THE RAINBOW BRIDGE

By JG Faherty

69,100 words

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This book is dedicated to Harley, Buffy, and Bruno, the greatest dogs anyone could ever have. We miss them every day. And also to Cleo, Anthony, Dewey, Babe, and all the loving pets that have occupied a place in their owners/best friend's hearts.

Hopefully, there really is a rainbow bridge and we will be reunited with them on the other side. Because if the bridge really exists, we know our faithful companions are waiting patiently with wagging tails to see us again.

SECTION I

Death and Discovery

You no longer greet me

As I walk through the door.

You're not there to make me smile,

To make me laugh anymore.

Life seems quiet without you,

You were far more than a pet

You were a family member, a friend

... a loving soul I'll never forget.

It will take time to heal—

For the silence to go away.

I still listen for you,

And miss you every day

You were such a great companion,

Constant, loyal, and true.

My heart will always wear

the pawprints left by you.

"Pawprints Left By You," author unknown

CH 1

In the days following The Accident, nothing was the same for Pete Rhodes.

That's how he referred to it in his head, *The Accident*, both because of the enormity of the event, and because of how much it angered him the way the rest of the family didn't seem to feel the same level of sorrow over Marko's death.

Pete was only twelve at the time it happened, but he'd known Marko for as long as he could remember. Pete's parents had gotten Marko when Pete was five, had brought him home from a shelter one bright summer day. The chunky Yellow Lab with the pink nose had actually been a gift for Pete's sister, Maria, who'd just turned nine. But, as so often happens with pets, things didn't turn out the way Ed and Kristen Rhodes had planned. The dog instantly gravitated to Pete, sniffing him and gently butting him with its head. Everyone assumed the dog was simply fascinated with the boy, until it started whining and barking. When Ed tried to shoo the dog away, it growled at him. Before anyone could react to that, Pete toppled over, his body contorted and twitching.

It was Pete's first grand mal seizure.

When Pete returned from the hospital three days later, saddled with a diagnosis of epilepsy and medicine he needed to take the rest of his life, Marko immediately jumped into bed with him and refused to leave his side.

They'd been inseparable ever since.

Maybe that's why Maria didn't cry, Pete thought, as he lay in his bed, the memory of the shovel still tingling his palms. He'd insisted on helping his dad bury Marko under the old elm, where the two best friends had spent so many summer afternoons playing or just napping. *She*

was mad at me because Marco was supposed to be hers. Maria hadn't even come outside until they finished filling the hole and patting down the dirt. Only then had she joined the family to say goodbye. Afterward, she'd gone right back into the house.

Or maybe it's because all she thinks about is texting on her phone and hanging out with her stupid boyfriend, Devlin. Until Marko died, Pete had been jealous of the freedoms his sister enjoyed, thanks to her being sixteen—seventeen in a couple of months—and getting ready for her senior year of high school. But if staying out late, driving a car, and having a job meant losing the ability to cry when someone special died, he didn't want to grow up.

"I'll never forget you, Marko," he whispered to the picture he held tight against his chest. It had been taken just a few days before The Accident. Under the elm, of course. Right after a Rocky Point Boulders game. Pete still wore the hat he'd gotten at the game, and he'd put it on Marko just before his dad took the picture.

Tears ran down Pete's cheeks as he thought about how he'd never be able to hold Marko again, never play with him again, never see his best friend waiting for him at the front door after school.

He was still crying when he passed from awake to asleep.

Even though he knew what was going to happen, Pete was helpless to stop or change the events unfolding in his dream. Marko's ears perking up at the sound of the garbage truck outside. Marko rarely barked, and never chased cars, but there'd always been something about big trucks he couldn't stand. Garbage trucks, the street cleaner that came by on Thursday mornings, the UPS truck. It didn't matter. Trucks were big bad monsters that had to be chased away. He'd run

back and forth by the front door, barking like crazy, and then jump onto the couch so he could see out the big bay window. Even at the age of eight, with his muzzle as much white as yellow and his step not quite as lively as before, he still acted like a crazy puppy whenever a truck passed by.

Right on cue, Marko ran to the door, barking in furious bursts of canine hatred.

Real-Pete shouted at his dream-self to get up and stop the dog before it was too late, but Dream-Pete remained on the couch, ignoring the dog's hysterics and oblivious to Real-Pete's frantic cries. Even in his despair, Real-Pete understood Dream-Pete's inactivity. Over the years, Marko's hysterics had gradually become nothing more than background noise for the whole family. No one even bothered to tell him to shut up anymore.

Except this time the door wasn't completely closed. Before the Pete on the couch realized what happened, Marko stuck his nose in the gap, pushed the door open, and ran outside.

Dream-Pete leaped from the couch and sprinted across the living room, afraid Marko might bite one of the garbage men, or get kicked.

Instead, he experienced the worse tragedy of his life, and now Real-Pete had to re-live it all over again.

Marko racing across the front yard and into the street. The truck's airbrakes roaring like a dinosaur as it came to a stop.

The car coming in the other direction swerving to avoid him, but too late.

Marko's heart-wrenching howl of pain as the car hit him and sent him tumbling over on the road like a bag in the wind.

By the time Dream-Pete reached him, the drivers were out of their vehicles.

"Get away from him!" Dream-Pete shouted. "Get away from my dog!"

Marko stopped howling as soon as Dream-Pete put his arms around him, but he continued to whine even as he thumped his tail weakly against the ground and tried to lick Dream-Pete's face. A line of blood dribbled from Marko's nose, and one of his legs was twisted at a weird angle.

"It's okay, Marko, it's gonna be okay. The vet will fix you up."

But the vet hadn't.

"I'm sorry," he'd said to them, when he came out to the waiting room. "Marko was hurt really bad inside. If it was just the leg...we could have helped him. But with all his internal injuries..."

"No!" Dream-Pete said. "He can't die! Do something!"

The vet had looked very sad as he shook his head. "I can't. There's some things we just can't fix. You gave him a good life. The only thing now is for you to say goodbye and let us take the pain away."

"It's for the best." Pete's dad put a hand on Dream-Pete's shoulder. "Don't let him suffer."

Unashamed at crying in front of his family and the other people in the waiting room, Dream-Pete nodded and followed the vet down the hall to where they had Marko on a metal table. Bloody bandages covered his leg, and a young girl in a blue uniform was petting him and whispering to him in soothing tones.

As soon as Marko saw Dream-Pete, his tail banged against the table and he tried to lift his head.

"Ssh, Marko, it's okay, I'm here." Dream-Pete went to the table and cradled Marko's head, stroked his face. The vet had cleaned up most of the blood, but Marko's fur was still sticky

in places, and his tongue still had blood on in when he licked Dream-Pete's hand.

"I'm going to give him a shot now, Pete," the vet said. "He won't feel it. He'll just go to sleep, nice and easy."

Dream-Pete put his face in front of Marko's. "You hear that? It's just like taking a nap. And I'll be right here. You be a good boy, now, and do what Dr. Burkhardt says. Just close your eyes and go to sleep."

Marko let out a small whine, the same sound he always made when Pete went to school in the morning, a lonely, *'don't leave me'* sound that Pete hated to hear.

"He knows, doesn't he?" Dream-Pete asked the vet.

Burkhardt nodded. "They always do. But dogs aren't like people. They accept it, almost as if they know there's something better waiting on the other side."

Marko whined again and lifted his head, ran his tongue along Pete's face, and then lay back and closed his eyes. His chest rose and fell ten more times – Real-Pete knew the exact number but counted along again anyway—and then it stopped.

It took fifteen more minutes before Dream-Pete, like Real-Pete before him, could let go and leave the room.

The Keeper woke with a strangled cry.

He'd finally had the Dream, the one he knew would come sooner rather than later. The one he'd both dreaded and prayed for since even before he learned his life-clock had begun to tick its final countdown.

It's time.

Doing his best to ignore the pain in his belly—was it a little worse tonight, or was it only his imagination?—he got out of bed and went to his desk. No need to turn on a light. He knew where everything was. The box, already addressed, with the compass and note inside it. The key, stashed where it would be found at the right time by the right person.

He wished he could add more to the note, explain everything. But that's not how it was done. Some information could only be passed on in person. It wasn't fair, but then, he didn't make the rules. With hands that trembled more than the day before, he packed everything into the box and taped it closed.

All the while praying there'd be enough time.

It's time.

The Watcher wasn't sure how he knew, but he did. There was a certainty inside him that hadn't been there a moment ago. More than just a simple feeling or a hunch, it was a powerful beacon in his mind, a neon light flashing red in the dark of night.

A sign. No, *the* sign. The one he'd been waiting for, the one they'd all been waiting for. Finally, he had a name.

Peter Rhodes.

Without turning on a light, he picked up his phone from the nightstand and punched a number from memory.

"Yours is the one. Be ready."

At long last, he could set the plan into motion.

CH 2

The morning after Marko's burial, Pete woke up with the picture of Marko still clenched in his hands. Fresh tears came at the sight of it, adding to the ones that had soaked his pillow while he slept. Despite the aching sorrow in his chest, he forced himself to get out of bed. Although the last thing he wanted to do was talk to anyone, he knew he couldn't stay in his room all day. He dressed in his pants and shirt from yesterday, tucked the picture into his pocket, and prepared to face a world without Marko.

"'Morning, Pete," his dad said, glancing up from the Sunday paper. As usual, Ed Rhodes had been up before the rest of the family, brewing coffee and putting out orange juice and bagels. "Want some breakfast?" From his expression, you'd have thought it was just another day.

How can you sit there like that? Pete clenched his jaw to keep the words inside. *My best friend is dead, and you're asking me if I want breakfast?* "I'm not hungry."

"Pete..." His mother reached out a hand to him.

"I said I'm not hungry!" Pete stormed past them and out the back door. Head down, hands curled into fists, he stomped his way across the backyard to the old elm. He and his dad had replaced the sod over Marko's grave, but he could still see the outline of the square they'd dug. He would have found the spot even if no traces of the hole remained and no wooden cross commemorated Marko's final resting place.

His back to the house, he sat down next to the grave and placed a hand on the ground.

"I miss you so much," he whispered, new tears running down his face. "Why'd you have to do it? Why couldn't you stay inside?" Even in his grief, Pete knew he couldn't blame anyone in the family. Everyone'd been going in and out all that day, even him, so there was no way to

know who'd used the front door last, who had forgotten to close it all the way. It was no one's fault, but he felt like it should be. At least then he could be angry with someone, take out his frustration and sorrow and loss on someone.

It didn't make sense that such a tragedy could simply be bad luck.

Pete closed his eyes against the tears, pressed both hands into the cool grass, pushing down until he felt the earth pushing back against him, preventing him from going any further. "Can you hear me? I love you, Marko. I always will. I'll never forget you."

In that instant, for one brief moment of time faster than a heartbeat, Pete swore he heard a sound he knew too well. Marko's whine, the goodbye whine, the last thing he'd ever heard his friend say to him.

Then there was only the chirping of birds in the morning air and the distant roar of someone mowing a lawn.

"Hey, little brother. Are you okay?"

Pete opened his eyes, found Maria squatting down on the other side of the grave. "He was my best friend. How would you feel if one of your friends died?"

Maria shook her head, a solemn expression on her face. "Pete, I know you loved Marko. We all did. And it really sucks that he died. But you shouldn't sit here staring at his grave. Why don't you come inside? We'll rent a movie or something."

"Shut up. What do you care? You'll be gone after next year anyhow." Pete jumped to his feet and ran away, no thought to his destination, wanting only to put as much distance between himself and his family as he could. None of them understood his pain. As he ran down the sidewalk, he heard Devlin Kim's car coming before he saw it turn the corner. The Honda Civic's muffler roared and growled, as loud as the race cars Pete enjoyed watching every year at the

county fair. In fact, the only thing louder than the Civic's exhaust was the thrash metal Devlin always had blasting at full volume on his stereo. Tires squealed as the bright yellow car rounded the turn and went past him. Pete imagined Devlin's smug face staring at him through the darkly tinted windows.

"What's up with your asshole brother?" he'd probably say when Maria got in the car.

"He's still crying like a baby over his dog," she'd answer. And then they'd laugh.

Why did everyone have to be so mean?

He remembered the whole family being so upset when Aunt Linda died two years ago. He'd never met his mother's sister, but he'd understood why everyone was sad, even if he didn't feel the same way. He'd felt bad for his mom, had held her hand while she cried, had brought her tea and toast the morning after the funeral, when she'd wanted to spend the day in her room. Dad and Maria had cried for an old lady they hardly knew. Why couldn't they cry for Marko?

"'Cause they're jerks," he muttered to himself, as he slowed his pace down. The thought crossed his mind to just keep walking, never look back, never go back, but he knew he couldn't do that. How could a twelve-year-old kid make it in the world? What would happen if he ran out of medicine or had a seizure? He hadn't had one in almost a year, and he hadn't had a bad one since the second grade, but that didn't mean he'd couldn't. He never knew when one was coming. Marko did, though. Marko always knew, always whined and pawed at him in that special way. Besides, even if he wasn't sick, he couldn't run away. You didn't leave your family just 'cause they were jerks. It wasn't like they beat him or anything.

"But if they can act like jerks, then so can I. I won't talk to any of them until they admit they were wrong and say they're sorry."

Feeling a little better, as if he'd done something to protect Marko's memory, Pete

changed direction and headed toward the park. Maybe there'd be kids playing ball or something. He couldn't play, but he could watch. Anything to keep him from thinking about the empty spot next to his left leg, where Marko had always walked.

Except when he got there, none of the kids from his school were around, and staring at the empty fields just made him feel even lonelier. He kept remembering all the times he and Marko had gone there to toss a Frisbee or a ball.

With a sigh, he turned around and headed home.

Maybe I'll spend the day in my room, after all.

"What's up with your asshole brother?" Devlin Kim asked, as Maria got into the car.

She leaned over and turned the stereo down.

"What did you say?"

"Your brother. What's his deal? I saw him running down the road. He looked like someone took all his toys away." Devlin rolled his eyes and leaned forward to kiss her.

And encountered only empty air.

"His dog died, remember? We buried him yesterday. Everybody's upset, but he's taking it really bad." Maria stared at him. They'd been dating for almost six months, and in that time he'd done and said his share of stupid things—like all seventeen-year-old boys—but he'd never been outright nasty. She hoped she was just misreading his actions.

His next words shot that theory down.

"Big deal. It was just a dog. He'll get over it. Get him a new one."

"He wasn't just a dog! Why are you being such a jerk?" Maria slid out of the car.

"Hey! Where you goin'? We're supposed to meet Tommy and Lee down at the river."

"You can go by yourself." She slammed the door and walked back to the house.

God, I hope college boys are more mature!

As she opened the door, a flash of yellow in the bushes caught her eye. She turned, but nothing was there.

I remember when Marko would hide in those bushes sometimes, only his nose and face peeking out, like he was playing hide-and-seek.

Thinking about Marko brought fresh tears to her eyes, tears she'd been fighting to keep inside so she wouldn't upset Pete even more. The poor kid was heartbroken enough already.

Tomorrow I'll try talking to him again.

Pete woke up the next morning to another wet pillow. He'd had the dream again, same as the night before, only this time he'd been sure that Marko looked past the Dream-Pete and saw the Real-Pete hovering overhead. And when he opened his eyes, the sound of Marco's goodbye whine still echoed fresh in his mind, like he'd just heard it a moment ago. With a sigh, he swung his legs out of bed and placed Marco's picture on his nightstand. Then he took his pill, automatically following his normal routine even though nothing seemed normal anymore. The bright yellow sun brought no happiness, he felt no desire to eat, and his body didn't have any of its usual energy.

Rather than get into another argument with his parents, he remained in his room until he heard his father leave for work and his mother follow not long after, most likely heading out to get groceries or run errands. Only then did he go downstairs and make himself some toast and

juice. He had the kitchen to himself, thanks to Maria being a late sleeper. He'd just sat down to eat when he noticed the box on the table.

A box addressed to him.

A note sat next to it, in his mother's handwriting. *Pete, this came for you.*

Normally, he'd be excited to get mail. Especially a package. But with the dream still hanging over him like a dark cloud, he could barely muster up the energy to open the plain brown paper wrapping.

Inside was a piece of paper and a black box that was a little larger than his father's wallet. He unfolded the paper, expecting it to be a letter. Instead, he discovered something very different.

Just this side of heaven is a place called Rainbow Bridge.

Any time an animal dies that has been loved by someone, that pet goes to the Rainbow Bridge. There are meadows and hills for all of our special friends so they can run and play together. There is plenty of food, water, and sunshine, and our friends are warm and comfortable.

All the animals who had been ill and old are restored to health and vigor. Those who were hurt or maimed are made whole and strong again, just as we remember them in our dreams. The animals are happy and content, except for one small thing; they each miss someone very special to them, someone who had to be left behind.

They all play together, but the day comes when one suddenly stops and looks into the distance. His bright eyes are intent. His eager body quivers. He begins to run from the group, flying over the green grass, his legs carrying him faster and faster.

You have been spotted, and when you and your special friend finally meet, you cling

together in joyous reunion, never to be parted again. The happy kisses rain upon your face; your hands again caress the beloved head, and you look once more into the trusting eyes of your pet, so long gone from your life but never absent from your heart.

Then you cross Rainbow Bridge into heaven together....

Halfway through, Pete had to stop reading because he'd started crying again, all his sadness rising up, as fresh as if Marko just died that moment. And he felt angry, too. Who would be so mean to send him something like that, a story about how happy pets were after they died? He looked at the wrapping, but it had no return address and the postmark was nothing but a blurred gray blotch. No signature sat at the end of the story.

So who sent it?

Even as angry and sad as he was, though, he couldn't help drying his eyes and finishing the story.

And then he understood.

Never to be parted again.

You cross the Rainbow Bridge together.

Could it be true? Did a place exist where dogs and their owners got reunited? A place like Heaven?

Although only twelve, Pete was pretty smart for his age. Because of his epilepsy, and the cancer he'd had in the second grade, he was a little smaller than most of his classmates. And he wasn't allowed to play contact sports, which hadn't helped him in the friend department, so books and Marko had been his best companions. And now that he was older, he still preferred a good sci-fi or horror book to playing video games or gossiping on social media like most kids.

Thanks to all his reading, he not only got good grades in school but understood more than

he let on when his parents and other adults were talking. He even got most of the jokes he heard on TV and radio, and in the movies. Except for that cranky guy on the radio his grandfather listened to in the mornings. Nothing he said was ever funny.

So it only took a second grasp the unsaid meaning of the poem. *Do I have to die to see Marko again?*

His first reaction was, *if that's what it takes, I'll do it.* Be together with his best friend forever, in a place that sounded so wonderful? It seemed worth it. Then he remembered that killing yourself was a sin; people who commit suicide never go to Heaven. And *that* would mean never seeing Marko again.

But waiting until you got old and died didn't make sense, either. He knew that in time his grief would lessen, would eventually fade. Not that he'd ever forget Marko, but the pain wouldn't be always be so terrible. He'd seen it with his Mom after her sister died. And he'd known kids whose pets had died. Some of them even got new ones, little puppies or kittens.

Did that mean when you got old and died, there could be a whole bunch of dogs waiting for you by the Rainbow Bridge? No, it couldn't be. The poem said a special friend, one who you always missed and who always missed you. It also made it sound like not every dog and owner got reunited, that when it happened, it was a special occasion.

Like maybe not every owner could get to the Rainbow Bridge.

Or maybe they just don't try hard enough to get there.

All thoughts of finding out who'd left the box for him disappeared from Pete's head. He took the box and the poem and ran upstairs to his room, where he turned on his computer and started searching the internet for the Rainbow Bridge.

And discovered finding the information he wanted would be tougher than he thought. Not

because there wasn't much to find.

There was too much.

It only took a few seconds to see there were more than eighty thousand sites devoted to the tale of the Rainbow Bridge. Many were just copies of the one he'd read, some of them on pretty colored wallpaper, and others on sites devoted to coping with the loss of a pet. There were also different versions of it, some written by real people, others with 'Author Unknown' at the end. He found one version even more beautiful—and specific—than the one he'd received:

Through deep woods and over the hills

Lies a lush, green meadow where time stands still

Where four-legged friends scamper and run

And live on and on after their time here is done

The sun always shines and there's plenty of food

Their health is restored, their bodies renewed

They no longer suffer, no longer feel pain

They're happy and free, and youthful again

Then one day it happens, from out of the blue

One animal freezes, it senses something new

A scent in the air that brings memories back

And then that joyous pet breaks free from the pack

For over the meadow comes that one special friend

Owner and pet, reunited again

The sadness they felt while living apart

Is gone in an instant, replaced by love from the heart

The two friends approach the Rainbow Bridge side by side

And cross over together, leaving all troubles behind

Reading through the different versions, Pete realized they all had certain things in common. The meadow. The hill. Sunshine. And, of course, the Rainbow Bridge, which none of the pets could cross without their owners.

Almost as if it was a real place.

Could it be? He looked out the window at an ordinary summer day. Sunlight glittered off the bumpers and windshields of cars. Teenagers mowed lawns while mothers pulled weeds from flower beds or went shopping for groceries. A few kids rode by on bicycles. *That* was real; he could see it, hear it. Even smell the fresh-cut grass and summer air.

But a magical place where dead pets came back to life? A bridge between worlds? That sounded more like a fairy tale.

Except he remembered when they'd been sitting in the doctor's office a few weeks earlier. It'd been time for his annual checkup, and while they waited for Dr. Pietro to call him in, his mother had been reading a magazine called National Geographic. At one point, she'd showed something to his father and said, "Look at this. These people discovered a whole lost city in Brazil based on a poem they found written on an old clay tablet."

So maybe, just maybe, the Rainbow Bridge poem was like that. A set of clues left for people. One of the websites had said the poem was based on an old Norse legend. And hadn't they learned in school that the Vikings—who were Norse peoples—had actually been to America before Columbus?

What if those ancient explorers discovered something? Something they wrote a poem about, but that nobody in the modern world believed anymore?

A quiver of excitement ran through Pete's body. He turned away from the window and started another search, this time using the AI function.

Rainbow Bridge+Real Places

A few inches away from his hands, the black box sat unopened and forgotten.

CH 3

Exhausted and yet filled with a wild excitement, Pete woke up the next morning eager to finish his search for the Rainbow Bridge. He'd spent hours on the computer the previous day, reading different versions of the poem and then using AI to sort through them all and list everything they had in common. He also looked up locations with the name Rainbow Bridge in the United States, and then did more research on each one so he could eliminate the places that were towns without bridges or bridges that didn't exist anymore. Before going to bed, he'd printed out information on six Rainbow Bridge sites that seemed like good choices. He hadn't bothered with other countries because if the Rainbow Bridge lay outside the U.S., he had no chance of getting there. Besides, the package he'd gotten didn't have overseas stamps on it. So most likely if the bridge existed, it had to be in the United States.

Or maybe there was more than one.

Now it was time to cross-check each location with Google Maps. Two of the places he crossed off right away—the one in Utah and the one in Arizona—because they were both in deserts. No meadows there. Another one, the Rainbow Bridge in Kansas, seemed to be a good fit at first because it was a historical landmark. But it turned out to be a man-made bridge, and that didn't make sense. If people drove over it, how could a meadow filled with pets stay hidden? Besides, it wouldn't have been around when the Vikings were exploring the country.

Niagara Falls had a Rainbow Bridge associated with it, but since none of the poems mentioned a humungous waterfall, Pete figured he could cross that one off the list, too.

That left two places: Ellington, Pennsylvania and Heaven's Gate, Tennessee.

According to satellite photos, both places were in hilly areas with woods and fields

around them. And they both took their names from old Indian legends of rainbows that led to the heavens. Neither of them had actual bridges, which made sense, too. After all, a bridge between two worlds wouldn't be something you could just spot from an aerial photo, or everyone would know about it.

It had to be something mysterious, something supernatural.

As far as Pete could tell, it would take a long time to get from New York to either one of the Rainbow Bridge locations. And since he didn't know which was the right one, he figured the smart thing would be to try Pennsylvania first, since it was closer, and then keep going to Tennessee if he had to.

You can't run away from home to chase a fairy tale.

Running away was crazy. And dangerous. How would he eat? Where would he sleep? What if something happened? Besides, his parents would freak. They still got nervous if he went fishing or frog hunting at the pond or rode his bike into town. They worried he'd have a seizure and there'd be no one around, even though the doctors said the chances were very small, now that he was older. They'd call the police and then the cops would find him before he got anywhere near where he wanted to go.

