

CHAPTER FIVE

That evening the family barbecue starts in our backyard around five when Josh's friends arrive, a few Down kids like him. We eat cake and sing a few songs, then Josh opens his presents. Eagerly unwrapping them, he thanks everyone as if their gift is the best thing he's ever gotten. I give him night vision goggles, which he puts on immediately.

"I can't see anything," he says.

I tell him, "You can only see things in the dark. Then you can see everything and no one else can."

My relatives arrive with more presents, and Josh is excited all over again. My heart goes out to him. Seeing his joy eases my trying day, one like few teens have ever endured. By the minibar, my Aunt Charlotte, a college physics professor of all things, asks me if I really ran naked through the school halls.

"No, of course not. It was the auditorium." Then I shrug. "Actually, I wore a body suit."

She laughs. "Well, you're never dull, Paula. I'll say that for you." Then she took on a more serious expression. "History was never made by well-behaved women."

I don't think she meant what I did was historic exactly. I raised my eyebrows as if I understood and wandered away. We eat hamburgers and then Uncle Dave brings out his guitar and insists I join him. This is an old family ritual. I play passably well while he is very good. My piano from years of lessons is better but not all that good. We sing, which used to be such an embarrassment for me since my singing voice is something akin to a braying donkey. Now, I don't care. I belt it out and watch my relatives try to hide their grimaces. If they want donkey, I will give them donkey.

After the fun fest, Josh's friends leave. It is early twilight, so I think I might be able to sneak out and catch up with my friends. No chance. Mother watches me with the hard eye of Big Brother, or Big Sister in this case. So as my aunts and uncles gather around the portable bar, I isolate myself across the lawn, sitting on the bench by the storage shed, sipping orange juice and trying to ignore everyone while feeling massively depressed.

Why does life have to be so freaking hard? The intense demands of school. Drugs everywhere. The pressure of having sex. Popularity always at risk. Technology ready to memorialize every bad move on YouTube or on the texting grapevine. Constant drudge duties at home. It just seems I am the only private in a world of generals. Too many people telling me what to do, leaving too little of me for me. It is just not fair.

I grimace in pain. My head aches worse than ever, and my stomach roils with nausea. Maybe I am about to pop a blood vessel in my head and die. That might not be such a bad thing. Dying would solve all my problems and make people regret how they treated me. But I'm not so sure I want my head to burst open even if I have to go back to school Monday and face Mrs. Guthrie? For sure, she will take all the pleasure out of being popular. In truth, I see no hope for me in or out of the Rector Academy. And my mother determined to find other remedies as if I am a disease.

As I look at my relatives clinking glasses and getting drunk, they all look so annoyingly happy. Well, I'm not. I have concluded this has been the worst day of my life. Everything is an uphill battle like that Greek Sisyphus we learned about in 8th grade, pushing that rock uphill just to have it roll back to the bottom and start all over again. That's me.

A warm day is cooling off. I need a jacket but I'm not going to go through the gauntlet of my relatives to get one. Wearing just a black t-shirt and jeans, I rub my arms to keep warm.

“Paula,” my mother calls. “Come over here and talk to your aunts and uncles.”

A couple of them smile and wave. So eager, so clueless.

I figure I might as well get this over with. Mom will not let it go till I do my family duty. Grimly, I put my smiley face on and start toward them, but as I do, they seem to drift farther away. Suddenly, cannons blast inside my head, and I shriek from the pain. My stomach floods with acid. I bend double, hands on my knees, and hurl a gush of bitter, yellow liquid splashing onto the grass. *I am afraid*. What is happening to me? Looking up, I see my relatives spinning in a kaleidoscope of heads and flailing arms rushing toward me. I fall to one knee. One last look at them. The terror on my mother’s face.

Then a black curtain comes down and I am gone.

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I floated in a nether world, spiraling down a black hole. I heard the words again: *Come. Finish the journey. Finish the journey.* Likely, only a few seconds passed by the time I opened my eyes and saw everyone gathered over me.

“Libby, Libby, my God, your arm is busted all to pieces!” a man shouted.

It felt like someone was banging my arm with a hammer, the pain excruciating. I stared up at them. Something was very wrong. I didn’t know any of them. Mom, Uncle Dave, Aunt Charlotte weren’t there. These people were strangers. Many of the men had beards and several women wore sunbonnets. *Sunbonnets!* I sat up, screaming at the searing pain in my arm. I looked at them, tears welling in my eyes.

