charlie, what if I killed him?"

Charlie took a breath and turned to her with a serious look on his face. "Megan, Phil is an adult. You didn't make him do anything he didn't want to do."

"But what if I put the idea into his head?"

"So what if you did? Even if he was only going because you told him too, odds are, him having a heart attack has nothing to do with it. It probably would have happened if he was at work, or at home in bed."

“It just seems like—”

“Megan, for as long as I’ve known you, you’ve always had a level head about this stuff. What if this”—he motioned to the invisible veil beneath them—“what if it’s just a strange fold in the universe? Just a random freakish thing? It’s so easy to attribute it to destiny, to fate, to an angry God—”

“But last night, you said—”

“I know, I know. But I went home and thought about it last night, and I decided I could live in fear of it, or I could do something about it.”

“Phil did something about it, and look where he is now!”

“Yeah,” replied Charlie, with a sparkle in his eye and a faint smirk stealing across his face. “and you know who’s at the hospital right now, waiting for him to wake up?”

“Susan,” Megan said quietly.

Charlie nodded. “And one of two things is gonna happen. Either he’s gonna wake up, and the love of his life is going to be sitting there smiling at him, and the risk he took is going to be totally worth it—”

“Or he’s going to die and never get to be with her!” Megan protested.

“Yeah, but as opposed to what? Stay alive and never get to be with her? You know what I think? I think he knew the risk of going to see Susan. He might have even figured this was going to happen. But he also realized that the alternative was waiting around for... well, for what?”

Megan sat silent for a minute, looking down at the trees below being enshrouded in the growing darkness. Wiping

the corner of her eye on the cuff of her sweatshirt, she looked up over the edge of the mesa across the way to the now-starry sky.

“We’ve all been doing the same thing as Phil was doing, you know,” Charlie continued. “We’re all just suspended in our own comfort zones. We’re caught between life and death and we’re too afraid to choose one or the other.”

Megan breathed in the abyss below and realized that Charlie was right. Where she had been so cavalier a year ago, the thought of jumping now—actually going through with it, pushing off and feeling the emptiness all around her—was something she would only do in the safety of her own imagination. But it wasn’t the thought of ending it all in the forest below that frightened her; it was the idea of awakening, unharmed, in the clearing on the other side that she found terrifying.

They sat in silence together for a while longer, the first and faintest chills of winter beginning to bite at Megan’s cheek.

“So you said you wanted to do something about it...” Megan said, treading as carefully as possible, hoping he would pick up the hint without her finishing the sentence. She turned toward him, but had trouble reading his expression in the darkness.

“I’ll talk to her,” Charlie responded, understanding her meaning as usual. He remained facing the silent canyon ahead. “I’ll do it if you do too.”

“If I do...?”

"If you let Anthony in."

"What do you mean?"

"You *know* what I mean, be yourself with him. Tell him whatever it is you want so badly to tell him. Let him actually come in to your life, instead of just hanging around in the doorway."

Megan sighed quietly. "I don't know if he even wants to, Charlie."

"Why not?"

"It's just—he hasn't talked to me since they came to the hospital last night."

Charlie let out a tiny chuckle. "It's been one day!"

"Yeah, but when he saw me in biology—"

"Megan, it's been *one day*! Plus, he's a *guy*—"

"I'm just saying, he seemed like he was avoiding me."

"Did *you* try talking to *him*?"

Megan could feel Charlie seeing right through her hesitation to respond.

"Megan, you're afraid—it's okay, I have been, too!"

Charlie interrupted himself as Megan readied her objection. "We've all been afraid. We jumped once, thinking we knew what would happen. Thinking we were in control. Who can blame you for not taking another leap, after what happened to you the last time?"

"And you," Megan responded quietly, feeling exposed.

"And Phil," Charlie responded. "It's happened to him twice now. If he wakes up, you think he'll take another leap?"

Megan didn't respond, but she knew the answer.

"Okay," she responded, after a moment's silence. "You promise you'll talk to her?"

"Yeah," he responded. She put her head on his shoulder again and he put his arm around her as she let out a slow breath and looked up at the stars.

MONTGOMERY WARD

“So... why didn’t you tell me it was him, all this time?”

After all the private rehearsing that Megan had gone through the previous night, and the emotional ramping-up that had distracted her throughout her other classes, Anthony simply came in to class, sat down in the empty desk in front of her, and asked her the same question she had been asking herself for the past forty-eight hours. She sat, suspended in an uncomfortable hesitation, trying to think of what to say.

“Anthony, I didn’t know,” she replied, her tone pleading for forgiveness, but realizing halfway through the sentence that it was a half-truth. “Not until a week or so ago, at least.”

“But, you live with him, right? Is he related to your stepdad or something?”

“No, he’s not,” Megan replied, wanting desperately to explain. “I know, it’s weird. Really, I do—”

“But you just don’t want to tell me yet.”

Megan felt crushed. Anthony seemed so frustrated with her, and he had every right to be. “I do! Just... not *here*,” she said, motioning to the busy classroom around them. “It’s just—”

“Nah, it’s okay, I get it,” Anthony responded, looking down. “I shouldn’t be mad, he’s kept us alive. I just—I guess, deep down, I always thought it would be someone I *knew*. Not some complete stranger. I mean, do you know about the money? Do you know *why*?” He looked up at Megan, wondering if it was an acceptable question.

Megan didn’t respond; she couldn’t find the words. She gave him as sympathetic and apologetic look as she could. “I—Anthony, I—” She wanted to find a time, a place, where they could be alone, where she could tell him everything he deserved to know, no matter how unbelievable it was. *He’ll write me off as a lunatic*, she thought. But at least the truth would be out. “Maybe we can—” she began, but she couldn’t think of a way to propose it that didn’t sound like she was asking him out on a date—something she’d have loved to do, were the situation not so far beyond normal. Giving up, she sighed, and looked down at the desk.

“Well, my mom found Margaret,” he finally reported in a resigned voice, producing a folded piece of paper from his coat pocket. “She got ahold of her yesterday through a mutual friend. Here’s the number. She said she didn’t feel comfortable asking for her address, though. But it sounds like she’s in Santa Fe, working at the De Vargas Mall.”

Megan was stunned, speechless. She took the paper and unfolded it, looking at the number. “Oh, uh, *wow*,” she responded, dazed. She felt miserable: her complete lack of cooperation was being parried by an act of complete

selflessness. A lump grew in her stomach as she searched for some way to show her appreciation.

But at the moment she was going to try to express the yet-unformed thought, Mr. Connor walked over to the stool next to the overhead projector and started the class.

Hearing the teacher's voice, Anthony got up. "I'll talk to you later," he muttered as he quickly returned to his desk. The seat's usual occupant, a girl who had been talking with Leah, sat down in his place.

Megan's mind was a million miles from the classroom as the force of Anthony's news finally reached her halfway through the period. She could call her, but what would she say? Santa Fe was forty-five minutes away. Megan could go find her, but whose life would she be risking by doing so?

"Did you finish?" Vicky asked as Megan came out from Phil's room toward the nurse's station.

"Yeah," Megan replied. She had been fighting the recollection of the events of the day, and focusing on the mundanity of her school work, even in the stillness of Phil's bedside, had been a battle.

"Did Susan come last night?" Megan asked, leaning against the back of the work area.

"Yeah, she did," Vicky responded, not looking up from her paperwork. "She sat with him for quite a while."

"Did you... talk to her at all?"

Vicky shook her head. "I don't know what I'd say to her."

"Did she ask you anything?"

“Just wondered about his progress. I don’t think she feels comfortable asking about anything further than that, and that’s fine by me.”

“Are you even allowed to tell her stuff? Like, his medical information?”

Vicky looked up, and furtively glanced around to ensure they were alone. “She’s his wife,” she said with a shrug. “Even if she doesn’t realize it. I’ve decided that she has a right to know.”

Megan was surprised, even a little irritated. For Vicky, who was always so careful about spreading rumors or sharing gossip, this seemed like sacrilege.

“Really? So you just told her—”

“I think Phil would want her to know, don’t you?”

“Well, yeah, but—” Megan felt slightly relieved that she wasn’t the only one bending the unspoken rules. “Did you tell her about the *bridge*?”

“Oh, no,” Vicky laughed politely, looking back down at her paperwork. “*That’s* up to Phil. I’m not touching that.”

Megan smiled to herself and walked a short distance to a water cooler. She was filling up a paper cup as another nurse came in through the doors that joined the department to the main hallway outside.

“Sorry I’m late, Vick,” she announced as she strode by behind Megan.

“Oh, it’s okay, Jan,” Vicky responded, her voice muffled somewhat by the back of the desk. “I was just finishing

these—Jan, what *happened?*” Vicky’s tone changed to one of surprise as she looked up toward the nurse walking by.

Megan spun around to see. The nurse who had just arrived was dressed in a black coat and pink scarf, had her brown hair teased in a pretty Molly Ringwald style, and was trying to subtly hide a large and obvious black eye.

“Oh, does it look bad?” She responded with a chuckle that almost seemed forced. “I tripped on the stairs on my way out and hit the banister. I’m okay, though.”

Vicky looked concerned but didn’t respond right away, simply staring at the bruise. “Yeah, Jan, it looks *awful*. Let’s get you some ice.” She got up and walked into the supply room. As the injured nurse followed her, Megan remembered where she had seen her before: it was the nurse who had come into the emergency room on the night of Phil’s heart attack—with the man who had captured Vicky’s close attention.

Megan went back into Phil’s room to collect her things. Her homework finished, she had no real reason to stay. Part of her had hoped that Anthony would come, that they would finally have time to talk, but then she felt a growing sense of dread at the conversation they would have—or, at least, his reaction to it.

She turned to look at Phil. It was as if his position had not changed since she first saw him lying there, though Vicky had told her that people had come in earlier to exercise his limbs, to bathe him, and change his sheets. The machines continued to beat time in conflict with the quiet

crooning of Johnny Mathis over the radio. Megan realized that her feeling of apprehension—that he might suddenly awake, or some rapid, noisy beeping would announce some cascading failure—was being replaced by a feeling of calm, that he was in a place of rest, one that his body was in no hurry to leave.

Morbid as it was, she almost envied him.

She put on her coat, hoisted her backpack over her shoulder and went back into the hallway. Vicky was standing behind the nurse's station, having a hushed conversation with another nurse. Jan, the nurse with the black eye, was nowhere to be seen. Seeing Megan come out of the room, Vicky left the other nurse with a quietly urgent "thank you" and moved quickly around the counter to where Megan was standing.

"Megan, would you tell Rom and Howard that I needed to go to Santa Fe? I should be back tonight, but tell them not to wait up for me."

Megan's heart skipped a beat. Santa Fe—De Vargas Mall. "Can I come?"

Vicky seemed taken aback at the question. "Oh, Megan, I—" She shook her head. "I'm not going to—"

"I just need to go to the mall, you can drop me off and pick me up when you're done. *Please?*"

"Megan, I just don't think it'll work out tonight—"

"What are you going down there for?"

Vicky looked a little uncomfortable. "I just—need to run some errands."

“*What* errands?” Megan could tell she was being put off, and she decided she wasn’t going to let up. She looked around at the nurse’s station, where the nurse Vicky had been talking to was collecting folders from the place where Vicky had been sitting. Megan lowered her voice a little. “Are you leaving work *early*?”

Vicky seemed to sense Megan’s determination and looked around. “All right, fine, you can get a ride with me. I don’t know exactly what time I’ll be picking you up, though.”

“Okay!” Megan answered, flushed with anticipation. “Thank you so much!”

Vicky was strangely quiet for almost the entire drive. As they were taking Trinity Drive out of town, she asked Megan shallow questions about school and friends but seemed to almost deliberately be avoiding the topic of Anthony. By the time they reached Main Hill Drive, the road that wound down the side of the mesa into the valley below, she descended into a thick, unnatural silence.

Megan was unnerved also by the speed at which she took the blind turns. She hovered just under the point of being reckless, at a speed which Megan had experienced many times when someone else—Charlie, or a friend from school—was at the wheel, but which was completely uncharacteristic for Vicky. Megan let out an inaudible sigh of relief when they reached the turnoff to White Rock and they left the sheer cliffs behind them, though Vicky did not

show any sign of slowing down. By the time they reached the trestle bridge over the Rio Grande, it seemed apparent to Megan that Vicky had not just been too distracted to talk, but actually seemed consciously against doing so, so Megan reached over and turned on the radio as a distraction for the rest of the forty-five minute trip.

"I'll meet you here at nine o'clock," Vicky told Megan as she pulled up to the outdoor entrance of J.C.Penney. "It looks like that's when they close. If I'm late for some reason, just wait by this door, okay?"

"Yeah, okay," Megan answered, gazing in through the glass doors into the department store, searching for the face that matched the sketch. Megan's mind reeled as she suddenly realized how many different stores there were at the mall, and what the odds were that Margaret would even be working tonight. *Am I even going to recognize her?* she thought, as she unbuckled her seat belt and opened the car door. *All I have to go on is a birthmark.*

"Nine o'clock," Vicky said, calling after Megan as she reached to close the door.

"Right," Megan said, coming back to the conversation. "Right here by the doors. Thanks, Vicky."

She looked at her watch; it was 6:15. She had less than three hours until the mall closed.

Okay, J.C.Penney first, she thought, and walked in.

Her plan had been to go to each of the big anchor stores first, figuring they had a larger workforce and therefore a

higher chance of having Margaret on staff, but by the time she had gone through J.C.Penney and Mervyns, she was about to give up and begin checking the smaller shops. It was after eight o'clock, and she was also keenly aware of how hungry she was, but she continued on, determined to find Margaret first.

She caught herself looking through some sweaters at Montgomery Ward, and had very nearly forgotten her mission when she looked down the aisle and saw an employee she hadn't seen yet in her surveillance. Megan was about to walk away when the woman turned toward her and Megan was struck with a cold jolt of recognition. While the proportions of her face were a little different than the sketch in Howard's notebook—she had fuller cheeks, slightly lower eyes—the birthmark was unmistakable; a small darkish splotch on the left side of her jaw, more pronounced than in the sketch. It was no wonder that Anthony had recognized her because of it. Her coffee-brown hair was cut just below her shoulders, and the faint age lines that emanated from her eyes showed that it had likely been a few decades since the picture in the notebook had been made. She was going through a display of jeans, adjusting the piles and refolding the occasional pair, with a speed and apparent motivation that belied the look of resigned boredom in her eyes.

She glanced over at Megan, who looked down quickly at the shirt in her hands to avoid being caught staring. The flash of green in her pupils caught Megan's eye, though, and

she was struck by their familiarity: they were Howard's eyes. There was no mistaking it. But there was something else there, too—some other aspect of her face that was familiar but which she couldn't quite place.

The woman—*Margaret*, Megan thought, putting the name to the face—refolded another pair of jeans, laid them on a pile carefully but quickly, and paused, looking over the entire display. Megan could tell she was making a few final adjustments to the placements of the pile and realized it was now her last chance to act.

"Uh, do you have any of these in medium?" she asked, grasping quickly at a reason to talk to her, and then realizing after the fact that the one in her hands was, in fact, a medium. She held it slightly closer to her chest in an effort to obscure the tag.

Margaret looked over with a pleasant smile that looked almost forced. "Everything we have should be there on the rack," she said, staying where she was. "You can order one through the catalog, though."

"Oh, uh, that's okay," Megan answered quickly, realizing her bluff had been unintentionally called. Margaret turned as though she were about to leave, and Megan started to panic.

"Hey, are you from Los Alamos?" she asked, falling over her words to keep Margaret from walking away.

Margaret turned back and her well-rehearsed smile was replaced by a look of suspicion. She didn't say anything at first, apparently sizing Megan up.

"I... grew up there—why?" she asked slowly.

"Oh, uh—" Megan responded, completely baffled about what to say next. "My—uh, boyfriend's mom is Susan Clark." The word *boyfriend* felt bitter on her tongue from the knowledge that she had no right to use it.

Margaret face warmed up a little with the obvious recognition, and a trace of smile appeared. "Oh, it was nice to hear from her yesterday. Is your boyfriend Anthony?"

"Yeah," Megan answered, smiling but feeling queasy at the lie she was unintentionally constructing.

Margaret began adjusting a stack of turtlenecks on the shelf beside her. "He was a cute kid. Does he remember me?"

"Yeah, he was telling me about how he'd come into the grocery store you guys worked at."

Margaret chuckled to herself but didn't respond with anything more than a mumbled "mm-hmm."

Megan continued. "So, uh, do your parents still live in Los Alamos?"

Margaret's expression immediately cooled. "No," she answered tersely.

Megan felt her face go red. Her mind scrambled to get back on track. As she was searching for another way to continue the conversation, though, Margaret replaced the stack of turtlenecks. "Well," she remarked in her earlier tone of cold indifference, "have a nice night."

Megan felt panic rising up in her throat as Margaret turned and once again began walking away. She frantically searched her thoughts for some way to get her to stay.

“Do you know Howard Fenton?”

Margaret stopped without turning around and it was as if everything in the store was suspended in silence. Finally Margaret turned around with a look of fury on her face.

“So *that’s* what this is. Who sent you? Phil, was it?” A look of fresh recognition crossed her face, followed by one of disappointment. “Is *Susan* in on this, too?” Her mouth hung open for a moment in disbelief, and then she resumed her expression of anger, and walked toward Megan. “I’ll tell you what I told Phil when he came harassing me about this. I’m not the one you people are looking for. So leave me alone, or I’ll call the cops.”

Her gaze pierced Megan’s eyes for a moment and she could see and feel Margaret’s anger as she recoiled in embarrassment. In that moment, however, Megan thought she saw something more than fury there: there was a sadness, a yearning, a regret, a pleading.

But the moment Megan saw it—imagined it?—Margaret turned around and walked away.

Megan had left Montgomery Ward’s as quickly as she could after that, her abyssal hunger now compounded with a nausea from the dressing-down she had just endured. It was nearly nine o’clock, and so she bought a milkshake and made her way back through J.C.Penney to the door where

Vicky had dropped her off. She scanned the parking lot outside the door and there was no sign of Vicky's gray Celica. Relieved that she hadn't kept Vicky waiting, but now wishing she had taken the time to get something more substantial to eat, she finished her drink while sitting on the sidewalk with her back up against the building.

Soon, she heard an employee locking the doors, and the parking lot began to thin as shoppers appeared from different directions, returned to their cars and drove off, leaving behind a little more silence each time. Megan waited, becoming more and more worried that she had been forgotten, until soon only a handful of cars remained, parked on the opposite end of the lot.

Finally, after listening to the sounds of cars approaching—but never pulling into the mall parking lot—for ten, then twenty, then thirty minutes, Vicky's car pulled into the lot and quickly drove up to the entrance.

"Sorry I'm late," Vicky said as Megan got in. Megan expected an explanation of her tardiness, maybe even a clue to what she had been doing, but she didn't say anything else. On the contrary, she seemed just as quietly focused as she had on the way down, although now she looked a little more frazzled.

"Did you buy anything?" Vicky asked as they drove up the hill past the veteran's cemetery on the north end of town.

"Oh, no. Well, I got a shake."

"Were you meeting friends?"

“No.”