Plus, he'd have to walk, or hitchhike. And try not to get picked up by a psycho or perv. It sucked that the only person he knew with a car, Devlin, was the biggest jerk on the planet.

With a sigh, he turned off the computer. A waste of time. Well, not totally, since it had kept him in his room and away from his family for a good part of a day and night. The whole silent treatment thing was harder than he'd expected, and his parents were mad at him about it. But by now his Dad was at work and his Mom would be busy cleaning or shopping. Maria was probably still sleeping. She would sleep until noon if you let her. If he was lucky, he could leave

a note for his mother and sneak out for the rest of the day.

Which is exactly what he did.

By the time he came home for dinner, his mood had improved. Some of the guys from school had been playing ball and a couple had tossed the ball with him between innings. They'd even seemed sympathetic about Marko. All except Jimmy Pierson, who'd rolled his eyes and walked away, but he was a jerkwad anyhow. Everyone knew it.

So when he sat down and his parents both told him they were sorry, they hadn't realized their comments had hurt him, he started to think that maybe things were going to get better after all. Plus, Maria was at a movie with her friends, which meant he didn't have to deal with her snotty looks or comments while he ate.

Later on, as he got ready for bed, he saw the poem again and realized he'd forgotten to ask his parents if they knew who'd sent it to him. He made a mental note to ask them tomorrow.

Except by morning, his whole world had changed.

The dream that night wasn't like the others. It started the same, but then, near the end, it went in a different direction. He stood in the vet's office, his hand on Marko's shoulder. That was the point where Marko had whined. Only this time, like the previous night, Marko looked past Dream-Pete and his brown eyes focused on Real-Pete. And instead of a whimper, Marko opened his mouth and spoke.

"Don't forget about me, Pete. I'm waiting for you. By the bridge. Don't leave me here all alone. I need you. We all do."

Then his eyes closed and he stopped breathing.

Pete woke up shaking and sweating, Marko's words echoing in the darkness of the bedroom.

Don't forget me. Don't leave me here all alone.

"I won't, Marko," Pete whispered.

He got out of bed and grabbed his clothes from the day before, despite his common sense telling him to stop.

It was just a dream. Dogs don't talk.

Maybe ghost-dogs do, though.

Marko loved him. He would do anything to find a way to come back.

That had to be it. It wasn't just a dream...

It's a sign. Marko's waiting for me. I can't let him down.

Although he could never have put it into words, Pete knew it hadn't been a dream. Just like he knew there was no talking him out of finding Marko. No rational explanations could ever hope to compete with the love between a boy and his dog.

Twenty minutes later, he was walking down the sidewalk, his backpack crammed with clothes, food, and soda, plus all the stuff about the Rainbow Bridge he'd printed out. He'd also packed his medicine, his old pocketknife, and a map he'd stolen from the garage. He'd considered taking his phone, but in the end he left it behind. There'd be no place to charge it on the road, and his parents might be able to track him by the chip inside it.

He had to make sure no one found him until he reached his destination.

At the corner, he turned left, heading west.

Toward Pennsylvania.

CH. 4

Maria woke up on Wednesday morning with her cheeks damp from tears. She'd had the strangest dream, one that was both sad and happy at the same time. In it, Marko had been alive and barking furiously at her, like he was trying to get her attention. He stood right by her bed, barking so loud it hurt her ears. And he wouldn't stop, no matter how many times she told him to shut up.

Then it got even weirder. Marko leaned in close and spoke to her while he continued to bark.

"Wake up, wake up! He needs you!"

At that point dream crumbled away, Marko's relentless barks following her into wakefulness and only disappearing when she opened her eyes to bright summer sunshine.

She wiped her eyes and shook her head. Who'd have thought the dog's passing would affect her so much that she'd dream about him?

Just then her stomach growled, hunger pushing the oddly realistic dream aside in favor of more important things, like breakfast. Her tears already forgotten, she pulled on shorts and a t-shirt, ran a quick brush through her hair, and headed for the bathroom.

During the week, it wasn't unusual for Maria to get up and find Pete and their parents already out and about. Summer meant very different things for her parents and Pete than it did for her. While she enjoyed staying out late and then sleeping in the next morning, Pete—at least before Marko's death—usually headed out right after breakfast for a day of catching frogs, walking around town, or watching the older kids play. Sometimes he even left before everyone else got out of bed. He knew their mother worried when he went off like that, and he always left

a note saying where he'd be and when he'd be home. Despite their concerns, they didn't stop him, because his illnesses had already robbed so much of his life. He couldn't play sports, he didn't have many friends. Sometimes Maria teased him that he and Marko were like that old comic strip, Calvin and Hobbes, because he spent more time with the dog than he did kids his own age.

For their parents, summer wasn't all that much different than the rest of the year. Ed Rhodes still went to work Monday through Friday and Kristen still ran errands, did housework, and volunteered twice a week at the women's shelter.

So when Maria started down the hall toward the kitchen, she figured she had the house to herself. After all, it was way past eleven. To her surprise, though, Pete's door was still closed. That meant he was still inside, either sleeping or sulking. She couldn't remember the last time Pete slept later than her, so she figured he'd decided to continue being mad at the whole world for not mourning with him.

Poor kid. I wish I could explain to him that it's not like we don't care, he's just so caught up in feeling sorry for himself he hasn't noticed we're all sad, too.

Maria's normal morning routine would be a quick bite to eat and then call Devlin to pick her up so they could hit the beach or the mall or something. But since she was still pissed at him, she decided to let him suffer a while longer. Maybe next time he'd think before speaking.

Instead, she figured it would be a good time to talk to Pete. After downing half a corn muffin and some juice, she went back upstairs and knocked on his door.

"Pete?"

He didn't answer, but there was a sound on the other side. A sort of whimper-snort.

Like Marko used to make when Pete wasn't home.

That's crazy. It's just Pete. Probably lying on his bed, looking at pictures of the dog and

crying, the poor kid.

Yet she couldn't shake the image of Marko sitting right on the other side of the door, waiting for his master to come back. So real was the picture in her head that she actually felt a shiver run through her at the thought of a dead pet coming to life, like in that movie she'd seen. A flash of her dream came back, Marko standing by her bed as real as could be.

Now you're just being silly.

She knocked again, and when he still didn't respond she opened the door, a nervous tingle running up her back because she half-expected Marko to jump off the bed and bark at her. Instead, she found herself staring at an empty room. That was weird. Even stranger, it looked like a whirlwind had hit it. Clothes on the floor and the bed. Papers all over his desk. All very unusual because Pete was the neatest kid she knew. No one ever had to tell him to clean his room.

A nervous flutter started up in Maria's stomach. She went to his closet, which was open, and looked inside. It only took a moment to see his sneakers were gone and so was the battered knapsack he used on family camping trips.

"Oh, hell." She remembered Devlin saying he'd seen Pete running like crazy down the sidewalk the other day.

Had he decided to run away for real?

It didn't seem like something Pete would do. He was usually a pretty level-headed kid. But he'd been so angry lately...angry and depressed.

Maria ran for her phone, intending to call her mother. Just before her finger hit the dial button, she paused. If he really had run away, wouldn't it be better if she was the one who found him, instead of their parents or the cops, so he wouldn't get in trouble? And what if Pete *hadn't*

run away? What if he'd just headed down to the park to play ball, or gone for a walk?

She'd be starting a ruckus for no reason.

His medicine.

He had to take a pill every morning and every evening. The prescription bottle always sat right next to his computer. So as long as it was there...

It wasn't.

Oh, crap. Now what? Once again, she considered calling her parents and then changed her mind.

An hour. I'll go to all his usual hang-outs, and then if I don't find him, I'll call. Even if he did run away, how far could he have gotten? He couldn't have left until after Mom was gone, and that was probably only a couple of hours ago.

But if she wanted to look for him in all those places, she'd have to call Devlin after all. They could cover a lot more ground in his car than she could on foot.

Great. Now I'm going to have to make up with him, even though I don't want to. Thanks a lot, Pete. If it turns out you were just out collecting rocks or bugs or something, you're gonna wish you really did run away.

To his credit, Devlin didn't laugh or try to brush off her fears when she told him she thought Pete might have run away.

"What? That's not good. I'll be over right away."

He'd hung up before she could say anything else, leaving her staring at the phone and wondering if she should be glad he was concerned or even more worried that Devlin thought it could be a serious matter.

True to his word, he arrived at her house less than ten minutes later, for once without the

music blasting at full volume. He threw the car into gear and pulled away from the curb before she even had a chance to buckle her seat belt.

"Where to first?" he asked, his dark eyes narrow and tense as he drove. His hands gripped the fur-covered steering wheel so tightly the knuckles of his bony fingers were white.

"The park." Devlin's unease was contagious. Breakfast tumbled around in her stomach and the vibration of the car made her wish she'd peed before they left. "I'm sure he's just out with his friends and forgot to clean his room." Maria said it as much to convince herself as to calm her boyfriend.

"Don't be too sure," Devlin said, taking a corner on squealing tires. "Boys are different than girls. He wouldn't be the first kid to run away over something stupid."

"A dead dog isn't stupid," Maria responded, a bit of her anger returning at his insensitivity.

He glanced over at her, and although his tense expression didn't change, his voice softened a bit. "I didn't mean it that way. I never had pets growing up, so I don't know what it's like to lose one. But running away from home because you're mad *is* stupid. This isn't the nineteen seventies. We might live in a small town but shit still happens, you know what I mean?"

Shit still happens. Those three words jolted Maria and she sat up straighter in her seat. She hadn't even considered the dangers of running away. Although she didn't follow the news much, she wasn't completely out of touch or dumb, even though she felt that way at the moment. Children got kidnapped all the time. Killed, locked in basements, molested. Not to mention run over by drunk drivers, tossed into ditches, and beat up by other kids.

Visions of Pete hurt or in trouble dominated Maria's thoughts as Devlin drove around town. With each stop—the park, the school yard, Crickettown Pond—she found herself growing

more alarmed.

"Where the hell is he?" She slapped her hands on the dashboard as they pulled away from the strip mall that contained two of Pete's favorite places, Tiny's Candies and Sweet Lou's Gelato.

"Why doesn't he have a phone?" Devlin asked. "Isn't he like diabetic or something?" They were heading for the last location on Maria's short list of places she could think of, the comic book store at the far end of Main Street. It would be a long walk from their house, but if Pete had left earlier in the morning than she'd previously thought, he could definitely have gotten there by now. And there was a pizza place right next door, so he could be just sitting in there, eating a slice and reading the latest Super Captain Cool Man comic.

Please, God, let that be the case.

Because if he wasn't there, it meant she'd have to call their mother, and then she'd probably get in trouble for not calling sooner.

"It's epilepsy. He can have a seizure if he forgets to take his medicine, or if he over-exerts himself."

"All the more reason to carry a phone."

"He's got one." Maria said. "It's sitting on his desk. The only thing he's got with him is his medical alert bracelet in case he starts to feel sick."

"Is it chipped?"

"No, it just has his medical condition, contact information, and doctor's name."

"The kid should be chipped," Devlin muttered, his anger as evident on his face as in his tone. "Then we wouldn't be in this mess."

"You don't have to help if it's such a pain," Maria said, her own voice rising as her temper

flared again.

"It’s not a pain. But if the bracelet had a chip, we could find him in 10 seconds flat. They have GPSs in them so the police can track them.”

"The police?" The combined stress of her anger and fear was building into a monumental pain that made it hard to think. Was Devlin saying they should call the police? What about her parents?

He didn't answer, just pointed ahead. "That the place?"

She nodded. The comic book store sat in a long strip mall. He took the turn into the parking lot too fast and had to slam on the brakes as a car crossed in front of them. The driver gave them a nasty scowl and flipped up his middle finger as he went by. When Devlin didn't respond in kind, Maria knew he had to be even more worried than he was letting on. And that frightened her more than anything.

Pete, please be inside. Please...

Devlin pulled into a spot and slammed the car into park. "You check the comic store and I'll check the pizza place."

Maria bit her lip as she crossed the parking lot to the store. Her hand went up but then refused to pull the door open. She was frozen by her emotions, terrified to open the door and see that he wasn't inside. As long as she didn't go in, there was always the hope he was in there, safe and totally unaware of the problems he'd caused. But if the comic book store and pizza shop turned out to be empty, then it meant her options were down to one; she'd have to call her mother.

Because he'd really run away.

How long she might have stayed there, the handle grasped in her hand and her body

immobile as a statue, she didn't know, but the choice was taken away when someone pushed the door open from the other side.

"Excuse me," the woman said, stepping past Maria, a small boy in tow.

Suddenly, Maria was positive Pete would be inside. No, more than positive. She *knew* it, felt it in every molecule, every atom of her being. He was inside, he was safe, and everything had all been just a big over-reaction on her part.

She hurried into the store, her eyes moving in all directions as she searched for the familiar sight of her brother. He would be buried nose-deep in a comic book, oblivious to everyone around him, his sandy-colored hair mussed up in that way that drove their mother crazy because no matter how many times he combed it ten minutes later it would be a mess and—

The store was empty.

Maria closed her eyes. The store *couldn't* be empty because Pete was in there, he had to be in there. She was just seeing things. Or not seeing things. Confused. He must have bent over, ducked behind a book table. That was it. He was just tying his shoe or he dropped something maybe a dollar or a comic book—

She opened her eyes.

The store was still empty except for a clerk standing by the cash register, his attention focused on a wall-mounted TV showing the latest Avengers movie.

"No." It was only a whisper, but the word seemed to fill the room. She moved from table to table, unwilling to believe Pete wasn't there. It didn't seem possible.

She'd been so *sure*.

"Can I help you?" The clerk had finally noticed her. His eyebrows went up as she turned toward him, and there was a second where she wondered if it was because she looked like a

frantic mess or because he wasn't used to seeing girls in the store. A weird giggle rose up in her throat and she swallowed it down.

"I'm looking for my brother," she said. "He's—"

"He looks like this." Devlin stepped up next to her and held out a picture of Pete wearing a Mets t-shirt and hat. It was from last year, when the whole family went to a game.

"I grabbed it on the way out of your house in case we needed it," Devlin whispered to her, while the clerk examined the picture.

"Yeah, I've seen him before, but not today. Sorry. It's been pretty slow, I would've noticed him." The clerk handed the photo back and returned his gaze to the TV.

Maria's heart dropped into her stomach.

He was really gone.

"We have to call your parents." Devlin took her by the arm and led her out of the store. The hot summer air wrapped around her like a blanket and she felt it trying to suck the strength from her body. At that moment, all she wanted to do was go home, crawl into bed, and go to sleep. Because when she woke up, everything would be all better.

"Maria!" Rough hands shook her and she opened her eyes, surprised to find that she'd closed them. Devlin was looking at her, his eyes wide. "Your mother. Call her now."

Why was he so angry? Mean, that was it. He was being mean again. Not letting her sleep. To hell with him. She would—

"Maria!"

A sharp pain in her arm made her cry out. This time, when she opened her eyes she remembered where she was. She glanced down and saw a bright red circle on her forearm where Devlin had pinched her.

"I'm sorry," he said, taking her by the hand. "But you looked like you were going to pass out. We can't waste any more time. Call your mother and tell her we'll meet her at the house."

She nodded. There was no putting it off. She pulled up her mother's number and hit call, while a creeping numbness slowly moved through her body until she couldn't feel a thing – not the heat, not Devlin's hand, not the thrumming pain behind her eyes. When her mother answered, her voice sounded distant and fuzzy.

"Hello, Mom? Something's happened."

CH 5

Running away was not turning out like Pete expected. Actually, he wasn't sure what he'd expected. After all, he'd never run away before.

But he'd never imagined sitting in the woods, sticky with sweat and covered in pricker bush thorns while mosquitos did their best to drive him crazy.

After leaving his house, he'd only gone a couple of blocks before he realized there was no way he could walk to Pennsylvania. It would take years. Walking downtown or to the river was one thing; a mile or two, at his own pace so he didn't exert himself too much. Anything longer than that and he usually took his bike or had one of his parents drive him. He'd thought about riding his bike to Pennsylvania, but that would mean staying on the roads the whole time, which would make it too easy for his parents to find him. On foot he could duck into the woods whenever a car went by.

He just hadn't figured he'd get so tired, so fast.

Right before noon, he'd decided to take a break for lunch, thinking he'd find a nice shady spot and have a soda and some cookies. Even though the doctors said exercise was good for him as long as he didn't overdo it, he made it a point to be careful. No matter what, the moment he felt tired, he stopped and rested. Like now. He knew there was a small stream not far back from the road—he'd gone fishing there a couple of times—so he'd headed in that direction, his head filled with visions of dipping his feet into the cold water and splashing some on his face to stave off the growing summer heat.

He found the stream right away, a good-sized brook at the bottom of a small slope. Except when he started to climb down, it turned out to be steeper than he remembered and he'd

lost his balance and slid most of the way down on his butt. Which wouldn't have been a big deal if he hadn't landed in the pricker bush and then stepped right in the water while fighting his way out of the thorny mess.

Which was how he ended up sitting on a wide rock, sweaty and itchy, his heart beating too fast, waiting for his shoes and socks to dry while he pulled barbs from his shirt and pants.

And he hadn't even left town yet.

At this rate, he thought, swatting another bloodsucker as it buzzed past his ear, *I'll be old enough to drive before I get to the Rainbow Bridge.*

The way he saw it, there were only two options. Go home and admit defeat—and get punished for running away—or do the one thing he'd always been taught not to do.

Hitchhike.

His parents would kill him if they found out he'd been hitching rides. He knew that because they'd told him so, more than once. They were pretty lenient most of the time, but he believed them when they said he'd spend the rest of his life in his room with no radio or TV if he ever hitchhiked.

On the other hand, how much more trouble could he get in? They couldn't ground him for life twice. And at least hitching he'd conserve his energy. As long as he didn't get a ride with any weird-looking people, he should be fine.

That's it. I'll do it.

He leaned back against a wide tree. The combination of his exertions, the heat, and lack of sleep were catching up to him. He felt himself drifting off. Rather than fight it, he gave in.

After I take a nap.

"Stop it."

Maria jumped at the sound of Devlin's voice. She'd zoned out again, staring at the phone and praying it would ring. She started to ask him what he was talking about and then realized her finger was in her mouth. She'd been chewing her nails.

Again.

She bit back an angry response and forced her hand to join its partner in her lap. There was no reason to take her frustrations out on Devlin. He'd been totally supportive over the past three hours, standing by her and defending her while her parents alternated between praising her for taking quick action and scolding her for not calling them sooner. Since then, though, he'd alternated between dozing and eating, as if nothing was the matter.

Like he's happy someone else is looking for Pete and we don't have to.

Her parents had filed a report with the police, who immediately put out an APB. Not only was Pete a minor, he had a medical condition. In minutes, every cop in the county had a picture and description of Pete and was on the lookout for him. But her parents had still gone out to look for him themselves.

And left Maria home in case Pete called or came back.

"I should be out looking, too," she said. Devlin rolled his eyes. She'd been voicing the same complaint since her parents left.

"Someone's gotta stay put." Devlin opened a can of soda and took a sip. "What if he came home and nobody was here, and then he went out again? We'd never know. Or what if a hospital calls?"

"Don't say that!"

"Hey, I don't want it to happen. But if it did, someone needs to be here."

"Screw that. He's my brother! I should be helping, not sitting around waiting for the phone to ring. I could just forward the house phone to my cell, or my mom's cell."

Devlin shook his head. "Whatever. Listen, I have to make a call. I'll be right back."

"A call?" Maria sat up. "Now?"

He held up his cell. "It's almost dinner. Gotta tell my parents I won't be home."

"Oh." She felt her cheeks grow warm. She'd forgotten that he'd been with her all day and hadn't checked in at home the whole time. Back when they first started dating, Devlin had told her his father was very sick with a rare form of leukemia. That had bonded them together in a way, because Pete's cancer when he was a little kid had been a form of leukemia, too. They'd caught it early and the treatments had worked. Pete had been completely cancer-free for years now, and his doctors said it was total remission. Even so, he still got a checkup every six months. In fact, he'd had one the morning of the day Marko died.

Because of the medications Mr. Kim took and his chemotherapy, no one was allowed in the house except family, to keep his exposure to germs to a minimum. Maria had never even seen where Devlin lived; she just knew it was in one of the older neighborhoods on the other side of town. Devlin's two sisters—who she'd never met—were much younger and he often had to run errands or head home early to help his mother with stuff around the house. And he always made it a point to check in once or twice a day to see if anyone needed anything.

She'd gotten used to those calls, which he always made in private. She'd asked about that once, and he'd said he didn't like talking to his father, or to his family about his father, in front of other people. Some of Maria's friends thought it was kind of weird. Lisa Dennis made it a point to say, in front of everyone, that Devlin might be cheating on her. But Maria respected him for it.

If her dad was sick, she'd want some privacy when talking to her family, too.

Not long after that, she'd stopped hanging out with Lisa.

She let out an exasperated sigh, which she'd also been doing a lot of since her parents told her to stay put. Her fingers kept trying to creep up to her mouth and finally she decided to get a soda and maybe some cookies from the kitchen just to keep her hands busy. Otherwise she'd have no nails left by the end of the night. Once she stood up, she realized she also had to pee. Changing directions, she headed down the hall to the bathroom. She'd just sat down when she heard Devlin's voice coming from the guest bedroom next door.

"...of course I will. But don't worry. He'll be back soon. How far could the stupid kid go? Besides, his parents and the police are all looking for him. I might as well let them do all the work while I just wait here. Once they find him and ground his ass for the next century, everything will go back to normal. Better than normal, 'cause he won't be able to step foot outside without me knowing."

Maria's lips went tight. So that was why Devlin wanted her to stay home! He didn't feel like looking for Pete anymore. In fact, he seemed happy that Pete would end up getting in trouble. What a jerk. Well, let him stay, then. She certainly didn't have to.

When Maria left the bathroom, Devlin was still on the phone, although she couldn't hear what he was saying. It didn't matter. He obviously wasn’t talking to his mother. What mattered was looking for Pete.

But where would she look?

Then it hit her. The one thing no one had thought of.

Check his computer. Maybe he downloaded a map or something.

How could we have been so stupid? We checked his emails but not his browser history.

Walking as softly as possible so Devlin wouldn't hear her, she went up to Pete's room and opened the list of the last websites he'd visited.

What the...?

It didn't make sense. Maps of Pennsylvania and Tennessee? Rainbow bridges? The poems about doggie heaven she could understand, because he was so upset...

"Oh, no." Unaware she'd spoken aloud, Maria went back and looked at the other websites again, just to be sure she wasn't mistaken.

She wasn't.

All the towns he'd searched either had Rainbow bridges in them or near them, or had rock formations or legends with the same name.

He's cracked up. He thinks the Rainbow Bridge is a real place and he's gone looking for it.

Maria chewed on her nails as she thought about what to do. If Pete was heading for either Pennsylvania or Tennessee, he'd be going west, on the highway. The police would probably look there as well as the other roads out of town, but he was a smart kid. He'd know to hide in the woods when he saw a cop car.

If he's so smart, why is he looking for a make-believe place?

That stumped her. Pete had always been so level-headed. He'd stopped believing in Santa at an early age, he knew better than to imitate what he saw in cartoons or those Jackass movies. He got good grades in school. He enjoyed scary movies but he never thought there were monsters in his closet after watching one.

Had losing Marko really messed his head up that much?

Maria pushed away from Pete's desk and stood up. The *why* didn't matter. All that

mattered was finding him. They could sort out the rest later.

"Maria? You upstairs?"

Devlin's voice, from the living room. She had to distract him somehow so she could sneak outside.

"I'll be right down," she called to him. "Just changing my shirt. Can you do me a favor? I was going to fix us a snack. Can you do it? There's a whole bunch of frozen stuff in the freezer."

"Sure. I'm getting hungry, too."

She waited until she heard sounds in the kitchen and then hurried down the stairs and across the living room to the front door. Outside, she stopped. A slight breeze tousled her hair and floated the scents of fresh-mown grass and distant barbeques past her nose, things so typical of a summer day but in her frantic state they seemed wrong, somehow. People shouldn't be enjoying themselves, not when her brother could be in trouble.

Focus on Pete, Maria!

Right. Pete. Heading west. How the heck was she supposed to get across town to the highway?

She glanced at Devlin's car. Afternoon sun glinted off the chrome and turned the shaded windows into impenetrable black squares.

He always leaves the key in the ignition when he's here.

She hesitated just long enough to weigh the consequences. He'd let her drive the car a few times since she got her permit. He said she was good. And her road test was only a couple of weeks away.