“WHO ARE YOU PEOPLE?”

CHAPTER SIX

I was never so miserable in my life. I lay on a quilt inside a cramped, rickety covered wagon amid several old chests, assorted garage-sale junk and a single rocking chair. Wrapped in a sling, my left arm throbbed with intense pain at every bump, and the woman driving seemed to be hitting them on purpose. My hand tucked inside the sling felt numb and swollen.

A couple of hours before, a fierce-looking man with a long black beard and the eyes of a madman knelt over me with wooden slats set to splint the break. No meds. No doctor. Get me to a doctor! I had shouted, but no one paid any attention. Someone stuck a leather strap in my mouth to bite on, and a woman held my shoulders so I couldn't move.

With a sickening snap, the man twisted my broken bones into place. I screamed, spitting out the leather onto his beard, cursing him and everyone else. In my life nothing, I mean nothing, ever hurt so much, *ever*. As he splinted me, I cried out, begging him to stop. They put me in this wagon—to wait for an ambulance to take me to a hospital, I thought, but then I heard a man outside say, “Henry, we can't wait any longer. We need to cover some miles yet today.”

“She's a tough one. We're ready.”

And with a jerk, the wagon moved forward.

I was scared, very scared. I didn't know what was happening. I couldn't remember how I had gotten here or anything that may have happened since I had passed out at the barbecue. On Thursday I had executed my run through the school auditorium, but when was that Thursday? For me to even be here, time completely lost to me must have passed. What was going on?

As the wagon hit another bump and pain shot through my arm, I called out to the woman driving. “God, lady, watch where you're going. Hey, you need to get me to a hospital. For Christ's sake, my arm is broken. I need a doctor. Please!”

She glanced back in at me, her face worried. “Oh, Libby honey, you know we're far from any hospital. Doc Pierce has fixed you up just fine. He says you'll be good as new.”

“It hurts. Jesus! Don't you have any painkillers? At least let me use your cell phone so I can call my mother.”

She gave me an expression of utter confusion that would have been comical if I wasn't hurting so much. “I know it hurts, dear, but in a couple of days it won't hurt so.”

That was too much. I shouted, “You people are in big trouble. My parents are lawyers. They're going to sue your asses off. You won't have a penny left.”

She sighed and went back to driving, soon singing about someone named Crazy Jane. Herself no doubt. Weird. Just freaking weird. I could not process what was happening to me. It was like tripping on bad drugs. I must have lost my memory, that much was clear.

At that moment, a man climbed in the back, grabbing a rope off a rung. “One of Captain Warren's calves got itself stuck in a mud hole,” he said to me as if I cared. He had brown hair sticking out from under a battered, wide-brimmed hat. “You might start thinking about getting yourself up now. I hope you're not planning on sleeping all the way.”

His face had such a hard, lock-jaw look I nearly flinched. Get up! Was the man crazy? I cut off a sharp reply because frankly the guy scared the piss out of me. This was one hard-ass bastard. I thought of a religious zealot at some commune. That might be it.

The wagon lurched sharply sending razors shooting through my arm. “Hey, you're deliberately hitting every freaking bump,” I screamed at the woman.

“Do not talk to your mother that way,” the man snapped. “What's gotten into you, Libby? I know you're hurt, but there's no call to take it out on your ma.”

“My ma! What have you been sniffing, dude?” I shot back. “She’s not my ma.”

He had such a black look that I thought sure he would hit me. If I could have backed any farther away, I would have.

The woman said, “Henry, she’s not herself.”

“That’s no reason to forget proper respect.” He scowled down at me. “You show your ma respect, you hear me? No more of this squalling.” He paused, his voice softening a bare fraction. “I know it hurts. Nothing we can do about that, Libby. Best you get out and walk. It will be easier on your arm.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I insisted. “I’m sure not walking. Get me to a hospital.”

We locked eyes for several seconds. “Suit yourself,” he said with a shrug. “Bounce around in here, if that’s what you want.”

“If you would just get an ambulance out here,” I pleaded, but he was gone.

“Honey, I know it’s hard,” the woman said. “But your pa’s right. It would be easier on you if you would walk.”

This was madness. My ma! My pa! These people had to be on something. But after a few moments in which my anger eased, I realized that, clearly, they were right. I couldn’t take another bump. I had to get out of this wagon. Keeping my arm immobile, I scooted to the back and carefully climbed out.