Vicky seemed a little confused and curious, and Megan wondered if she'd press any further. *I'll tell you if you tell me*, Megan thought.

“So I'm going to take you back and pick up a few things, and then I need to come back down for the night,” Vicky said later, as the city lights were disappearing over the hills behind them.

Megan was taken aback. “What for?”

“It's... something personal. Nothing you need to worry about. I'll be fine.”

The last sentence caught Megan's attention in particular, as if her need to say it was evidence that she wouldn't, in fact, be fine.

“Vicky, what's going on?”

“Really, it's nothing,” she replied, with a tone that sounded simultaneously reassuring and cautionary. “I'll probably be back later tomorrow.”

“Probably?” Megan asked, incredulously.

Vicky turned to her with a stern look on her face. “Megan, it's nothing that concerns you! You know, it might be best if you don't try to interfere with other people's personal lives.”

Megan felt like she had been kicked in the stomach. Her only response was a speechless stare before Vicky turned her eyes back to the road. Megan turned in her seat to look out the passenger window at the passing reflectors lining the

road, and spent the remainder of the uncomfortable ride eagerly waiting for it to be done.

They got back to Howard's and Megan got out and ran inside without looking back at Vicky. She saw Rom on the sofa in the living room but ignored him and immediately climbed the stairs to her room. She waited for Vicky to come into the house before closing her bedroom door loud enough for Vicky to hear—immediately after, however, she silently opened it again and sat down, listening for the ensuing conversation downstairs.

“Vicky, where’ve you been? I called the hospital and they said you took off early today.”

“Oh, I had to run down to Santa Fe for something.”

A pause. “Really?”

“Yeah, but, uh... I just need to grab some things and head back down, though.”

Another pause. “Vicky, what’s going on?” he asked in a worried and deeply suspicious voice.

Megan heard Vicky coming up the stairs and quietly closed the door, holding the doorknob and letting it latch slowly.

“It’s nothing, Rom, don’t worry.”

Rom’s voice got nearer as he followed her up the stairway.

“Vicky?”

“Really, Rom, it’s nothing you need to worry about.”

Vicky passed and Megan could hear her going into her room at the end of the hall, Rom following behind.

“Vicky, you need to tell me what this is about!” His voice was insistent and forceful.

“Rom, I just need to get some things taken care of down there. I’ll tell you about it later.” Vicky spoke in hushed tones, doubtlessly aware of Megan’s proximity.

“It’s about *Shaun*, isn’t it?” Rom asked, deliberately louder.

“Rom! I—I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Vicky, I am *not* letting you go back to him!”

“I’m not arguing about this right now, Rom! Mind your own business, anyway!”

They had both moved into Vicky’s room, and Megan strained to listen in to the conversation. Either they were both being quiet enough that Megan couldn’t listen in, or they weren’t saying anything, but Megan could hear Vicky moving around in her room, pulling things from under her bed, from out of her closet. At one point, she thought she could hear the telltale spring of luggage latches being opened simultaneously.

Megan, who had opened the door just a crack again, glimpsed Vicky coming back out of the room carrying a small suitcase, and quickly closed her door. She heard Rom follow her, urging her back.

“He hasn’t changed! Don’t you see? It’s going to end up just like the last time!”

“It’s not!”

“What about the nurse—Jan? I thought they were together?”

“He was—She—” Vicky stammered, and Megan could hear the emotion brewing behind her words. “They’re not together anymore, Rom, she left him. He’s vulnerable, and he needs someone.”

Rom paused for a moment, and his voice dropped in volume but increased in intensity. “He *hit* her, didn’t he?” Vicky let out what sounded like a stifled sob. “He hit her! Vicky, don’t you see what’s going on?”

“Rom, stop! It’s not like that!” Vicky was struggling to keep enough composure to keep her voice down, but was failing. Megan thought she heard movement from Charlie’s room next door.

“It is! Vicky, you—” and his voice dropped off, and there was what sounded like struggling between them just outside the door. Something—an elbow or a foot—bumped into Megan’s door, causing her to step back suddenly, but she leaned in again, keeping a careful distance to continue listening. After a few seconds she heard the jingling of keys join rest of the the fracas.

“Rom, no, please!” Vicky exclaimed, as the scuffling lessened, but continued.

“No!”

“Rom, give them back—”

And suddenly, the door opened from the outside. Megan threw herself backward in an attempt to distance herself from her surveillance. Rom had his back to her—it was he who had opened the door. He swiveled around and lobbed

Vicky's keychain toward Megan, so it hit her thigh and dropped to the floor.

She stared at the keys for a fraction of a second and looked back up to Rom, who was blocking the door from a disheveled and shocked-looking Vicky, her suitcase on the floor beside her. She looked back down at the keychain—three or four keys and a large, white, plastic fob shaped like the number one—and picked it up.

"Megan," Vicky asked, unsuccessfully trying to mask her tears, "please give me back my keys."

Megan froze, trembling. She looked at Rom, who stared back at her with a strength in his eyes that she had never seen, or at least never noticed.

"No."

"Megan," Vicky responded, her voice now colored with a hint of anger. "Give me my keys."

Megan held the keys a little tighter in her fist, afraid of what would happen next.

"No."

Vicky stared back at her with a fire burning through her teary eyes. She started, almost imperceptibly, to move forward toward Megan, and Megan held the keys closer to her chest, bracing herself. But before Vicky moved more than a few inches, Rom put out his arm, barring her entrance into the room.

She looked back at Rom with a mixture of pain and raw fury and held his gaze for several excruciating seconds, and

then turned and ran back to her room, slamming the door behind her.

Rom dropped his head for a moment as Megan stood, rooted to her spot, still clutching the keys. He then turned and walked toward her. Trembling, she placed the keys in his outstretched hand.

He looked at her with an expression of gratitude, exhaustion and heartache. "Thank you," he said—almost at the edge of hearing—as he turned to walk out of the room, carefully closing the door behind him.

C H A P T E R T W E N T Y - N I N E

ROM'S DREAM

The dark room was familiar. Racks and racks of costumes filled the space, along with shelves filled with hats, helmets, swords, wigs, and boxes he knew to be filled with any and all types of accessories and knick-knacks.

He knew the floor above him to be the stage of the high school auditorium; he could hear occasional footsteps on the wooden floorboards. He sat still, as quiet as he could, knowing that they were looking for him.

He didn't want to be found. It was that day, his sophomore year, when Julian would come to take him to register for the class at the UNM branch across the street. The pre-business course. The course, he would later calculate, that was the first step toward his MBA.

There was a knock on the door that opened to the parking lot outside.

"Rom? Are you in there?"

It was Julian's voice. Once upon a time, he had answered it, having felt a wave of nausea come over him at the thought of his father finding out that he had been hiding. Then Julian and he had walked across the overpass and up the hill to his future.

But this time, he kept silent.

“Rom? Open up!”

He was petrified, not even breathing. Did Julian know he was hiding? Could Julian sense his fear, his shame?

He looked over at the other door in the dark, far corner of the room. The door that led to the system of steam tunnels that crisscrossed beneath the entire campus. He had been down there before, despite stern warnings that trespassing there would result in suspension; for the members of the high school theater club, it was almost a rite of passage.

More knocking. “Rom?” How could Julian know that he was in here? Why didn’t he move along and search for him somewhere else?

He ducked between two racks of clothes toward the door. Reaching up to a nearby metal brace on the wall, he felt for the key, the knowledge of whose existence and location had been passed from friend to trusted friend for what he assumed had been generations. He opened the door, replaced the key, ducked into the darkened corridor, and closed the metal grated door behind him.

The light coming through the door illuminated an old school desk sitting near the entrance, but otherwise it was dark. The knocking had stopped outside, and he wondered for just a moment about the possibility of Julian giving up. No, Julian would be back with a key, there was no doubt. He would have to keep going.

He reached over and flicked on the light switch, illuminating the long hallway and the fallout shelter area

alongside. He dodged quickly around the dusty, long-unused furniture and made his way toward the other end of the corridor.

He turned to follow the tunnel that went under A wing. As he reached out for another light switch he knew to be just around the corner, he was thrown off to have his hand meet not the metal switch box, but a doorknob.

In the confusing darkness, he turned it, pushed open the mysterious door, and the light beyond met his eyes suddenly, blindingly.

It was the back room of his old shop—the small business he had started after finishing his MBA and realizing he could follow his own dreams of going into video production while still making his father proud. The shelves were lined with halfway-working videocassette players, cameras, and boxes and boxes of tapes, cables, and other parts, all gathering dust in the afternoon sun that streamed in through the high windows.

He stopped for a moment and looked around. The shelves, the equipment, even the lamps, all purchased with the funds fronted by his father, who at length had come to see his vision for the fledgling company.

But of course these videocameras would never be repaired. The company would fail, and his father would never see the return on his investment.

He walked around the corner, toward the front of the store, and all at once he was back in the dark mustiness of the tunnels.

“Rom, wait!” Julian’s voice came from far behind and made him push forward with a new urgency. Dodging between the file cabinets and various lengths of old pipe, he moved toward the large open space he knew to be directly beneath Senior Lobby. He reached over for the next light switch and flicked it on.

Again everything instantly changed: he was at a party. Which one it was he couldn’t recall; they had all been the same anyway. The people present were nameless, soulless, assembled under the flimsy guise of friendship, but there merely as convenient acquaintances.

The real reason for the gathering was carefully measured out on small mirrors and glass tabletops, neatly divided into short parallel lines. The music was loud, thumping, and those who didn’t have straws to their noses, leaning over with reddened faces, were sitting back, letting the white powdery stuff settle in to their dazed minds.

The image was one of deep, tragic hopelessness, and yet he ached to participate. He remembered the anticipation of walking into the room, the music blending in to the feeling of release that would melt everything else away.

There was a spot there, on the sofa. Carefully sculpted lines of the drug awaited him on the low, elegant coffee table. He moved closer, his body preparing for the high.

And then the table, the music, and the light, was all gone, and he was looking down at a trapezoidal school table, its top chipped and covered with scratched initials and crude drawings.

"Rom, are you down here?" The voice was getting closer now. The darkness provided suitable cover from his pursuer, but made movement much more difficult. Several times he bumped into something as he moved as quickly as he could, feeling along the wall for the southwest passage that went toward the gym.

Finding it, he ran down the relatively clear corridor, ducking to avoid the valves jutting down from the steam pipes overhead.

Making it to the end of the straightaway and shimmying between the pipes at the corner, he continued on toward a dim light up ahead. He knew the swimming pool was nearby and his memory of being here before, refreshed by the smell of chlorine in the already damp air, gave him even more impetus to move forward than Julian's pursuit.

As he burst into the area where he knew the pool's boiler system to be, however, he stopped abruptly: it was completely different than what he had remembered. The walls were lined with what looked like mainframe computers, cooling fans whirring and tape backup systems stopping and starting. He looked around for a terminal and his eyes landed on not a single screen but a panel of meters, switches, and lights.

He tried to make out the engraved labels adorning the panel, but they were too dirty, blurry and dark to make out. Even reading the dimly lit meters themselves proved difficult; the glass was clouded over and pockmarked. The system was operational, though, as he could see lights

burning steadily and could feel the hum of electricity running through the units.

As he stepped back to look for some way to identify the machine's purpose, however, his attention was instead drawn to a wavy blue glow coming from behind him. The memory flooded his mind as he moved toward it.

It was a circular window that looked into the water of the swimming pool itself. The water was still, but he waited, knowing what would come.

Suddenly, the gentle undulations of the water erupted in white bubbles as a swimmer dove in from the left and glided underneath the surface past the window. Clad in a black swimsuit, her slender, graceful form passed directly in front of the window and she looked over to him as she passed—just as she had done all those years ago. As she disappeared to the right of the porthole, he leaned over and saw her stop and resurface. A moment later, she had made her way back toward the window where she submerged again, crouched in front of the glass, and peered in at him.

He could see her green eyes behind the lenses of her goggles as her pupils adjusted to the dark of the tunnels, looking around at the submarine world she had apparently just discovered. To him, time seemed to slow to a halt, as his eyes traced the beautiful curve of her cheeks and jaw, the delicate line of her lips, the strands of hair escaping from her swimming cap and floating freely in the water.

Her eyes now met his, and an expression of recognition came across her face, widening her eyes and warming her

lips into a friendly smile. He felt the warmth of her kind reaction move through his body as she gave a friendly wave. Feebly, he brought his arm up to return it, which resulted only in a stunned, slow-motion display of his palm and apparently caused her to giggle, judging by the bubbles of air released from her now even wider smile.

“Rom?”

He turned around and Julian was there, standing amidst the panels of computers. His older brother looked to be nineteen or twenty years old and wore a three-piece suit, tailored to fit his unusually tall and lanky form. His expression was one of confusion and surprise.

He stepped in front of the window, as if to protect her, to hide her, from Julian. His mind raced at how to react; his instinct was to run, but he couldn't, not now. Not with her here. Not where Julian could see his cowardice. Not when his father would find out.

But somehow the panic he felt seemed to resonate through the computer; there was the sudden furious clicking of repeatedly pegging meters, the beeping of audible alarms, the flashing of lights. Julian turned to a small terminal in the far corner of the room, now lit up with unfocused green characters behind the smoky glass.

As he watched his older brother lean over, hold the sides of the screen and gaze deeply into it, he turned, panicked, back to the window to see the girl, who could apparently sense the change. Her confused expression turned to horror as all of a sudden he felt the lurch of a violent seismic shift.

Her head swiveled as though reacting to something behind her, and she quickly pushed upward with her legs to resurface. He watched as she stood in the chest-deep water, first frozen in apparent frightened anticipation, then quickly scrambling to move toward the side and pull herself out of the water as another shuddering vibration moved through the concrete walls.

Then, amidst the din, he heard a snap, and a slow, high-pitched creak. His focus went from the water beyond the window to the glass itself as his eyes located the source: a tiny crack in the lower center of the window. As the shaking continued, it appeared to be slowly lengthening.

There was a gasp from behind him. "Rom—somebody jumped!"

He turned around. Julian was still staring into the terminal, upon which the blurry text was scrolling upward with an increased intensity.

"J-Jumped?" he responded, petrified.

"From the bridge! Somebody jumped from the bridge!" Julian turned to look at him with a hellish fire in his eyes. "Rom, was it *you*?"

He was frozen with fear. He wanted to run but his feet wouldn't move. "I—" he stammered, his mouth suddenly dry. "Julian, I—"

But as he struggled to form the words, the air was torn apart with a deafening explosion as an incredible force threw him forward into the cold concrete of the opposite wall.

Had he blacked out? He struggled to regain both his consciousness and his footing in the now suddenly complete blackness. The window was gone, and hundreds of gallons of water were rushing through the gaping hole and filling the corridors. He searched in the rushing current for the floor beneath him but it was to no avail. As he continued to wrestle with the relentless torrent, the density of the water surrounding him became thinner and thinner—not receding, but somehow evaporating until he felt as though he was floating in the dark night air. As he felt gravity slowly take hold and begin to pull him downward, he reached out blindly into the nothingness that surrounded him.

Somehow, his left hand found a metal ledge, seemingly suspended in midair a few feet in front of him. While he felt the structure to which it was attached sway with the force of his added weight, it felt steady enough to hold him and he brought his right hand up through the current of wind that now enveloped him. The rest of his body went limp with fatigue, and he held fast as the starlight faded in and illuminated the canyon walls around him.

He closed his eyes and dropped his head in exhaustion. Feeling the now calm night air on his face, he opened his eyes again and was struck with terror as he gazed hundreds of feet below him to the dark canyon floor. Of course, he knew exactly where he was. He looked up. The rusted gas main was directly in front of him, running underneath the metal grating of the walkway to which he desperately clung. The pain of the dull metal cutting into the circulation of his

fingers was intense. He reached his right hand, which seared with pain, farther toward the middle of the walkway, in an effort to relocate the site where the edge of the grating pierced his palm when he heard a commotion down the bridge to his left. Footsteps, the vibrations of which reverberated along the walkway, approached rapidly but haltingly.

“Rom, are you out here?” It was his father’s hushed voice, weary and worried.

He froze, and the pain in his hands was momentarily forgotten as a cold chill went through his body. What would he think if he saw him out here? If his father found out that he had run away?

“Rom? Where are you, son?”

He wanted to cry out, to swallow his embarrassment and cry for help, but couldn’t bring himself to do it. He had made his father so proud, pretending to be the man he would never be, appearing to live up to the dream that was inaccessible to an imperfect, flawed son. How it would crush his father to see him in this state. How it would disappoint him.

His father had not yet found him, because the tears came silently. He wanted so badly to be in his embrace, to feel his overflowing pride. To hide his failures forever, so his father would never find them.

He looked down to stifle his sobs and saw the canyon floor, and he remembered. Yes, it had been the best

solution. The only sure way to make it all vanish, so that he could never let his father down again.

“Rom?”

He let go, slipping willingly into the darkness.

First, he was back at the porthole. She was there, her hands on the window. Her warm, caring smile. Worlds separated by the thick, strong glass.

“Tammy?” he whispered.

Her smile faded as he continued to fall into the darkness.

Then he awoke in the clearing, but he was not alone. Vicky lay on her side, still, her back to him. He did not know if she was awake or asleep, alive or dead. He thought to reach his hand out to rouse her, but then pulled it back, afraid of the answer.

Then he awoke in his quiet bed, alone.

CHAPTER THIRTY

THE FIRST DATE

The tiny, pixelated gunman moved around in the maze on the television screen with no correlation between the speed of his legs and the passing of ground beneath them. As he moved up a long passageway, the man became engaged in a firefight with a white robot, moving back and forth along the passageway and bobbing his balloon-like head with every step. As the robot moved directly above the protagonist, it began letting loose a blast of tiny dots of light in the man's direction, apparently unfazed by the fact that they were being absorbed by the barrier directly in front of it.

Sam was on the edge of his seat, holding the controller tightly with both hands, furiously pressing one of the buttons much faster than the video game system seemed to be able to register. The sounds of laser fire were accompanied by a constant pulsing of a strange electronic heartbeat. Sam lunged toward one side of the controller and the small man turned and ran into the path of the oncoming blasts while firing his own volley, but it was apparently too late—one of the shots fired by the robot met its target, causing the man to freeze, become surrounded by a field of red, and disappear a moment later.

Sam flopped back into the sofa and held out the controller in front of him. "Your turn," he bellowed in a defeated voice.

Rom looked up, having been gazing toward the television but seemingly staring blankly at a point behind it. Bringing himself back to the room, he got halfway up from the chair he was in and took the controller from Sam. "Yeah, okay," he responded as he sat back down and began moving the gunman around the maze.

If Vicky had emerged from her room since the night before, it had been while Megan was asleep. Megan had been watching Rom fumble with something in his trouser pocket, figuring it was likely Vicky's keys. She looked back down at the paragraph she had been attempting to read in *The Scarlet Letter*—not recognizing any of the plot where she had left off, she once again started at the beginning of the page.

"Rom," Sam asked, now sitting back up on the edge of the sofa, "did you play video games when you were a kid?"

"Heh, no," Rom replied as he tapped the controller with much more proficiency and much less motion than Sam had. "They didn't really have them when I was your age."

"What did you do for fun?"