He'll be totally pissed.

It didn't matter. After hearing what he'd said on the phone, they were through.

She ran to the car.

The key was right where she expected it, with its ultra-gross bird foot charm hanging down. The dried up, gnarled flesh and dangerous-looking black claws—which were posed in imitation of the classic heavy metal devil's horns sign—totally gave her the creeps. Plus, it always seemed warm, even on the coldest of days. Like it was still alive. She'd asked him about it once, why he kept something so nasty, and he'd laughed, saying it was no worse than having the foot of a dead rabbit for good luck.

"Bet the rabbits don't think it's so lucky. At least mine looks cool."

During all the months they'd been dating, she'd done her best to avoid touching it, taking care to hold the key between her fingers on the rare occasions she had to pick it up. She did the same thing now, using her thumb and forefinger to turn the key as she slid into the seat and closed the door.

The car started with its usual roar and she threw it in reverse so fast the tires chirped as she backed down the driveway. By the time Devlin reached the road, she was three houses away and he was nothing but a tiny figure in the rearview mirror.

As she headed west across town, the sun a ball of fire in her eyes, a single thought filled her head.

Pete, you better be where I think you are, or we're both gonna be grounded for life.

CH 6

Pete lay on the grass and smiled, the sun baking his skin, the faint breeze just strong enough to dry the sweat from his forehead and neck. It was the perfect way to spend a summer day, simply doing nothing. Next to him, Marko snorted and grunted, a sure sign he was getting restless and wanted his dinner. Sure enough, a moment later a cool, wet nose nudged Pete's cheek.

"Go away, Marko. It's not time yet."

The nudging continued. Pete swiped his arm but Marko must have danced out of the way, because he felt nothing.

More nudging. Harder this time. Urgent.

"All right!" Pete sat up, shielding his eyes against the bright yellow sun streaming through the trees.

He was alone.

"Marko...?" Pete looked around, still groggy from his sleep. For a brief moment—less than a heartbeat, less than an eye blink—he could have sworn he heard Marko whine. Then there was nothing but the ordinary chirps and tweets of the woods and the gurgling of the nearby stream.

It felt so real!

He stood up, tears welling in his eyes, wondering if he should feel happy or sad. Happy because he was positive Marko's spirit was visiting him in his sleep. First at home and now here. Sad because from now on, his only interactions with his best friend would be in his dreams.

Unless I find the Rainbow Bridge.

It was time to get back on the road. He checked his watch, saw it was almost five. He'd napped way too long. His parents had to be looking for him by now. They'd probably called the police, too, which meant he needed to be extra careful on the highway.

He started off through the woods, fighting his way between trees and clambering up and down small hills, wondering all the while if police in other towns were looking for him, too. Had they issued one of those amber alerts, like they did when kids got taken by weirdos? Or would they wait a couple of days before expanding their search outside of Rocky Point? If he could put some distance between himself and the town real fast, maybe they wouldn't catch up. After all, no one had any idea where he was going. That meant they'd have to search in all directions, and there wouldn't be a lot of cops on any particular road.

I should have left a note saying I was going to Canada, or Maine. Then everyone would be looking in the wrong places.

He stopped at the top of a small rise, where he could look down at the road while hiding behind the trees. The main road out of Rocky Point led to the Palisades Parkway. That, in turn, would take him to the New York State Thruway. From there, a couple of different highways headed west to Pennsylvania.

Cars rushed by in both directions, the traffic heavy with people heading home after work. He slapped at a few mosquitos that had followed him and wondered what was better, hitchhiking when the roads were busy or waiting until later. More cars meant more of a chance of getting caught, but also better odds of getting a ride. Night would be safer, because he could hide easier. Except at night, he wouldn't be able to see if a cop was coming towards him.

Then he remembered his dream.

Marko's insistent nose, nudging his cheek.

He wanted me to wake up and get going. Just like last night. He wants me to hurry and find him. That means I should be trying to hitch a ride right now.

"Thank you, Marko," Pete whispered. "I'm coming."

This time he knew Marko's answering whine was only in his head, but it didn't matter. Marko was waiting for him, somewhere. Waiting and watching.

Pete hoisted his backpack and scrambled down the grassy hill, keeping one eye on the road in case a cop—or his parents —showed up, and one eye on the ground, watching for rocks and roots. The last thing he wanted to do was twist an angle or break a leg. Then he'd never get to Pennsylvania.

When he reached the bottom, he stuck his thumb out the way he'd seen people do in the movies. He wasn't sure what was supposed to happen next. What did you say if a car pulled over? What if the driver looked creepy?

The one thing he didn't expect was for nobody to stop.

It didn't take long to realize hitchhiking wasn't as easy as it looked on TV. The passing cars whipped up sand and dust that battered his skin and burned his eyes. The heat baked him until he felt like a Thanksgiving turkey. His arm ached from holding his thumb out. Even though he walked backward as he hitched, at the end of an hour he'd gone less than a mile.

At this rate, I'll never get to the next town, let alone Pennsylvania.

On top of everything, his stomach was growling again and his mouth was so dry it felt like a litter box. And he had to pee. He didn't want to climb back up the hill and into the woods, but he wasn't about to pee on the side of the road, either. With his luck, the cops would show up in the middle of doing it.

Then he saw the perfect solution. Up ahead, the shoulder dipped into a brush-filled gully.

He could scoot down, pee, scarf down a candy bar and some water, and be back on the road again nice and easy.

Turning his back to the traffic, Pete started down the short slope, only to find his progress halted when his backpack got snagged on some branches. He tugged himself free, but it snagged again right away. By then he really had to go, bad. Another minute and he might end up with wet pants. And then who would pick him up?

"Stupid pack!" Rather than fight with it, he slipped it off his shoulders and left it hanging from the branch, figuring he'd just get it on his way back to the road. It wasn't like there was anyone around to steal it.

At the bottom of the gully, the vegetation blocked most of the sunlight. The wall of earth and scrub muted the sounds of the traffic. No breeze reached him, and the air grew hot. Sweat rolled down his forehead and neck, creating muddy tracks through the road dust caked on his skin. He hurried to relieve himself, suddenly anxious to get back to the monotony of the road. Overhead, a car roared past with a violent *Bam! Bam! Bam!* like a gun firing. It startled him so bad he almost peed on his sneakers. A nervous sensation came over him. Something about the gully made him feel like an animal caught in a trap that hadn't closed yet. He zipped up and headed back. He'd take his chances snacking at the side of the road.

His pack was gone.

Fear raced through Pete's body in electric jolts. He'd left it right on that tree!

Or had he? A lot of the trees looked similar, and he hadn't really been paying attention when he descended into the gully. Maybe he'd just gone to the wrong spot. He worked his way back and forth on the short slope, check each tree and looking in the tall grass as well, in case the pack had fallen. Each passing minute ratcheted his anxiety up another notch. Where the heck was

it? Because if it hadn't fallen, and it wasn't hanging from a tree...

Someone had taken it.

Someone who might still be lurking around, waiting to rob a stupid kid all alone on the highway.

Or do something worse.

Get a grip, Pete, he told himself. He hadn't seen or heard anyone. He'd probably just missed it, that's all. Between the trees and scrubs and his rush to pee, he'd gotten off track. All he had to do was climb back up to the road and then find the spot where he'd first entered the gully, and it would be right where he'd left it.

He changed his direction and went straight up, digging his fingers into the warm, dry earth to pull himself over the lip and onto the shoulder.

"Looking for this?" a familiar voice asked. His pack dropped to the ground in front of his face.

Pete looked up and saw Maria staring at him, angrier than he'd ever seen her. Before he could say anything, she reached down and pulled him to his feet.

"Get in the car, you little jerk. You are in so much trouble!"

A few feet away, Devlin's car idled on the shoulder. Pete belatedly recognized the sound of its muffler as the gunfire car he'd heard earlier.

"How did you find me?" he asked, picking up the pack. He held it against his chest and didn't move. There was no way he was going home. If he had to, he'd jump back into the gulley and run for the woods.

"Your pack. It's pretty hard to miss when it's hanging from a tree."

Pete looked at the red canvas, which over the years he'd covered with reflective monster

stickers from bubble gum machines.

Maria kept talking while he cursed himself for not keeping the pack with him.

"Let's go. I'm taking you home. Mom and Dad are going crazy, the police are looking for you, and I'm probably gonna get grounded for coming out here." She grabbed his arm and pulled him towards the car.

He jerked free of her grasp. "No. Wait. What did you say?"

"I said, Mom and Dad are—"

"No. You said you're taking me home." He pointed at the car. "Where's Devlin?"

Maria's expression was not a pleasant one. "Home. Our house. It's a long story. I took the car to look for you."

Pete wanted to laugh. Maria was alone? She'd never get him in the car by herself. He took a few steps back.

"I'm not going."

"What?" She stared at him like he'd just announced he'd decided to become a Yankees fan. "Why not?"

He opened his mouth to answer but nothing came out. How could he explain it to her without her thinking he was nuts? There was no way to put into words the way he felt, the way he *knew* he was right.

"Wait a minute." Maria's eyes narrowed. A truck thundered by, spinning a hot tornado in its wake that sent Maria's hair flying in all directions, so that she looked like an underage witch. "Is this about that Rainbow Bridge stuff? You know that's all nonsense, don't you? It's not a real place."

"It is!" He didn't ask how she knew. He figured someone would check his computer

sooner or later.

"It's not." To Pete's surprise, his sister's voice softened, and so did her gaze. When she spoke again, she sounded sad, not angry. "It's just a poem someone made up. Someone who lost a dog just like you did. They were depressed and lonely, like you, and they wanted to do something to make themselves—and other people—feel better. Like when you say a prayer in church because someone died, or is sick. Except this is a doggy prayer, and the Rainbow Bridge is doggy heaven."

"You didn't read the poem very well. It's not heaven, it's a place where pets go until their owners can find them. Usually it's when the person dies, but I figure if it's a real place, and I can find it, then I can talk to Marko when I'm awake, not just in my dreams."

Too late, Pete realized he'd told her something he'd wanted to keep secret. He closed his mouth, lips squeezed tight, and waited for her comeback. She was bound to have one. After all, her dumb little brother had just admitted his dead dog talked to him in his dreams.

Instead, her eyes went wide.

"You dreamed about him, too?"

"I didn't just dream about him, I saw him. That's how I knew the bridge was real. He... he told me to come find him."

Maria started pacing back and forth, chewing on a fingernail as she walked, which Pete recognized as a sure sign she was upset.

"I heard him barking in my dream," she said. Pete could barely hear her over the sound of the car's idling engine, so he moved closer. "Like he was trying to wake me up. To tell me something was wrong. When I got up, that's when I discovered you were gone."

A sudden realization came to Pete, what his science teacher, Mr. Bothner, liked to call an

"Ah Ha!" moment—that instant when the light bulb goes on in the cartoons, where out of nowhere you figure out a problem you've been stuck on all night.

"Marko wanted you to be the one who finds me!" The words burst from him in an excited shout. "That way you can drive me to the Rainbow Bridge and I don't have to hitchhike."

"No." Maria shook her head. "That's not possible. This isn't one of those stupid SyFy Channel movies you're always watching. It was just, you know, a subconscious thing. We were both upset about Marko dying. So we dreamed about him. That was all."

Pete crossed his arms and glared at her. "It was real. Besides, you wouldn't dream about Marko. You didn't even care that he died."

Maria's lips twisted and sadness filled her eyes. She went to a large rock by the top of the gully and sat down.

"Is that what you think?" She patted the rock, indicating he should join her. When Pete didn't move, she held up her hands in mock surrender. "I promise, no tricks. Just talking."

She said something else, but a passing truck tore the words away, the wind from it strong enough that Pete had to brace himself against it. He wasn't sure he should trust her—after all, she had come out here to take him home, and she'd lied to him plenty of times over the years—but he wanted to hear what she had to say.

Besides, they wouldn't be anywhere near the car, so he should be safe. He took a seat a couple of feet away.

"Pete, why would you think I didn't love Marko? We all did." In the golden light of the setting sun, her normally green eyes faded to almost yellow, giving them a cat-like glow that made them seem wider than normal.

"Did not. I don't see anyone else crying that he died. Mom and Dad act like nothing

happened. And you keep telling me to get over it." Just thinking about Marko's death had him near the edge of tears again, and he had to wipe the back of his hands across his eyes.

Maria smiled, but there was nothing happy in it.

"Sometimes you're totally oblivious. You've been so caught up in your own misery that you haven't noticed what's going on around you. While you've been in your room crying, Mom and Dad were in the living room doing the same thing. The day Marko died, I cried in Devlin's car and I couldn't get to sleep all night. He was your dog, but we all loved him."

Pete wiped more tears away. "So why is everyone pretending nothing's wrong?"

"Because we knew if cried around you, or kept talking about how much we missed him, then it would just make you feel worse. We were just trying to help you get back to normal because we hated seeing you so sad." Now tears were running down Maria's cheeks as well. The setting sun turned them into tracks of golden fire against her pale skin. Seeing her cry made Pete cry harder, and he was glad the glare of the sunset and the location of Devlin's car prevented passing drivers from getting a good look at them. Anyone seeing two kids crying on the side of the road would probably call the police right away.

"I thought you were just big jerks." He tried to smile, but it wouldn't come, so he settled for sniffing back snot and wiping his nose with his arm.

"I really did dream about him," Maria said. "But that doesn't mean his ghost has come back, or that the Rainbow Bridge is real."

Pete shook his head. He should have known she'd never believe him. Which meant he'd have to keep going on his own. He picked up his backpack and slipped it on.

"You can't stop me. I'm going to find the Rainbow Bridge and Marko. He needs me." He started off down the road, purposely not looking back at his sister because he knew if he did, his

willpower might just break. Pennsylvania was a long, long ways away, and he was already tired and his legs were sore. But he had to keep going.

Marko was waiting.

Maria wanted to scream in frustration. She'd really thought he'd come back with her once he understood how the family felt about Marko. That whole thing with their dreams had been weird, but once she'd thought about it, it made sense that people would dream about a lost pet. So why couldn't Pete see that, too?

She turned towards the car and then hesitated. Should she follow him? Call home and tell them she found him? Her infuriation with her little brother grew stronger. All of this because he couldn't accept that his dog had died! He was seeing signs where none existed, his grief turning ordinary events into the extraordinary.

"There's no such things as ghost dogs, and there's no such thing as the Rainbow Bridge," she muttered to herself. Letting Pete believe those fantasies would only get him in more trouble.

It was time to call her parents.

She took her phone from her pocket.

And heard Marko barking.

Maria looked up just in time to see a car passing by, a Yellow Lab leaning out the back window and staring directly at her. For a second, she was sure it was Marko, then she blinked and there was no dog in the window at all.

But she could still hear the barking. This time from behind her.

She glanced back and saw movement up on the hill, something yellow darting from shadow to shadow, its fur seeming to glow whenever the sun's rays glanced off it. It was

following Pete, who didn't seem to notice it.

The shadow-dog paused and looked back. Maria gasped.

Marko!

There was no doubt. It had the same face, the same ear that tilted slightly off-center when at attention, the same pink nose. It stared at her for a long moment and then disappeared into the dark gloom between two trees.

That was when she realized the barking came from inside her head.

In that instant, Maria's world changed forever. Marko's appearance struck her like a hammer, shattering her old beliefs. All her doubts crumbled under the force of the sign she'd been given and her mind delivered a new decision.

Smiling and crying at the same time, she ran for the car and threw it in gear. Gravel and dirt clanged off the bumper and wheel wells as she stepped hard on the gas pedal and the wheels spun on the loose soil. The car slid sideways and then straightened out when she hit the road, already accelerating to thirty miles an hour. She caught up with Pete seconds later, skidding to a stop next to him and making him jump. Horns blared angry tones as cars swerved around her.

"Get in!" she shouted through the passenger window.

"No! I said I'm not going home."

Maria laughed aloud at the joy rushing through her.

"Neither am I. We're going to find the Rainbow Bridge!"

CH 7

"Don't worry, I'll find them! Lee and Tommy are ready to go. As soon as I hear something we'll be on the road. And if he has the compass, I'll get it before he finds the Key."

Devlin Kim hit the ‘End’ button on his phone and waited until the screen went dark before releasing a loud curse. What he really wanted to do was break something, but then he'd have to explain the damage to Maria's parents when they got home, and that would just create more problems. He needed to stay on their good side, at least for now.

How had things fallen apart so quickly? One day he was just a Guardian, assigned to watch a Potential like a dozen other Guardians. Then it turns out his Potential is the One, but before he can even enjoy that honor, the little shit takes off, runs away from home because his damn dog died. And just when he thought the problem solved, that the police would do his work for him, the brat’s stupid bitch sister has to go and steal his car, opening up a whole new box of problems.

What if the One already had the compass and knew where to find the Key? What if Maria found out who her brother really was and decided to help him? What if the stupid shit hid the compass and then threw a fit and died?

Devlin knew the price of failure and he had no desire to experience it. He had to find the One before anyone else, and either get the compass or figure out where it was. The Watcher did not have a reputation for leniency.

He lifted his phone to call Tommy again and find out where the hell they were. Without his car, he’d have to rely on his friends to drive. Another problem that bitch had caused. Before he could hit redial, the screen lit up and the first few lines of Demon Dogs' latest single,

"Anarchy in Hell," exploded from the tiny speaker.

Anarchy in Hell! The Devil's on the run!

The demons run the show and they're killing everyone!

Devlin answered the call, cutting off the song. "What?"

"We're two blocks away. And get this. My sister just saw your car parked on the side of the road outside of town. We can be there in fifteen minutes."

"We'll be there in ten. I'll drive." Devlin ran for the door.

Pete and Maria had a lot to answer for.

"They were here."

Devlin Kim stood by a group of large rocks set back from the road. Although it wasn't night yet, the sun had dipped far enough below the tree line to cast long, dark shadows across the ground.

"How can you tell?" asked Tommy. With his stocky body stuffed into gray sweatpants and a matching t-shirt, he could have passed for another boulder, one that had come to life to bring forth vengeance on the world. His perpetual scowl made him even more menacing.

"Look." Devlin used his foot to push a soda can out of the grass. "RC Cola. Maria's parents have a case of it in the garage. Everyone else in the world drinks Coke or Pepsi."

"So how do we find them? They could have gone anywhere." Lee sat on the bumper of Tommy's sixty-seven Camero, which hummed and growled like a lion waiting to be fed. In another half-hour, the black paint would make it almost invisible in the dark and turn its yellow fog lights into the eyes of a giant animal peering from a cave.

"Not anywhere. If Maria was parked here, that means Pete had to be walking that way." He pointed down the road, where a reddish-purple sunset was turning the sky into a pastel canvas. "And there's only one thing in that direction. The highway."

"Great. So that narrows it to east or west."

Devlin smiled. With his face painted red by the sunset, it wasn't a pleasant look.

"Nope. It means he went west. If he wanted to go east," he continued, cutting off Tommy's next question, "he would've walked east through town and caught the highway there. Let's go." He kicked the soda can into the brush.

Playtime's over, Petey-boy. You've got something I need. And I'm gonna get it, no matter what I have to do.

Pete was unaware he'd dozed off until a change in the car's vibrations brought him awake. He opened his eyes just in time to see Maria exit the highway and pull into the parking lot of a rest stop. Cars and trucks filled the first two rows in front of the long brick building. Behind those, only a few vehicles occupied spots. Red and white neon signs glowed against the night sky, advertising food, coffee, and gasoline.

"Where are we?" he asked, rubbing his fists against his eyes. The last thing he remembered was heading west on Route 84. Using the GPS app on her phone, Maria had plotted their course, which involved taking Route 6 to Route 17 West and then picking up Route 84 near Middletown. Not long after that, he'd gotten bored with looking out the window into the dark and closed his eyes for a minute. Or at least that's what he'd thought. Now that he was awake, he had to pee again, which meant they'd probably been driving for a while.

"Just outside of Port Jervis," Maria said, guiding the car into a parking spot. "Close to the Pennsylvania border. We need gas and I'm starving. Plus, you need to take your medicine and I could use a cup of coffee. Unlike you, I didn't get to nap."

"Ha, ha." Normally he'd have a smart comeback, but the mention of food set his stomach growling and he eagerly exited the car and joined Maria as she headed for the food court. The air temperature hadn't cooled much despite the departure of the sun, and it was a relief to go through the sliding doors and get hit with a blast of air conditioning. Frigid waves of cold washed over them, carrying the mouth-watering, sweet-and-greasy scents of frying hamburgers, pizza, tacos, and cinnamon buns. Despite it being after nine, more people stood in line and sat at tables than Pete expected. He'd never realized so many people traveled at night.

"Bathroom, and then we eat." Maria pointed at an alcove where signs for Men and Women were posted on either side of a brightly lit souvenir stand. Pete started toward the Men's Room but stopped when his sister put a hand on his shoulder. "Be careful."

"Geez, I can go to the bathroom by myself," he said. God, did she think he was still a baby? He used public restrooms all the time. The people here couldn't be any worse than the weirdos walking around the mall or the movie theaters.

Still annoyed at being treated like a little kid, he pushed open the bathroom door and headed for the long bank of urinals occupying one whole wall. Only three were in use. Two by teenagers who obviously knew each other because there were only two empty urinals between them, and one all the way at the end where a fat guy in a business suit was relieving himself.

Pete chose a spot in the middle, well away from everyone else. Even at the age of 12, he knew proper bathroom etiquette: you never peed next to someone unless you had no choice. He was already in mid-pee when the door opened and a tall, rough-looking man in a stained t-shirt

and equally filthy jeans entered the bathroom.

And took the spot directly to Pete's left.

"Hey," the man said, the word rumbling out from beneath a bushy beard that seemed to cover every inch of his face except his nose and eyes.

"Um..." It was all Pete could get out. He averted his eyes as the man reached down to open his own zipper. Another unspoken rule: never make eye contact. But the lumberjack next to him seemed intent on breaking bathroom protocol. He continued talking, asking if Pete was on his way somewhere special. Pete gritted his teeth and kept silent, wishing he was done peeing or that he'd used a stall instead of a urinal. Why was the man talking to him? Was he a pervert? One of those psycho freaks who drove cross-country and used public bathrooms to pick up guys?

Or boys?

"You here by yourself?"

Pete couldn't help a quick glance at the man, who was now staring at him with narrowed eyes while he peed a yellow river. With a shake of his head, Pete zipped his pants up and hurried for the door. Behind him, the man raised his voice.

"Hey, pretty boy, ain't you gonna wash your—"

The door closed, cutting off the rest of the man's words. Feeling like he'd escaped a dangerous trap, Pete quickened his pace as he headed for the hallway with the Ladies room. Maria was just coming out when he got there.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "You look pale."

"It's just the lights." He turned toward the food stalls so she couldn't see his face. "Let's go. I'm hungry."

Pete kept an eye out for the lumberjack while they waited for their food but saw no sign

of him. When he still hadn't seen the man by the time they sat down to eat, he allowed himself to relax.

Probably went back to his truck. Besides, even if he was a perv, he couldn't do anything in public. Not in a crowded place like this.

He still couldn't get over the number of people in the food court, despite the late hour. Families, men in business suits and work clothes, teenage boys and girls texting and talking at the same time. He wondered where they were all headed. That thought led him to another, and he finally asked Maria the question that had been sitting in the back of his brain ever since she'd shown up on the highway.

"What happened with you and Devlin? How'd you get his car?" Left unspoken was how much trouble she was in for taking it and driving on her own.

Maria sipped her coffee and took a bite of a cinnamon roll. Outside of meals with the family, Pete had never seen her eat anything except coffee, diet soda, and sweets. It amazed him that she stayed so thin, considering her only exercise was wandering through the mall on Friday nights.

She took so long swallowing that Pete began to think she wasn't going to answer, but then she stared at him and he immediately felt bad for asking. He'd never seen her look so miserable.

"What happened was he turned into a first-class jerk. You're still too young to really know this, but most teenage boys are pains in the butt. You'll probably be one, too. All they think about is cars, video games, parties, and sex. But some aren't as bad as others. Devlin was always... he was nicer than most of the guys at school. He actually listened to what I said instead of pretending to. He was fun. He wanted to spend time with me. And he cared about me. Or at least I thought he did. He knew what to say when I was feeling down and he knew not to bother

me when I wanted to be alone. I know you didn't like him, but you're not supposed to. He's the older kid dating your sister. And to him you're the snotty little brother."

"Thanks a lot."

"It's not an insult. Older kids always think little kids are snotty. You will, too, when you're my age. But when you went missing, he acted like he was really worried. He took me all over town looking for you."

"Really?" Pete had trouble believing it. Nice and Devlin had never gone together in his mind. Not that Devlin was mean or cruel, just...

A dick. Like all the other high school kids.

"Yeah. But then we got home, and I heard him talking on the phone and he said some things... well, let's just say I found out he was more worried about how this would mess up our time together than he was about you being missing. Once Mom and Dad called the police, he lost all interest in looking for you. Just wanted to watch TV and wait. When I figured out what you'd decided to do, I knew he wouldn't want to go all the way across town—or further. So I stole his car."

"What are we going to do tonight? You're not allowed to drive after nine."

Maria shook her head and gave a soft laugh. "Technically, I'm not allowed to drive at all without somebody who's got a license. So driving at night's not gonna make a difference if we get caught. But I'm tired. I saw a sign that there's a motel not far from here. We'll gas up the car, get a room, and tomorrow we'll be back on the road as soon as it's light out. We should be in Pennsylvania by breakfast."

“How are we supposed to pay for all that?”

Maria held up her pocketbook. “I’ve got almost a hundred bucks plus the credit card

Mom gave me."

"A credit card you can't use." When Maria frowned, Pete continued. "Don't you pay attention to the TV shows? The cops can track us by the credit card. We can only use the cash."

"Oh." Maria looked crestfallen for a moment, then shrugged. "So, like, we'll stay in a really cheap motel."

Pete took a deep breath. There was one more thing he had to say, and it was one of the hardest things he'd ever had to do.

"Thanks. I mean, thanks for everything. I know you're gonna be in a lot of trouble for this. But I don't think I could've done it without you. And you'll see. When we find the Rainbow Bridge, we'll—

"Stop right there." Maria held up her hand. "Don't start. I still don't know if this was a smart idea or the dumbest one either of us have ever had. I'm willing to admit I've seen some strange things today, but every time I start thinking about Marko and your crazy bridge, I get serious doubts. So if you want us to keep going, you won't bring it up again. Finish your food. I'm gonna get a refill."

"Right." Pete hid his smile behind another bite of his cheeseburger as he watched Maria head for the coffee machine. He knew her better than he knew anyone; if she didn't want to do something, she wouldn't do it. So she had to at least half-believe that Marko was still alive somewhere, or she'd have turned the car around and driven them home as soon as he fell asleep. Either that, or she loved her little brother so much she was willing to risk being grounded forever just to help him feel better. That actually freaked him out more than the idea of life after death.

I never thought of her as the caring type.

It made him wonder what else he'd been wrong about.

As she stirred cream into her coffee, Maria glanced back at their table. Pete was busy with his fries and burger. Which meant it was the perfect time to text her parents again.

She'd already sent them one message, after Pete fell asleep in the car. It had been short and sweet—she didn't like texting while driving—stating that he was okay, she was taking him on an overnight so she could talk to him and calm him down, and they should tell the police to call off the search because she'd have him back tomorrow. Then she'd turned off her ring tones and message alert tone, knowing there'd be a flood of calls coming in that she couldn't answer until she was alone.

This time her text was even shorter. *Getting a room 4 the nite. Treetop Inn. All is good. More info latr. Luv u.*

She slid the phone back in her pocket and returned to the table.

"Ready to go?"

CH 8

Twenty miles away, Devlin Kim held up his phone and shouted "Yes!"

Tommy looked over at him, the question written on his face. They'd been driving up and down Route 84 for hours, and he'd been about to say maybe they should go home when Devlin's phone had rung.

"That was Maria's mother. Maria texted her. She's with Pete. They're holed up in a motel just outside of Port Jervis."

"We passed that exit like twenty minutes ago," Lee said from the backseat.

Devlin lit a cigarette and put his feet up on the dash.

"Turn around at the next exit."

"Do you think he has the Key?"

"I don't think so. But he's got the compass, I'm sure of it. How else would he know which way to go?" Devlin exhaled angrily. "And I intend to get it."

Barking. Pete looked around but couldn't tell where it was coming from. He'd never heard Marko so loud, so... persistent. It had to be something important for him to carry on like that. But where was he?

"Marko! I can't see you!" Pete turned in a circle. The night was darker than anything he'd ever seen, not a star in the sky, no lights from any houses. A power failure? Was that what had Marko upset? Was he afraid because he couldn't see?

The barking grew louder, more relentless, as if the dog wasn't even taking breaths.

A strange smell reached Pete, like the cleaning stuff his mother kept under the kitchen sink but stronger, much stronger. The odor made it hard to breathe. He felt like he was on a carnival ride, spinning around and around....

Pete opened his eyes and for a sickening moment thought he was still in his dream. His stomach churned like it wanted to explode, the room kept turning in circles, and the weird smell still filled the air. A tiny white glow provided just enough light for him to recognize the motel room they'd checked into earlier. He tried to sit up and the room spun again. A shadow came at him so fast he had no time to react before a heavy body hit him and knocked him flat on the bed. The smell grew stronger and then overpowered everything else. He tried to call for help but something pressed against his nose and mouth and the hotel room disappeared, leaving him in a place filled with a thick mist that hid everything behind clouds of gray.

Sounds reached him through the fog. Someone shouted in an angry voice. A distant explosion vibrated the ground. Spotlights tried to pierce the fog but only succeeded in hurting his eyes. Someone called his name, over and over. The sounds grew further away, and he wondered if everyone had left him alone in the mist.

Then the weight on top of him disappeared and he could breathe again. He sucked in deep, gasping breaths still tainted with the terrible, sickly smell. This time his stomach couldn't handle it and he threw up, only half-aware of what was happening but able to feel the acid burn of the puke in his throat and mouth. He tried to stand but then he was floating, floating in the fog while the distant people shouted and played the drums.

"Pete! Pete! Let's go! You have to move!"

Maria's voice, close yet far away. She wanted him to move? But he didn't feel like it. Floating was so much better.

Someone tugged at his hand. He tried to pull away but they tugged harder, forcing him to land on the ground. His legs didn't want to hold him. They wanted to dance, to send him in all directions at once. It was funny and he laughed, even though it made his head hurt and his stomach do flip-flops again. The fog broke apart, replaced by lights and shapes that kept moving in different directions. One of them stood right in front of him.

"Maria?" He wasn't sure if he said it out loud or in his head, but the shape nodded.

"C'mon!" The shape still held his hand, started guiding him around the other shapes. Fast. Too fast. His feet hit something and he fell onto a lumpy pillow. He clutched the pillow to his chest. All he wanted to do was go back to sleep. You couldn't sleep without a pillow. Hands grabbed him, pulled him to his feet again. He clung to the pillow. Nice pillow. Wherever he was going, he would need it. That much he knew. Couldn't sleep without a pillow.

Then the lights disappeared and he was flying again, flying all around like a butterfly. Faster and faster, him and his pillow. So fast that everything around him turned into flashes of light and dark. He wished his head would stop hurting so he could enjoy the flying. Flying was supposed to be fun. Instead, his lungs burned and his skull wanted to explode. He started to feel heavy and the flying part got harder. Heavy, so heavy. And tired. He slowed down and Maria had to pull him with both arms. Where had she come from? When did she learn how to fly? She said something but the pain in his head turned the words into noise. There was other noise, too. Barking. Marko was back and barking louder than ever.

His headache grew worse. He couldn't think. He wanted to tell everyone to shut up—Marko, Maria, the people in his head with the hammers and drums. Too much, too much. He couldn't see anything but black. His feet were on the ground again but they didn't want to walk. He couldn't breathe.

Finally, he gave up and let the darkness claim him.

The Watcher shouted his frustration and threw the phone across the room. It shattered against a wall and left a hole in the plaster.

They'd failed again!

He stood up and kicked over a small end table. Magazines and a coffee cup tumbled to the floor. Wood splintered as he brought a massive foot down on the table again and again, until he'd turned it into a collection of jagged shards.

Only then did he stop his tantrum. His heart, unused to any type of exercise, thudded so hard it hurt. He forced himself to calm down, drawing deep breaths until he gained some control over his anger.

They had failed, yes. But the One still had a long way to go. He didn't even have the Key yet. While many things remained uncertain, that much he was sure of, because he'd not felt it change hands.

Still, there was no telling how close the One was to the Keeper. As always, that one stayed infuriatingly invisible to his searching Eye, even in death. It was the way of things, just as a Keeper could never see a Watcher. A way to maintain the balance of power. Which was why he couldn't let the Key change hands; then he'd be even more blind than now. Best to acquire the boy as soon as possible, to avoid any complications. Or worse, to lose him to the Enemy before they had what they needed.

After several more deep breaths, he made his way to the kitchen and sat down at the table. Everything he needed was already there. The map of the east coast. The wooden box with

the rusty iron hasp. He lifted the lid and a puff of winter air escaped, causing his breath to mist before the chill faded. From inside it he took the only two items it held: a circular pendant roughly the size of a quarter and an oval-shaped glass disk affixed to a metal handle. Both pieces of metal were bronze, their surfaces tarnished and green with age. Centuries past, someone had carved an image on the pendant, a ship with a billowing sail riding stormy waves. A cracked and stiff leather string ran through a hole at the top.

The Watcher lifted the pendant by the string and held it over the map. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on the girl, Maria Rhodes, whose face he knew as well as his own thanks to the pictures the Guardian had sent him.

"Where are you? Come on, now, don't hide from me."

Normally he'd search for the boy. Even though his inner eye couldn't see him, he'd be able to narrow the location down to a pretty small area. But he hoped focusing on the girl—who had no protections over her except her proximity to the One—would give an even smaller circle of possibilities.

The pendant swung back and forth, slowly, gently. Right-left, right-left. He concentrated harder. *The girl, the girl, the—*

A slight electric charge tingled his fingers. He opened his eyes. The pendant was now moving in circles, around, around, the diameter growing smaller... another tickle and a new movement began, the pendant spinning on its string...

It stopped.

The Watcher slowly lowered the pendant straight down until it touched the map. Using a pencil, he drew a circle around it, roughly the same size as the pendant's circumference. Then he set it aside and picked up the glass lens. Leaning forward as much as his thick midsection would

allow, he peered through the lens at the area inside the circle he'd made.

The greens and yellows of the map disappeared, replaced by shades of black and gray as the Eye came alive. The image expanded until it surrounded him; he hovered above a deciduous forest, pines and elms and maples, their colors hidden by the cloak of night. Above him stars dotted a cloudless sky like bits of glitter on ebony velvet. Far to the lower left lights flashed in red and blue. Near them, something pulsed a darker red, almost violet. He recognized the amorphous shape immediately. The Guardian. But before he could move closer, the scene shifted and the lights disappeared. He watched trees and hills move by, as if he sat in a slow-flying helicopter that was gradually making its way...

The image faded.

The lens was nothing more than a magnifying glass, showing an area just over the Pennsylvania border. He put his finger down in the center of the viewing area and followed the same line the Eye had shown him.

West. They were still moving west, following trails in the woods instead of main roads.

A pity it was night, or he might have even caught a glimpse of the girl, if she strayed too far from her brother's side. It didn't matter, though. He had a direction, and they couldn't stay in the woods forever. They'd need food, water, a place to sleep. Likely within a day, if not sooner. Which meant they'd have to either return to the roads or make their way into a town.

Heaving his bulk from the chair, he located his backup phone and punched in the number for the imbecile Guardian. This time there would be no screw ups.

Or else.

Pete opened his eyes and immediately wished he hadn't. That insignificant movement set his head aching and caused the world to spin around in nauseating fashion. His stomach protested and he moaned.

"Don't move." A whispered voice in the dark. Maria's. Pete turned in the direction of her voice. Another wave of dizziness gripped him. Although not as bad as the first, he couldn't help another groan.

"Sshhh!" Maria again, more insistent. He tried to peer into the blackness. Something moved next to him and he recoiled, memories of the shadow attacking him filling his head.

"Pete, it's me! Now stay still and be quiet or they'll find us."

He did as she said, despite being totally confused about what was going on. Where were they? And who was looking for them?

Jumbled images danced in his brain. The motel room. The shadowy figure. The terrible smell. And then flying. Or running. He couldn't be sure. Careful to keep his movements to a minimum, he glanced around and tried to get a sense of where they were.

Hard ground beneath him. Dirt and grass and rocks. A night sky overhead, cloudy with just a few stars peeking through. Lights off in the distance—white ones, red ones, and some flashing red and blue that he recognized as emergency vehicles, probably police cars. Beyond that lay the black stripe of the highway, illuminated by occasional sets of headlights going in one direction or the other. Then it hit him. The lights down below belonged to the motel they'd been staying at. Which meant they had to be somewhere up in the hills behind the building.

How had that happened?

A hundred questions begged to be asked, but Pete clamped his lips tight and held them in. Whatever had gone on during the empty times in his memory could wait until it was safe to talk.

In the meantime, he focused his attention on the motel and took slow, deep breaths. The clean night air helped clear away the last of the cobwebs and nausea, allowing him to think without any shooting pains in his head.

The combination of bright lights and deep shadows made it hard to see what was happening, but he caught glimpses of cops moving in and out of the hotel. At one point, they put someone in one of the squad cars, which then drove off. A few minutes later, the other two police cars followed and the motel parking lot returned to its normal state, just a large, gray square dimly lit by the vacancy sign that cast red highlights on the few parked cars.

Maria touched his arm.

"C'mon, I think it's safe for us to leave now." She stood up and brushed grass and dirt from her clothes.

Pete stood also, happy to find his stomach and head almost back to normal.

"What happened?"

"You don't remember any of it?" Her face was a pale oval against the black sky. He saw her eyebrows arch up as he shook his head. "You didn't have an episode, did you?"

Pete thought hard. Although his seizures were infrequent, he'd had enough of them over the years to be familiar with the after-effects. Headache, nausea, aching muscles. If it was a bad one, a grand mal, there be an aching jaw and he'd pee himself. Since his mouth didn't hurt and his pants were dry, he knew that hadn't happened.

But a small one? Triggered by whatever chemical he'd been attacked with? Maybe. Or did he simply feel sick from the drug?

If I tell Maria I might have had a seizure, she'll never take me to the Rainbow Bridge.

"No, I'm okay. But I think someone tried to drug me."

"They did," she said, her relief evident in her voice. "I'll tell you while we walk. Put your shoes on and don't forget that," she added, pointing to the ground. He looked down and saw his backpack there, with his sneakers next to it. Another question added to his list, but he decided to wait until he heard her story. He slung the pack over his shoulders and followed her up to the top of the hill, where a wide, hard-packed trail disappeared into the woods that closed in from both sides. His legs were still kind of weak, but he kept quiet about it as Maria turned to the left and set a slow pace in the near darkness. After they'd put the lights of the motel behind them, she began her story.

"I was sleeping and then this loud thump woke me up. I turned on the light and a freaking giant had had you pinned against the bed."

"A giant?" The shadowy figure in the room. Someone had attacked him. Why?

"Yeah. A man, big as a football player. With a bushy beard. He looked like a bear."

A giant with a beard? Pete's thoughts flashed back to the weird guy in the bathroom. It had to be him! He'd been watching Pete, following them...

Pete felt sick again, but this time it had nothing to do with whatever poison the giant had tried to use on him.

"I should have said something..."

He wasn't aware he'd spoken aloud until Maria paused in her story and peered at him through the dark.

"Said what?"

He shook his head. He couldn't tell her the truth now. She'd be furious with him for not mentioning some sicko had made a move on him in the bathroom.

She stared at him for a second longer and then continued talking.

"I screamed and then things got even crazier. Someone kicked the door open and Devlin came in. I thought I was seeing things. I shouted at him to help you, to save you. And he did. He ran across the room and tackled the guy who was on top of you. Lee and Tommy were with him—you know them—and they jumped on the guy, too. You rolled off the bed onto the floor. I was going to run for help but then I heard Devlin shouting "Don't let the kid get away! Break his legs if you have to but get him in the car!"

"What? Break my legs? Why...?"

"I don't know." Maria shook her head. "I told you, everything was crazy. But he scared me, almost as much as the other guy. So I grabbed you and tried to get you out of the room. Only you wouldn't leave without your stupid pack. You could barely walk, you were all stumbling and everything, but you kept that pack in your arms. I had to practically drag you outside. And that's when things started really getting weird."

"How much weirder could they get?" He wasn't sure if he was asking himself or his sister the question, but it was Maria who answered.

"I got you out the door and then had no idea what to do. Devlin was beating the hell out of the big guy with a lamp, his friends were coming after us, and I could hear police sirens already. And then..."

She stopped and bit her lip. Even in the dark, with her face shadowed by the night, Pete could see something really had her freaked. He waited for her to go on.

"Then I heard it," she finally said.

"Heard what?"

"Barking. A dog barking. But it wasn't just a dog. It was..."

"Marko," Pete finished, remembering the barking he'd heard while in his foggy daze.

"Yeah. He was barking his head off. Like when the garbage trucks used to go by. I couldn't see him, but there was something in his voice... I wasn't sure if he was telling me to run away or follow him, so I did both. Ran across the parking lot and up this big hill. Dragging your clumsy butt the whole way. I kept thinking you were gonna fall and Tommy and Lee were gonna catch us, but the cops pulled in and stopped them. They didn't see us, we were already around the corner of the building. I just kept running and running. I don't even remember when the barking stopped. We got most of the way up the hill and then you collapsed. So I pulled you into some tall grass and we've been hiding since."

"But it's safe now, right? I saw the cops putting someone in one of the cars. It had to be the lumber—" Pete caught himself before more of the word came out "—the guy who broke into our room."

"I don't know. Devlin and Tommy and Lee were acting so strange... they looked angry, and kind of mean. Like they really wanted to hurt you. And none of them said a word to me, like I wasn't even there. It really scared me."

"So what do we do now?"

Before Maria could answer, her cell phone went off, the happy jingle startling both of them.

"It's Devlin," she said, checking the caller ID. She hit the speaker button so Pete could hear.

"Hello?"

"We're through playing games, Maria. We want the compass. Pete won't get hurt if he gives it to us."

"What compass? What are you talking about?"

"I’m coming for it, bitch!"

The connection went dead. Maria stared at the phone even after the screen went blank.

"I don't understand," she said in a soft voice.

"Me either." Pete hiked his pack higher up on his shoulders. "But you're right. He's scaring me, too. You have to get rid of your phone.”

“What? Why would I do that?”

“Because the police are going to be looking for us now, and they can track it.”

“I’ll turn it off.”

Pete shook his head, which sent another wave of nausea through him. “It doesn’t matter. There’s a GPS chip in all cell phones. And I’ll bet a creep like Devlin has an app or something that can do the same thing. No matter where we go, they’ll find us.”

Maria looked at her phone with an expression like it was the most important thing in her life. Which, Pete realized, it probably was. She spent more time staring at the screen than talking to her family or doing her homework.

“What if we need it? For directions? Or in an emergency?”

“We won’t.” Pete dug into his pack and pulled out the map. “We’ve got this for directions. And we’ll never be far from a town. We can use a payphone.”

“Crap.” She bit her lip. Pete was prepared to argue more, but she took a deep breath and tossed it as far as she could back the way they’d come. “So help me, if you get sick or break a leg and we can’t call someone—”

“We’ll be fine.”

“Yeah. Like we’re fine now?” Maria looked at the map and then pointed down the trail. “West is that way. But all my stuff is back at the motel. My purse. The keys to Devlin's car. All I

managed to take was my phone and my money. You’re lucky we’ve got shoes. They were next to your pack and I grabbed them.”

"I have a little money, too. And there's food and soda in my pack." Pete smiled. "Now we're both runaways. We'll hike through the woods until we're away from here and then hitch a ride the rest of the way."

"Hitch? All the way to Pennsylvania?" Maria raised an eyebrow at him. "Mom is so gonna kill you."

"No," he said, smiling even wider as he stepped past her. "She's gonna kill both of us."

CH 9

Devlin Kim stood on the steps of the State Police barracks and took a deep breath. The cool night air did nothing to help him relax, although it did clear some of the stink of old cigarettes and body odor from his nose. The last hour had been an excruciating exercise in self-control. Question after question about Pete and Maria. Why did they run away? Why did they have his car? Why was that man in their motel room? Did they have problems with their parents?

Finally, after answering the same questions for the third time, he'd let a little of his frustration show.

"I told you. Pete ran away because he's upset that his dog died. Maria took my car while I was in the bathroom because she didn't want to wait at home anymore. Her parents told me to get them because I was already halfway there. And I don't know who that dude in the room was but he was trying to hurt Pete so I jumped him. Now, can I go?"

The weary-eyed cop with the nasty coffee breath who'd been questioning him finally nodded yes and Devlin had wasted no time getting the hell out of the stuffy little room serving as an interrogation area. After pausing just long enough to get his key—finally, he had it back!—from the officer at the front window, he exited the building and then stopped.

He had no idea what to do next.

Pete and Maria could be anywhere. Tommy and Lee had seen them heading toward the woods but that didn't mean anything. They could have doubled back and hitched a ride as soon as the cops cleared out. Or they could still be hiding in the devil-knew-how-many-acres of wilderness behind the motel.

Even with two cars, the odds of finding them again were slim to freaking none.

His phone felt heavy in his hand. He needed to make a call, one that he really didn't look forward to making. He tried to think of a way to postpone it and came up with nothing. By now the old man had to know the One had escaped. How he knew things like that, Devlin had no idea, although he had some suspicions. Unfortunately, despite all his tricks, the one thing the Watcher couldn't tell them was where to find the Key, which was why they needed the damn compass. He might have a better idea of Pete's location, though, and maybe they could use that to figure out which way they were heading. If it wasn't too close, there still might be enough time to find them before they got to the Key.

They had to, because if Pete and Maria found it first, they'd disappear from the Watcher's radar completely. And if that happened...

Best not to think about that.

Devlin lit a cigarette and drew the smoke in, letting it burn away the remaining traces of cop smell from his tongue. Down in the parking lot, Tommy and Lee stood by Tommy's Camero, waiting for him.

Tommy had a phone in his hand.

That was bad. Devlin had turned his own phone off while being questioned, afraid a call might come in and then the cops would want to know who it was. Maybe even trace the number. He'd figured on making his call only after he they put some highway between them and the cops.

But if the old man was impatient enough to call Tommy…

Devlin hurried down the stairs and over to the car, preparing himself for a severe tongue lashing.

Two minutes later, he handed the phone back to Tommy, glad for the darkness that hid his burning face from the others.

“What’d he say?” Tommy asked. He and Lee had made sure to step away during the call, giving Devlin some privacy. Not out of consideration, Devlin was sure. More likely to avoid getting sucked into the unwelcome shit storm of blame getting doled out.

The last thing Devlin wanted to do was recount his conversation—if you could call repeating “Yes, sir” over and over while the old man practically destroyed your eardrum a conversation—to the two idiots who’d let Pete and Maria escape. In fact, what he really wanted to do was open a beer, drink it, and then crack the bottle over both their skulls. He might have done it, too, if he hadn’t needed them.

“The big man says they’re still heading west, but right now they’re not on the roads.”

“Damn. So whatta we do?”

“We keep looking, that's what the hell we do.” Devlin gripped his key chain in his fist, getting a perverse pleasure from the sting of the claws biting into his flesh. “We'll split up and cruise all the roads going east and west until we find them. They’ve got to leave the woods at some point, to hitch a ride or get something to eat. When they do, we’ll find them. The little jerk’s not gonna get past us this time. I want that goddamn compass.”

Lee frowned. "What if he don't give it to us? What if he hid it somewhere?"

The tight-lipped smile Devlin gave them caused them to both back up a step.

"Oh, he will. Because if he doesn’t, I'll torture his sister until even her own family doesn't recognize her. That will get him to talk."

"What if he doesn’t even have it?” Tommy asked.

Devlin's smile grew wider but remained just as cold.

"Then at least I'll get to enjoy seeing his face while she dies."

Pete had no idea how far they went before they stopped to rest. After Maria detailed the events at the hotel, they'd traveled mostly in silence, saving their energy for walking.

"That's it. I can't go any farther." Maria's words came out raspy and her voice sounded as exhausted as Pete felt. He was happy to drop his pack and sit down on the trail next to her. His feet hurt, his back ached from the heavy pack, and a dull throbbing in his head told him he still hadn't completely recovered from his attack.

And I haven't even been gone twenty-four hours. He'd known it wouldn't be easy finding the Rainbow Bridge, but he'd never expected it to be like this.

"Here, have a soda." He dug in his pack and handed one to Maria, who didn't even complain that it wasn't diet. She drank two long gulps and then let out a loud belch.

"Thanks. You said you've got snacks in there?"