"Same stuff you like to do. Cars, army men, that sort of thing. We played outside a lot, too."

"Did you have brothers too?"

"Just one. Julian. He was five years older than me."

"Did your mom and dad play with you sometimes?"

Rom seemed to stop playing for a minute, as if he was collecting his thoughts. "My mom died when I was little," he said, continuing the game. "I don't really remember her. My dad played with us sometimes, though. I used to love that. He used to throw the ball for me to do batting practice. Julian was always really good at hitting. I kept trying, though. I wanted to show him that I could do it, make him proud of me, like he was of Julian. So I kept practicing."

"Did you get good at it?"

Rom grinned and let out a tiny chuckle. "No, not really. I think he got tired of helping me practice after a while. And... it's one of those things that's hard to get good at by yourself, I guess."

"My dad would throw the ball for us, too," Sam responded while staring at the screen. "I even hit the ball sometimes! But we had to stop doing it, because my mom said we were too close to the house and she didn't want me to break the windows."

"Well, I can see her point," Rom responded. "You guys could have gone to the park or something."

"They did, my dad and Kyle and Jacob. But my dad said that I was too little to go with them. He said maybe I could go when I was older."

"How old were you?" Megan asked.

"Um, seven years old, I think."

"You're seven now!" she said, realizing the injustice and surprised that Sam wasn't more bothered by it.

“He said it was ‘cause he didn’t want to make my mom mad. There’s lots of things that my mom says I’m not allowed to do ‘cause I’m too little. But I think it was because I’m special. I heard them yelling at each other about it one night when I was supposed to be sleeping.”

Megan put her book down. “What do you mean, special? What did they say?”

“It was when I was playing cars in the house and I spilled juice on my mom’s important papers, and she got really mad. I had to go to bed early and when my dad came home she yelled at him because she was so mad. She said that when I came, I ruined everything, but I didn’t ruin *everything*, I only ruined her papers... oh, and one plant. Anyway, I heard her yelling from my room even though I had the door closed, and when my dad came to tuck me in, he said that she was mostly mad because she was tired.”

“What did you mean when your mom said you’re special? Like, special to her? Because she loves you?”

“I dunno. I think it’s because I’m *step*.”

“Huh?”

The phone rang, and Megan waited, knowing Howard was upstairs, waiting to see if he would answer it. Sure enough, there was no second ring, and both she and Rom relaxed. Still, she couldn’t help wonder if there was news from the hospital.

“What do you mean, ‘step’?”

“Kyle and Jacob said that’s why I’m special, and it makes Mom mad sometimes. Well, a lot of the times.”

Megan was no less confused than before, but was distracted by the creaking of the floorboards above her as Howard made his way to the top of the stairs. She waited, wondering what the news was.

“Megan! Phone call for you!”

Caught off-guard, she got up, went to the empty kitchen and picked up the receiver.

“Okay, I got it.” There was a click as Howard hung up the extension upstairs.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Megan, it’s Anthony.”

Megan felt her face go flush. “Oh, hey.” She was delighted that he was calling her, but wondered what the reason was—and braced herself for a letdown.

“Hey, so I—um, was wondering... uhhh, if you wanted to go catch a movie tonight, or something?”

She felt almost numb with surprise, wondering at first if she had imagined him saying it.

“Uh, yeah! Uh... what movie?”

“Well, *Supergirl* is playing at 7:00, but we could watch something else, if you want.”

“Oh, no, that sounds fine.” She didn’t know anything about the movie, but she realized that anything could be playing on screen and she’d be excited to go.

“So, do you want me to pick you up? We could go grab something to eat before if you want.”

She was still feeling dazed. “Sure, that’d be great.”

“Uh, what time do you want me to pick you up?”

She forced herself to come back to reality. "Oh, uh..." She didn't want to have to wait. Couldn't he just come now? "How about five o'clock?"

"Cool. See you at five, then?"

"Yeah, sounds good."

"All right. Bye."

There was a hesitation and then a click on the other end as Anthony hung up the phone. She was still standing there, looking off into nothingness, trying to wrap her brain around what had just happened. Wasn't he mad at her for not telling him about Phil? What about him avoiding her at school the previous day? And now, he just asked her out?

She hung up the phone, realizing she hadn't even said goodbye.

He just asked me out, she thought with a sudden jolt of realization. *Anthony and I are going out on a date tonight!*

She turned and ran up to her room to get ready.

The evening brought with it a welcome relief to all the stress and sadness of the past few days. Anthony came by right at 5:00 and they went to Sonic for dinner. Out of nervousness, she hadn't eaten anything since breakfast, so the foil-wrapped burger and the bag of onion rings perched on his dashboard were delicious. His car stereo and the restaurant's outdoor speakers were both tuned to Q-106, making it feel like they were part of a statewide Saturday night dance party. Leah and Greg, who had coincidentally made the same plans, came over from Greg's truck and

climbed into Anthony's freshly-cleaned back seat, where the four of them talked about concerts, vacations and skiing. Having Greg there, surprisingly enough, hardly bothered Megan at all, but then he was a different person than the boy she used to know.

Then, as the clear and cool sky faded into twilight, both cars drove over to the movie theater. Anthony had gotten a large popcorn for the two of them to share and the movie wasn't actually all that bad—at times, she was even more immersed in the movie than in faint smell of cologne which so intoxicated her.

"I'm just saying, they could have done worse than Helen Slater, is all," Greg was explaining to Leah, who would have none of it, standing with her back to him and an impish grin on her face. "She's a good looking actress!"

"You should ask *her* out, then," Leah answered shortly, without turning around.

The four of them were on the sidewalk at the edge of the portico in front of the theater, where many other clumps of people stood in lively conversation in the chilly night air. Megan stood elbow to elbow with Anthony, taking turns brushing up against each other's arm only somewhat inadvertently. Leah was wearing Greg's green and gold letter jacket, one which Megan herself had worn a time or two in another lifetime.

"So we're heading up to the dome," Greg mentioned, apparently unfazed by Leah's attempt at a cold shoulder. "You guys want to come? A bunch of us are camping, but

you don't have to stay all night, you can just leave whenever."

Anthony looked at Megan with a questioning look, and in response she scrunched her face into as pleasant an expression of derision as she could muster. Anthony smiled back.

"Ah, that's okay," he reported back to Greg. "You guys go ahead."

Greg started to respond but was immediately interrupted by a voice from behind Anthony.

"Hey, you crazy kids, get in here!" It was Charlie, sticking his head out of the partially open door to Sparky's, the sound, liveliness and warmth spilling out around him on to the patio.

Greg put his arm around Leah's waist, turning her around again. "Catch you guys later, then," he nodded, and Leah's face warmed into a full, happy smile, one that Megan never really saw in biology class.

"Have a good night, you two," she added, casting a twinkling eye at Megan.

Megan and Anthony went into the restaurant where the warm air, bright music and animated conversations rejuvenated the evening after the cold goodbyes outside.

"Hey, I don't think we were properly introduced the other night," Charlie said, putting out his hand as Anthony and Megan stepped inside. "I'm Charlie Moretti."

"Anthony Clark," Anthony responded, shaking his hand with a smile. "Good to meet you."

“Oh, yeah, sorry,” Megan remarked. “Charlie works here.”

“Nice,” Anthony responded, looking around. “I don’t think I’ve ever actually been in here before.”

“Hey, we’ve got a booth over here, come join us.” Charlie led the way through the tables to the same booth Sam and Linda had been sitting in the other day.

The booth was occupied by one person already: Sarah sat waiting, her hands cupped around one of two mugs sitting on the table before her. Her clear, bright face beamed with Charlie’s approach.

“Sarah, you know Megan, right? And this is Anthony. Have a seat, you two,” he said, turning to them and directing them to the seats opposite as he sat down next to Sarah.

“Hi,” Sarah responded, glowing. “It’s nice to see you again, Megan.”

Megan sat down and moved over to make room for Anthony, who followed her into the seat. “Same here,” she responded to Sarah, unable to keep from smiling at the sheer joy she felt as she watched Charlie pick up his matching cup.

“So what’d you guys see?” Charlie asked after taking a sip of what Megan could smell was a dark-roast coffee.

“*Supergirl*,” Megan responded, shifting in her seat as if to readjust the legs of her jeans, but using the ruse to move a little closer to Anthony. “What have you guys been doing?”

“Just coffee and desserts,” Charlie responded, motioning to the tables around them. “I don’t think we’ve had a new customer for forty-five minutes.” He looked over at Sarah. “Except Sarah here,” he grinned. He continued in a mock whisper, holding the back of his hand beside his mouth. “But she’s got an ‘in’ with one of the employees.”

Megan feigned surprise. “Oh, her and Gabe?”

There was commotion under the table as Charlie apparently tried to kick Megan’s shin, but found Anthony’s instead.

“Omigosh, I’m so sorry,” Charlie exclaimed as a look of surprise and confusion came across Anthony’s face. Megan and Sarah both fell into fits of giggling. “I totally wasn’t aiming for you!”

“Nah, it’s alright,” Anthony replied, realizing what had happened.

“Hey, you guys want coffee? Or hot cocoa?” Charlie asked while jumping up out of the booth.

“Ooh, hot cocoa sounds good,” Megan replied, looking over at Anthony. “You want something?”

“Yeah, that sounds good to me, hot cocoa,” he responded, looking up at Charlie.

“Hey, come on,” Charlie asked Anthony. “Let me introduce you to Gabe.”

Anthony looked over at Megan, and she gave him a smile. He got up and followed Charlie to the kitchen, where they disappeared behind the swinging door.

“Have you guys been dating for a long time?” Sarah asked, her voice hushed with excitement.

Megan turned back toward her. “Actually, this is our first real date, I guess.”

Sarah’s eyes widened. “Really? How exciting! He’s really sweet.”

“Yeah,” Megan responded. “Yeah, he is. So... you and Charlie...?”

Sarah blushed a little. “Yeah,” she answered demurely. “I got to know him this summer, and, I don’t know... he’s *so* nice. I... I’ve been wanting him to ask me out for a long time, and for a while there I didn’t think he was interested in me at all. But lately, it’s... I don’t know, it’s been so nice. It’s like he finally noticed me, you know?”

“Yeah.”

Sarah leaned in a little. “You know him really well, right? Do you think I’m crazy for thinking that he likes me?”

“No,” Megan replied, smiling. “I can tell you for a fact that you’re not.”

This made Sarah blush a little more deeply, and her already radiant happiness seemed to be turned up another notch or two. If it weren’t for Sarah’s earnestness and genuine air of humility, Megan thought, it would be almost sickening.

After a few moments, Sarah looked over toward the kitchen, and her smile gave way just a little for the first time since Megan had sat down. “Can I ask you something...

about Charlie?” she asked, turning to look back into her cup.

“Sure,” Megan answered, a little surprised at the request.

“Well, I don’t know how to say it, really—there’s just something I feel like I need to tell him... about me, I mean. But I’m scared.”

Megan’s curiosity was immediately piqued. “Well, do you want to tell me? I won’t say anything to him, I promise.”

Sarah stared into her cup. “I’ve dated other guys, you know... not a lot, I mean, but—well, when I’ve told them, they never really know how to react. But it’s not long after that they leave. They never say its because of... this thing, but I know that it is.

“With Charlie—I just don’t want it to happen that way. I want him to know first, and if he can’t handle it, then... Well, at least I won’t have been fooling myself, right?”

Megan nodded silently, watching her as she continued to gaze into her drink.

“I found out when I was a freshman that I have a... disease. It’s a mild type of muscular dystrophy. It doesn’t really bother me right now. It’s just hard for me to hold stuff above my head for very long. But as I get older, it’s probably going to cause muscles to get weaker and weaker until I can’t really use them anymore.”

Megan didn’t know what to say. “I’m... sorry,” she said, hesitantly. *Was that the right thing to say?* she thought.

She glanced over and saw Anthony and Charlie emerge from the kitchen, each carrying a mug and a piece of

chocolate pie on a plate, and she felt a sense of relief. *Charlie will know how to respond to this*, she thought before catching herself and realizing that Sarah had nothing to worry about.

She turned back to her quickly. "You should tell him," she said to her in a hushed but urgent tone as the boys navigated the busy dining room. "If there is anyone *in this world* who will be okay with it, it's Charlie."

Sarah's eyes finally met hers with a warm smile, which broadened again as she turned to see Charlie approaching.

They sat and enjoyed the drinks, each couple sharing a piece of pie, and they talked about movies and school and music. Megan offered enough to the conversation to keep Anthony from feeling stranded, but her mind wandered to Charlie and to Sarah's secret. *If only she knew*, she thought, *that she's not the only one with a secret*. For Charlie, his secret was his past. For Sarah, her future. But why should that keep them from being happy in the present?

But she could see what Sarah meant. She wanted to start the relationship off with all the cards on the table. They deserved to be honest with each other. And if someone was going to run—well, let it happen right away, before they had a chance to build something together.

Megan looked over at Anthony, sipping from his mug, listening to something Charlie was saying and unaware of her gaze. A wave of guilt came over her.

You know his secret, she said to herself.

They got to the car in the relatively empty parking lot and Megan realized that if she was going to act, it needed to be now.

“Um, I... want to show you something. Can we take Canyon Road?”

“Uh, sure,” Anthony responded, looking around as if to orient himself. They climbed in and she led him to the turnoff to the Jewish Center, where they got out and began walking down the dirt road.

“Peggy Sue?” he asked as they started down the path, dimly lit by the waxing moon. She gave enough of a nod to satisfy his curiosity.

When they got to the hole in the fence, she climbed through first and led him past the bridge and a short way along the ridge to the clearing. She had never been there at night before, and it had an eerie feeling to it. A cricket chirped somewhere close by and the dark silhouette of the bridge hovered in the sky just over the trees.

Anthony stopped, looked around for a moment, and then turned to her, expectantly. She realized that she hadn’t thought about what to say, much less rehearsed it, and she trembled in fear, unable to find the words—or the courage to say them.

“Hey, it’s okay,” Anthony said, stepping forward as if to console her.

She wiped the corner of her eye, determined to keep her composure. Still, she couldn’t bring herself to speak and stood there, shaking in silence.

Anthony waited patiently for a minute, and then spoke again. "Would it help if I went first?"

"What do you mean?" she answered quietly.

"Look, if you're not ready to tell me, I promise it's fine. But—*who is Phil?* Why has he been supporting us all these years? I swear, seeing him the other night, he seems somehow... familiar. But I can't figure out how, and neither can my mom."

"I don't know if I should say," she responded, trembling. "I know, but... it's not really my secret to tell."

Anthony moved closer and lowered his voice just slightly. "Does it have to do with this place? Is that why you brought me here?"

Her arms tightly folded, Megan forced a quick nod to answer him. Anthony turned to look around, doubtlessly trying to discover the meaning of the clearing. His eyes fell upon Rom's sign, and he knelt down close to it, straining to read the lettering in the shadows of the surrounding pines.

"This... this is *your* phone number, isn't it," he said, standing up. His face contorted with confusion. "Did he—did he jump off the cliff or something?"

Megan stood, petrified, wanting so badly to explain, but after the perfect night she was scared to death to lose him. Tears streamed from her eyes and she turned to try to hide her emotion. *Phil tried to do this*, she thought, *and now he's in a coma.*

Anthony stepped over closer to the edge of the canyon, causing Megan to flinch, thinking he couldn't see the sheer

drop in the darkness. But he stopped and carefully tried to peer over the edge, then stepped back. He looked up, his eyes focusing for a moment on the bridge, and then turned back to her.

“Did he jump off the bridge?” He seemed to read Megan’s face. “And then climbed up here? Why is there a sign *here*? And not down there?” He motioned to the bottom of the canyon.

Megan gathered all the courage she could and spoke, the words barely escaping her lips.

“Because he woke up here.”

“What?”

Louder, her voice quivering, she repeated the words.

“Because, when you jump, you wake up *here*.”

Anthony responded with a look of complete misunderstanding and disbelief, which made Megan turn away in frustration and resignation, burying her face in her hands.

“Hey, hey,” Anthony said, moving in and putting his hand on her shoulder. “Hey, I’m sorry. Tell me, please, I want to know.”

“I’m just so afraid,” she answered, forcing back sobs.

“What are you afraid of?”

She turned to look at him, her eyes foggy with tears. “I’m afraid of ruining—*this*. I’m afraid I’ll tell you, and—you’ll leave.”

Anthony looked her in the eyes. After a moment of thoughtful silence, he spoke. “Will it change who you are?”

“Huh?”

“If you tell me, will it change who you are?”

She shook her head. “It’s *part* of who I am,” she responded, realizing the truth of the words as she spoke them.

“Then I’m not going anywhere.”

She felt the sheer power of his beautiful eyes strengthen her own resolve as she spoke, fighting back emotion. She explained how she had jumped and awoken in the clearing. She described how her life had been erased, how her parents’ marriage had vanished, how she found herself a ghost among the living. She told him how Howard took her in, being one of the few who understood anything about the bridge, about how even he didn’t seem to understand why it did what it did.

She told him in turn about Charlie, about Vicky, about Rom. She told him about Linda and even about Stephen Palmetti. She told him about Sam.

Through it all, he listened, speaking only to clarify an occasional name. She finished, emotionally exhausted, wanting to know his reaction, if only to begin the difficult task of dealing with his rejection.

“Phil,” he asked quietly, after pondering what had been said, “he jumped, too, didn’t he?”

She hesitated, unsure how to proceed.

“I know, I get it,” he continued. “It’s his secret. And I—I want my mom to hear it from him.” He paused and looked back at her again. “But *I* want to hear it from *you*.”

She had managed to regain her composure, but his request brought her emotions back to the surface.

"They were married," she said quietly. "He was your stepdad. He loves her—and you. He misses you so much."

He looked at her for a moment and turned away, gazing across the dark canyon in thought. Her tears were too much to hold back, and she wiped her eyes and shuddered, quietly sobbing.

Hearing this, he turned back toward her as she frantically wiped her face with her hand, avoiding his eyes.

"You're—you're all just trying to move forward with your lives, aren't you," he said, moving close to her. "You're just trying to get back on your feet, and the only thing you have in this whole world is... is one another."

Megan nodded again and looked up into his eyes.

"And you," she responded, her voice breaking.

He put his hands on her arms and gazed back at her for only a moment before leaning in for a long, warm, wonderful kiss.

She threw her arms around him, and the darkness surrounding them no longer mattered.

PROJECT SIGMA

Megan had the dream again that night, the house teetering precariously, impossibly, on the strained bridge. How strange it was, she thought, that she felt the full weight of responsibility for the structure and its occupants; for Sam, trapped outside on the bridge; for Anthony, running toward the disaster as she urged him to get away. Where had Howard been, anyway? It wasn't *her* house.

Curled under the thick comforter, she regained her bearings and remembered the kiss. She worried for a moment that it had been part of the dream. But as she replayed the evening in her mind, she reached the happy realization that it wasn't just a figment of her imagination, and pulled the covers around her more tightly. Deep down, she wanted to stay in bed until the next time she could see Anthony.

But as she lay there the next morning, she considered the thought that he might drop by, so she got up, showered, and took her time getting ready, even to the point of almost borrowing Vicky's curling iron and makeup. At length, after putting her hair up a few different ways, she decided against any of it, primarily to avoid raised eyebrows from the others.