"Cookie packs or cracker packs? Your choice." He pulled out one of each. That left only four more, plus two cans of soda and a few candy bars, which triggered several worries, although he didn't say anything. Without Maria's money, they'd have to survive on vending machine food the rest of the way. And now they had no car, which meant the trip would take longer. If those had been their only problems, he wouldn't care so much. After all, when he'd originally run away, he had no car and no money. Now, though, they had Devlin and his minions after them for some reason, not to bring them home but to hurt them. And for what? A stupid compass that he didn't even have? Why would anyone want a compass so badly?

As if she was reading his mind, Maria opened a pack of cookies and brought up the same subject.

"What's with this compass, anyhow? Why would Devlin want it?"

"I don't know," Pete said through a mouthful of cracker and cheese spread. It came out *I don'f nuh.* Bits of cracker sprayed onto his shirt and he dabbed them up with his finger. "I don't own a compass. I don't think I've ever even seen one in the house."

"That's really weird." Maria nibbled at her cookie. Pete recognized it as a sign of intense concentration. He'd seen her do it before, when she'd been studying or reading a book. Instead of eating in normal bites, she gnawed at the cookie with her front teeth, like a chipmunk.

"What's weird is your boyfriend turning into a complete psycho." Pete took the soda from her and drank some.

"Yeah," she answered, her tone still distracted. Pete waited to see if she'd say anything else, but she didn't. After a moment, he turned his attention to his pack. She'd talk again when she'd finished sorting her thoughts.

Maybe some chocolate will help. Maria always seemed to crave chocolate whenever something upset her or she didn't feel good. He'd wanted to save the candy bars for when they found the Rainbow Bridge, sort of a mini celebration, but she had saved his life, so he figured he kind of owed her for that.

Pete reached back into the pack, digging around for the candy bars. As he did so, his fingers touched something hard and square. He pulled the object out and belatedly recognized it as the small box that had come in the same package as the Rainbow Bridge poem.

"What's that?" Maria asked.

"I don't know." Pete turned the box over. With everything that had happened, he'd forgotten he even packed it when he ran away. "Whoever sent me the poem sent this, too. I never opened it. I guess I grabbed it when I packed the map and the other stuff." He held the box up. The heavy wood was a deep black and had a shine to it, like it had been burned and then

polished. It felt old, the way furniture did when you went into an antique store, or somebody's grandmother's house.

"Well? Open it." Maria's voice had more than a little impatience in it.

He flicked the lid up and gasped when he saw what was inside.

A compass.

But not an ordinary one.

"What the fudge...?" Maria's words echoed Pete's thoughts as he stared at the strange device.

Made entirely of metal, with no glass plate over the top, it looked nothing like any compass he'd ever seen. The bottom was circular and slightly larger than a half dollar, with an edge about a quarter inch high that went all the way around. The metal had a copperish tint, with greenish-gray blemishes covering a good portion of it. Inside, a simple needle, made of a darker metal, floated atop a tiny pool of water or oil, he couldn't tell which. When he moved the box, the thinner end of the needle swung smoothly around, always remaining aimed in the same direction.

West, Pete realized, comparing it to the direction they'd been walking. *The needle points west instead of north.*

"That's a compass," Maria said, as Pete carefully lifted the object from the box and placed it on his palm. The metal burned like ice against his flesh, and he didn't need to see the tarnished finish to know it was old. Way old. He could *feel* the antiquity soaking into his skin.

"What are those markings on the sides?" Maria pointed at the compass' edge.

"I don't know." Pete brought the object up even with his eyes. The greenish stains made it hard to see the markings, but of the ones he could see, most appeared to be stick-like figures of

different types. There were also a few circles and squares scattered among them, and one that looked like...

"Holy crap." He rubbed his thumb along the edge, trying to clear away some of the patina.

"What?" Maria leaned closer.

"Look." He held his finger right below the symbol he'd cleaned, three arched lines, one under another.



"A rainbow," he said, his voice falling to a whisper as the full meaning of it took hold.

"I can't see it."

Without thinking, Pete tilted the compass, remembering too late it contained a liquid. He turned his hand back too fast and the ancient device tumbled to the ground. Afraid he'd broken it, he snatched it back up, sure he'd see the liquid spilled and the needle in the dirt.

Instead, it looked exactly the same.

That's impossible! Carefully, he turned the device until he held it totally sideways. Somehow, the needle and liquid remained where they'd been, at the bottom of the dish.

It's like magic.

Pete wanted to shout with joy. He held the compass up so Maria could see the rainbow symbol.

"Those lines represent a rainbow. Which means this is a way to find the Rainbow Bridge. It must point to the bridge."

Maria took the compass and held it out. "But it doesn't. Look."

Pete stared at it, comparing the orientation of the needle to the picture of the rainbow. The needle still pointed west, while the rainbow sat at an almost 45-degree angle to it. He shook his head.

"That doesn't make sense. We know the Rainbow Bridge is west. The needle is pointing west. Why would the picture be in a different spot?"

Maria bit her lip before answering. "Maybe the rainbow means something different. Like, all those symbols and things are the directions for how to use the compass to find it."

Pete started to dismiss her comment, because what would a straight-C student like her know about an ancient compass, when another thought came to him.

"You know, you might be right. If the needle always points to the Rainbow Bridge, it couldn't also always line up with the picture of the rainbow. Because it would depend on where you were. Right now, it's west of us. But if we lived in California, it would be east."

"So, all you have to do is figure out what the rest of the symbols mean."

"Great. Too bad I don't read ancient Viking or whatever those are."

A smile came to Maria's lips. "You might not, but maybe whoever sent this to you knows how to."

"That's the problem." Frustrated, Pete kicked at a pebble. "I don't know who sent it." He told her about the poem and the lack of a return address.

"What about inside the box?"

Pete felt like smacking his forehead. He'd been so excited about the compass he'd never looked to see in the box held anything else. Sure enough, when he picked it up, a tiny square of paper sat inside. Maria plucked it out and opened it.

"Peter. Let the compass guide you to the Key. HG TN"

Pete frowned when Maria stopped reading. "That's it?"

She handed him the note. "Yep. And you still have no idea who sent this to you?"

"No." Pete felt himself growing irritated. Instead of answers, they kept getting more questions. Clues hidden in poems, mysterious notes, a compass that someone apparently wanted very badly.

And a key. Don't forget that, whatever it is.

It didn't make sense! Why the heck was all this happening to him? Who sent the package, and why did they do it? Just so he could find Marko? Or did they need him to do something else, something important that they couldn't do?

I'm just a kid. Why pick me?

"Is that a Hershey bar?" Maria pointed into his pack. Still focused on the questions running circles in his brain, Pete reached in and grabbed it. In the process, a pair of socks and his map spilled out.

So intent was he on his own thoughts, he didn't notice Maria had gone silent again until he glanced up and saw her staring at the ground.

No, not the ground. The map.

"What?" he asked, following her gaze. All he saw was the same page they'd been studying back in the hotel room, before bed. A line in yellow highlighter traced his planned route from New York to Pennsylvania, and from there to Tennessee.

"That spot in Tennessee. What's the name of the town?" Maria wore a funny look, like she couldn't decide whether to throw up or smile.

"Heaven's Gate. There's a place there called Rainbow Hill. An old Indian legend says that

when warriors died, they walked a rainbow from the hill to the afterlife."

"Native American, not Indian," Maria said. She took the note from his hand and placed it next to the map, her voice growing excited. "Look. Heaven's Gate, Tennessee. HG TN."

"Holy..." Pete stared at the letters and wondered how he'd missed that the first time he read the note. It was so obvious.

Then Maria shocked him a second time.

"That's where our Uncle Nate lives."

It took a moment for Pete to get his thoughts in order. He couldn't even remember an Uncle Nate, and now to find out the man lived in one of the two towns with a Rainbow Bridge...

"Who's Uncle Nate? Why don't I know him?"

Maria sat down again and took another sip of soda. The day had grown warm, with enough sun filtering through the trees to raise a fine sheen of sweat on Pete's arms and forehead. All around them, the forest delivered its daily concert. Birds twittered and sang happy tunes and the buzzing of insects lending a steady accompaniment to the songs. At any other time, Pete would have been more than content to just lie back, close his eyes, and let the sounds lull him to sleep. Instead, he found himself wishing they'd shut up so he could make sure he didn't miss a word of Maria's story.

"I'm not surprised you don't remember him. I only met him once, and you were like five at the time. You thought he was so cool, though. You sat on his lap and laughed while he did magic tricks for you."

"Magic tricks?" A hazy memory surfaced in Pete's brain. Another warm summer afternoon. People all around. Clapping his hands while a funny old clown made things disappear.

"Yeah. When he was younger, Uncle Nate worked as a magician. The Amazing Nathan."

A clearer memory came to Pete. A yellowed flyer in one of the family albums. *The Amazing Nathan! Illusions and Sleight of Hand Spectacular!*

"That guy is our uncle?" He'd always figured the flyer came from a show his parents went to. Their albums were filled with stuff like that.

"Well, not exactly an uncle. More like a second cousin or something on Dad's side. He came to my birthday party because Mom and Dad turned it into something like a family reunion, the only one we ever had at the house, and..." Maria's voice trailed off and a distant look came to her eyes.

"What?" When she didn't answer, Pete poked her leg.

"I was just thinking. The weekend of that party... Uncle Nate stayed over at our house. And before he left..."

This time Pete didn't wait. He jabbed his finger hard into her leg.

"Ow! Knock it off. I think... I think that was the day Mom and Dad brought Marko home."

With those words, the world around Pete disappeared.

The day Mom and Dad brought Marko home.

He'd thought every minute, every second, of that day had been etched permanently into his heart. *Mom and Dad pulling into the driveway, the huge yellow shape bounding out of the back seat and running right past Maria to Pete, knocking him to the ground and covering him with slobbery kisses, instant best friends...*

And then his seizure. His first one. When he came home from the hospital, Marko refused to leave his side.

Sudden doubt made Pete wonder if he could trust his memories. Were they really his, or

just images his mind had made up over the years, after hearing stories of that day from his parents so many times? How much was real and how much was just the imagination of a five-year-old boy meeting his first dog?

Why couldn't he remember anything about his uncle? Why hadn't his parents mentioned him in any of their stories?

And who picked Marko out at the pound? His parents? Or Uncle Nate?

Something about his uncle being the one seemed...*right* somehow.

If so, why?

They had to find out.

"We have to go to Tennessee."

To her credit, Maria didn't look surprised at his announcement. "What about Pennsylvania?"

Pete shook his head and lifted the compass. "No. If this came from Uncle Nate, it means he sent it to me for a reason. To find some sort of key. Maybe we need that key to locate the Rainbow Bridge."

"Maybe the compass leads you to the key," Maria said. "Like in the Pirates of the Caribbean movies, where Jack Sparrow's compass always points towards his one true desire."

"Or maybe Uncle Nate and the key are in the same place."

Off in the distance, a dog barked three times and then went quiet. Maria’s eyes went wide.

Pete smiled. Wherever Marko was, he agreed.

"Let's pack this stuff up. We're heading to Tennessee!"

SECTION II

Hope & Loss

Sunlight streams through window pane

Unto a spot on the floor...

Then I remember,

It's where you used to lie,

But now you are no more.

Our feet walk down a hall of carpet

And muted echoes sound...

Then I remember,

It's where your paws would joyously abound.

A voice is heard along the road,

And up beyond the hill,

Then I remember it can't be yours...

Your golden voice is still.

But I'll take that vacant spot of floor

And empty muted hall

And lay them with the absent voice

And unused dish along the wall

I'll wrap these treasured memorials in a blanket of my love

And keep them for my best friend

Until we meet above

CH 10

Nate Rhodes—once known as The Amazing Nathan, now barely remembered by his family or the people in the tiny burg that was Heaven's Gate, Tennessee—lay curled in a fetal position on his bed and wondered what would kill him first: the cancer or dehydration. He desperately wanted something to drink, to the point where his thirst occupied more of his attention than the stabbing pains in his belly. Anything would do. Water, ice tea, lemonade—oh, for a sweet, tongue-puckering glass of lemonade!—iced coffee, anything at all. Even a sip of bitter diet soda, which he abhorred. He'd gladly accept it and down the entire thing without a complaint.

Except he didn't see any respite from his thirst in his near future.

"Not unless they serve drinks in the afterlife," he whispered to his empty bedroom. He'd been talking to himself for several days, ever since he staggered home from the post office after mailing the package to Pete. That short trip into town had done him in, used up the last of his energy. Sweating like he'd run a marathon, every muscle aching, he'd collapsed onto his bed and slept for sixteen hours, until massive cramps in his stomach woke him. He'd managed to make his way to the bathroom for a piss much too dark and odorous to be healthy, and then into the kitchen to fill a jug with water, which he'd carried back to his nightstand. Then he'd fallen back into bed.

Where he'd remained ever since.

He finished the water the next afternoon, trying to stave off the burning fever that was simply his body's last hopeless attempt to rid itself of the deadly disease waging war against his healthy cells. His immune system had no idea the enemy came from within, that it had no chance

to defeat an army capable of replicating itself faster than it could be destroyed. Although aware he fought a losing battle, Nate wanted to stay hydrated and alert long enough to give Pete the Key, to explain what it meant, as his Keeper had done for him. He owed the boy that much.

He'd never expected he'd be too weak to leave his bed again.

For two days, he'd lain atop the sheets, alternating between a dreamless state that was more coma than sleep and a semiconscious condition where he knew he needed to move but his muscles simply refused to respond. Sometime during the first night, he'd pissed the bed, a dark brown stain tinged with red that filled the room with the stench of ammonia and nitrates. Since then, he'd experienced nothing but an occasional drip that burned the inside of his penis so badly it managed to distract him momentarily from the broken-glass agony in his belly.

In his rare lucid moments, Nate cursed the insidious nature of the cancer digesting him from the inside out, how its unpredictability had led to the one situation he'd never planned for. Because there was no denying the truth. He would most likely die before Pete arrived, removing any chance of helping the boy with the final leg of his journey. Worse, with the Key still tucked away in its box and hidden from unwelcome eyes, Pete might not find it before the others arrived.

Had he known how quickly the cancer would claim him, he'd have written a note for Pete. Or taken a chance and mailed the Key with the Compass, even though that would be a breach of the Keeper's Oath.

"Screw the Oath," Nate whispered now, his cracked lips splitting open and oozing from the slight movement. He couldn't leave Pete at a disadvantage against the forces that were after him. He had to leave a message and hope the boy arrived before the others. As he'd done so many times throughout the years, he wished he could see his ancient enemy, see Pete, but being a

Keeper meant certain things were not to be known. His only consolation was that the Watcher suffered the same limitations.

Wasted muscles protested as Nate lifted his head, the tendons and ligaments creaking and popping from just that small effort. He looked across the room at his desk, where paper and pen lay just a dozen feet away.

"Just do it, old man," he told himself. "For Pete." *And Marko, and all the others,* his mind added. Somewhere in the distance, a familiar *yip-yip-yip* urged him on.

"Brutus, you crazy pup. A few more minutes, that's all I need." Had there been any spare moisture left in Nate's body, he'd have wept at the sound of his companion's voice. Instead, his eyes burned a little more. It had been days since he heard his old friend, weeks since he'd seen him. Not the tubby Chihuahua's fault, of course. Just another sign that his time on this plane was drawing to a close. He'd grown too weak to visit the Meadow, and in his semi-comatose state the past days he couldn't even hear through the veil of the Divide. The fact that he'd heard Brutus now meant his own soul was getting ready to exit the corporeal world for good.

"Can't let it happen yet." He focused all his attention on the desk, forced his body to move another inch, and then another. The agony coursing through him reached a crescendo and then receded as his mind finally lost the ability to process the pain. Organs ruptured, leaking deadly toxins into his body. Unaware of the blood dripping from his nose or the fact that his bowels had released, Nate compelled his dying flesh to move one last time, urged his body to rise up from the bed.

Unable to function properly from the poisons saturating them, his muscles gave out. He cried out as he fell, dimly aware of Brutus howling in sympathy.

And then all his misery disappeared.

In the next instant, Nate found himself floating above his emaciated, soiled body, the absence of pain such a relief it made him dizzy for a moment. He watched his old form slide off the bed onto the floor. A terrible sadness flowed through him at the thought of Pete making the gruesome discovery of the dead body. That hideous sight would be Pete's last memory of his uncle. Another burden the poor kid shouldn't have to bear. But what was done was done, no changing things after the fact. He'd succeeded and he'd failed, so typical of the human experience. Now it was up to Pete and Marko. The gods be willing, Pete would find the Key and the instructions before the others, or else there would be Hell to pay for many years to come, ramifications that could very well send an already-troubled world over the brink, as they had the last time a Watcher found the Key, when a whole world had ended up at war.

An ecstatic yipping interrupted Nate's thoughts and he felt himself grinning, even though he no longer had a body. He would soon, though. Everyone did, on the other side.

"Keep barking, you old sonofagun," he called out. "I'm coming."

Nate let his incorporeal self follow the sound, heading toward the reunion he'd been anticipating for half his life. An unbelievable joy filled him as he floated through the walls, leaving the only home he'd known for forty years for the one he'd dreamed about ever since the first time he closed his hand around the Key and learned the truth.

The time had come to cross the Bridge.

A little more than 1,200 miles away, The Watcher sat up in his chair, his fitful doze broken as surely as if someone had doused him with cold water.

The Keeper is gone.

And the Key not yet transferred.

How he knew these things he couldn't say. Even in death, the Keeper's whereabouts, like those of the Key and the One who would be the new Keeper, remained hidden from him. But with no Keeper joined to a Key, something had changed. A weakening in the powers of the veil, minuscule ripples that enabled him to sense the edges of things he normally couldn't, catch glimpses of shadowy figures in even more shadowy places. For the first time in more than forty years, no Keeper guarded the secret of the Bridge, and the world was vaguely off-kilter because of it. That microscopic instability would soon begin to expand, the ripples in the fabric of the Divide turning into waves that would continue to swell the longer the Meadow remained without a Keeper.

And with each successive wave, my ability to see will grow stronger.

Even now, despite the shadows that prevented him from perceiving any details, he knew one thing he hadn't known an hour earlier.

The boy was no longer in New York, and no longer on the highway.

The Watcher reached for his phone, a new plan already forming in light of this new information.

"Wherever you are, whatever you are doing, stop. We have things to discuss."

After three hours of walking, Pete and Maria noticed the sounds of rushing water off to their left, where the ground sloped down and disappeared into thick forest. Pete checked his map and determined they must be near the Delaware, which was the only river of any size near Port Jervis. He knew at some point they'd stopped paralleling Interstate 84, which ran straight west,

and were now heading in a more southwesterly direction, which worked out well, since it both took them toward Tennessee and put them in the middle of sparsely populated state park lands. They'd skirted around one town, which Pete thought might have been Milford, along the way, catching glimpses of it through the trees when they came to a crest of a hill. Occasionally, the noise of traffic filtered through to them, a reminder that despite the seeming wilderness surrounding their path, civilization was never that far away.

As they'd walked, Pete marveled at how different this area was from the woods he and Marko had enjoyed exploring back home. Unlike those sections of undeveloped land, crowded with maples and oaks and birches and filled with frenetic squirrels and numerous families of deer, this forest of tall pine trees was surprisingly bereft of animal life and somehow ominous instead of happy. No squirrels or chipmunks, no deer. Birds roosted high up and out of sight, their muted songs trickling down from up high.

With their thick branches and dense needles, the close-growing trees created a living umbrella that blocked much of the light, making it seem like dusk at all times. That same lack of sunshine at ground level made it impossible for other types of trees to grow, and the evergreen forest extended in every direction as far as they could see. Much like the compass in Pete's backpack, the pines generated a feeling of ancientness. One could easily imagine them being there for centuries, perhaps standing sentinel as the very same Viking explorers who made the compass marched along the banks of the river below.

He wondered if the Vikings or other explorers had felt the same way he did, kind of spooked and awed at the same time by the giant trees whose mission seemed to be blocking people from moving forward. With each step, they stabbed at skin and clothing with gnarled, brown braches covered in dead needles that remained just as sharp as their living counterparts.

Pete had no trouble imagining they were guardians of a mysterious secret hidden deep in the gloomy depths.

"We have to stop soon," Maria said, interrupting his reverie. She stepped behind him to remove a packet of cookies and their last bottle of water from his pack. "I'm exhausted and we need to get more food."

They shared the cookies and sipped the water while continuing to walk.

At least with the river nearby, we can wash and cool off, Pete thought, swishing a mouthful of water to rinse cookie sludge from his teeth. He wondered how bad his breath stunk. The one thing he'd forgotten in his haste to run away had been a toothbrush, and now his mouth felt totally slimy and gross.

"We've only got like ten dollars between us," he reminded her. "That's gotta last all the way to Tennessee."

"We'll, we're never going to get there at this rate. Let's find a gas station or something. They'll have a snack machine and then we can try our luck on the highway."

"So, now you're okay with hitching?" He'd suggested it at least twice more while they'd been hiking, and both times she'd said no, they couldn't take the chance of Devlin spotting them.

"Yeah. My feet can't take this constant abuse. This is more exercise than I've done in a year. Besides, everyone's probably searching on 84, and we're nowhere near there anymore. It should be safe. Safe as we're gonna get, anyhow. What's the next town?"

Pete took out the map and tried to guess their location. "Some place called Dingman's Ferry. It's right on the edge of the river."

"I've heard of it. My friend Jacqueline and her family went camping near there, at the Delaware Water Gap."

"Yeah, that's on here, too." Pete tapped the paper. "I guess it's as good a place as any to stock up on junk food." His stomach gurgled as he spoke, and suddenly the prospect of eating chips and candy for the next few days seemed more like torture than an adventure. He never imagined he'd miss ordinary food, like sandwiches or meatloaf or spaghetti, so much.

Remember why you're doing it, he reminded himself, and that helped, a little. He'd eat nothing but cabbage and beets if it meant finding Marko.

Now if only his stomach would think the same way.

"We should head down to the water," he said, trying to ignore the grumbling and growling coming from his midsection. Why did Maria have to talk about being hungry? "That should take us right to the town."

“Okay.” Maria took a step and then stopped.

“What?” Pete asked.

“Did you take your medicine this morning?”

Pete rolled his eyes. “Of course. I always take it—” he paused. Had he taken it? He couldn’t remember. He reached into the pack and pulled out the plastic jar. A quick count showed twenty of the little white tablets. Enough for ten days. He tried to think back. The days after Marko’s death were a jumble. How many? They hadn’t brought the body home that night—something about paperwork, the vet had said. So, six? Seven?

Has it been a week already?

It seemed like only yesterday that The Accident happened; the squeal of brakes and Marko’s awful howl were that fresh in his mind.

A week. And he always got the prescription filled the first of the month. His mother would pick it up for him. So add fourteen days...the number matched. He’d taken his dose.

“Good?” Maria asked, eyeing him closely.

“Good.” He dropped the jar into the pack. “Let’s go.”

They stepped off the trail and immediately found themselves fighting an unyielding army of dead wood. Like immobile zombie soldiers, the branches and trunks formed a near-impenetrable barrier, forcing them to spend as much time moving from side to side as down the hill in order to find spaces between the trees. Eager botanical fingers covered in nubs and barbs scratched exposed skin. Bark and needles fell down the fronts and backs of their shirts, bringing about an intense itching that only grew worse when mixed with sweat.

By the time they reached the bottom of the hill and spotted the river, Pete and Maria were tattooed in scratches and welts and ready to jump in. Instead, they settled for shaking their shirts out as best they could and rinsing their arms and faces in the ice-cold water. Refreshed, and with their skin reasonably soothed, they followed the river downstream.

“I can’t believe they call this a river,” Pete said, as they hiked along the sandy bank. Compared to the Hudson, which was more than two miles wide where it made up the eastern border of Rocky Point, the Delaware seemed more like a large stream. Any high-schooler with a decent arm could probably throw a rock across to the other side.

“I still wouldn’t want to fall in.” Maria pointed to some branches that were floating on the surface. “That water’s moving fast. There’s a reason people come down here to go rafting.”

After fifteen minutes, they came to a two-lane road that crossed the water via an odd-looking bridge made from three sections of steel lattices that resembled the top halves of hexagons. A sign on the road identified the bridge as Dingman Bridge.

"Well, I guess this is where we cross," Pete said, after they'd climbed the gentle slope of the embankment from the river to the road. "Dingmans Ferry, here we come." The words brought

a smile to his face, and he wondered if the people in town ever got tired of saying them.

"What's so funny?"

"Dingman." When Maria just stared, he said it again. "Dingman. Dingman. It's one of those words that makes you want to laugh. Like gazebo or burlap."

Maria shrugged and rolled her eyes. "Whatever."

Pete shook his head. *Girls. They never thought anything was funny.*

A twenty-minute walk brought them into a town just as insignificant as it sounded. Small enough to make Rocky Point seem like a city. In a town that tiny, two strangers were sure to stand out and be remembered. He hoped they'd find a gas station quick and get back on the highway before some cop took notice of them.

As luck would have it, one of the first buildings at the edge of town turned out to be a Mobil station, complete with a mini mart. Maria seemed especially happy to see it, hinting it would be nice to pee in a real bathroom—even a gas station bathroom—instead of behind a tree.

Pete pointed to a sign on the door. “Bathroom for customers only.”

“We’re buying snacks. That makes us customers.”

"Okay. You go first," Pete said. "I'll see what I can get to eat."

"Don't spend all the money." Maria gave him a stern look. "If you buy too much at once, we'll be tempted to eat it and then we'll be screwed."

Pete nodded and they went inside. An old man sat behind the counter, reading a newspaper. He glanced up once as they entered, alerted by the tinkle of bells over the door, and then returned his gaze to the paper. A skinny kid in cut-off jean shorts and a stained t-shirt stood by a rack of magazines, flipping through one that had a picture of Iron Man on the cover. Like the old man, he gave Pete and Maria a once-over and then paid them no attention.

“Excuse me,” Maria said to the clerk. “Where’s your bathroom?”

“Gotta buy something,” he said, not raising his eyes from the paper.

“We are.”

He sighed, then pointed past a row of slushy machines. “Down there. Second door on the right.”

“Thanks.” Maria headed off, and Pete went down one of the aisles. When he was sure no one could see him, he took his money out and counted it. Thirteen dollars and sixty-two cents. Even the cheapest junk food would use that up pretty darned fast. He removed a five-dollar bill and put the rest back into his pocket.

Gotta get as much as I can. The thought crossed his mind to stuff a few candy bars or jerky sticks down his pants, but he was afraid there might be cameras in the store. So instead, he did his best to find filling, cheap snacks from among the rows of junk. As he examined each item, he tried to calculate the total, adding in an extra dime for every dollar to cover the tax.

When he figured he'd reached his limit, he brought everything up to the counter.

"Let's see," the old man said, punching numbers into the cash register while he talked. "Two pepperoni jerkies, bottle of Pepsi, chips, and Twinkies. That'll be four-ninety-eight."

Pete handed over the five, got his change, then grabbed the plastic bag and hurried out. Bright sun blinded him momentarily. When he could see again, he looked around the parking lot. No sign of Maria. He figured she was still in the bathroom, so he walked to the far end of the lot and sat on the curb to wait.

He was staring at the door and wondering how long she’d take, ‘cause he really wanted to eat, when a voice spoke from behind him.

“Are you guys running away from home?”

CH 11

Maria entered the dim corridor with a plan in mind. She'd been growing more frantic all day, knowing their parents would be sick with worry when she didn't call or text. And she had to figure that Devlin would tell the police she and Pete had been in that hotel room, which meant her parents would be doubly anxious. She peered into each doorway, hoping to find an office where she could use the telephone to call home and let everyone know they were alright.

Instead, she found something even better.

A storage room, filled with stuff that would eventually go on the shelves.

In one corner was a stack of cellphones, the cheap kind you had to pay by the minute to use. And the cards to go with them.

Maria approached the phones, her whole body shaking. She stopped and looked around. No one else was back there. Right before she reached for a phone, she remembered where she was and checked the ceiling. No cameras, at least none she could see. Praying she wasn't about to go to jail just for helping her stupid brother, she grabbed a phone and several cards and stuffed them all into her shirt. Then she hurried for the bathroom. With every step, she expected someone to shout "Thief!"

She let out a huge sigh of relief when she shut the door and locked it. The hard plastic of the phone package wouldn't open, and she ended up having to use her teeth. Once she got the phone out and opened the three card packages, she read through the instructions. She'd never used a pre-paid phone before, but on TV people always said they couldn't be traced. It was always the bad guys who had them. Or people on the run.

Like us. I'm on the run and now I'm a criminal, too.

If her parents ever found out, she was more than just in trouble. She'd be dead.

Setting up the phone was easy. Turn on, hit accept a few times on the screen, and input the prepaid card info. It was weird having such an old-fashioned phone; no internet, just texting and a primitive camera. But it would do for now. The battery read more than 80%, which was good, because she had no way of charging it. She sent a quick text telling their parents they were fine, sorry, her phone got broken at the hotel, she'd call later and explain everything. Then she shoved the phone down her pants and buried the plastic packaging in the filthy, overflowing garbage can. After peeing and washing her hands twice, she exited the bathroom, terrified the clerk would be standing there with police.

He was still at the counter, buried in his paper. He didn't even look up as she left.

Still, her fear didn't ease up until she was in the parking lot and no alarms went off.

Then she looked around for Pete.

And her heart froze when she saw him with a scruffy-looking teenager.

Pete gasped and dropped the bag of snacks. Turning, he saw a skinny boy who looked like he'd either spent the morning rolling in dirt or he just hadn't washed in days. Considering the worn, ratty appearance of his clothes, he decided to go with his second guess.

A local, Pete thought. *Lives in a trailer or a run-down house somewhere nearby.* Every town had an area like that, where people lived well below the poverty line and lawns always overgrown and decorated with rusting cars perched on cement blocks.

Pete instinctively picked up the bag and clutched it to his chest, wondering if the boy approached with the idea of stealing it. He certainly seemed like the type. Rough around the edges, like he wouldn't be afraid to fight. Light brown eyes that matched his hair and the dirt

covering his clothes, as if he were made of sand. A little younger than Maria, maybe fifteen. The boy raised one eyebrow and leaned forward.

"I ain't gonna call the cops."

That reminded Pete of his question. *"Are you guys running away from home?"*

“What the hell is going on? Pete, are you okay?”

Pete turned in relief as Maria ran up to them, her eyes wide.

“It’s cool.” The boy stepped back and held his arms out to the side. “I ain’t tryin’ to start trouble.”

“What do you want?” Maria put herself between them. Pete stood up.

“All I did was ask him if you guys were running away.”

“Why would you think that?” she asked.

He shrugged. "I saw you come out of the woods. And all he bought in the store was junk food," the boy added, pointing at the bag. "Besides, you don't look like you're from around here."

"Do you live here?"

"Nope." The boy leaned against a nearby light pole. "I'm on the road, too. Just killing time 'til the next train comes through."

"We're not runaways," Maria said.

"Where does the train go?" Pete asked.

“Shut up, Pete,” Maria gave him a nasty look. The scruffy boy smiled and nodded.

"I knew it! Where'd you come from?"

"New York," Pete answered before Maria could stop him. The boy stood straight and Pete tensed, prepared to run if the stranger tried anything. But the boy just nodded again.

"New York," he said. "That's cool. I'm from Michigan. Where you guys headed?"

“Tennessee,” Pete said, and Maria just groaned and shook her head. “We're going to my uncle's house."

"At least you got someplace to go. I been riding the trains for the last month. Seeing places, you know?"

"Why did you...?" Maria stopped and closed her mouth. Pete felt like laughing. She was no better at this than he was.

"Run away?" the boy asked. He shrugged, and although his tone remained friendly and calm, his smile disappeared and something hard came into his eyes. "My old man was a real scumbag. Used to hit me and my brother all the time. He'd hit my mom, too, if she tried to stop him. Then he took off, and things were good for a while. Until he came back. His temper was worse than ever. I figured it was time for me to go. Better livin' on the road than gettin' beat every day. Not like I was all that good in school or nuthin'."

The boy stopped talking and looked from Maria to Pete and back again.

“Now it’s your turn.”

Maria hesitated while the boy stared at them. She understood that he wanted their story. But what should they tell him? Not the truth, that was for sure. Maybe twist it a little, say they'd gotten into a fight with their parents, she'd stolen her boyfriend's car—

"My dog died and we're trying to find this place called the Rainbow Bridge where you can be with your dead pets again."

Maria turned to Pete. "Is your mouth even connected to your brain?"

Pete scrunched his face and frowned. “Jerk.”

"Hey, I ain’t a cop or nuthin’," the boy said. "But that sure is a weird reason to run away.

A magical bridge to fairy land?"

"It's not fairy land, it's real. My uncle even sent us a compass that shows you how to get there. We just need to get the key from him."

"The key?" The boy looked at Maria. "He's a kid. I can understand him not having any common sense. But you gotta be old enough to know better."

Maria opened her mouth but nothing came out. She felt trapped, caught in a nightmare where everything she did or said led her down the wrong path.

"She knows it's true," Pete continued. "She heard our dog barking. And her boyfriend tried to kill us because he thought we had the key."

The boy's eyebrows went up and he whistled. "Wow. That is some story. The guys are going to love this one."

"The guys?" A chill crawled through Maria's stomach and she looked around to see if anyone was nearby. Had the boy set up an ambush?

"Yeah. I'm traveling with some other kids. You meet people on the road. There's four of us right now. They're back at the tracks. You'll meet them. Don't worry, they're cool, though. Nobody's gonna rat on you."

"We're not going anywhere with you." Maria put as much steel into her voice as she could.

The boy shrugged. "Whatever. It's your choice. But I figure you might want to."

"Why?" Pete asked.

The boy's smile came back, bigger than before.

"'Cause tonight there's a train heading to Tennessee."

"That's it. I can't wait any longer. We're calling the police." Kristen Rhodes glared at her husband as if he was to blame for everything bad happening in their lives.

"It's only been a few hours." Ed put his hands on her shoulders. They were rock-hard with tension. "She said she'd text again this evening. It's not even dark out yet."

"She's just a damn kid!" Kristen pulled away. "They're both just kids. Crazy, stupid kids and we're just as crazy and stupid for letting them do this. Anything could happen to them."

"We agreed to give them two more days, just 'til they reach Nathan's house. Maria's doing a great job of keeping us in the loop. She's sixteen. Remember some of the things we did at that age?"

Kristen's eyes narrowed even further and Ed took a step back. She looked ready to throw the phone at him. "This is not like hitching to a concert or staying out overnight in the woods to party. We always came home the next morning. And it's a different world now. I'm making the call."

"All right. Go ahead." Despite the relief he felt at no longer having to worry about his kids being alone on the road hundreds of miles from home, a little bit of sadness found its way into Ed's heart. Pete and Maria were having the adventure of their lifetimes. He remembered the thrill of being young, of doing something so wild, so liberating, it seemed like your body could fly on joy and adrenaline. All too soon, they'd be out of college and stuck behind a desk, the biggest excitement taking their own kids to Disney or Seaside for summer vacation.

It's a different world now.

It was, in more ways than one. And as much as he loved his family and his life, he found himself more and more often missing the adventurous times of his youth. Back then, every day

seemed magical.

And now the magic was gone.

Kristen picked up her phone from the table.

And then nearly dropped it as it went off in her hands. She looked at the screen and her face drained of color.

"What's wrong?" Ed asked.

"It's the state police."

"What's the first thing you're gonna do when we get the Compass?" Lee Pyle glanced at Tommy Nugent, who had his eyes fixed on the highway ahead of them. His long, greasy hair whipped around in the wind from the open windows and he kept brushing it back from his face. He said something, but the words got lost in the hammering thunder of Charred Walls of the Damned blasting from the speakers. Lee leaned over and turned the volume down.

"What?"

"I said—" Tommy stopped, lowered his voice from a shout as he realized the music was gone—"I said, I'm gonna get fucking rich. That compass is gonna lead me right to free money."

The power of the Compass had kept both of them awake many nights. It was the carrot on the stick of their obedience. Two years ago their best friend, Devlin Kim, had revealed a secret to them. He worked for a man named the Watcher, who he'd only met once but who was the scariest man alive.

"Scarier than any mob boss or super criminal, for sure," he'd said.

His job was simple. Keep tabs on a boy named Peter Rhodes. If the kid ever said

something about a key or a compass or bridge made of rainbows, then he was to get the key and the compass and bring them to the Watcher, no matter what it took. In return for this, he got a couple of hundred bucks a month.

"It's money for nothing," he bragged. "It's like he's paying me to try and get laid."

It had been Devlin's idea to date the kid's sister as a cover. It hadn't been easy; she'd been a real prude at first, but now she was finally starting to give up the goods. At least according to Devlin, who said they'd done everything but bang. Sometimes Lee didn't believe that—to him, and Tommy agreed, it seemed like more often than not Maria Rhodes called the shots. Devlin said he just let her think that so she wouldn't break up with him, because then it would be way too hard to find excuses to watch Pete.

He'd also said that he might need their help someday, in case Pete or his family gave him trouble getting what he needed. In return, he promised them whatever they wanted.

"How are you gonna do that?" Tommy had asked.

"It's the Compass," he'd said. Lee remembered the night perfectly. They'd been in Devlin's garage, drinking beer and listening to tunes. "It's got this power. You ask it for whatever you want, and it points the way. All you have to do is follow. The Watcher said that if you help me, you each get to use the Compass one time to get your greatest wish."

Of course, no one had believed him at the time. Who would? A magic compass? That was little kid stuff, like Harry Potter. But then they started getting the phone calls. Sometimes at home, sometimes on their cells. Always a man's voice that identified itself as The Watcher. Before you could say anything, it would tell you a secret. Sometimes about something you'd done—like the time the voice told Lee that he should never return the gun he'd stolen from his stepfather's car, because he might need it someday to help Devlin. Lee had freaked out over that,

because he'd stolen the gun more than a year ago and he hadn't told anyone. Not even Devlin and Tommy.

Or the time Tommy had woken up and found a message waiting on his cell. "Don't take the bus today." He'd laughed it off, thinking one of his friends was playing a joke on him. He'd still intended to take the bus, though. It was a mile and a half to school and the middle of November. No way was he going to walk. But then he'd taken a few hits off a joint before getting in the shower, and few more after, and next thing he knew, he'd missed the bus. So he'd just stayed home. An hour later he got a call from his mother asking if he was all right.

The bus had been hit by a truck and three kids killed.

After that, they started believing Devlin when he talked about weird or magic shit.

So the idea of the special compass—"Like the one in Pirates of the Caribbean!" Lee exclaimed one night—grew on them. They talked about what things they'd wish for. Over the years, they tossed around all sorts of ideas. Buried treasure, drugs, money, supermodels.

As they got older, they got wiser. Don't wish for buried treasure, why work so hard to dig it up? Don't ask for a supermodel, what happened if you didn't like her after a couple nights? What if you get caught with the drugs before you can sell them?

After two years, neither of them had come up with the perfect wish.

The idea of finding "free money" made Lee burst into laughter.

"Dude, that's the dumbest idea I ever heard," he said, while Tommy guided the car around a long curve. They'd crossed into Pennsylvania a while back and were currently going from exit to exit on the highway, getting off to check all the truck stops and gas stations. Devlin was convinced Maria and her brother were hitching rides with truckers and he hoped to catch them in between lifts. While they did that, Devlin was cruising backroads and small towns from

east to west.

"What's so dumb about it?" Tommy frowned, his face pale yellow in the glow of the dashboard.

"What kind of money is free money? You might end up finding a lost wallet with ten bucks in it."

"I'm gonna ask for a million. Maybe two."

"Oh, yeah. 'Cause people just leave that kind of cash lying around for people to find."

"You're so freakin' smart, what's your big wish?"

Lee leaned back in his seat, put his feet up on the dash. You couldn't do that in Devlin's Civic, he'd smack you silly. But even though Tommy drove a classic car, he didn't seem to care much what you did in it.

"I'm gonna wish for a rich old lady who wants to leave money to a stranger before she dies. Then, when I meet her, I'll be nice to her and she'll put me in her will. All legal, and I don't gotta do nuthin' except act real sweet for a little while."

Tommy opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again. Lee pointed at him.

"See? You can't find nuthin' wrong with that, can ya? Now we're talking easy money."

"You really think you can be—"

Lee's phone blared to life, making both of them jump.

"It's Devlin. Yeah, what's up?"

"Change of plans. Just heard from the big guy. Maria's parents called the cops. I'm gonna call them now and find out what I can while they still trust me."

"What should we do?" Lee put the call on speaker so Tommy could hear.

"The brat's heading southwest and he's still in Pennsylvania. I'll know more in a little

while. You guys should pull off somewhere and wait for my call."

"Got it. There's an exit a mile up. We'll hang there."

"Later." Devlin clicked off. Lee turned the music back on, keeping it low enough that he didn't have to shout over it. "Cool. I can use some food."

"I don't like that the cops are involved again. Gonna make our job harder."

"Not our job. Devlin's. I see any sign of cops I'm gone. I didn't sign on to go to jail for nobody."

Tommy nodded. "Yeah. If it comes down to that, we gotta think of our own skins."

CH 12

Maria stared at her phone, her heart racing as she waited for it to turn on. She had to get a message to her parents, let them know everything that had happened since her last text. In the bathroom of the gas station, she'd said she'd be in touch again in the evening. But that had been before they'd planned on hopping a train to Tennessee. With a bunch of strangers, no less. Now here it was, way past dark, and if she didn't get in touch soon they'd be freaking.

And I didn't want to hitchhike because it was too dangerous?

I had been Pete's idea, of course. As soon as he heard the train went to Tennessee, he'd practically jumped out of his skin. There'd been no way to stop him, so she'd had to go along. Which was how they'd ended up in a small patch of woods just past the Dingmans Ferry freight yard. The boy they'd met, Benny, had explained that the best way to hop a train was to catch it just after it left the yard, before it had a chance to speed up. But if you were too close to the yard, the security guards would see you. So you had to time it just right.

They'd met up with Benny's traveling companions in the woods. Rufus, a red head with shotgun patterns of freckles on both cheeks. Big G, who stood taller than any of them and carried at least forty pounds of extra weight. Allie, the lone girl, who hid behind her long black hair and hardly spoke.

To Maria's surprise, none of them complained when Benny showed up with two strangers.

"Lots of kids ride the trains," Rufus said, after everyone introduced themselves. "You meet people and then they're gone in a day or three. Our little group's been hanging for a couple

of weeks now, mostly 'cause we get along and 'cause we're all going south."

"What do you do for money and food?" Pete asked, taking a seat between Rufus and Benny on a fallen tree. Nearby, Big G had piled some sticks together and was using a cigarette lighter to get a fire going.

Benny shrugged. "Whatever we have to. Sometimes you can find work for a day, make ten or twenty bucks. Sometimes you have to use the five-fingered discount." He reached into his pocket and pulled out two jerky sticks in plastic wrappers. "I swiped these at the gas station while you were paying for your food."

Big G nodded. "Once in a while you get lucky and end up in a train car that's carrying something good, something you can sell for mad money."

"We all share," Benny said. "That's one of the rules of traveling together." He tossed the jerky onto the ground. Allie came over and dropped a package of ground beef next to them. Benny nudged Pete. "She's the best. She can hide all sorts of stuff in her shirt and no one ever tries to search her, 'cause she's a girl. Last week she nabbed two steaks."

Big G looked at Pete. "You wanna eat with us, you gotta contribute, man."

For a moment, the only sounds were the sparking and crackling of the fire and low buzz of grasshoppers up by the tracks. Maria saw the uncertainty on Pete's face as he tried to figure out if they were getting played for fools or if the foursome of runaways really would share their food. She considered saying something, but decided Pete needed to make the choice by himself. He'd gotten them into their current pickle, now he needed to finish what he'd started.

Time to grow up, little brother.

After another second, he nodded. "Okay." He took their bag of food and added it to the small pile. Allie immediately tore it open, exposing the contents.

"Thanks, man." Big G gave him a thumbs up. "Alright, let's eat!" He opened the package of ground beef and began forming it into balls.

Maria's stomach clenched. They weren't going to eat raw, were they? Then she noticed several long, thin sticks near the fire. Just as she realized what they were for, Big G picked them up and speared a ball of meat onto each one and then angled them over the fire. Within seconds, the smell of the beef cooking filled the air, a smell that reminded Maria of burgers on their backyard grill. Her stomach rumbled as the greasy odor grew stronger and the sizzle of fat dripping into the fire added to the sensations of homesickness and hunger. When Big G cut up the jerky sticks and handed her two sections, she found herself gnawing on one like she hadn't eaten in weeks. The smoky, hot flavor of the jerky burned her throat but she paid it no mind, biting off another piece as soon as she'd swallowed the first.

She noticed the others all chowing down with a similar fury and wondered when they'd eaten last. A day? Several? How did they live like that, never knowing where the next meal would come from? God, she was starving after only two days of not eating regular meals, and she'd never been a big eater to begin with. Nothing like Pete, who sometimes seemed like he went through a bag of groceries a day.

Halfway through his jerky, Big G rotated the sticks and then passed around a large bottle of water. Maria took a sip, hoping nobody noticed that she wiped the rim with her shirt first. The water was icy cold and had a slightly metallic taste, which told her they'd gotten it from a stream or a well. At least, she hoped so; the idea of drinking river water made her want to gag. Still, it tasted good. She downed another mouthful and then reluctantly passed it on.

"Meat-a-balls they are a ready," Big G announced in a corny Italian accent. He handed one to each person. Maria took a small bite, not sure what to expect from something that looked

like a giant over-cooked marshmallow. Steaming hot juices ran out, overflowing her lips and filling her mouth with meaty deliciousness. The meatball tasted just like one of her father's hamburgers, and she devoured it in four bites, licking the juices from her fingers when she finished.

After that, the group divided up the rest of the snacks and washed everything down with water and soda. By the time they finished, Maria was happy to find that her stomach no longer ached. The meatballs hadn't been very big, but together with the jerky and snacks, each person ended up with a decent-sized meal.

It was then, with everyone sitting around the fire and talking, that she decided to text her parents. She told Pete she'd be right back, she had to pee, and headed deeper into the thickets. Once she couldn't see anyone and the fire was only an orange glow through the trees, she turned the phone on. She knew it only took less than a minute for the phone to boot and acquire a signal, but it seemed like hours before the tiny green bars appeared.

And then disappeared.

"Damn." She'd had a good signal earlier at the gas station. Three bars. Better than what she got at the mall back home. Which meant they'd either walked out of range from the closest tower or the woods were blocking the signal somehow.

Now what? She couldn't walk around trying to find a better signal. Someone—probably Pete—would notice. She couldn't stay where she was, either. It didn't take that long to pee, and soon everybody would wonder where she'd was.

I could wait until we're on the train and everyone falls asleep, and then send a text. Benny had explained that was how they rode. Go to sleep in one state, wake up in another.

Except what if she couldn't get a signal on the train, either?

On the other hand, what choice did she have.

"Damn." She slipped the phone back into her pocket, glad it was so much smaller than her old one. Pete wouldn't see it. *Please, let me get a signal later.*

Her stomach in knots, she'd just sat down again when a distant train whistle reached them through the trees. The sound sent a shiver up her back. At home, they heard trains all the time; the tracks paralleled the river and trains went by throughout the day, loaded with freight and oil and who-knew-what. She'd never really paid much attention to them, mostly because their house was far enough away that you only heard them at night in the summer, when the windows were open. But sitting in the woods, around a campfire with a bunch of strangers, the whistle took on a different quality, became the cry of a prehistoric beast stalking the land. The last of its kind, its mournful howls filling the night, telling the world its story of sadness, loneliness, and fear.

Maria wrapped her arms around herself even though the night was warm. This was so not the time to start thinking like that.

It's just a train, she told herself over and over. The mantra didn't help. As the wail of the engine grew louder, her emotions reacted even more strongly. She wanted to cry. To run away. To have her mother and father hug her and tell her everything would be all right. Now it wasn't a train approaching, but a miles-long primordial serpent, scales glistening in the moonlight as it snaked through the forests searching for food. It would devour their little group in one bite and continue on, circling the world, alone and brokenhearted forever.

Oh, my god! Get a grip! She knew it was her own fear twisting her thoughts and feelings, but she seemed helpless to stop it from happening. The events of the past couple of days threatened to overwhelm her. Marko's death, the discovery of another world where spirits lived, running away, Devlin's betrayal... *And now I'm about to ride a train like some kind of hobo. It's*

too much. I—

"That's our train." Big G stood up and kicked dirt over the fire. Benny joined him, while the others packed up their meager belongings. Pete hoisted his pack over his shoulders and fiddled with the straps while he waited. Maria caught the nervous look on his face.