She went downstairs to get some juice. Upon closing the refrigerator door, she noticed Vicky sitting alone at the table, reading the newspaper and eating her breakfast as though nothing else had happened. It felt very awkward after the events of Friday night, so Megan grabbed a glass as casually as she could, poured her juice, replaced the pitcher and left the kitchen.

She went into the dining room, where Charlie and Rom sat, Charlie with a bowl of cereal and Rom with a cup of coffee.

"Has she... said anything?" she asked Rom, motioning with her head to the kitchen, her voice hushed.

Rom shook his head. "Not to me. She works this afternoon, I think."

"Wasn't she supposed to work yesterday?" Megan asked, just now realizing that Vicky must have missed her shift.

"Called in sick, I'm sure." Rom took a sip of his coffee.

"Are... *you* going to drive her?"

"If she wants me to, I will. But she hasn't asked."

Megan wondered if Rom had told Charlie. She assumed that he knew something about it, since he didn't seem fazed by Megan's questions. Instead, Charlie seemed more interested in Megan herself, as he was gazing back at her with his usual knowing grin.

"What?" Megan asked, halfway irritated, and trying to decipher his meaning.

“Oh, nothing,” Charlie responded, his grin expanding into a wide smile as his eyes descended to his next bite of cereal.

Megan rolled her eyes, frustrated at whatever she was obviously missing, and turned back to Rom.

“What are you going to *do*? I mean, do we just sit here and act like nothing’s happened?”

Rom took another slow sip of his coffee. “I don’t know.” He stopped, then shook his head. “We just need to be here for her when she’s ready.” He looked into his cup. “And... I don’t think she’s ready yet.”

Megan took a drink of her juice and heard the squeak of someone coming down the stairs.

“Good morning, Vicky,” she heard Howard say as he crossed the entryway into the kitchen.

“Morning, Howard,” came Vicky’s oddly cheerful reply.

“I’m going in to see Phil for a bit,” he responded. “And then I’ve got some errands to run. I should be back later this afternoon.”

“Okay,” she responded. “Be safe.”

Megan looked at Rom and Charlie. Rom seemed absorbed in thought, perhaps not even listening to the exchange. Charlie was focused on the last bit of milk in his bowl.

Howard came into the dining room next. He was about to speak when Charlie beat him to it.

“Hospital, then errands. Check.” Howard gave a half-smile in response.

“Megan,” he continued, almost as though it was his only reason for entering the room, “where did you go after the movie last night?”

The feeling of sympathy Megan had gained over the past week of searching for Margaret gave way, at least temporarily, to a sudden irritation at his nosiness. “At Sparky’s, with *friends*,” she retorted, giving the last word extra emphasis in response to his insinuation that she was up to no good if she were alone with a boy. “Charlie was working, he can tell you.”

That’s what all the smirking was about, she thought. He wants to know how the rest of the date went.

“It’s true, she was there,” he answered, standing up with his empty bowl. “She’s a lousy tipper, though,” he muttered with a smile as he departed into the kitchen.

“A call would have been nice,” Howard said, turning back toward her after watching Charlie leave.

“Sorry,” she answered.

He remained standing there for a moment, as if he was going to say something else, and Megan waited, knowing that despite what really happened after Sparky’s he had no evidence of it. *It was just a kiss, anyway*, she thought, though thinking about it again made her cheeks feel a little flushed.

At last, Howard left, pausing as he passed the kitchen and looking in at Vicky with a hint of curiosity on his face, but then continuing on out the front door. Megan finished her juice and took it to the sink without saying anything to Vicky, who continued reading her newspaper without

looking up. She went back up to her room to find Charlie sitting in her desk chair.

“So...” he said, with a big smile.

“So what?” she answered, flopping down on her bed, trying to suppress her own grin.

“Where did you guys go? What did you do?” He lowered his voice with a dramatic flair. “Were the authorities involved?”

“You’re weird,” she answered, turning to hide her involuntary smile. “I took him to Peggy Sue.”

“Wow, that’s kind of heavy for a first date.”

“I just... I just wanted him to know.”

“You *told* him?”

“You told me to let him in! What—do you think I shouldn’t have?”

“Oh—well, I guess I, uh,” he responded, stammering. “Well, what did he say?”

“He...was okay with it.”

“Seriously? I mean, he didn’t think you were crazy or something?”

“Well, it’s the truth, isn’t it?” Megan replied, a little irked.

“Yeah, of course,” Charlie responded quickly. “I mean, you know, it’s a little hard to believe for someone who’s... who’s never...”

“Yeah, I know,” she interrupted, looking at her hands in her lap. “But he did, he understood.”

“Wow, that’s crazy.”

"I don't know, Charlie, maybe it was stupid. Maybe I shouldn't have said anything."

"Nah, I mean, why not? Like you said, it's the truth."

"I know, but that's what Phil was doing when he—"

"Which was a coincidence," Charlie interrupted.

Megan didn't respond.

"Nothing bad happened to you or Anthony, right? He didn't keel over or anything, did he?"

"No," Megan answered. "No, in fact he... kissed me."

Charlie's eyes and smile widened. "Oh, see, *now* we're *talking!*"

Sam appeared in the doorway. "What are you guys doing?" he asked, looking around the room.

"Just talking, buddy," Charlie replied. "What about you?"

"I'm bored," Sam answered. "Do you have any toys, Megan?"

"No, sorry, Sam," Megan responded, sitting up and looking around the room. Her eyes rested on a set of art supplies on her shelf. "Here, I have some crayons," she said, getting up to pull the box down. "Do you want to draw something?"

"Sure," Sam said, his face lighting up a bit. Megan pulled out a yellow and green box of crayons and a sheet of lined notebook paper.

"What about you guys, you and Sarah?" Megan asked Charlie after Sam took the supplies and lay on his belly on the floor with them. "Did you guys do anything after you got off work?"

"Nah, she had to get home before I could break free. I even tried to get Gabe to do all my side work, but he wouldn't take me up on the deal."

"Gosh, I can't imagine why," Megan chimed.

"Yeah, so no kissing for me, no sir."

"Ew," Sam said without looking up from his artwork in progress.

"So did you guys talk any more after we left?" Megan asked, recalling her conversation with Sarah.

"Yeah, a little bit, sure," Charlie responded. "I don't think we're quite at the 'I come from an alternate universe' stage of the relationship, though, if that's what you're getting at."

"No, no, that's not what I meant," Megan quickly retorted. "But... well, you never know. I mean, she might have secrets of her own, you know."

Charlie stared into space for a moment. "Yeah, I guess," he answered hazily.

It had been an hour or so since Charlie had left to run some errands of his own, and Howard was still not back from the hospital. Megan, laying on her bed, had nodded off in the afternoon sun while Sam was watching *Clash of the Titans* on her television set. Other than the sound of the TV, the house was quiet; as far as Megan knew, Vicky and Rom were both still downstairs. In a way, she wished Anthony would call to say he was coming to take her away from the tension, but more than ever she felt a responsibility toward

Sam, and did not want him to be left alone in the care of either of them.

She had fallen asleep on her hand and it felt cool and prickly as she got up and walked across the hall to the bathroom. As soon as she walked in, though, she heard the sound of a car pulling up outside and moved the thin cloth curtain to peek out and see who it was. Instead of Howard's truck or Charlie's car, however, it was one she didn't recognize: a dark, nicely detailed Pontiac LeMans. She heard a bit of commotion from downstairs as the sound of a chair scraping against the kitchen floor was followed by the rustle of papers. *It must be Vicky's ride to work*, she thought, as the car's driver side door opened.

To her surprise and alarm, however, the person who stepped out was none other than the man she had seen in the hospital waiting room. *Shaun*, she mouthed to herself, as he walked around the front of the car and down the concrete steps to the front walk.

She raced to the stairs, almost falling down the first flight, then turning toward Rom's side of the house. She stumbled down the steps toward the storage room, dashed into the computer room, and relayed the news to Rom.

"It's Shaun, he's here! He's picking her up."

Rom flew out of his chair, down the hallway to the other side, just as the doorbell rang and Vicky, her suitcase from the other night packed and ready beside her, opened the front door.

"Vicky, no!"

Shaun stepped inside and gave Vicky a peck on the cheek. Rom stepped forward into the entryway while Megan remained just around the corner. Shaun looked more frightening, more menacing than she remembered him being at the hospital, but then Megan had learned a lot more about him since then.

“Hey, there buddy,” Shaun said, his apparent congeniality tinted with a shade of derision. “Shaun Campbell. And you are?” He stretched forth his hand, and Megan could see the colors, if not the pattern, of a tattoo on his bare forearm.

“You’re not welcome here, Shaun,” Rom responded defiantly, though Megan could hear the nervousness in his voice.

Shaun took the hand he had offered Rom and stretched the fingers out in a friendly, surrendering gesture. “I’m sorry to intrude. We’ll be on our way, and we apologize for the intrusion.”

“Vicky, no, you can’t go with him,” Rom called out to Vicky, keeping his eyes squarely fastened to Shaun’s relaxed but unwavering gaze.

“Rom, I—” Vicky began.

Shaun put up his hand to silence her. “Now—Rom, is it? —that’s not a very polite way to speak to a lady, is it? I think she’s perfectly capable of making her own decisions, don’t you?” Megan, peeking through the leaves of a potted rubber tree plant at the edge of the entryway, could see a fire build in Shaun’s eyes that scared her.

“Vicky, don’t do this,” Rom continued, now looking at her over Shaun’s shoulder.

Shaun scowled, any pretense of politeness fading. “Hey, I’m talking to you, boy!”

Megan prayed that Sam would stay upstairs and not be drawn to the escalation occurring at the base of the stairway. Rom stood, unyielding to Shaun’s intimidating advance, and stuck his right hand in his pants pocket as though he were going to pull something out. For an instant, Megan worried that he had a gun or something, but his hand emerged, balled in a fist, and if he had retrieved anything, it was small, and he was holding it tightly.

“Shaun, if you want to take her with you, you’ll have to go through me.”

Shaun stopped, stunned, but only for a fraction of a second before raising his arm back and sending a white-knuckled fist into the side of Rom’s jaw. Vicky gasped and Megan let out a stifled scream as Rom fell backward into a side table, knocking the lamp over and throwing the lampshade askew.

The din of Rom’s fall gave way to the sound of something rolling along the linoleum of the entryway beneath Shaun’s feet. All eyes were suddenly on a small gold coin that caught the light of the sun streaming into the living room behind Rom. Shaun bent over to pick it up, and as he held it up to examine it, flipping it over in his fingers once or twice, a grin crept over his face.

“Narcotics Anonymous?” he said with a mocking sneer. “Rom, my boy, you’re an addict, are you?”

Rom looked up, his nose and lips bloodied but his eyes still steeled and unyielding against his opponent, even as he lay beaten on the living room floor.

Shaun carelessly flung the coin at Rom’s chest, where it bounced and landed on the carpet next to him. Shaun looked down at Rom, and the smile vanished from his face, leaving a look of cold disregard. He turned, said, “Come on, Victoria, we’re leaving,” and left, letting the screen door slam behind him.

Vicky, her eyes wet with tears, stood looking at Rom, bloodied and beaten.

“Vicky?” Rom asked, his voice trembling—more with shock than with fear.

“I’m—I’m sorry, Rom,” she whispered, shaken and distraught, and she turned and followed Shaun out the door.

“Oh, Rom!” Megan fell to Rom’s side as he dropped his head in resignation. “Come on, get up and I’ll get something to clean you up.”

She helped him to the sofa and tended to his injury, stemming the bleeding and preparing a bag of ice for his cheek. Through it all, Rom seemed lost in his own thoughts, speaking only a few times to thank Megan for her help.

Once she had done everything she felt necessary for Rom, Megan ran upstairs to check on Sam. The television was still on in her room, and the crayons and paper were laying on the floor, but he was nowhere to be found. She

checked Charlie's room and even Vicky's, checking in closets and under beds, but to no avail. As she was walking back to her room, though, she noticed one of Charlie's curtains blowing a little from the chilly breeze of an open window. She walked over to find the window cranked completely open and the screen missing, and she peeked her head out to look around. Sam was nowhere on the roof of the back porch that stretched across the rear of the house, but her eye caught the movement of a bright blue shirt among the branches of the evergreen tree at the far end.

"Sam?"

The only answer was another shift in the branches of the tree, but looking closely she was able to make out his shirt, arms, and finally his face gazing back at her through the pine needles.

"Sam, I can see you," she called out.

"I'm in Project Sigma," he responded in a voice that was simultaneously secretive and frightened.

"Project—what?"

"Project Sigma. It's when my brothers tell me to go climb in the tree in our backyard until the badness stops."

Megan felt the beginning of a lump in her throat. "Did you hear the badness downstairs?"

"Yeah," Sam responded. "What happened?"

"A friend of Vicky's came over and he hit Rom. But Rom is okay, and that man isn't coming back."

"We need to tell Vicky that he's a bad friend."

“You’re absolutely right, Sam. Do you want to come back inside?”

Sam didn’t answer right away. “Can I stay out here a little longer?”

“Of course you can. I’ll leave this window open, and you can come in whenever you’re ready.”

“Thanks, Megan.”

Megan walked back into her room and turned off the television. She knelt down and began picking up the crayons and saw the paper on which Sam had been coloring. On one side was a group of several stick figures. Most of them looked identical except for their size; one had brown hair longer than the rest of them, and what looked like a dress hastily scratched over the torso in blue crayon. Flipping the sheet over she found three more stick figures, this time labeled in Sam’s uneven but earnest lettering: “MEGIN,” “MEGINS MOM,” and “MEGNS DAD.”

The lump she had felt while hearing about Sam’s apparent necessity to occasionally hide in the backyard was back as she gazed upon the smiling faces of the figures on the page. Her mom’s hair was lighter and longer in real life than in the picture, but the thought of them smiling together, an actual family, was as real as if it had been a photograph.

She sat on the bed, gazing at the picture, thinking back to those days before—the times at Big-T/Tastee Freeze with her mom, the times “racing” her Dad across the grassy area

inside the bicycle path at Urban Park, the times they watched the fireworks display out on North Mesa.

She was lost in this reverie when the phone rang. Knowing Rom was in no condition to get up—and secretly hoping that it was Anthony—she jumped up and ran into Vicky’s room to pick up the extension.

“Hello?”

The voice on the other end was not Anthony’s, but Howard’s.

“Megan?”

“Yeah.”

A pause, a sniff. Was he crying? She braced for the worst.

“Megan, Phil just woke up.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

REUNION

While waiting for Charlie to return, she successfully coaxed Sam back inside and had called Anthony, but there was no answer. When Charlie came in the front door, she ambushed him with a summary of what had happened during his absence and the four of them climbed into Charlie's car and drove to the hospital.

"Hey, everyone," Howard said as he stood up from his chair in the lobby just outside the ICU. "Where's Vic—Rom, what on earth *happened?*" he said, shocked at the sight of Rom's still deep-red cheek.

Rom started to speak but winced in pain upon moving his jaw. Regaining his composure, he pushed through. "Shaun's back," he grunted through gritted teeth. "Vicky went with him."

Howard cursed to himself and shook his head. "And he hit you?" Rom nodded. "You need to get that taken care of, Rom. Go on downstairs, I'll be down in a bit."

Rom turned to go. "Rom, I can come with you," Megan offered, "you don't have to go by yourself."

"It's okay, Megan," Rom answered. "I'll be fine." Megan was unconvinced, but couldn't think of a way to talk him

into it, so she rejoined the others as Rom left down the hallway toward the elevators.

"Phil said we can go in and see him, if you like," Howard announced.

"You guys go ahead," Megan answered. "I just need to take care of something first."

Megan went to the nurse's station, asked to use the telephone, and tried Anthony's house again. This time, his mother answered, and though she offered to put Anthony on the line, Megan decided to give her the news directly.

"Mrs. Clark, Phil just woke up."

There was silence on the line for moment, and then Susan answered, in a voice choked with shock, emotion, and nerves, "Thank you for thinking to call me, Megan."

"I'm sure he would love to see you, if you'd like to come."

Another moment as Susan evidently gathered her composure. "Um, yes, okay—we'll be there shortly."

Megan hung up and walked across the hall into Phil's room.

Phil was propped up on a few pillows; Megan thought it strange that, despite being asleep for days, he looked exhausted. But he also had a warm smile that she hadn't *ever* recalled seeing.

Howard and Charlie sat in nearby chairs while Sam sat on a doctor's stool, slowly spinning himself around while reading a kid's magazine he held in his lap. They all turned to Megan as she came over.

"And Megan here has been keeping you company a lot these past few days," Charlie said, apparently resuming a discussion already in progress.

"No wonder I feel so well taken care of," Phil remarked, flashing a weary but appreciative look in Megan's direction.

"It was nothing, really," she answered.

"So, Megan, you were at the house when Shaun came?" Phil asked.

"Yeah," she responded, sitting on the floor in the corner. "I don't understand why Vicky left with him, after what he did to Rom. How can she defend someone like that?"

"That's a good question," Howard said. "I had hoped we had seen the last of him when he moved away from Los Alamos. I didn't realize he had come back."

"So they've been together before?"

"They were married," Howard answered. "Before Vicky jumped."

Married? The revelation shocked Megan. "I can't believe he would be so much different now. I mean, it sounds like he was hitting his last girlfriend, too!"

"He hasn't changed at all, Megan. He's always been that way. It's why Vicky jumped."

"I thought it was because she was depressed... because she couldn't have kids."

"That was part of it," Howard replied, "but it was the emotional abuse that made her jump. When she couldn't bear him a child, it became so much worse. And now, well,

he's going to learn that about her all over again, I'm afraid, and I don't imagine the results will be all that different."

Megan was stunned. "Why in the world would she go back to him, after all that? Why was she ever with him in the first place?"

"It's not the first time she's gone back to him," Phil explained. "They dated for a little while a few years back, before he started getting violent again. That was around the time Rom moved in, I think."

"That kind of abuse... it's hard to see when you're in that kind of relationship," Howard said. "I think her father treated her mother badly, too, and when you grow up with that, well..." His voice trailed off, and he shook his head, looking down.

"I guess he lives in Santa Fe now," Megan said after a moment. "She went to see him Friday night and was going to go back down there before Rom took her car keys."

"Yes, that's what Rom was telling me," Howard said. He got up from his seat. "I should go check on him."

Charlie gave Megan a significant look. "Howard, Sam and I will come with you."

"We'll be back in a bit," Howard said, and the three of them left the room.

Megan saw the two empty chairs but did not feel like leaving her spot in the corner.

"Phil, I'm so sorry."

“Why, Megan?” She felt sure that he must blame her for it all, and wondered if he was just trying to be considerate, but he looked genuinely confused.

“Because I told you to go see them.”

Phil thought for a moment before speaking. “Megan, I don’t blame you for what happened.”

“Do you think all of this is punishment for... you know, ‘breaking the rules?’”

“You know,” he answered pensively, “I’ve given that a lot of thought. It was my first reaction, too, when I was lying there in the road, but... somehow, I don’t think that’s it. Maybe it was a coincidence. Or maybe it’s something... more. Not a punishment, but—I don’t know. A challenge. Not meant to keep me from her, but to make me appreciate life.”