What a kid. If I'm this freaked out, what's it gotta be like for him? He's never even been allowed to play sports, and now he's getting ready to jump into a moving train.

She sidled up to him. Rather than embarrass him by trying to say something comforting, or by giving him a big hug like she wanted to, she gave his shoulder a quick squeeze.

"You took your medicine, right?" After dinner was his usual time for his second dose.

Pete nodded once then stopped. Scrunched his face as he thought. His eyes went wide.

"I forgot to." He slid the pack off and dug into it for the bottle. "Thanks for reminding me."

"Don't worry about it. That's why I'm here." She squeezed his shoulder again and smiled when she saw some of the tension ease in his expression. Always smart for his age, he'd understood she was talking about more than just forgetting his pill.

Neither of them noticed Allie watching them while she zippered her own pack shut.

"Dingmans Ferry."

"What?" Tommy still wasn't sure he'd heard Devlin correctly. He'd gone outside the truck stop diner to take the call, but the noise in the parking lot, with trucks and cars constantly passing by, was worse than the god-awful country music and constant chatter inside.

The first time Devlin said the words, Tommy thought his friend had called him a *ding-*

damned fairy. Which made no sense. All he'd done was ask where to meet up. Devlin had found out where the brat's parents were heading with the police.

"DINGMANS FERRY!" This time Devlin's shout came through clear. Except it still didn't make sense.

"What the heck is that? We have to take a ferry someplace?"

"It's the name of a town, you—" The rest was lost in a roar of diesel-soaked wind as a big rig loaded with lumber growled by. "—there in an hour."

"Gotcha. One hour, Dinkmen Ferry." Tommy clicked the phone off as Devlin started cursing again.

Geez, what's got him in such a pissy mood? He oughtta be happy we found the kid again.

While walking back into the restaurant, he opened the Maps app on his phone. Turned out Dingmans Ferry was a town only twenty miles or so from their present location. Perfect.

They could finish their burgers and still get there with plenty of time to spare.

"Get ready."

Benny's voice was little more than a whisper behind Pete but it still made him twitch.

We're really going to do this!

From where the group crouched in the bushes, they could see the train they'd be hopping. It was idling a few hundred yards down the tracks at the depot. Almost an hour had passed since it pulled in, wheezing and grinding to a stop with a squeal of brakes and a final gasp as the air hissed out of the lines. According to the crumpled schedule Big G carried in his pocket, it was due to pull out any minute and resume its long trek from New Hampshire to Texas.

With a stop in Tennessee.

Adrenaline coursed through Pete's body as he waited. Nervous energy made him want to pace, or tap his feet, or talk. But they had to be quiet and still. They'd already seen a couple of guards patrolling. Benny said this depot had a reputation for people trying to hop trains and the guards were always on the alert. So he settled for clenching and unclenching his fists until his knuckles ached.

A glance to the side told him Maria was just as anxious. She kept glancing up and down the tracks, as if expecting the guards to surprise them, and her hands patted at her pockets over and over.

"Here we go." A ghostly hand reached past Pete to point at the train. At first he saw nothing different, then he realized that the red lights on either side of the tracks had turned green. A moment later, the hiss and shriek of the air brakes disengaging shattered the silence of the night and the train slowly inched forward.

A turtle could catch that train, Pete thought, and a little of his anxiety eased up. He should have figured it would be easy. After all, something that large and heavy would have to take a long time to get up to speed. Why—

"Don't let it fool you, kid. By the time it reaches us, it'll be doing almost fifteen miles an hour. Two hundred yards after that, you'd have to be a track star to catch it."

Pete's stomach dropped. Fifteen miles an hour? Could he even run that fast?

Then there was no time to think. The bright lights of the engine were already drawing closer. The thrum of steel-on-steel vibrated through the tracks and the sorrowful yowl of the whistle shook the air and pounded at his eardrums.

Benny and the others stood up. Strong hands pulled Pete and Maria to their feet. Big G

gave them the thumbs up and then took off at a run down the tracks, toward the train. As the oldest, his job was to risk getting seen by the guards in order to hop the train at its slowest and open one of the storage car doors wide enough for the rest of them to jump in. Pete felt a little awe at his bravery. Not only could he end up arrested, but he'd only have the handles to grab onto when he jumped. If he missed...

Rufus let out a quiet but happy "Yes!" and pointed at the train. A shadowy figure hung from a box car, waving at them. The rumble and roar of the train grew exponentially louder with each second that passed, drowning out all the other noises of the night.

"When I say run, you run," Benny said. "Just like in the movies. Run as close to the train as you can and jump as hard as you can. Remember, the train is still moving forward while you're in the air. You gotta account for that. Either Big G or Rufus will grab you."

Pete bit his lip. His legs wobbled and he shook his head. This was crazy. He couldn't jump into a train! He was gonna die, and maybe that was okay because he'd be with Marko again and—

A dog barked. Maria's head whipped around. Pete leaned past Benny. A small shadow sat on top of the train, right on the same car where Big G now had the giant door open several feet, creating a black square target. Another bark.

"Marko." Pete's heart leaped. Was the dog telling him to jump, or warning him not to?

"What?" Benny shouted.

"Now!" Allie ran forward, Rufus right behind her.

"C'mon!" Benny pulled at Pete's arm and suddenly they were running, sprinting down the tracks. Gravel and dirt slid beneath his feet, threatening to send him head over heels. He kept his eyes down, fearful of catching his feet on the ties and falling under the wheels of the train.

Thunder filled the air, making it impossible to hear anything. Allie leaped up and forward, graceful as a cat, and landed on her hands and feet inside the car. Rufus jumped a second later, his method completely different, grabbing the metal handle and swinging himself inside like he thought he was Spider-Man or something.

Then it was Maria's turn and Pete was sure she'd miss, she'd never done anything like this before and her feet would catch or her hand would slip, she'd die right there on the tracks, and—

And she jumped right in. Big G grabbed her arm and pulled her back from the door, making space for Benny and Pete.

"Let's go, kid, your turn." Benny's shout sounded far away, drowning in the roar of the behemoth. Because that was what the train had become once again. An image came to Pete, a scene from a movie he'd seen the previous summer when he'd been stuck inside for a week with poison ivy, spending all his time reading or watching Netflix. A sci-fi film called Dune. These people lived on a desert planet, where they had to ride giant worms—worms bigger than the biggest trains!—and if you didn't catch hold just right it would roll over and squash you into the sand, there'd be nothing left but a red smear.

"Pete, hurry up!"

I don't want to be a red smear. I don't want to die! He started to slow; all it would take is one wrong step and he'd be run over, pieces of Pete all down the tracks.

Benny grabbed him by the arms. "You can't chicken out now. Last chance, kid. Jump!" Strong hands pushed him forward toward the dark maw of the car. Maria's face, eyes wide, mouth open. Shouting something. Big G leaning out, his arm stretched forward. Allie and Rufus, further back, bodies invisible, faces pale moons floating in space.

Time seemed to stop around Pete. Sound disappeared. Only the thudding of his heart remained.

And Marko's barking.

It came through loud and clear. Insistent. Urging him on.

You can do this! Jump!

Pete jumped. He put everything into it, every bit of strength he had. His body soared, a human arrow aimed right for the center of the black square, right for where Maria stood. So easy. Why had he been afraid. The train's not even moving, I'm going to—

The world came alive in a crash of noise. The train growled and rumbled; the air whooshed past his ears. Wind and sand buffeted him, stinging his flesh.

And the train slid forward, racing away, taking the safety of the black square with it. Maria was no longer right in front of him, she was racing away and he was going to hit the side of the car and die after all *oh, crap, I screwed up I'm sorry goodbye—*

He hit hard on his right side, his shoulder and ribs landing first, knocking the air from his lungs. His head struck metal with a dull thud and bright colored spots filled the darkness. There was a sense of movement, of gliding across ice. Someone called his name but he couldn't tell who it was or where it came from. A deafening ringing filled his ears and the whole world was vibrating and shaking so bad it had to be an earthquake.

Then, for one all-too-brief moment, a happy, wet tongue washed across his face and he breathed in the sweet smell of hot doggie breath.

"Marko?" Pete threw his arms out, ready to wrap them around the warm, furry body of his best friend. Death was okay, because it didn't hurt and Marko was there, just like he knew, and—

"Pete!" Something struck his face. A stinging sensation. He opened his eyes. Marko was and the empty space in his arms made him want to cry.

"Pete! Talk to me." Maria's voice. She knelt in front of him, her hand raised to slap him again. Behind her, the rest of the kids from the woods were all staring at him.

"What? Why'd you hit me?"

"The kid lives!" Benny shouted. He clapped his hands and the others joined in.

"What's going on?" Pete sat up. The train vibrated and bumped under his butt. Maria's expression went from fearful to relieved to something else and she shook her head.

"You almost died, you idiot! God, what a scare you gave us. You landed half in and half out and Big G saved you by grabbing your pack and pulling you inside."

"I hit my head." Pete touched the tender spot behind his ear. "Marko was with me."

"Who's Marko?" Allie asked.

"Our dog," Maria said. "It's a long story."

"I heard a dog barking." Benny held out his hand and helped Maria to her feet. "Right before I jumped after Petey, here. But didn't you say your dog was dead?"

"He is. He still talks to me." Pete sat up and winced. His shoulder hurt almost as much as his head.

"Right. He's trying to help you find your uncle." Benny smiled at him and Pete was sure the older boy was going to laugh or make fun of him. Instead, the boy shrugged and then touched Maria's arm. 'C'mon, let me show you around your new home for the next couple of days."

They walked off and the others did the same, spreading out to different parts of the box car, disappearing into the gloom. For the first time, Pete took notice of his surroundings.

A few feet away, Big G was sliding the giant door closed, until only a small open space

remained, just large enough to peek out through. Gray shapes flashed by, trees and hillsides a blur as the train reached full speed.

I jumped a train. I really did it! A sense of wonder filled Pete. He'd been so terrified, but he'd actually done it. With a little help from Marko and Benny, but still...

How cool was that? He'd have some story to tell when he got home. None of the other kids he knew had ever done anything like that. Maybe... maybe they'd even ask him to play ball. And maybe his parents would let him. After all, if you could jump into a moving train, and hitchhike on the highway, and escape a crazy pervert, how dangerous could a game of baseball be?

Turning away from the door, he examined the rest of the car. Small emergency lights set along the ceiling gave off just enough light to see by, although not enough to read a book or a map. Maria and their new friends were ghosts as they walked around the space, checking out the crates stacked along one side or finding spots to bed down for the night. Rufus said something about it all being junk—"just machine parts and crap—" and Big G said they'd look again in the morning, "In case there's something we can use."

Benny and Maria sat down next to each other on the far side of the car, heads down, talking. The near-deafening rumble and clacking of the train on the tracks made it impossible to hear them, but Pete imagined his sister giggling and talking about dumb stuff like movie stars and reality TV shows and fingernail polish. That was all he'd ever heard her and her friends talk about, when they weren't gossiping or complaining.

"You should get some sleep, kid." Big G gave him a pat on the shoulder. "Not much else to do in here anyhow."

Pete watched him walk away and drop his pack against a wall, then lay down and use it

like a pillow. How could anyone sleep with all the noise? It was like sitting inside a metal drum while someone beat on the side with baseball bats. *CLACK-CLACK-CLACK-CLACK-CLACK* His head throbbed in time with the wheels bumping on the tracks. The constant *thrum* vibrating through the floor and walls seemed to reach right into his bones. Plus the steel floor was cold, way colder than when they'd been sitting on rocks around the fire earlier.

No way he'd be able to sleep. But he might as well get comfortable. He took off his pack and leaned it against the wall, far away enough from the door so that if someone glanced in they wouldn't see him. At least he hoped not. What he really wanted was to be in a nice bed. If only they hadn't left all their money back in that motel. Instead of riding a bumpy old train, they'd be in a diner somewhere, eating French fries and grilled cheese and then going to their room for the night, with clean sheets and a pillow and a real shower with hot water and soap and—

Lulled by the monotonous rhythm of the train, Pete drifted off, his thoughts sliding right into his dreams.

CH 13

"This is the last place anyone saw them." Officer Tim Schwab pointed from the convenience store to a pot across the street. "The owner says they went down there, toward the park by the river."

"He saw them both?" Kristen Rhodes' face was pale behind the sunglasses she wore to stave off the early morning glare. Schwab imagined she'd gotten very little sleep, what with them driving in from New York in the middle of the night.

"Yes." Schwab checked his note pad. "The boy—your son—and the girl came in. He bought some snack food and soda. She used the bathroom. Then they both walked across the street."

"That's all? He didn't call the police, or see where they went?" Kristen's voice was rising and her husband, Ed, put a hand on her arm.

"No. It was after school hours. Lotsa kids go in the store. He didn't know they were runaways."

"So we have no idea where they could have gone." Ed Rhodes' eyes narrowed and frustration lined his face.

"Well, we're going to—"

A black sedan pulled up to the sidewalk, cutting off Schwab's words. Even before the two men got out, he recognized the vehicle. *Feds. Thank God. For once I'm glad to see them. Let them deal with this mess.*

The two agents approached Schwab and the Rhodeses.

"Mister and Missus Rhodes? I'm Special Agent Ray Billingsley with the FBI," the first

one said, holding out a leather ID wallet. He was tall and lean, with dark skin and a pencil mustache. His black suit made him look a little too thin. “This is my partner, Special Agent Curtis Wilkins.” Wilkins, a short, stocky fellow with short-cropped hair and laugh lines around his mouth, nodded once but stayed silent.

“Officer Schwab, Pike County Sheriffs.” Tim held out his hand and Billingsley shook it. “My partner, Officer Foster, is inside checking the security footage to see if there’s anything more than what the store owner told us.”

“Why is the FBI here?” Kristen looked from the agents to Schwab. “Is there something you’re not telling me? Are our kids in danger?”

“Standard procedure, ma’am. When minors cross state lines, either as runaways or through coercion, it automatically becomes a matter for the FBI. We coordinate with local law enforcement along the way, of course.”

“They have greater resources,” Schwab added. What he didn’t say was that he was the one who’d called them, hoping the feebies would take over. Not only did it free him from a lot of paperwork but in the event the kids weren’t found—or worse, turned up dead—the burden of the failure fell on the federal agents. He’d had to break terrible news to people on more than one occasion, and he relished any opportunity when he didn’t have to be responsible for that.

Just then the door to the convenience store opened and a second police officer came out, his plump face alive with excitement.

“Looks like your partner has some news for us.” One of Billingsley’s eyebrows twitched up in wry amusement.

“I found something on the video,” Officer Foster said as he joined them. “There was another kid in the store when your boy, Peter, was there. A little older, maybe sixteen or so.

Dressed kind of shabby. The cameras caught him pocketing some jerky and then he left right after your son."

"This area is a hot spot for kids who ride the tracks." Schwab scratched his chin. "Can we get a copy of that video?"

"The owner's making it now. He's pretty pissed the kid stole from him. But in the meantime, I used my phone to get a screen capture of the kid's face."

"I'll want a copy of that video. And text me that picture. Now, what's this about riding the tracks?" Billingsley eyed Schwab.

"There's a train yard not far from here where the freights either slow down to switch tracks of stop to drop off or pickup cars. Or both. They run up and down the East Coast, and out west, too, from here. Lotta people try to hop the trains. Runaways, hobos, the usual. There's security, but they can't catch everyone."

"Jesus, are you saying my children have been kidnapped by, by hobos?" Kristan's hands flew to her mouth. "Why are we just standing here? Do something!"

"Calm down, ma'am." Schwab shook his head. "I'm not saying that at all. In fact, it's more likely that your kids met up with some other runaways and decided to ride the trains instead of hitchhiking."

"We'll need the manifests and schedules for everything in and out of the depot in the past twenty-four hours." Billingsley motioned to his partner, who whipped out his phone and walked away.

"What do we do?" Ed asked.

It was Billingsley who answered first.

"We go to the train depot."

Devlin waited until the cops got in their cars and left, with the Rhodeses right behind them, before leaving the convenience store. As soon as he got outside, he called Tommy.

"Get over here right now. I think I know how to find them."

Pete knew he was dreaming. He had to be, because nothing so strange could ever happen in real life.

He and Marko were in some kind of giant mine, riding in one of the old-style ore carts. The cart bumped and banged on rusty railroad tracks, moving so fast he was afraid to do more than stick his head over the edge. All around were dark caves and tunnels, the only light coming from scattered oil lanterns hanging on the walls. The cart flew around sharp curves, dove down steep hills, and banked left and right to avoid giant wooden poles that kept the ceiling from caving in. It reminded him of the chase scene in one of the Indiana Jones movies, except they were alone. The deafening *clack-clack-clack* of the wheels pounded his brain like someone had put an old-fashioned typewriter in his head and was trying to write the longest book in the world.

Marko's constant barking didn't help. The dog wouldn't shut up. And it wasn't just an ordinary bark, it was his crazy someone's-at-the-door-and-I-don't-like-them bark, the one usually reserved for the mailman or delivery people. The barking rose up to near ear-piercing levels, dropped to low and menacing, and then went back up again, the doggy version of a siren.

ArfArfARFGrowfWHOOOFArfArfARF!

Pete put his hands over his ears, but it didn't help. Plus, he ended up getting banged

around even worse because he couldn't hold on to the cart for balance.

"Marko!" he shouted, his voice lost in the din. "Be quiet!"

In response, Marko barked even louder—if that was possible—and pawed at Pete's arm. It occurred to Pete that maybe the dog wasn't just excited or freaked out about being in the ore cart—maybe it was something else.

In the movies, the tracks in mines always ended at a cliff, or a fiery pit, or dead-end wall.

Is that what Marko was doing? Warning him of danger ahead?

Pete sat up further and peered over the edge of the cart. The darkness made it impossible to see very far ahead. And at the speed they were traveling, they'd reach any danger before he had a chance to do anything.

Not that there was anything he could do.

The cart had no way to steer, and no brakes that he could see. In the cartoons, people used their feet but he sure as heck wasn't going to try that.

The clattering of the wheels grew dimmer, and the cart started to slow. Everything tilted up, and Pete realized they were climbing a hill. A steep one. Soon the cart had lost almost all its speed, the wheels reduced to a *clack.....clack.....clack.* They passed one of the lanterns, which revealed a flat area of dirt and stone to both sides of the tracks.

Marko barked and pawed at him again. This time the message was clear.

Get out! Get out now!

The dog put action to words and leapt out of the cart, landing easily on the ground.

Pete stood up, knowing there wasn't much time. Either the car would go over the crest of the hill and down what was probably a deadly cliff or incline, or it wouldn't make it over the top and it would sail backwards down the hill and probably fly off the tracks.

He put his hands on the edge and prepared to jump. Marko barked again.

Hurry!

"I'm coming." Pete pushed off. An easy jump. Only a few feet and—

He slammed into the side of the cart, banging his elbow hard against the metal. When he tried to move, something pulled at his shoulders, holding him in place. He glanced back.

The straps of his pack were caught on the edge of the cart. He tried wiggling the pack, but it wouldn't come free. He couldn't even see where it was snagged.

Marko's barking increased into a yipping, woofing frenzy.

Pete pulled and yanked, but the pack remained caught. To his horror, he saw his worst fears coming true. The cart was rolling backward now, slowly, but already picking up speed.

He had to get loose! Hanging on the outside of the cart he was a goner for sure.

Instead of trying to free the pack, he slipped one arm out. Marko's barking didn't sound as loud.

No, it was just further away.

The cart was moving faster now, too fast to jump off. Pete grabbed for the edge, hanging by one hand and one strap. He tried to get his feet over the edge but couldn't lift his legs that high. One foot hit the tracks and bounced, sending sharp pains up his leg. He tried lifting himself again but he couldn't keep himself up; his toes dragged and bumped over the railroad ties.

Marko raced alongside the cart, barking and yapping, but couldn't keep up.

Darkness closed in around Pete as he fought to keep from falling onto the tracks. His hands grew sweaty and started to slip on the rough metal.

Marko howled.

The cart hit a bump and his hands came free. The pack pulled at his shoulder and he felt

his arm sliding out, any second now he'd slip loose and then—

"Stop it, what are you doing?"

Maria's voice. Loud. Near by. But she wasn't in this dream. She was—

Pete opened his eyes and then squeezed them shut again when bright light attacked them. He raised his hand and tried again. A wall of pure white, with people silhouetted against it. As his eyes adjusted, the wall turned into a field of green and a clear blue sky moving past in leisurely fashion. The silhouettes became Big G, Allie, and Benny. Big G held something in his hands.

"My pack." Pete sat up and reached back to his shoulder. Reality and his dream were jumbled. He wasn't caught. His pack was gone. He was still in the box car, but why had the others opened the door?

"They took it. They got my phone, too." Maria knelt next to him, her face angrier than he'd ever seen it, even that that time he'd taken her diary and read it.

"Sorry, but we don't have a choice." Benny had the grace to actually look ashamed. He couldn't even meet their eyes while he spoke. "We're desperate, man. Some other guys stole almost everything we had. Money, food, blankets. We need to sell your stuff or we're gonna starve."

"So now you steal ours? That makes you as bad as them." Maria stood up and put her fists on her hips, the same pose her mother always took when scolding one of them.

"Life's different on the tracks," Allie said. "This isn't the playground or the park." She gave them a wave and jumped out the door. Pete gasped, then remembered how slow the train was going. They must be coming up to another depot. The clacking and rumbling weren't as loud, either.

"We're just trying to survive," Big G added, before following Allie out the door. Pete assumed Rufus must have already jumped out, since there was no sign of him.

That left them alone with the biggest traitor, Benny.

"You'll be okay. You're not like us. We don't get to call home to mommy when things get tough like you do." He waved Maria's phone at her and then dropped it into his pocket.

"I haven't—" Maria stopped before she could say the rest, but it was too late. Pete turned toward her.

"You've been calling home? Wait, you lost your phone. Where'd that come from?"

"This isn't the time, little brother." She kept her attention focused on Benny, who was backing toward the door.

"I can't believe it. You've been lying to me the whole time. I thought you were on my side. I thought you believed me."

"I am. I do," she said, glancing at him. Her eyes glistened with tears. "Yeah, I've been texting them every day, okay? I had to steal that phone at the gas station. Are you happy? I've been helping you, you little jerk."

"Helping? How? Now they know where we are."

"Duh. Why do you think they haven't come to get us? I let them know we're safe, and we'll be home in a couple of days. That's why the police haven't been looking for us. They will be now, though," she said, returning her attention to Benny.

He shrugged, his expression changing from guilty to happy. "I'm glad. You guys aren't cut out for the road. Go home where you're safe." He grabbed the door frame with one hand and prepared to jump.

"Wait!" Maria stepped forward. "Pete's medicine is in that pack. He needs it."

Benny shook his head. “I’m sorry. Big G will sell those pills for a lot of money, whatever they are. Your parents can get you more. I’m sure they’ll be here in a few hours.”

“I can get your stuff back.”

“What?” Maria and Benny spoke at the same time, both of them turning to look at Pete.

“I said, I can get your stuff back. If I do that, will you let me have ours?”

“Are you crazy?” Maria frowned. Outside, the meadows were passing by more slowly. Pete knew they’d only have a few minutes to get off the train before it came to a stop and they got caught. And if that happened, they’d be back home before nightfall, and he’d never see Pete or find the Rainbow Bridge.

“I can do it. I swear.”

“You know, I almost believe you. But Big G never would.” Benny turned to jump out, and in that instant, Pete heard it.

Barking.

Outside, somewhere in the tall grass of the field.

“Marko!”

For the next few seconds, Pete felt like he was watching a movie of himself, only everything was happening in slow motion. Benny jumped out of the car, his body disappearing as the train continued forward. Marko continued to bark, but the sound was lower, stretched out. Pete stood up and ran for the door, each step seeming to take forever. Behind him, Maria shouted, *“Noooooooo,”* her voice at the wrong speed just like Marko’s. When he reached the door, he didn’t hesitate. He pushed off as hard as he could, not thinking about the gravel or getting hurt, just focused on the compass at the bottom of his pack. He had to get it; without it, they’d never find the key or the bridge.

Or Marko.

The moment he jumped, the world snapped back to normal speed.

Gravel and grass flashed by. Wind whipped at his face. The ground came at him impossibly fast, and he closed his eyes and put his arms over his head. His feet hit first and he tumbled forward, rolling over and over until he thought he'd gone over a cliff.

Then he was lying on his back, chest heaving, staring at blue sky and wispy clouds. Grass and dust tickled his nose.

Someone called his name.