“Phil, um, Anthony and Susan—they came to the hospital the night it happened. I didn’t say anything to them, I promise. They just showed up. And Susan’s been coming to visit you... every night.” Megan looked up furtively, bracing for his reaction to the news.

It didn’t seem to affect Phil in the way she thought it would; he sat pensively, looking down at his blanket-covered lap.

“I... know,” he responded slowly. “I’m not sure how, but... there were times when I was aware of my surroundings, in between the dreams, and I—I could feel her close. Other times, I could feel that you were there. I’ve been alone for

so long, and knowing that you two were watching over me... it made me feel safe."

Megan felt herself going red in the face, but felt a sudden closeness to Phil.

"What were your dreams like?"

"I don't know if they were dreams, or memories, or something in between. It's hard to remember them now. But they were happy, definitely happy. It was like I had never jumped, like Susan had never forgotten me, and we could look forward to getting old together. Like the connection between us had never been broken."

"My parents never met each other," Megan said, sitting up a little straighter. "At least, not in this world, where I jumped off the bridge. Somehow, the act of me jumping worked its way back and prevented them from ever even meeting each other. I'm just wondering, if something like that is possible, then maybe... maybe there's still something there, between you and Susan? I mean, maybe she feels it too, and just doesn't understand why? Maybe that connection is... deeper than we can understand."

Phil looked up at her with a warm smile. "You're a very wise person, Megan," he said, and they sat again in silence for a few minutes.

"Phil, when Vicky went to Santa Fe, she took me with her."

Phil looked taken aback. "To see Shaun?"

"No... I didn't even know that's why she was going. I asked her to take me to the mall, to try to find, uh—

someone.” Her voice trailed off as she debated whether or not to tell him more.

Phil’s look of confusion dissolved into a more relaxed expression, as though he knew what was coming next.

“And?”

Megan continued, seeing Phil’s expression and feeling foolish and exposed. “I thought I found her, but—she didn’t know what I was talking about. I mean, she *did*, because she, well, she asked about *you*—”

“I thought she was the one, too, Megan. In fact, I was sure of it—Margaret matched every last description of the woman Howard saw in the grocery store that day. In fact, I’m almost sure that it *was* Margaret that he saw.”

Megan looked back at him, and this time it was her turn to be confused. “But you said she wasn’t—”

“The one. Margaret was probably the one Howard saw, but that’s all—she’s not his daughter.”

It took a minute for Megan to get it straight in her mind. “But—why did Howard feel so strongly about Margaret, then? Who *is* his daughter?”

“Of course, there’s no way anyone can really know, but if you ask me, I don’t think Howard ever *had* a daughter. I have no doubt that he’s always wanted one. To this day he regrets Barbara leaving him, because she took with her any hope of him having a child.”

Megan’s mind was spinning. “But—Rom says he’s been looking for her for *years*. I’ve seen drawings he’s had made —”

“He’s obsessed with it, Megan. He blames himself for Barbara leaving, and that—it can take its toll on a man in different ways. In his mind, Barbara leaving him and his daughter leaving him—by jumping off the bridge—are kind of the same thing.”

“Why *did* she leave? His wife, I mean?”

Phil shook his head. “The bridge. His other obsession.”

“Stephen Palmetti?”

Phil nodded. “That’s where it started. Such a tragedy. It affected him so deeply, this man who had his family ripped away from him. Howard was never really the same after that.” Megan sat quietly, taking it all in, and he continued. “It just goes to show, you don’t have to jump to have that bridge ruin your life.”

“I... I guess I feel stupid for thinking I could find his daughter.”

“Don’t. Every single one of us has tried. It’s the decent thing to do after everything he’s done for us.”

“Yeah,” Megan replied, lost in thought.

“The thing is, Megan, you’re special. You have something to offer him that none of us can.”

“What?” Megan asked, looking up.

“Whether or not he had a daughter that jumped from the bridge, in *this* world, you’re the closest thing to a daughter he’s ever had.”

As the truth of his words sank in, she heard footsteps come down the hall toward the room. A moment later, the door opened slightly and Anthony stepped hesitantly inside,

followed a few steps behind by Susan. She looked first at Megan, who could see that her cheeks were wet with tears. She then locked eyes with Phil, whose face had shades of fear and anticipation on it, but was dominated by a warm, joyful smile.

“Hi,” Susan said, her voice quaking but resolved. “I’m Susan Clark.”

Phil sat up a little straighter in his bed, and his tired eyes suddenly shone brightly, shedding years of age and toil. As he spoke, his voice cracked with emotion.

“Hello, Susan.”

Realizing they hadn’t had anything to eat through the afternoon’s ordeal, Megan, Anthony, Charlie and Sam drove to Pizza Hut for dinner. As they were waiting for the pizzas to arrive, the conversation was thin when it wasn’t completely absent; Sam was distracted by the tabletop arcade game near the door, but for the others it was a mixture of mental exhaustion and not being able to put feelings into words.

It was Charlie that first addressed the unspoken tension.

“So... Anthony, I’m told you have recently been introduced into the zombie world.”

Anthony broke a smile and an expression of relief as he turned to Megan. “Is that really what you guys call it?”

“No,” she responded, rolling her eyes at Charlie. “I don’t know, it’s the same world. We just got left out.”

“Rom calls it ‘waking up in Pottersville,’” Charlie continued, taking a sip of soda. “Anyway, what do you think? Gotta be a lot to swallow, right?”

“It’s hard not to be a little skeptical, I admit,” Anthony said. “I guess it all comes down to the fact that, well, why would you all make something like this up?”

He asked it in such a way that Megan wasn’t sure if the question was rhetorical or not. Feeling a little uncomfortable about it, she struggled for an answer before Charlie beat her to it.

“Hmm... I suppose we could be Soviet spies, with a scheme to extract nuclear secrets from... high school students and restaurant customers,” he said, putting on an air of mock intensity.

Megan smiled in spite of herself, and then gave in to Charlie’s goofiness. “And second graders,” she added, looking at Sam. “Sam here is actually our commander.”

“Sssssshh! Ve haff already sayd too much!” Charlie hissed, causing both Megan and Anthony to laugh for the first time all day.

The waitress appeared and lowered a plate of garlic bread to the table, and Megan got up and made her way to the salad bar. As she weaved between the tables, though, she saw a familiar face in the booth nearest the door: her mother was there, sitting and talking with another woman Megan didn’t recognize. Megan turned away quickly, went around the salad bar, and sat down at the video game behind her mom’s back and pretended to play.

The conversation was light and lively, reminiscing about being together on swim team in high school. Soon the discussion paused and the friend spoke a little more intimately. “How have *you* been? I feel like I haven’t seen you in weeks.”

“Oh, well, okay... you know, I told you what happened with Ed back in July—”

“Ugh, yeah, I remember.”

“So it’s been quite a while, and I actually called up a guy I hadn’t seen for, like, ever. We had dated a few times way back when and I think I was just too down on myself to let him in. He’s such a nice guy, and so... I don’t know, comfortable? Like, I don’t need to be someone else around him. And... I know it sounds dumb, but—well, he’s the kind of guy you can trust, you know? He—just has that *way* about him.”

“Oh, Tammy, you deserve that!”

“Well, we were going to meet for lunch, and... I mean, on the phone, he sounded really excited about it. Said he’d been thinking about me a lot, and—oh, it sounds so stupid, but I was on cloud nine! Went out and got a new outfit, got my hair done...”

A pit began to form in Megan’s stomach.

“And he completely stood me up. Didn’t call or anything. I called him the next day, a couple of times even. No answer. I haven’t heard a word from him since.”

“Oh, honey, I’m *so* sorry,” The friend responded. “That jerk!”

She could hear her mom sip her drink before continuing. “No, no,” she said, swallowing. “No, you know, it’s—it’s this *town*. I’ve been here since second grade. And I’ve tried, I’ve really tried, you know? So— that’s actually why I wanted to see you today... I’m thinking of just moving out. I have a friend with a spare room in Phoenix, and I’m just going to try to start over. I’ve got nothing keeping me here, you know?”

Megan felt stunned. Of course, her mom was right: she had no one. Wherever her dad was, he didn’t seem to factor into her life. *And heaven knows she hasn’t got a daughter to tie her down*, Megan thought.

In fact, if Megan were in her mom’s shoes, she likely would have done the same thing, she felt. Except for—

Except for Rom.

Megan couldn’t believe she was even thinking it, but she couldn’t shake the feeling that they belonged together. Only now was she letting herself recall the disappointed look on Rom’s face when she told him he had to cut it off with her mom. Never in a million *trillion* years would she ever call Rom “dad.” But she couldn’t ignore the fact that they would make each other very happy. And that, despite what she had felt earlier, maybe seeing them together would make *her* happy.

“Oh, Tammy... I’m so sorry, but I get it. When are you leaving?”

“Well, I need to give Will my two weeks’ notice for Barranca Mesa. And I was figuring I’d tell Cindy this week,

but I'm sure she won't have any trouble finding someone else to watch the kids when she has her meetings. I've just"—her confidence suddenly backed off a notch or two—"I've been trying to work up the courage to do it."

The conversation continued, but Megan was stuck dwelling on her mother's plan to leave town. Thinking of the strength she saw in Rom's eyes when he kept Vicky from leaving—and the weariness she saw when Shaun laid him out in the entryway, she felt awful for standing in his way of happiness with Tammy. In fact, she hadn't even expected Rom to pay any attention to Megan's request; she figured they were still dating behind her back. Finding out that Rom had been a man of his word made her feel even more selfish and low.

Megan got up to walk back over to the table, determined to somehow make it right.

They had returned to the hospital for a short time before Charlie, Megan and Sam went back to the house to get Sam ready for bed. The idea of going to school tomorrow seemed so anticlimactic after the events of the weekend, but in a way, Megan welcomed the return to normalcy. There was no sign of Vicky, and frankly Megan did not expect her to return. While the idea of losing one of their own had deeper meaning than what Megan felt like dwelling on at the moment, she was silently bemoaning the more immediate consequences: Vicky would not be getting Sam ready for school in the morning.

Having seen Sam off to sleep and then spending nearly an hour quietly talking with Charlie about the events of the day, Megan got herself ready for bed and closed the door to her room. She found the drawing Sam had made laying on her bed and she sat to look at it again. The face on the figure marked MEGINS MOM wore a smile, and Megan thought for a moment how inaccurate it now was before realizing how much she missed that smile, and how little she had truly appreciated it when it was there.

She flipped the page back over to the other group of stick figures and had a sudden realization: there were five figures, two adults and three boys. Sam had talked about his two older brothers, Kyle and Jacob, and here they were. Short brown hair, just like Sam. And his parents were there: his father, short brown hair and a smile identical to his sons'. And his mother, sporting longish brown hair, standing beside his father, and—why was she not smiling? She flipped the page over again to check both sides. Everyone wore the same smile, except for her: the line for her mouth was clearly curved downward.

She thought back to the dark backyard where she, Charlie and Sam peered into Sam's old life. His parents, his older brothers, the picture of family joy through the large living room window. She seemed joyful there, unlike the scene rendered by Sam's hand in crayon. Megan wondered about the disparity, finally coming to the conclusion that she was reading too much into it, that it wasn't even worth

worrying about, and that she needed more than anything to get some sleep and put the last few days behind her.

LINDA'S DREAM

She stood in a strange neighborhood in the late afternoon. The houses were familiar—was this Barranca Mesa? There were none of the ugly duplexes and quads that dotted the western area, and it was too new, open and suburban to be anywhere close to downtown. She looked for a street sign, a hint of where she was. Nicely manicured lawns welcomed the eye to pretty, well-maintained and lovingly decorated homes.

As she looked down the street, the sound of squeaking wheels and air brakes caused her to turn around to see the school bus driving toward her. It stopped in the road and the door swung open. Moments later, a young boy came bounding down the steps, his backpack bouncing on his back. The boy looked up at her and gave a big smile as he ran toward her.

Before she could feel his embrace, however, she saw someone across the street: a man, his face somehow in shadows despite the clear, sunny day. He stood at some distance and lent an ominous air to the situation: she could not feel the warm hug of the child she now welcomed into her arms. The man brought a chill and a familiar feeling—that she did not belong here, that she was a trespasser in

this place. She held the boy tighter, longing to feel him, to protect him, to know him.

At once the scene changed to a grassy field. She sat in a folding lawn chair, her arms on the cracked and weather-worn plastic arm rests, faceless others lined up alongside her on blankets, under umbrellas, or standing with their hands held up to shade their eyes. Once again the sun filled a cloudless sky, but now the smell of sunscreen met her nose. The noise around her was one of festivity, of happiness. Ahead, two teams of nine- or ten-year-olds chased an errant soccer ball, the crowd cheering them on. The children were bedecked in oversized shirts and shin guards that reached the knees, but a feeling of joy and belonging was written on their faces: they were having fun in the bright rays of the weekend morning, and hard-won goals were soon forgotten as the ball was kicked and dribbled to the other side of the field. She strained to find him among the blue and black jerseys as the young players jostled back and forth. Finally, a whistle blew, and the players broke away, scattering toward the sidelines. He jogged toward her, separating from the others as he neared, sweat beads on his young but striking face. He stopped alongside her, plopped onto the ground and grabbed a thermos from beneath the chair. He opened it and noisily guzzled the contents, looking up at her with smiling eyes. She reached for his shoulder with an encouraging hand, anxious to feel that he was there, that he was real.

But just past him, the man in shadows sat in an adjacent chair. He was not there for the game. He was there for her—or for the boy.

The expression on the man's face was cold and sterile, and as he gazed at her he shook his head slowly, almost imperceptibly. She felt a jolt of fear, as though the man were about to pounce, and she reached for the boy. Her hands stopped but she could not feel him—she pulled him near but there was no warmth pressed up against her. She shivered with fear as the man continued to stare at her, and the corner of his mouth turned up into the faintest horrible smile.

And then, she was inside. The living room was warm, cozy with the smell of green chile wafting in from the kitchen. She waited among the pictures of him that lined the walls and adorned the tables. The young boy was a young man now, and he walked in from the other room, breathtakingly handsome in a tuxedo, his hair freshly cut, his rugged features scrubbed clean. Behind him, a girl in a beautiful and fashionable prom dress, full of the love, smiles and youthful intoxication that she herself felt inside for him. Laughing, the girl hanging from his arm, they moved to stand against the brick fireplace, and she raised the camera to snap picture after picture of joyful smiles and exuberant youth. A night of fun before them, she wanted to plead with him to be careful while still encouraging him to make it a night to remember.

The young couple left the room, giggling, as they joined friends in laughter and conversation, and she sat down in one of the upholstered chairs behind her, where she could see the celebration without being part of it.

“He is not yours,” the ancient voice of the man intoned, sitting idly in the other chair.

His sudden presence sent horror and panic through her, and she jumped up to take a protective stance over the teenagers in the other room. The man did not react, other than to look up at her as she stood guard. She could see his dark eyes and felt the icy chill go through her. “No,” she whispered. “You can’t take him from me.”

The man raised an eyebrow in amusement. Once again, the dark smile began to creep across his face, and he moved his arms as though he were preparing to rise from the chair. She felt her pulse begin to race and she tensed up, closing her eyes and preparing for the worst.

She opened her eyes and she was once again outdoors; the high school football field, packed with people, conversation and laughter. People dressed in their Sunday best intermixed with young men and women dressed in green gowns and mortarboards, holding up diplomas and smiling for clicking cameras. He was there, the girl once again alongside him, standing in a circle that included parents and siblings—talking, planning, laughing. The celebration was electric, full of accomplishment and hope, success and dreams. Plans were being made for graduation parties that would last from now until the wee hours of the

morning, for trips to sunny summer beaches and resorts, for moves into dormitories, for future weddings, jobs, families, lives.

The boy—no, he was a man now—smiled broadly, his arm around the girl's waist. He spoke with friends and family, acknowledging passing classmates as they called out to him, moving across the busy field.

But now she was on guard, looking at all the faces but his, searching for the man in the shadows. She could feel the moment pulling her in, seducing her with the joy and the sunlight, and she yearned to be a part of it struggling to remain vigilant. Beside her, behind her, in the far off bleachers, among the crowd talking with each other just ahead, she studied every face, every robe, every jacket. Had she finally escaped him, after these many years?

She cautiously turned to the boy, still basking in the triumph of the day. For what felt like the first time, he gazed into her eyes, truly accepting her into the scene.

“Mom?”

It was something halfway between a question and a recognition; not waiting for an answer, but allowing time for a response. She felt the warmth of his attention, his acknowledgement, his loving eyes, and she moved forward to embrace him, to finally, truly feel him in her arms.

But as she stepped forward, the chill encompassed her, deeper and darker than it had been. She reached out to him in the blackness but her hands felt only empty space. Panicked, she lunged forward, screaming and struggling to

find him, until the emptiness finally dissolved to yield not the cheerful, bright face of the boy but the shadowy form of the man. His face was clearer now than it had been before, almost familiar, but it was seared with a hellish anger.

"He... is... not... yours!"

There was fire in his eyes, and she recoiled in terror as he barred the way forward. She turned and ran from the horror and chill, but tripped and fell into the blackness. The ground did not come up to reach her, though, and she descended, flailing and breathless, into the abyss.

There was silence when she awoke in the clearing. It was not peaceful, but oppressive, deadening. It tore through her as she filled her lungs with the cold air. It absorbed her screams as she realized where she was and what had happened; it followed her back to the house where she had been less than thirty minutes ago.

It swallowed her wails as she pounded on the door.

It pierced her as the woman appeared, frightened, confused and unknowing.

It engulfed her as she pushed the panicked woman aside, looking desperately for what — who — she had left there.

It consumed her as she fell to the hard floor with the realization that he was gone.

An older, gentler silence surrounded her as she awoke in her apartment, alone.

She arose, determined to not wake up alone again.

CUSTODY

The overcast skies made it feel unusually early as Megan sat alone at the breakfast table the following morning. Sam had eaten while she packed his lunch, then she had sent him upstairs to Charlie, who agreed to help him brush his teeth and wash his face so Megan could eat too.

Howard appeared around the corner of the stairwell and descended into the kitchen.

“He—has his coat, hat and gloves? It’s supposed to get cold today,” Howard asked as he poured himself a styrofoam cup of coffee from the pot in the coffee maker.

“Yeah, I’ll make sure he has them,” Megan responded.

Howard stopped and sighed. “I’m so sorry, Megan. I never meant for so much of this to fall onto your shoulders.”

Megan looked up and saw a weary sadness in his eyes. She considered that, for him, all of the trials of the past weeks were simply the most recent chapter in a lifetime of disappointments and heartbreaks.

“It’s okay, Howard, I—I want to help.”

“That means a lot.” He paused awkwardly. “Um... you, *you* mean a lot to me.” Setting his cup on the counter, he went to the closet and retrieved his coat, put it on, grabbed his cup and keys, and opened the front door.

"I'll see you after work. I'll try to be home early to help you out, okay?"

"Okay," she responded, and he left.

She watched him get into his truck and drive away as she finished her breakfast, and she was struck with a thought that she couldn't put out of her mind. *What if Phil was wrong? What if Margaret is his daughter, and just doesn't want to be found?*

She sat for several minutes in the quiet kitchen, thinking of the possibilities.

"Sorry I can't make it... it kind of came up at the last minute," Megan explained to Leah as they were collecting their books after biology class. In addition to complicating the morning routine, Vicky's departure had thrown a wrench in Megan's plans to meet with the group at the library after school. Had it been a week or two earlier, Megan would have been furious at the change in plans. Today, however, she almost looked forward to walking Sam home from school; amidst all the drama with Vicky, Rom, Phil and Susan, and even Howard and his hopeless quest, her thoughts had been turned to this little boy and his sweet crayon drawing of the family who no longer knew him.

"Oh, no problem," Leah responded. "I'll just make sure that Anthony fills you in on what you missed." Her eyes twinkled and she smiled broadly and knowingly as she said his name. "So," she continued, a little more quietly but no less joyfully, "how did it go Friday?"

Megan smiled back. "Really well," she replied demurely.

"Oh, you have to give me more than that," Leah said, her eyes glowing. "What happened?"

"He kissed me."

Leah's eyes widened. "And?"

"And it was really awesome," Megan answered.

Leah grinned and touched Megan's hand. "You deserve it, Megan."

For some reason, the offhand compliment struck Megan as though it was the first time she had ever received one. "Thanks," Megan said. Leah gave her a quick but earnest hug, and Megan marveled at how it didn't feel awkward at all; in fact, it made her realize how comfortable Leah's company had become—how, without realizing it, she had made a genuine friend.

She walked out of the classroom alongside Anthony, who had appeared at her side with a gentle smile. She reveled in the fact that the silences were no longer awkward, the looks no longer hesitant.

"You going to the hospital later?" he asked as they approached the breezeway where they would part ways.

"Sure."

"See you there, then?"

"Yeah."

They looked at each other and Megan wished the crowds of students walking by were gone so they could revisit the kiss they had shared in the clearing. He seemed to feel the same way, and he reached out to lazily squeeze

her hand before turning and joining the flow of students up the breezeway.

The cool air was finally yielding a few tiny flakes of snow as she made it to the path behind the junior high that cut across to Aspen School. She crossed through the barbed wire fence at the point where it had long ago been made passable by some fellow foot traveler. The land belonged to the Lab or the County—Megan had never really paid much attention to the rusted signs. She rarely saw anyone else back here, and so she was surprised to hear the crunching of pine needles and the glimpse of a dark brown coat up closer to the fence around the junior high school.

Ducking behind a group of trees, she peered through the woods to watch, and it shortly became apparent that her fellow trespasser was Rom, looking around a little nervously as though he were waiting for someone. He stood and searched the forest a little, obviously not seeing Megan, before continuing along the fence line in the opposite direction.

Megan thought at first about calling out to him, but then thought better of it, choosing instead to watch for a moment to see if he came back toward her. As he disappeared around the corner, she decided not to follow, figuring she needed to continue on toward Aspen School. *I'll ask him about it later*, she thought.

“What’s wrong, Sam?” Megan asked as the boy approached. His usual cheerful run had been replaced today

by a slower trudging, his head hung low. He wore his coat and oversized gloves, which finally seemed to be warranted, as the afternoon chill was signaling the impending winter.

“Daniel is having a birthday party and he didn’t invite me because his mom said he could only invite three people,” he explained. “It’s no fair, because none of my other friends remember me, so they’re not going to invite me to *their* birthday parties anymore, and I only have one friend at my new school, and it’s Daniel...” He gave a great sigh, then paused like he was thinking, but did not continue.

Megan felt awful for him—she had felt the same way for months. In fact, it had been only recently, with the appearance of Anthony and Leah into her life, that she had felt like things were improving. *And he’s only seven*, she thought. What would she have done if she had to face the same pain at less than half her age?

“I’m your friend,” she said in an attempt to comfort him. “And Charlie. You’re at the top of my list for birthday party invitations.”

He gave a half-smile and a mumbled “yeah” but otherwise they continued on in silence. She suggested going to the Walnut Street playlot, something he asked about fairly often—and something she usually overruled—but he declined, opting instead to head back to Howard’s. As soon as they arrived, he ran to the door and went in before Megan even reached the front walk.

As she approached the door, though, the sun glinted off of something in her peripheral vision, laying in the grass

near one of the hedges that lined the front yard. She walked over and recognized it as the gold coin that Rom had dropped when Shaun had come for Vicky.

She picked it up and turned it over in her hands. One side had words engraved along the four edges of a diamond: “Self,” “God,” “Society,” and “Service.”

She flipped the coin over. “That no addict seeking recovery need ever die...” and “4 years clean.” *Narcotics Anonymous*, she thought. In her mind, she had seen Rom as nothing but a druggie for so long that it struck her to see the coin. Four years clean—he had been clean since he jumped.

She looked around at the yard. Why was it here? It wasn’t close enough to the sidewalk or the porch to have been dropped accidentally; it had to have been thrown. As she put it in her own pocket and considered giving it back to Rom, she realized why she had seen him behind the junior high school, out of sight of the public: he was there to buy drugs.

She wanted to go back, to talk him down from it, to make him realize what he was throwing away. She was ready to run back to the path behind the junior high but remembered her responsibility to Sam upstairs. She wished Vicky were there, or even Phil. She ran inside to call Howard at work, but there was no answer. Charlie was at work, but he would understand the urgent nature of the situation, if he could get there soon enough—she hung up

and began dialing Sparky's when the front door opened and Rom walked in.

"Oh, hey, Megan." His voice was a mixture of surrender and despair.

"Rom—" Megan uttered, unsure of how to continue.

Hanging up his slightly snow-flecked coat, he turned after realizing that she was not going to continue speaking.

"Huh?"

Megan felt panicked, unsure of who she was talking to: the addict she had always thought he was, or the brother, son, and loyal friend.

"Rom, did you—I mean I, uh, saw you... by the..." She was trembling, trying to find a way to approach the subject. Rom stood there, either completely unaware of her knowledge of his actions, or hiding it behind a well-rehearsed look of innocence.

As she struggled with the words, she became aware of the medallion she held tightly in her fist, and realized that it might say what she could not. She opened her palm and stuck her hand forward, the gold trinket laying with the inscription "4 years clean" facing up. She looked up to him, hoping he would understand.

Rom looked at the coin for a long moment. Megan willed him to claim it, hoping that it was still valid..

Finally, Rom looked up at her. "You... saw me?"

"Behind the junior high. I was cutting across from the high school."

Rom looked back at the coin without speaking.

“Were you meeting someone?” she pressed.

Rom looked back up at her with a look of resignation.

“Yeah.”

“A... dealer?”

A long pause. “Yeah.” Megan’s heart fell.

“Rom—”

“I didn’t go through with it, though.”

Megan froze in disbelief. “You didn’t?”

He shook his head. “No,” he answered. “I... don’t know why.”

Megan looked down at the medallion, and looked back at him, nudging her hand forward.

He paused for a moment, and took it from her.

“Thanks,” he said, and deposited it into his pants pocket. Looking down, he gave a soft sigh, and turned toward the stairs. As he did so, Megan called after him.

“Rom?”

He turned his head back toward her. “Yeah?”

“Do you... like her?”

“...who?”

“My mom? Uh, Tammy?”

Rom paused, then nodded. “Yeah. I’ve liked her for a very long time.”

“Rom, maybe you guys being together—maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.”

Rom seemed to brighten just a bit. “Are...you sure?”

“I’ve been thinking about it, and I just want you—and her—to be happy.”

“Okay,” he answered, the hint of a smile breaking through, and he climbed the stairs.

“ON A FIELD, SABLE, THE LETTER A, GULES.” While Megan had been able to wade through Hawthorne’s prose without much trouble, the final sentence of *The Scarlet Letter* made no sense. A “sable field”? “Gules”? The terms were completely foreign to her.

As she was pondering the ending, Sam walked into the room.

“What’s that?”

Megan was laying on her bed, and turned to her side and put the book down. “A book I have to read for class.”

“What’s it about?”

“This woman, Hester Prynne, did something really bad, and so she had to wear this red ‘A’ on her shirt all the time as a punishment, and it made all the people around her treat her like a bad person. But the thing is, what she did wasn’t, like, as bad as it seems, but she still had to live with the punishment. And she has a kid, and when she takes the letter off her shirt, the kid doesn’t even recognize her. So it’s like... her sin is part of who she is.”

“What’s a sin?”

“It’s when you do something that you know is bad.”

Sam seemed to understand the similarities that Megan was just now grasping herself.

“Was falling off the bridge a sin?”

The question caught her off-guard, and she took a moment to respond. "No, not for you, Sam. It has to be something you choose."

"Was it a sin for you and Charlie?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Does she have to wear the letter for the rest of her life?"

"No, I guess not. Her kid grows up and gets married. But she wears it anyway."

"Why?"

"I think it's because she realizes that it's not something she can separate herself from. It becomes part of her and she chooses to live with it."

Sam didn't respond, and didn't seem to be affected one way or the other, though the sullenness he had left school with seemed to remain. He left the room without speaking, which concerned Megan enough to get up and follow him. But as she went into the hallway, she heard voices from the front yard, so she went into the bathroom and peered out the window. What caught her eye first was the police car parked out front. She caught a glimpse of someone stepping onto the porch and heard the front door open.

She felt a sense of panic brewing up inside of her. Were the police here for Rom? If he didn't buy any drugs, would he still have to go to jail, just for meeting with a dealer?

She slipped out of the bathroom, stepped over Sam's coat and gloves on the floor of the hallway, and perched

herself at the top of the stairs. She first heard Howard's voice.

"Yes, but what *right* does she have?"

The other voice was that of Officer Roe. "She doesn't have *any* right, Howard. She has no more claim on the boy than you do. But that's the thing—she knows that the arrangement here, it... cuts across the standard procedure. You know that, too. You know that we break a few rules by doing this."

"Yes, but the alternative is him living in an infinite loop of foster care! You know he can't be adopted without clearing the parental rights, and that's never going to happen. It's the same with Megan."

"I realize that, and—Howard, you know I'm on your side, right? *I* know this is the best place for them. It's just that—she's threatening to expose the arrangement here. I don't know why. I don't understand it any more than you do. In fact, you know her a lot better than me, so you probably have a better idea of why she's doing it."

There was a pause. "I don't know, Kirk. She's never opened up to me. Whenever I've tried to help, it has just pushed her farther away."

"Howard, she's on her way, and she has every intention of taking him with her. Now, she told me that if he can go with her, she won't take the case to Social Services. So maybe that'll buy us some time to figure out our next move."

Howard was silent for a moment. Megan's mind raced. They were talking about Sam, it seemed obvious... but who was trying to take him away? Who would want a seven year old boy that the world had forgotten about? Who else even knew he existed?

Megan, have you ever thought about leaving Howard's?

Linda's voice came into her mind like a thunderbolt. Was she blackmailing Howard to gain custody of Sam? Suddenly her questions about Sam's well-being, her concern over what he was watching on TV, what he was eating, who was taking care of him, they all suddenly made sense. She didn't trust Howard to take care of a seven-year-old boy. She didn't think this was a good place for him.

There was a sharp knock at the door, and the squeaking of the screen door as it was opened at the bottom of the stairs. "Hello, Kirk," came Linda's voice, as Megan's heart skipped a beat. As stealthily as she could, she swept across the hall into Charlie's room, where Sam was sitting, looking at a book.

"Sam," she whispered with a panicked urgency. "Sam, Project Sigma."

He looked at her with a mixture of fear and dread in his eyes, and then scrambled to the window into the light snow.

As he climbed out to the roof of the porch, she quietly moved down the hallway and descended the stairs to find Linda, Kirk and Howard standing in the entry way. Linda was dressed nicely, in heeled shoes and a dark pant suit. She was obviously intending to cast an image of confidence and

power, and she did so, especially in contrast with Howard's rumpled end-of-the-workday appearance.

"Kirk, did you tell him what we're doing here?"

"I think it's best that you explain it, Linda," came Roe's polite but steeled reply.

Linda looked at Howard and took a short breath.

"Howard, I know how poorly Sam has been taken care of here, and I don't think this is any place for a young boy, so I've come to take him with me. You and I both know that you don't have the proper foster home papers for him to stay here, and so if you refuse, I'll report you and Kirk both to the police."

"Linda," Howard replied, "you don't have the proper papers either."

"That may be, but you're not going to report me, because that will dump him into the foster care system, and I know you don't want that. Now, where is Sam?"

Howard looked over to Megan. "He's upstairs," she responded quietly, desperately hoping that he was hidden well enough.

"I'll go get him," Roe said resignedly, and he slowly walked upstairs.

"Linda, why are you doing this?" Howard asked.

Linda's tone was seething. "Because you are too wrapped up in your own imaginary quests to take care of him, Howard. He needs someone to care for him, to be there for him. Not you, Howard. You've handed him off to Megan and Charlie, who have their own lives to live. To Rom, who's—

who's a drug addict. To Vicky, who is off for another round of abuse from Shaun, and Phil, who is off in la-la-land most of the time!"

Megan felt mortified by the dressing-down. Her adrenaline was making her heart pound in her neck, but her body was caught between rushing to Howard's defense and running away, never to return.

But Howard, whom she had expected to completely capitulate to Linda's tirade, instead stepped toward Linda with a look of strength on his face that Megan had never before seen.

"Linda, you can say what you want about me, but I will not stand by and allow you to insult these—these good people. You have no right. You may have left this place, Linda, but surely you realize how much you have in common with them?"

"I'm the only one who had the sense to leave, Howard! They're adults, they can take care of themselves or not... but Sam—how can you expect to raise a child in a place like this, Howard? You've never been a parent, despite what you believe in your little fantasy world! You don't know what it's like to have a child of your own!"

"And *you* do?"

"Yes!" Linda exclaimed in frustration, but immediately caught herself and cupped her hand over her mouth. Howard's eyes widened in shock as the room fell suddenly silent.

"Linda, you never told me—" Howard began, but he stopped mid-sentence as he apparently realized the full truth at the same time Megan did. "Linda, did you have a child... *before you jumped?*"

Linda glared at him. "You—you have no right to know anything about him. He doesn't exist."

"He... exists as long as you remember him."

"No!" Linda screamed. "Don't you understand, he's gone! I left him there, where he was supposed to have a future, a good mother... and that bridge"—her voice cracked as her confident poise began to slip into emotion—"it took him away from me. *I* was supposed to be the one to disappear from *his* life! He was supposed to live, to grow old, to be happy!"

The steel in Howard's expression was gone, replaced by pity. "Linda, tell me about him! What was his name?"

"No!" she cried between sobs. "You have no right to his memory, Howard! *I* have no right to it, after what I did!"

"Linda, the memory is all that's left of him. Don't you see? At least you have that! You can't let it disappear too!"

"It's torture to remember! I bought all his old toys, Howard, to *remember* him, and they just lay there in that box and *torture* me! Don't you understand? You want to remember your daughter, but you have no idea how hard it is, to remember someone who's gone, who's never coming back!"

Howard responded calmly. "Linda, I'm so, so sorry. I can't imagine what you've gone through. But—please, think

about what's best for Sam. Let's work *together* to help him, so he doesn't need to suffer like we have."

The words seemed to speak to Linda, as after a moment she seemed to calm down—but after a quick look into Howard's eyes, she turned, without a word, back toward the door. Shielding her face out of apparent embarrassment, she walked quickly by Megan and out the front door, the screen door slamming behind her as Megan heard the *click-click* of her heels increase in speed up the front walk.

Megan and Howard were alone in the living room for no more than a few seconds when Officer Roe came down the stairs. "I can't find Sam anywhere," he reported, and Megan went out the back door, into the snow now thickening with a building wind, to the edge of the porch where she could peer up into the tree where she knew him to be hiding.

But Sam was gone.

THE SEARCH

Megan ran back inside, through the living room, past Howard and Officer Roe, past Rom—who had apparently come downstairs to see what all the shouting was about—and darted up the stairs. Sam was no doubt hiding under a bed or in a closet somewhere, she figured, especially with the snow flying outside.

He was nowhere in Charlie's room, though, and she leaned out the still-open window to check the tree once again. She went to her room, but there was no sign of him there either. She called out to him as she searched, but there was no response. Vicky's room was empty; nothing under the bed, no one in the closet. The bathroom, even the linen closet showed no sign of him.

Officer Roe was coming up the stairs again. "Did you look on the other side?" she asked.

"Yes, everywhere. Didn't you say he was up here, Megan?"

"He was hiding on the roof of the porch, but he's gone now," she answered, but as she spoke she realized something: his coat and gloves, which had been laying in the hallway, were gone. He must have come back in to get them.

“He’s outside somewhere,” she said aloud, though to herself as much as to Roe.

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah, his coat is gone. We need to check in the back yard.”

She galloped back downstairs and back out into the increasing snow. “Sam?” she called out, checking the perimeter of the yard, but there was still no trace of him. She went around the side yard by the kitchen door, and into the front yard, calling his name in the biting cold.

Rom came out the front door. “Did you find him?”

“No, I can’t find him anywhere!”

“Do you think he ran off somewhere?”

Megan tried to stop and think, but the wintery air bit at her exposed face. “I don’t know,” she thought, heading toward the front door. “Daniel’s house, maybe?”

“Who?”

“A friend of his who lives up the street. Let me get my coat and I’ll run over and check.” She swung around and noticed Linda’s car was gone. “Linda wouldn’t have taken him, would she?”

“I don’t know, she just got in her car and left. Unless he was hiding in her car or something?”

“No, I can’t imagine... maybe call her anyway?”

“She won’t be home yet, but I can try.”

Megan went in to get her coat and then ran back out into the cold. *Which one is Daniel’s house?* she thought, remembering that Daniel had pointed at one of a few

houses across and two or three doors down. She jogged down the middle of the road in that direction, looking for a swing set, a treehouse, any clue that a seven- or eight-year-old boy might live there.

A couple of bikes, red and pink respectively, gave away the correct house but despite two or three rings of the doorbell, several loud knocks and even a surreptitious trip into the back yard, there was no evidence of anyone, adult or child. She looked quickly around at the neighboring houses and called out Sam's name a few more times, but it was in vain; if Sam was there, he didn't want to be found.

She ran back, and Rom was standing in the doorway. "No answer at Linda's, but Kirk is headed there now. No luck at the friend's house?"

"Nobody there. I even tried the door."

"Where else do you think he would have gone?"

"I don't know, his old house, maybe? The school?"

"Where's his old place?"

"Up past Mountain School, off of Yucca. But it's probably a fifteen minute walk!"

"I'll head that direction. You want to go to the school?"

"Okay," she responded. "Do you think we should call Charlie?"

"He's on his way," Howard called from the living room. "I'll tell him to meet you at the school when he gets here."

Megan left again and ran back toward Aspen School, looking around and calling his name as she went. The snow was just starting to collect in wispy swirls on the ground as

her shoes made contact with the asphalt; were the circumstances different, the long-awaited onset of winter and the gathering twilight would have made for a beautifully peaceful, romantic walk. Knowing Sam was out in it, though, made the cold and coming night an enemy, and as Megan thought about the state Sam had been in since she picked him up from school, her pace and her heart rate increased.

The school was nearly desolate, with only a single car parked in the lot furthest from the school's main entrance. She looked at her watch—it was almost six-thirty, and as she reached the doors of the school, the dimly-lit, empty hallway beyond the windows told her they were locked even before she tried the handles. Still, she ran the circumference of the school, peering in windows, checking jungle-gyms and slides, calling his name, but the grounds were vacant.

She came back around to the front doors just as Charlie's car pulled quickly into the lot. The driver's door swung open and he jumped out, engine still running and lights on.

"Did you find him?"

"No," Megan cried, close to tears. "Any sign of him at the house?"

"No. Hop in, let's go check the playlot."

Megan let out a sigh of relief. *Of course*, she thought, and felt stupid for not thinking of it sooner. They both got in and Charlie nearly spun the wheels against the pavement as he accelerated out of the empty parking lot.

“Howard said he was hiding from Linda?” Charlie asked, his eyes glued to the snowy road ahead.

“She came to try to take him, Charlie,” Megan answered. “Did you know she had a baby before she jumped?”

Charlie turned to look at her with an expression of shock. “She never told *me* that.”

“She never told anyone. She’s been trying to forget him all these years. I think that’s why she’s hated Howard for so long... he’s trying to remember, but she’s trying to forget.”

“Oh, you mean—she jumped and then the baby—”

“Gone. Never born.”

“Oh... oh, wow—”

“I know! I think she felt like Sam didn’t have a happy life here, and she wanted to take him as her own, and—”

“But she didn’t?”

“She broke down after she let slip about her baby, and—she just left.”

They pulled up to the small cul-de-sac where the playlot was and jumped out into the storm again.

“Charlie, maybe Sam *doesn’t* have a happy life here. Maybe that’s why he ran.”

“Let’s just make sure he’s safe, and we can talk about it,” Charlie answered, shrugging his shoulders against the wind.

They checked in and around each piece of playground equipment, but once again there was no sign of the boy. Her hands in her coat pockets and shivering in the cold air, Megan ran over to where Charlie was gazing into the surrounding trees.

“Charlie, where else could he be? Rom went to see if he went back to his old house, do you think we should head in that direction to see if he’s out there?”

“I don’t know, Megan,” Charlie responded, still scanning the boundaries of the playlot. “I mean, he—”

But then Charlie froze, and his eyes grew wide as he walked quickly over toward the fence along the canyon behind Megan. She swung around and followed him, trying to see what had caught his attention in the trees just beyond.

“Oh, no—” he spoke, leaning over the fence and staring into the distance.

“What, Charlie?” Megan frantically looked from tree to tree in the blowing snow.

“There,” Charlie pointed. “There, across the canyon!”

Megan’s heart fell as she refocused her eyes to the distance, where through the snow she could just make out a small form in a blue jacket, a red backpack bouncing back and forth from shoulder to shoulder as he moved quickly through the trees.

She let out a gasp as she followed the trajectory of his pursuit to the north tower of the Peggy Sue Bridge.

“No, no, no! He—Charlie, we have to get over there!”

Charlie was already planning. “We’re not going to make it in time on foot. Let’s go.”

They ran back to the truck and tore off back up the street, Megan’s heart pounding in her chest as they flew by parked cars along the narrow streets. They reached

Diamond Drive and Charlie pulled out without stopping, causing a station wagon to screech its brakes and lay on the horn. Megan let out a short squeal as they sped up the hill past the near miss, but urged Charlie on as the light turned yellow a few seconds before they arrived at the intersection at the top. Making it through, Charlie accelerated around the curve, flew down the straightaway past the junior high at fifty or sixty miles an hour, and came to a rest at the red light by the high school.

Megan was willing the light to turn, anxiously looking through the oncoming traffic and down Orange street, as though she would be able to see the bridge nearly a mile down the meandering road. Suddenly her attention was drawn to the foreground, however, as the driver of the car that had just pulled up to the corner began frantically waving and honking.

“Charlie, it’s Anthony!” Megan exclaimed, nearly jumping from her seat as Charlie accelerated through the intersection with the green arrow now shining through the mounting blizzard. Connecting Megan’s realization with the honking, he let up on the throttle as he cleared the intersection and quickly rolled down his window.

“Phil told us!” Anthony yelled through the wind. “Did you find him yet?”

“He’s going to the bridge!” Megan shouted. “We’re trying to get to him!”

Anthony nodded with comprehension and threw his car into reverse as Charlie sped on. After careening around

parked cars and dodging one driving up the road toward them, Charlie stopped the car in the middle of the cul-de-sac and jumped out. Megan followed and could hear Anthony pulling to a stop behind her.

The three of them ran down the path through the woods toward the north tower. The cold wind stung Megan's face and her vision was blurred with the force of the snow blowing directly into her eyes as she strained to find the blue of Sam's coat amidst the trees and the storm.

They reached the base of the tower without spotting him, and Charlie began climbing the ladder to the deck of the bridge. *Surely, he didn't*, Megan thought, remembering Sam's staunch resistance to using the bridge as a shortcut on their many trips downtown, but as she spun around the only other person she saw in the darkening forest was Anthony, standing a few paces away, calling Sam's name and shielding his face against the wind.

Realizing the only possible answer, Megan began climbing the ladder behind Charlie, arriving at the top to see Charlie standing there, his forearm held before his eyes to protect his face from the even more intense gusts of freezing wind.

"SAM!"

Megan peered through the snow to see the familiar blue coat some thirty or forty yards away. Sam was not moving, or even standing; he appeared to be crouched along the side of the deck, up against the steel rope that lined the walkway.

"Sam, no!"

Charlie advanced quickly at as close to a run as he could muster on the swaying structure, and Megan followed close behind, keeping her eye on Sam's motionless form. "Sam!" she shouted, "Sam, hold on! Don't move!"

As they drew near, the howling, numbing wind gave way to Sam's terrified cries, causing them both to increase their pace. Finally, they reached him, and Megan dropped to her knees on the metal grating beside him.

"Sam, what are you doing? We need to get you off of here!" She took his arm, which was rigid as he clung to the guide wires with all his strength. His face was red and soaked with tears, and snow covered his coat, backpack, gloves and uncovered head.

She could hardly understand him through the violent sobs. "I—I want to—go back home!" he wailed, and Megan went limp with sympathy. "I miss my mom and dad!"

"Oh, Sam!" Megan replied, her own tears now flowing. "Oh, Sam, I know, we all do! But why—why did you climb up here?"

"If I jump off, maybe it would make my Mom and Dad remember me so I could go back!"

"Sam, it doesn't work that way! It—it would just make everyone forget you again!"

Sam looked at Megan with a look of realization and then buried his face in his arms, still clinging tightly to the wires. Megan could see his body shake with emotion before the boy's wail once again filled their ears.

She took him in her arms and held him tightly. "I just miss my family so much," he cried between great, heaving sobs. "Maybe it'll work *this* time!"

"I know how much you miss them," Megan replied, her mouth close to his frigid-looking ear. "Sam, let's get somewhere safe and warm and we can talk about it."

Slowly, carefully, Charlie and Megan eased his gloved fingers from the cables and coaxed him to his shaky feet. Anthony, who had been standing just behind Megan as she knelt, led the way back toward the north tower, with Megan right behind. Sam clung tightly to her waist, and Charlie brought up the rear of the slow progression. The wind continued to rock the bridge as they moved across it, and Megan held fast to the guide cable with one hand and to Sam with the other.

For a few seconds as they walked, it seemed as though the winds had suddenly died down, and the snow, which had been flying nearly horizontally, fluttered lazily downward around them. The sudden calming allowed Megan to release her grasp on the guide cable for a moment and readjust Sam's tight grip around her waist.

As suddenly as the wind stopped, however, a forceful gust came from her left as though an icy flood had been released a few feet away. The onslaught caught her off balance, and she fell in Sam's direction as she watched Anthony's body get thrown against the cables on the opposite side of the walkway.

As she struggled to regain her balance, she felt Sam's grip around her suddenly loosen, and she turned with horror to see him slipping between the deck and the lowest guard cable.

"No!" She thrust her hand down to catch him, but she couldn't grab hold quickly enough. She dropped to the deck as his hand struggled to grip on the grate; she lunged forward and caught it as she fell with a sickening thud.

"SAM!" she screamed, the pain of the fall burning through her chest and back. "Grab hold of me!"

It was getting more and more difficult for Megan to hold on to Sam, who was convulsing with fear. She tightened her slipping grip as she felt Anthony behind her, now anchoring her to the bridge. "Sam!" she shouted through the wind. "Sam, you just need to hold on!"

Sam looked up, terrified. "I don't want to fall!"

"I'm not going to let you go!"

A look of sudden strength came across Sam's face and he swung his free arm up toward Megan, grabbing her forearm. She held on with all her strength and tried to pull him closer. As she strained, however, his right hand slipped and the sudden downward force caused his left arm to slip through her hands.

"NO!" she exclaimed as she tightly grabbed his gloved hand as it came through hers, and she held it fiercely with every ounce of strength she could find, her entire body aflame with pain and fatigue.

Sam gazed up at her through tears of realization. “No! Hold on, Sam!” she pleaded, feeling the hand slipping out from the oversized glove. “I don’t want to forget you!”

They both let out desperate screams as she felt his fingers slip from beneath the fabric — and as she clung tightly to the now limp glove, Sam disappeared into the bleak and furious torrents below.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

SAM'S DREAM

He opened his eyes, the sting of his fall burning his hands and knees. Steadying himself against the guide cables, he looked down at his shirt to see a ragged tear down the side where it had caught against the metal mesh of the decking.

"Oh, no," he said to himself. Mom was going to be so mad at him for tearing his shirt.

He looked up to see Kyle standing, facing him on the other side of the bridge. "Kyle, wait, I fell!" he yelled, pushing himself back to his feet. One leg buckled a little as he stood up, the pain increasing as he put weight on it. Pushing through, he focused again on the other side of the bridge and moved ahead, putting all the effort he could into keeping his eyes from looking down.

Step by limping step, he made it to the opposite tower where Kyle waited for him. "You okay, Sam?" he asked, spotting the tear in his shirt. "Oh, man, mom's gonna kill you."

"Don't tell her, okay?" he asked as he looked over the edge of the platform.

"Sam, she's gonna find out!"

"We can tell her that a hawk ripped it, or a—a falcon!"

“She’s not gonna believe that!”

“Just tell her,” he pleaded, as Kyle began descending the ladder to the ground below. “Or I’ll tell on you about the firecrackers!”

“Okay, okay! Come on, let’s go!”

He climbed down the ladder, looking behind him for a glimpse at Jacob and Scott, who were once again far ahead. Kyle stayed with him as they walked through the neighborhood of small houses by the high school, up Diamond drive and behind Urban Park towards his house.

“Here, give me your shirt and zip up your coat. We’ll go upstairs and I’ll hide it,” Kyle said as they approached the front steps. He complied, ducking behind a parked car to make the change.

“Hi, Mom,” Kyle called as they walked in, quickly ushering him up the stairs while peering into the kitchen.

“What do you have, Kyle?” his mom called back, her voice colored with suspicion.

He ran up the stairs as quickly as he could and ducked into his room, closing the door behind him. He could hear voices downstairs as he pulled off his coat and rummaged through his chest of drawers looking for a different shirt to put on.

There were rapid steps coming up the stairs as he rooted through the pile of shirts and sweaters. He had just found a *Dukes of Hazzard* shirt, one that he hadn’t worn for a long time, and scrambled to pull it over his head as the door to his room opened—but just a little.

It was Jacob. "You ripped your shirt?"

"I fell on the bridge!"

Jacob listened for a moment. He could hear his mom's voice downstairs, her temper rising. He finished pulling the shirt on and looked to his oldest brother for directions.

Jacob looked at him with concern and resignation. "You'd probably better go 'Sigma,' bud."

He immediately understood and climbed up onto his bed to start cranking the window open. As he climbed out, he could hear his mother now through the screen door below. She was no longer yelling at Kyle; he could hear his dad responding to her shouts.

"I know, Joy, but it's just a shirt! He probably—"

"It's *not* just a shirt! How are you not getting this—"

"Oh, come on, we've been over this and over this. How many times do we have to dig up this *one mistake* I made years ago—"

"A mistake! *A mistake!* Is that what you're calling it now? Do you have any idea how many times I've been ready to take Jacob and Kyle and leave you here with you and your little *mistake*—"

"Oh, come on, Joy, he's just a boy, and it's not his fault—"

"I don't want to hear it, Brian! I work my fingers to the bone to take care of him, to buy clothes for him—"

"He's our son, Joy!"

Her voice suddenly decreased in volume but the intensity was white-hot. "*Your* son, Brian. Not ours. *Yours*."

“I don’t think she’s going to cool off for a while,” came Kyle’s voice from the open window as the argument downstairs continued. He didn’t know his older brother had been there, just inside the room, but it made him feel better as he perched in the tree near the roof. “You wanna head over to Tim’s house or something? I’d go but I have chores.”

“Okay,” he responded quietly. He wished he hadn’t ripped his shirt.

He climbed down the tree and slipped around the side of the house, sneaking under the kitchen window. Once he was clear he took off running, but after a minute he decided he didn’t want to go to his friend’s house after all. He continued down the hill as the sun began to set, past the church and the fire station, past the gas station at the top of the hill and down to the house near Aspen School that he had begun to call home.

But as he stepped in through the unlocked front door, he found only empty rooms. In the kitchen, all the counters were bare, all the cupboards were empty. The living room was devoid of furniture and the giant picture window, lacking curtains or even rods, opened up to an empty porch and barren back yard.

He didn’t even bother with any of the other rooms: they were all gone. Were they... forgotten? *No*, he thought. *I remember them.*

He slumped to the floor against the wall opposite the big window, and sat down. He pulled his knees to his chest and gazed out into the twilight.

He felt her presence before he saw her, so he wasn't startled when she spoke — but he was curious as to where she came from, who she was.

"I'm sorry, Sam, they're all gone."

"Where did they go?"

"I don't know. Maybe they were never here."

"But I remember them."

"So do I."

He turned to look at her. She was pretty, but he didn't recognize her, not yet. She smiled at him, a kind of smile that showed she felt bad for him.

"This used to be my home, too, you know," she said, sitting down next to him.

"Did they forget about you, too?"

She looked down. "It was before most of them came to live here, so they never knew me. I think I would like to have met them, though."

"I—I shouldn't have run away from them. I wanted to go back home, but—but I don't think my mom wants me to be there."

"I know, Sam. It's hard for her."

"Do you know my mom?"

"Only a little. I knew your dad a long time ago, when he worked at Safeway."

He thought for a moment. "After I fell off the bridge, I saw them—they looked so happy. They were all playing together, and smiling, and... I don't think I've ever seen my Mom smile like that before."

She looked at him again with the kind smile.

“Why does she say that I’m not her son? Is it because I’m ‘step’?”

She smiled and gave a gentle nod. “I think you’re right.”

“But... ‘step’ means special, right?”

“Sam, you’re *very* special. It’s just that—Sam, it’s that you weren’t one of *her* babies. You started out as the baby of someone else. And that’s hard for her.”

He thought about that for a minute, trying to figure it out. “I was the baby of my dad?”

She let out a quiet, polite chuckle. “Yes. What happened was that your dad made—a mistake. A bad choice.”

“A sin?”

“Yes. He made someone else have a baby, and that baby was you.”

“Who did he make have a baby?”

She didn’t answer him, but looked at him again with the gentle smile. This time her eyes sparkled just a little more, like tears were growing inside them. He didn’t know if they were happy tears or sad tears... but now, looking at them—now he recognized her eyes.

“I think—I think I do remember you a little bit.”

She looked forward, out the big window. “I used to take care of you, a long time ago.”

“When I was a baby?”

She nodded.

“I didn’t want to leave you, but—I couldn’t take care of you anymore. But I always wanted to come back to be with

you. I've missed you" —she turned back toward him and the tears started coming out of her eyes and down her cheeks—"a lot."

He followed a tear with his eyes as it ran down past her still-smiling lips. Maybe they were happy tears, because she was smiling? The tear continued down, over her cheek and on toward the curve of her jaw, where it crossed into a spot of darker skin that he hadn't noticed before, but which, like the rest of her face, seemed now comfortably familiar. He reached up to catch the tear with the side of his finger, feeling her warmth in this otherwise cold, quiet and lonely place, and laid his head on her chest. Tenderly, she put her arms around him, and he felt safe, warm, and loved.

"But you can be with me now, right?" he asked, after several quiet moments passed.

"For a while," she answered softly. "We don't need to hurry."

C H A P T E R T H I R T Y - S E V E N

BACK

Sam stayed there, in that warm and happy place, for a long time. Very gradually, he became more and more aware of his own body, still immersed in the warmth and comfort. His head pressed against her chest, he listened to her heartbeat and let himself fall into a deep relaxation, withdrawing into himself to the point where he could no longer feel her warm touch, where he could only vaguely sense her presence nearby.

The rhythm of her heartbeat continued, however—if not in his ears, in the depths of his mind. Soon, it became his own heartbeat, and then it imperceptibly changed into a lullaby of quiet beeping. Was there music? Faint music, from far off. The sounds of someone talking in another room somewhere.

As he slowly emerged from the strange sleep, he remembered only a faceless presence who made him feel happy and safe.

After a few moments, he opened his eyes, his eyelids fluttering in the sudden and blurry light. Closing them and squeezing them tightly shut, he opened them again to try and make out his surroundings. He was lying on a bed, there was a chair, a drawn curtain, a desk. He wanted to turn his

head to look around but the slight turn of his neck caused a sharp pain to go down his back, and he inhaled audibly.

There was a rustle of paper to his right, and the short squeaking of chair legs being pushed back.

“Sam?”

Though different, the voice brought him that same feeling of comfort and safety that he had remembered from before. It hurt his neck and his back, but he didn’t care: he turned his head to see her.

“Sam, are you awake?”

She leaned over him and put her hand on his. He felt the warmth of her touch and gathered up the strength to speak. His voice came out in a ragged whisper.

“Do... you remember me?”

Megan’s eyes blurred with tears as she smiled, nodded and squeezed his hand. “I’ll *always* remember you, Sam.”

As Sam lay there, bleary-eyed but inquisitive, Megan told him what had happened: the realization that Sam’s memory had not slipped from their minds, and the subsequent horror that he was not in the clearing. The frigid, frantic race to the canyon floor and the joy of finding his tiny body broken but still breathing.

She described his injuries: broken vertebra and a severe concussion, along with a multitude of scrapes, cuts and bruises. How the doctors prepared them for the worst, and how slowly time went by in the waiting room as they waited.

She told him how they were able to bring him back to stable condition, how they came in to see him laying in the bed, bandaged and immobile, his face bruised and his body in a brace, sleeping.

And how he continued to sleep, despite all their efforts, for more than two weeks.

“Was I in a coma, like Phil?” he asked.

“No,” she answered. “The doctors said it wasn’t like that. They said there was no reason that you shouldn’t wake up. They squirted water in your ears and looked at your eyes, and they said that your body was just acting like you were asleep. They tried rubbing your chest really hard, stuff that was supposed to wake you up, but you just stayed... asleep.

“So they were worried about brain damage from you hitting your head, and they said all they could do was to wait and see if you would wake up. They just took the back brace off two days ago, and you look tons better than before, but you just wouldn’t wake up, until now.”

Sam lay quietly for a few moments, apparently absorbing it all. Then he slowly lifted his head and looked around the room. “Is anybody else here?”

“The nurse is calling them... they’ll probably be here soon. We’ve all been worried about you.”

“Is Vicky coming?”

Megan dropped her eyes. “I don’t know.”

She told him that Vicky had returned the day after he fell, but that it was clear that she was not back to stay. She quit her job at the hospital and began moving out. When

Howard pleaded with her to take more time to think about it, she told him that Shaun had offered to provide almost enough money for her to finally go to nursing school, and the rest they would get by selling her car.

Within a week, her car was gone, and the room at the end of the hall was dark and empty when Megan arrived there from the hospital in the late evenings.

After they both sat in silence for a moment, Megan spoke. "I'm sorry, Sam, I don't want you to feel bad. I'm so glad you're awake."

His still-tired eyes looked over at her. "Me too," he replied. "Can I go home now?"

"They said it will probably be another week or so," she answered. "I think they want to make sure you're all the way better, that you can walk and everything."

"What about school?"

"Tomorrow's the last day before Christmas break," she answered. "You should be all better to go back when it starts again in January."

"Will you stay with me? I'm... scared of being all by myself."

"Of course I will, Sam."

As news of Sam's awakening reached the others, they arrived in turn to see him, bringing toys and sweets which Sam opened gratefully, but with a heavy-lidded lethargy that renewed Megan's feelings of sadness for what the little boy had gone through. In the following days, as the physical

therapist came to get him out of bed, onto his feet and eventually walking around the room, a certain sparkle slowly returned to his eyes—but the cheerful boy Megan remembered from before had yet to return, and she wondered if he ever would.

It was late Saturday night, and Megan and Charlie were sitting in Charlie's car outside Howard's house, having just gotten back from sitting with Sam as he fell asleep in his hospital room. Though she hadn't wanted to say anything before for fear of jinxing the outcome, she couldn't help but feel optimistic about Sam's progress, at least medically.

"When do you think they'll let him go?"

"Soon, I hope," Charlie answered. "He seems ready. And with Christmas on Tuesday—"

"I know," Megan answered, though hearing him say it was a bit of a shock; the holiday had been lurking on the horizon for quite a while, but the thought that it was three days away was sobering. "I haven't really gotten anything for him, though, I feel awful..."

"Hey, you shouldn't," Charlie responded. "You've been there by his side through all of this. That's worth a lot more than a toy or something. You know that."

"Yeah, but I still feel bad... he's seven years old, you know? And it's Christmas..."

"I'm willing to bet that getting out of the hospital is going to be as great a gift as he could ask for."

They went in to find Howard sitting in the living room, reading a book. He asked about Sam, and Charlie had just

begun reporting on his progress when there was a soft knock on the door.

Megan glanced at the clock on the wall—it was just after 10:30. She exchanged a look of curiosity with Charlie and went back to the front door to open it.

It was Vicky, carrying an overnight bag and her purse, her clothes looking rumpled, and her face stained with tears. She turned her head with embarrassment, apparently unable to bring herself to speak.

Megan pushed open the screen door and held it for her. She looked back toward the living room. “Howard?”

Howard saw who it was and immediately set his book down and rose from the chair. “Oh, Vicky!” he exclaimed as he hurried to the entryway to meet her.

She dropped her bag and went to him, burying her head in his shoulder as he embraced her. He gave Megan a look and she understood, gesturing to Charlie as she turned and went up the stairs.

They both went to their rooms, and Megan left her door ajar to listen in.

“A new truck?” she could hear Howard ask through Vicky’s sniffling sobs.

“Yes, he spent it all! Oh, Howard, why did I think he’d changed? I feel so stupid...”

“Oh, Vicky, I’m so sorry. You still have the money you’ve saved, though, right?”

“No, I had transferred it over to his account so we could pay the tuition, and I was going to go and register after

Christmas, and he—he said that the truck was a gift for both of us, and—and that he—he felt like it would be better for me not to go to school, and—oh, Howard, what was I thinking? It’s happening all over again, and I—I—”

If she continued, it was hard to hear, as her words were lost amidst her crying. As the emotions calmed a little, Megan could hear Howard’s words.

“Vicky, you’ll always have a place here.”

“I’ve got nothing, Howard,” Vicky said tearfully. “No job, no money, no car. I can’t help with the bills, the groceries—”

“We’ll make it work, Vicky. We always have, and we always will.”

Megan sat back against the doorjamb for several minutes, listening to Howard’s comforting words as Vicky regained her composure. She heard Howard offer to put sheets on her old bed, but she declined, insisting that she go do it herself so he could go get some rest.

She heard Howard go up to his room and several minutes later she could hear Vicky’s slow, defeated footsteps as she climbed the stairs toward the empty room at the end of the hall. Megan silently closed her own door but remained sitting there for a moment as she heard Vicky open the linen closet, close it again, and go back into her bedroom, gently closing the door behind her.

As it closed, Megan realized that, for the first time in nearly a month, the house’s population was back to where it had been for most of the past year, and yet Sam’s absence

made the house feel utterly empty. *I miss him*, she thought. *I can't wait for him to come—*

And she hesitated at the thought of completing the sentence, of using the word she had always deliberately avoided, but as she looked around her little room, she couldn't help but realize that it fit.

I can't wait for him to come home.

The word echoed in her mind for only a moment before she was startled by the sound of someone running up the stairs. She opened her door just in time to see Rom passing by and anxiously knocking at Vicky's door. A moment later, the door opened and Megan could see Vicky's ashamed, exposed and wordless reaction to seeing him for the first time since she left him, wounded and beaten on the entryway floor weeks before.

And then, as she lowered her head and was about to speak, Rom stepped forward and, without a word, took her in a full, deep and welcoming embrace.

Megan sat in the back seat, looking out at the half-melted piles of snow in the high school stadium parking lot, wondering if the overcast sky would bring forth any more. Searching through icy woods for Sam some three weeks earlier — her feet, hands and face numb from the winds — had soured her taste for winter weather in the interim, but she hoped for it now, if only to give Sam something, *anything*, to make the day feel special.

It was Christmas Eve, and when she brought up her feelings of failure to Charlie that morning, he had once again reminded her that just coming home would be enough of a Christmas present for Sam. And there they were, in the back seat of Howard's car as he drove them home, but Megan dreaded the let down that was inevitably coming when they got back.

No seven-year-old should ever miss out on Christmas, she thought, as she felt the cold outside radiating in through the glass. The discharge procedure at the hospital had, little by little, eaten up the whole of the day, and though the clouds had obscured any sign of the sun, the sky was beginning to grow dark.

She had pooled money from the others to purchase the Star Wars playset Sam had ogled during that first trip to TG&Y, and had fronted half the cost herself. It sat in her closet, lovingly wrapped, waiting for him to find tomorrow morning.

But it was just one gift. After all he had been through, Sam deserved so much more.

"I'm hungry," Sam said quietly. Megan felt the same way; with the day's constant feeling of being on the verge of leaving the hospital, they had never actually stopped to eat lunch.

"I can make you something when we get there," she answered, trying to think of something to make that would have at least the slightest trappings of festivity.

They crossed the landfill bridge and Megan watched the cars driving by, imagining the people inside finishing their last-minute shopping, or going to visit relatives. She found herself closing her eyes and daydreaming for a moment that it was her parents sitting in the front seat instead of Howard, that they were returning home to celebrate Christmas the way they always had, with a nice dinner, a drive around to see the Christmas lights and *luminarias*, a night of television and eggnog until they all went upstairs to bed. Looking back on it, it all seemed so forced, so quiet, so lonely.

She opened her eyes and turned back to Sam, who looked with eagerness at the lights hanging from some of the houses across from the junior high school. She despaired at the thought of them arriving at the house to find the same humdrum people, each doing their own thing. But why should it be any different? The house wasn't ever meant for a seven-year-old boy who believed in Santa Claus, but now it was his home. Their home, his and Megan's.

After all he's been through, she thought, after all that's been taken away, what else can I give him?

Howard pulled up in front of the house and shut off the engine. Megan got out and came around for Sam, helping him out of the car while Howard opened the trunk and pulled out the bags of clothes and gifts Sam had accumulated during his stay at the hospital. The cold air bit at Megan's cheeks and reminded her for a moment of the

fateful day on the bridge. She scowled the memory away and walked to the door, Sam trudging behind her.

Megan reached out for the doorknob, turned and pushed it, and was greeted by the warmth and light of another world.

The dreary weather outside was immediately cut through by the life, joy and activity of the holiday in full swing. As they entered, Megan and Sam were greeted with Christmas carols from the stereo speakers and the delicious smell of ham. In the kitchen, Vicky, Susan and Charlie were engaged in excited conversation as biscuit dough was being rolled out and flour filled the air. In the living room, Anthony and Rom were producing ornaments from boxes and hanging them on an already-lit tree that was dwarfed by the number of wrapped presents that sat beneath and around it—while Phil set a table with more place settings than Megan had ever seen it hold.

Sam came into the entry way behind her, his eyes wide with joy and excitement at the scene, and let out a voiced gasp at seeing the pile of gifts beneath the tree. Immediately there arose a roar of elated welcome as everyone came in to greet both Sam and Megan with eager hugs and warm smiles.

Megan had just received a kind and gentle embrace from Phil when she noticed Vicky looking past her toward the front door with an expression of mild concern. Megan turned around to see Howard standing in the open doorway, bags in each arm, gazing upon the scene. Within a moment

or two everyone had turned to him in a troubled silence, trying to read Howard's strangely blank face.

"Howard, what's wrong?" Vicky asked, stepping forward through the crowd.

In response, Howard seemed to snap out of his momentary trance, blink a few times and look down and to the side, his chin quivering very slightly. "I'm sorry, I—" he began, his voice catching, "I—haven't seen this house so—so happy in such a long time."

"Oh, Howard," Vicky said, her voice thick with emotion, as she stepped forward to hug him. Everyone in turn followed, until the door was closed and they all moved into the kitchen, living room and dining room to continue the preparations.

After helping Anthony, Rom and Sam finish trimming the tree, Megan went into the kitchen to assist with bringing food to the table. Ham, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, cranberries, peas amandine, and biscuits—and three different kind of pies for dessert. As the food came out, the places around the dining room table were filled, one by one, until only Megan, Vicky and Howard were yet to take their seats.

And as the final strains of "O Come, All Ye Faithful" came to a triumphant finish on the stereo, there was a sudden, almost apologetic knocking at the door, and Megan, who was just closing the refrigerator, went to answer it while Howard came around the corner from the dining room to see who it was.

She opened the door to see Linda, considerably less put-together than the last time Megan had seen her, her eyes moist with tears. As she stood on the porch, the dark sky behind her began to finally let loose a sprinkling of Christmas snow.

“Linda,” Megan exclaimed, “come in!”

She stepped slowly over the threshold and stopped at the sight of Howard standing at the other end of the short entryway. Several of the others had come over to see who it was, and now stood behind Howard with an awed reverence.

“Howard,” Linda spoke, her voice strained with emotion. “I’m—so, so sorry.”

Howard stepped forward to her. “Linda,” he answered in a soft, comforting tone. “Thank you for coming. Please, won’t you join us?”

Linda stepped through the entryway and into the living room, where she could see the table overflowing with food and drink, and the smiling, welcoming faces of everyone beaming back at her.

Still, she hesitated in the entryway, a troubled look on her face. As Howard realized that she was not coming in, he opened his mouth and was just about to speak when—

“David,” she muttered, apparently having difficulty keeping her emotions at bay.

Howard responded with a quizzical look. “What?”

“His name was... David. My little boy, my son. He was three months old when I jumped. He had deep, brown eyes,

and—and his stuffed blue bear always made him smile.” Her voice wavered and cracked as she got the last few words out.

Howard’s response was simple and reverent, a gentle nod and a warm smile as he looked into her eyes with a clear understanding. “I’d love to know more about him.”

Howard took Linda’s coat and Vicky took off her apron as everyone took their seats around the table. To Megan’s right sat Anthony, his eyes and smile shining brightly in the warmly lit room. To her left, Sam bounced in his seat, the joyful exuberance she had grown accustomed to—but which she missed terribly during his absence—returned to its full glory with the spirit of the holiday all around.

She sat and looked, one by one, at each of the faces around the table, talking with, laughing with, and enjoying one another without any pretense or discomfort or ill will. And where a few months ago she would have been loathe to spend time with them, the thought now greeted her mind with the excited anticipation that Sam must surely have felt for the gifts beneath the tree behind her.

I’m home.

Howard rose from his seat and held up his glass to offer a toast, and the room hushed. As he began to speak, however, it was apparent that the emotions of the moment were overtaking him, and he pursed his lips together in an effort to stifle the tears which began to roll down his cheeks nevertheless.

Linda looked up at him, her own eyes becoming newly wet with tears. Around the table, everyone took their glass and raised it up to acknowledge the unspoken toast.

And as though the support from all of them gave him breath to speak, Howard let go of the tightness in his voice and spoke with an expression of wistfulness and deep, abiding love.

"I am so—proud—to know each and every one of you," he proclaimed, and Megan noticed his eyes lingering a moment on Rom as he said it, causing Rom's face to twitch a little as he apparently clung to his own composure. "You have all had so much taken from you, and yet—what you give to each other, what you give to me, is... so much more.

"To—friendship," he concluded, raising his glass.

Just as the others began to move their glasses toward one another with the first murmured tones of assent, the word escaped Megan's lips almost without her realizing it.

"No!"

The table fell silent and frozen as all eyes turned to her with a mixture of confusion and surprise. Megan felt her face go flush with nervousness for a moment, but she took a breath, realizing as she looked over at Howard, his glass still raised, that it needed to be said. He needed to *hear* it.

Holding her glass in front of her, she took a breath.

"To *family*."

The table remained silent for another moment as the word seemed to echo across it, and Megan worried that

perhaps she had gone too far, that maybe she was the only one who felt it after all.

“To family,” Howard repeated, his voice thick with emotion.

And as Megan looked down the table from face to face, she saw teary eyes and heard choked voices affirming their heartfelt agreement amidst the sound of clinking glasses and creaking chairs.

Howard sat back down in his chair and, after a spontaneous moment of quietly shared reflection, plates were handed around and filled with food. The room began to ring with conversation and laughter as the warmth and joy of Christmas dinner shone through the large living room window into the back yard, silently reflected by the peaceful fall of snow.

EPILOGUE

The ground crunched beneath their feet as Megan and Sam walked down the dirt road—the same road, Sam recalled, that he had first followed his brothers down some thirteen years earlier.

“Wow, that’s so weird,” Sam said as they came to the point where the tower would have normally come into view. “So strange for it to just be empty sky.”

“Yeah, really,” Megan agreed. Sam, athletic and handsome, was several inches taller than she was now, but having her by his side still brought him a certain feeling of protection, and after all this time, the nearness to the place—neutered as it had recently become—still brought back an old feeling of unease.

They came to the spot where Megan had so often climbed through the fence to reach the tower. Now, the fence was gone and there was nothing beyond but a razed pile of pulverized concrete.

“Wow,” Sam remarked, standing in awe of the emptiness before him. “Just last month?”

“Yeah. Tammy and I came out and watched the demolition crew for a little while. It was so surreal.”

“I bet. It’s... hard to believe it’s gone.”

They stood in silence for a moment as they both took it all in.

"It's hard to believe *he's* gone," Sam said, his voice lower, more reverent. Megan stood firm, looking out over the canyon, though she could feel the lump forming in her throat.

"I know," she answered, trying to keep her emotions under control, but knowing Sam could see right through her attempt.

She could feel the weight of his gaze lift as he turned back toward the canyon. "Are you... doing okay?" he asked, looking out over the drop. "I mean, being in the house without him there?"

"Sam, it's okay, really. The house is hardly ever empty. Everyone else is close, and they're over all the time. Even more now that he's gone."

"Well, that's good. I made Charlie and Rom promise, anyway."

"I know," Megan smiled. "Besides, it's... not just going to be Anthony and me there by ourselves for too much longer."

Sam looked at her for a moment with a look of confusion, and then his face lit up with a sudden dawn of recognition.

"Oh, Megan, are you serious?!" he asked, looking down at her hand on her belly.

Megan couldn't keep the broad smile from her lips. "The due date is late October," she beamed.

“Oh, Megan, that’s so awesome!” he excitedly replied, hugging her tightly.

Soon they were turning to walk back, but Sam stopped suddenly, and looked back down the path.

“Wait—what about Rom’s sign? In the clearing? I mean, now that the bridge is gone, there’s no real need for that any more, right?”

Megan stopped and smiled again. “I don’t know,” she said. “I’ve actually thought about that, and... I know it’s weird, but—I kind of want to leave it there.”

Sam thought for a moment and then nodded in understanding. “It’s kind of the only monument left to what we all went through, isn’t it?” he replied.

“Yeah,” she responded quietly, thinking to herself as they walked that the real reason she had in mind was too crazy, too far-fetched to bother trying to explain: that somehow, somewhere, someday, someone else would be lost, scared, and all alone in the world, and they would come upon that sign, and call the number.

And she would answer, and finally welcome another lost soul into the house that had offered so much to so many for so long.

Howard’s house.

Her home.

* * *

EPILOGUE

Roughly a mile north, tucked into woods at the base of the ridge, the reverie of the cemetery was interrupted by the grinding of tires over the dirt road. A small car pulled up and the noise of the engine gave way to the silence of the hallowed spot. The driver's door opened and out stepped a woman, wearing a dark skirt and blouse and carrying a modest but pretty bouquet of brightly-colored flowers.

She closed the door and walked determinedly among the grey monuments, stepping around plots and between stones but not stopping, keeping her eyes down but her direction deliberate.

Finally, she stopped at a stone near to the edge of the woods, and knelt down to look upon the inscription.

HOWARD MICHAEL FENTON

MARCH 26, 1931 – NOVEMBER 20, 1996

BELOVED SON, HUSBAND,

BROTHER, FRIEND

AND FATHER

The woman knelt for several minutes, looking at the gravestone, then at the surrounding wood, then back. Finally, she laid the flowers down at the base of the stone with a soft sigh and stood up to leave.

Just as she was about to turn and go, however, she knelt once more. Raising her trembling hand, she gently, lovingly ran her fingers over the last word of the inscription as a tear

came down her cheek and passed over the birthmark on the curve of her jaw.

She raised her hand to her neck and gently took the tiny gold chain of a necklace between her fingers, following it down to a sparkling gold heart-shaped pendant that dangled beneath. Opening it, she peered inside at the faded picture of a man and his young daughter, foreheads touching, each looking deeply into the other's eyes and smiling broadly.

A few reverent moments later, she closed the locket, stood up, took a last look down at the grave, and walked back to her car. Soon, the engine started again and the vehicle wound its way up the forest drive toward civilization, leaving behind the bouquet, the headstones, those who rested there, and the gentle wind whispering in the trees.