"Over—" A series of coughs halted his words. He spat out bits of seeds and leaves. "Over here." He'd just gotten to his feet, shocked that nothing hurt or bled, when Maria rushed up to him.

"Don't you ever do anything like that again!" She grabbed his arm and shook him. "Are you freaking crazy? You could have killed yourself!"

"Let go!" Pete yanked himself free. "We have to find them. We need that compass."

Maria's eyes went wide. "The compass. You can use it to find their stuff that got stolen."

"Duh." Pete purposely mimicked her from before. "That's why we have to hurry."

Without waiting for her to answer, he took off to his left, paralleling the train tracks. As he ran, he wished Marko would speak up again, let him know if he was going in the right direction. They couldn't lose Benny and the others.

"Pete, stop! Pete!"

Pete ignored her shout and kept running. Stupid girl. If she couldn't keep up that was too bad, he wasn't waiting, she could rest or tie her shoe or whatever and catch up to him—

"You're going the wrong way!"

He stopped.

What?

She was thirty feet back, hands on her hips, chest heaving. Her hair looked like she hadn't combed it in days and damp strands were stuck to her cheeks and forehead. She pointed at the meadow.

"They..." *huff-pant,* "they... there." Flatten grass showed where the group had entered.

Stupid! This time Pete berated himself, not Maria. He'd been so intent on finding them he'd paid no attention to where he was going. Wiping sweat from his face, he started back to where Maria waited.

He was only halfway there when a figure sprang out of the grass and grabbed her.

CH 14

Kristen Rhodes had a cup of coffee halfway to her mouth when the musical tones of her phone going off shattered the tense silence in the hotel room. In her haste to answer it, she dropped the cup. Hot coffee spilled out the tiny opening onto the bedspread. She ignored it.

"Hello?"

"Mrs. Rhodes? This is Sheriff Schwab."

"Is it Maria?" Ed turned off the television. He'd been watching the news with the sound off, afraid to miss a call or a knock on the door.

"No, it's that police officer. Have you found them?"

"We just got a call about some kids seen jumping off our train in Virginia. Less than four hours from here. How soon can you be ready?"

"We're ready now." Kristen clicked off the phone. Ed was already heading for the bedroom to get their overnight bag. They'd have to wear the same clothes as yesterday—they hadn't expected this to be a long trip—but that was okay. If they had to spend another night somewhere, they'd buy what they needed.

"What did he say?" Ed asked as he zipped the bag closed.

"Virginia. He thinks they got off the train in Virginia."

"That doesn't make sense." Ed rubbed his forehead. Dark circles sat beneath his eyes and Kristen knew she looked just as exhausted. No amount of makeup could cover the worry and lack of sleep etched into her face.

"None of this makes any sense." Kristen retrieved her coffee and took a long sip. Closed her eyes and allowed herself a moment of enjoyment. The Dunkin Donuts coffee was a hundred

times better than the bitter slop they'd had at the Sheriff's station the previous day. She'd mentioned it to Ed over dinner and he'd commented that 'maybe that's why so many highway cops are mean.' They'd both laughed, and then felt guilty about finding humor in such a terrible situation.

Still, didn't people laugh at funerals and accidents? Psychologists said it was a way to release stress. *And God knows I'm stressed right now. Also, stop thinking about death and accidents.*

She automatically tapped her knuckles on the wooden desk near the door. A silly superstition she'd picked up from her mother not long after Maria was born. Back then she'd laughed about it. Now she hardly noticed doing it.

"Ready?" Ed finished his coffee and tossed the cup into the waste basket. She nodded, still staring at her hand. In that strange way the mind works, she remembered how it felt to hold the tiny, soft fingers of her newborn children for the first time. Warm, all cleaned up after the mess of childbirth, so fragile and yet such miracles of strength.

"Hey, it's gonna be all right. They're going to be all right." Ed pulled her closed and wiped tears from her cheeks. She hadn't even realized she was crying. She pressed her face into his shoulder.

"What if we don't? What if something happens to them before we get there? Jesus, our kids are jumping off trains, for Christ's sake. What the hell?"

"I know. It's crazy. But we'll find them. And when we do, we'll ground them for life."

A burst of laughter jumped out of her. This time she didn't feel guilty, she felt afraid. She could hear the edge of hysteria in it, knew she was too damn close to just losing it right there in the middle of a cheap hotel room. But she couldn't let that happen, because she might not get

that control back for a long time, and she couldn't afford to spend the next few days drugged in a hospital bed in the middle of Butthole, Pennsylvania.

Somewhere outside a car engine started up, loud and obnoxious, the roar of the exhaust rattling the cheap windows of their room. She jumped a little. Something about the sound was both frightening and oddly familiar.

Gotta keep it together, girl. Just a little longer. Until your kids are home and locked in their rooms, with asses so sore they won't sit for a week, as your father used to say. Then you can let it all out. Preferably at a nice spa where people bring you champagne and cucumber sandwiches and weird Japanese music plays all day long.

"Okay." She pulled away and dabbed at her eyes with her sleeve. "I'm good now."

Ed gave her another hug and then went to start the car. As she watched him head for the door, she wondered at the conflicting thoughts running through her head.

I love him so much. He's my rock.

And

I hate him for being so calm while I'm falling apart.

Such is the paradox of marriage.

Devlin slipped his phone into the front pocket of his jeans and headed back to where Tommy and Lee waited by the cars. They were parked at the coffee shop across the street from the motel where the Rhodes had spent the night—stupid a-holes hadn't even noticed that the same car they saw at their house every day was right there when they went for their coffee!—and

he'd just gotten the call he'd been expecting from The Watcher.

"Bunch of kids were seen jumping off a train down in Virginia. If we haul ass we can be there before lunch. And before the cops."

"How does he know that kind of shit?" Tommy asked.

"What are you, an idiot?" Devlin threw his empty coffee cup at him. "You think we're the only ones he's got working for him? He's got eyes all over the country. Remember that if you screw up."

Devlin got into his car and the engine started with a roar. He was tearing out of the parking lot, tires screeching and exhaust belching smoke, before Tommy and Lee even had their engine started.

"Eyes all over the country," Tommy mumbled, pulling out of the parking lot at a more sedate pace. "Kinda creepy."

"Yeah." Lee lit up a cigarette. He didn't say anything else, but for the next several miles he couldn't stop thinking about who those eyes belonged to.

Or what.

CH 15

Pete stared at Benny, who was rubbing his leg and glaring at Maria. Everything had happened so fast; Benny appearing out of nowhere and grabbing Maria. Maria screaming and kicking him in the leg. Pete shouting at Benny to let her go. Benny cursing and telling them to shut the hell up before someone heard them.

"You scared the crap out of me." Maria gave Benny her own nasty look, but she kept her voice to a normal level.

"You're not supposed to even be here. Why aren't you on the train?" Benny winced as he flexed his leg.

He should be thankful she's wearing sneakers and not her regular shoes. The thought of Benny with a broken shin made Pete want to smile, but he forced himself to focus on what was going on.

"Don't blame me. He's the one who jumped off. I just followed." Maria pointed at Pete, and he knew she was still angry with him for what he'd done. Too bad. They had more important things to worry about.

"I need my pack. We're not leaving without it."

Benny rolled his eyes and shook his head. "I told you, kid. You don't get your stuff back. This isn't playtime."

"I can find the people who took your things, and we can get them back."

"Yeah? How are going to do that?"

This was the part Pete had struggled with. If he told the truth, Benny and the others might keep the compass for themselves. But he couldn't think of any other explanation that someone

would believe.

What do I do?

Somewhere nearby, a dog barked. Three quick *ruffs.* Maria turned at the sound.

So did Benny.

In that instant, Pete knew what to do. Marko had given him the clue he needed.

"You heard that dog barking, didn't you?" he asked.

"Yeah, so what?"

"That was my dog. And you heard him."

Benny frowned, but Maria's eyes went wide. She understood what it meant.

"He can hear Marko."

Pete nodded. "And that means we can trust him." Pete turned to Benny. "I'll tell you everything, and it's gonna be hard to believe, but it's true. I have a magic compass and with it I can find anything. But it only works for me."

He'd added the last part just in case; no sense letting Benny know anyone could use the compass. Then he might never get it back.

Before Benny could do more than smile, Pete began his story.

Pete experienced a moment of déjà vu as he sat across from Benny, Big G, Rufus, and Allie, the blackened remains of an old campfire between them. Just like the day they'd met.

Except this time, he did not feel welcomed by the group.

We weren't welcomed the last time, either, he reminded himself. *It was all an act to steal our stuff.*

Benny had listened to Pete without interrupting, although more than once his eyebrows went up and he glanced at Maria, who just nodded. When Pete finished, the older boy had rubbed his face and frowned. “That’s one hell of a story.”

Pete told him he could prove it, he just needed the compass to do so. After scratching his head and thinking about it, Benny told them to follow him. They’d walked through the tall grass and wildflowers for about fifteen minutes, while the morning sun grew warmer and warmer until it was baking Pete’s face and neck. The day was going to be super hot, and with nothing to drink he was already thirsty. He hoped wherever Benny was taking them, there’d be water and shade.

Turned out they had both, but it took a while before he got either of them.

They caught up with the rest of Benny’s companions after walking for what seemed like forever. They’d crossed a road and a small stream, and then made their way through what seemed like miles of open fields. Benny explained they were way on the back end of a huge horse farm. Big G had been there before, knew about a broken-down lean-to they could hide in. The aged building, about the size of a corner bus stop shelter, looked ready to collapse, its three walls and roof sagging and leaning at different angles, the wood splintered and peeling. They’d tossed their stuff inside the small space, and Pete’s heart jumped with excitement when he saw his own pack sitting in the pile.

Any hopes of opening the pack and getting the compass were dashed when Big G stood up and started shouting at Benny, who yelled right back.

“What the hell are they doing here?” Big G pointed at Pete and Maria. Rufus and Allie stood as well. Rufus looked surprised rather than upset, but Allie wore a furious expression, more so even than Big G’s.

“They jumped off after us. And the kid—”

"I don't give a rat's ass about the kid! We can't have them hanging—"

"He might be able to—"

"The only thing he's gonna do is bring the police here! You know—"

"Shut up!"

Maria's scream was so loud it hurt Pete's ears, but it did the trick. Everyone went quiet and turned toward her.

"We don't want to be here any more than you want us here. You think this is fun for us? Some kind of damn game? It's not! We have to get to Tennessee before the cops or our parents or my crazy boyfriend catch us. And we need that pack you stole. Pete's medicine is in there, and he could die without it. So at least listen to what he has to say."

Maria pushed Pete forward so he was standing in the middle of everyone. He'd been all set to tell them the same story he'd recounted to Benny, but with all the angry faces staring at him, all the words disappeared from his head. He opened his mouth, but couldn't even mumble out the first sentence.

Then Benny stepped forward and saved him.

"The kid says he can get back all that stuff we lost. He's got something in his pack that can find missing items, or some crap like that. And only he can use it. I don't know if he's telling the truth or not," Benny raised his voice as Allie started to object, "but it can't hurt to try. If it doesn't work, we leave them here for the cops to find."

Rufus cleared his throat. Up to that point, Pete hadn't heard him speak more than a dozen words since meeting him. "That sounds pretty crazy. Why would you believe him?"

Benny smiled and gave Pete a wink. "I guess you could say a little dog told me."

Allie gave a sarcastic snort but sat back down. So did Rufus. Big G glared at Benny for

another moment, then shrugged. “Whatever, dude. You’re responsible for them. If the cops come before he does his stupid magic trick, we’re leaving you with them. I ain’t goin’ back to juvie because of you.”

Pete didn’t wait for him to change his mind. He covered the space to the lean-to in three steps and grabbed his bag, hugging it to his chest for a second before opening it up. His fear returned as he dug through the clothes to the bottom. What if the compass was gone? Or broken? Or—

His fingers touched wood worn smooth by who-knew how many hands touching it over the centuries. It was there!

He pulled it out.

“Hey, first things first.”

Pete looked up. Maria was staring at him.

“Right. Medicine.” He reached back in and grabbed the pill jar. Maria handed him a plastic water bottle that had about three sips left at the bottom. He had no idea where she’d gotten it, but he popped one of the pills into his mouth and washed it down with the warm water, finishing every last drop and wishing he had another two bottles to go with it.

“Is that it?” Benny had joined Maria and was looking at the compass box. Pete nodded. “Well, open it up.”

Pete lifted the lid and took out the compass. A shiver ran through him as the chill of the arcane metal seeped into his hand. It looked just the same as last time, the needle afloat in its tiny pond, still pointing west.

“Damn. It really is a compass. Lemme hold it.” Benny reached out but Pete pulled away.

“No!” He covered it with his hands. He trusted Benny—to a degree—but he wasn’t

letting anyone get the compass away from him again.

"Fine." Benny rolled his eyes. "So, how's it work?"

"You ask it to show you the way to whatever you're looking for. See?" He held it up. Carefully. Far enough away that he could pull it back if Benny grabbed for it. The needle wobbled a few times and then held steady. "It's pointing west, because that's where we need to go."

"Well, it better point to the guys that robbed us, or we're all in big trouble. I put my ass on the line for you. So ask it, already."

Pete opened his mouth, then closed it again. He'd never actually asked the compass anything; it had already known what direction he needed to go. What did you say?

"Umm, compass, where is Benny's stuff?" It sounded dumb even as he voiced the question.

The needle remained still.

"Ask it again," Maria said.

"Show me where Benny's stuff is."

Still no movement.

"Damn." Benny shook his head. "I'm as big an idiot as you for even believing this."

"What's the matter, your toy not working?" Big G called out. Rufus and Allie laughed, and Allie added, "Maybe it needs new batteries!" More laughter followed.

"Try being more specific."

Pete glanced at Maria. Sometimes she really did have good ideas, although he'd never admit that to anyone. Especially her. He thought about what words to choose, rejecting several before finally stating his request.

"Show us where to go to find the people who stole Benny's clothes."

Nothing happened.

"This is total bullshit." Benny grabbed Pete's wrist. "I'm gonna throw that thing—"

The needle spun in a circle.

Benny and Pete froze in mid-struggle. The needle whirled around again. Stopped. Spun again.

"It's getting colder," Pete said, and held the compass up. The metal, which had already been chilly, now seemed like ice in his hand. As they watched, tiny patterns of frost appeared on the sides of the circular dish, obscuring the green patina of age.

As suddenly as it had started, the needle came to a stop.

Pointing in a new direction.

"Holy hell, it worked." Benny let go of Pete's arm and stepped back.

The needle spun once and returned to its original position.

"What the—"

"That's it!" Maria took the compass from Pete. "It's whoever's holding it. Pete still wants to go west, to our uncle's house. But for Benny, it points to where he needs to go. If we're going to find them, Benny has to hold the compass."

She held out the compass to Benny. As he reached for it, Pete had to resist the temptation to grab it from her. It was his. Their uncle had left it to him. And without it, he'd never find the Rainbow Bridge, never see Marko again. What right did his sister have to give it to someone else?

The only thing that stopped him was the memory of Benny hearing Marko bark. It had been a happy bark, not a warning sound.

Marko trusts him. Maria seems to trust him. I trust him. Sort of.

He let Benny take the compass, although it twisted his guts to do so.

"Geez, that's really cold. Hey!" Benny held it out for them to see. The needle had spun around again. "It's pointing that way." Benny used his other hand to show everyone.

"North," Rufus said.

"Big deal. All compasses point north." Allie made a face. "All you did was fix a broken piece of junk."

"I don't think so." Benny picked up the box from where Pete had set it down and placed the compass inside, then slid it into his pocket.

"Hey! I didn't say you could keep it." Pete lunged forward but Denny put a hand against his chest.

"Relax, kid. I'm not gonna keep it. Not permanently. Only until we get back what's ours. Then I promise I'll give it to you."

"You swear?" The stupidity of his question hit Pete even as he asked it. If Benny was lying, he wasn't going to admit it.

"I swear." Benny held up his hand and smiled. With no other recourse—it wasn't like he could threaten Benny or beat him up—Pete nodded. All he could do now was hope Benny kept his promise.

"All right." Benny looked over at the others. "Are you guys coming with us?"

"Nope." Big G shook his head. "Your idea. Go follow your yellow brick road. We'll be here when you get back. Or maybe we won't be. And don't even think about taking that," he added, as Maria bent to pick up Pete's backpack. "Like Benny said, you don't get yours until we get ours."

"At least let the kid bring his medicine," Benny said.

"Fine. But that's all."

Maria handed the pill jar to Pete, who stuffed it in his pocket with a silent promise. From now on, anything valuable would stay with him all the time, not in the pack.

"Let's get moving." Benny motioned to them. "Too bad your compass doesn't tell us how far we have to go."

"Tell the wizard I said hi!" Laughter followed Big G's taunt and Pete's burned as he left the makeshift camp.

They won't be laughing at us when we come back with all their stuff.

Then he remembered Benny's comment.

How far would they have to go? What if the other kids had hopped a train going north and they were hundreds of miles away already? Or they'd sold everything they'd stolen and the compass was leading them to a dead end?

Suddenly the warm spring day didn't seem so pleasant.

"According to the witness, the kids jumped off about a mile north of here."

Special Agent Billingsley shielded his eyes with his hand and looked past Special Agent Wilkins to where a man in dirty coveralls was still speaking with two local police officers.

"How does he know?" Ed Rhodes wiped sweat from his forehead. Only just past noon, and already the temperature had to be at least eighty-five, without a cloud in the sky or a hint of a breeze. Billingsley noted the sweat stains already spreading under the man's arms and said a silent thank you for his own dark suit. It might add another ten degrees to the broiling day but it

hid all signs of discomfort, enabling agents to give the impression of remaining cool and relaxed while everyone around them wilted.

Of course, by the time he got back to the hotel and undressed at the end of the night, he'd be soaking wet and stink like a goat, but only he and his shower would know the truth.

"He's a maintenance worker here." Billingsley indicated the train yard behind them. "He was on his way to work this morning. Apparently there's a point where the road parallels the tracks pretty closely, and that's where he spotted at least three kids jumping from a train as it slowed down. He wasn't close enough to catch many details, but he did say one of them was a skinny girl with black hair. He reported the incident to his supervisor, who called the local police, thanks to the BOLO we put out yesterday."

"Now what?" Kristen asked. "Where do we start looking?"

"*You* don't," Billingsley said. "One of the officers will take you back to the station and you'll wait there. Wilkins and I will go see what we can find down the tracks, and we'll coordinate a search team with the locals and the state police. As soon as we know anything, we'll get in touch with you."

Kristen looked ready to protest, but Ed stopped her. "Let's do what he says. They know what they're doing."

They had to wait another fifteen minutes for the locals to finish with their questions. Billingsley was eager to get on with the search—the longer they waited, the wider the potential search area became—but he didn't let it show. Wilkins, on the other hand, had difficulty controlling his growing restlessness and finally mumbled something about checking in with the office before heading to the car.

"That was awkward," Billingsley said, when he could finally join his partner. The first

thing he did after shutting the car door was aim all the passenger side vents at his face and neck. A sigh escaped him as blessed air conditioning washed over him.

"What? Us standing there with the distraught parents and absolutely nothing to say while we all baked in the heat, or me leaving to make a call?"

"Both." Billingsley took his sunglasses off and rubbed his eyes. Like everyone else working the Rhodes case, he hadn't had much sleep lately, between long drives and late nights pouring over maps and reports. "You owe me lunch for leaving me stuck there with them."

"When you see what I've got, you're going to be more than happy to buy me lunch and dinner, my friend. Look at this." Wilkins handed over his tablet. On the screen was a photograph overlayed with gray lines. Billingsley recognized it as a Google Earth map. A quick tap enlarged it enough to make out the freight depot where they were parked, along with the nearby road and tracks.

"What am I looking at, besides what's probably a year-old photo?"

Wilkins leaned across and with a *tap-drag* zoomed in on a section of the photo just to their north. "This is the general area where our witness saw the kids jump the train." He pointed to a slight curve in the road where it drew close to the tracks.

"And?" Billingsley couldn't see anything different in the photo than on the maps they already had. He said as much to his partner. "So what?"

"That's what I thought, too. Then I noticed this." Wilkins moved his finger slightly, to the other side of the road. Two tiny black lines, one running roughly north-south and the other east-west, intersected each other just past the bend in the road.

"What is it? A bicycle path? Another road?" If there were other side roads—and in backwoods country like they were in, unnamed roads were as common as satellite dishes on

tarpaper shacks—the kids might have taken one. Which means someone might have seen them.

"Better. This one," Wilkins ran his finger down the photo, "is a stream. The other one isn't anything at all. Not a street, not even a dirt road." He zoomed in once more, to the maximum level the program would give without the pixilation becoming too blurry. Billingsley peered at it closely, but all he saw was a large field, probably several square miles, with a grayish streak running through it. Smaller streaks veered away from the main one here and there, almost like deer trails. Almost, but not quite. As if...

"Damn." Billingsley looked at his partner, who wore a wide grin. "Someone went through the field."

"A lot of someones," Wilkins said, taking the tablet back. "And if you follow the large path, it goes right past some kind of shelter or shed before looping around the far edge of a horse farm. It stops right at the edge of some state park land, where the field gives way to forest and the trees block out everything."

"You're thinking this might be a regular jumping off point that someone with those kids knows about."

"We know they met at least one other boy. Someone's got to be helping them—I can't believe either of our missing kids knows squat about riding the rails. Maybe they got off because they need to wait for a different train."

"Or they're meeting someone." Billingsley pointed at the fuzzy structure in the field. "Is there an easier way to get there than hiking through all that?"

Wilkins closed the tablet and pulled on his seat belt. "Way ahead of you. I found out who owns the farm and called them. They're expecting us and they said we can use the trails on their property to get almost all the way there before we have to walk."

"So what are we waiting for?"

As Wilkins put the car in gear, Billingsley slid his sunglasses back on and closed his eyes. This could be the big break in the case they needed. He fervently hoped so. Missing children were always the worst, and things could go south very fast.

He wanted this to be one of those times when he could bring good news to the parents.

"This is like seriously the craziest thing we've ever done." Tommy Nugent pulled his baseball hat a little lower over his face. Not that it would make any difference if the feds in the car ahead of them caught on to being followed.

"Yeah, I don't like this." Lee chimed in.

"Shut up, both of you." Devlin kept his eyes on the gray Chevy Malibu ahead of them. Trying to keep several car lengths between them was getting on his nerves. He was afraid to get too close on the empty road, but if he let the distance get too great he might lose them. Hopefully the Camry he'd stolen in town wouldn't arouse their suspicions. They'd had to ditch his Civic and Tommy's Camero in case the feds recognized them. He picked the Camry because it was a few years old and already beat up and dusty. Probably belonged to some farmer. Having his bird-foot key back made it easy. Open the door, start the car, drive off. Maybe it wasn't as special as the Key they were searching for, but it sure came in handy being able to open any door or start any vehicle whenever you wanted. He'd put it to use many times since the Watcher gave it to him.

Sometimes he wondered what other kinds of magical tricks the Watcher had up his sleeve. The things he could do were pretty scary. Which worried Devlin. If the Watcher was such

a powerful dude, what was the Keeper like? After all, he'd managed to prevent the Watcher from gaining the Compass and the Key for all these years. Even now, the Watcher had no idea who it was or where he lived.

That had to be some magic.

None of that mattered right now. According to the Watcher, the Keeper was dead. As long as they got to the Key before Pete, he'd never be able to take over as the new Keeper. Then all the power would be in the Watcher's hands. Which he'd promised to share with his trusted Guardian, Devlin. The others would all get their chance to use the Compass once.

I get to keep it. Anything in the world I want will be mine, after the old man uses it to find the bridge. He wants to control the doors to Heaven and Hell. Screw that. I just want cash.

Up ahead, the Malibu slowed and then turned onto a long driveway that led to a fenced-off property. Devlin pegged it as another horse farm—they'd seen dozens of them on the drive down from Pennsylvania—and his guess proved right when he drove past the entrance.

Como's Ranch & Tack Shop

"Now what?" Tommy asked. "We can't follow them in there."

Devlin drove another hundred yards until he came to a spot in the road where the shoulder widened. He pulled over and shut off the car.

"Now we walk."

CH 16

"Hold up."

Pete was only too glad to stop when Benny held up his hand. They'd been walking all day, pausing only long enough to pee, sip some water from one of the streams they crossed, or duck down in the undergrowth while Benny checked ahead to make sure it was all clear to cross a road or driveway. The trail had led them through woods, fields, and farms. There'd even been one point where they'd sprinted across someone's backyard.

Normally Pete enjoyed being outside, but between the heat, exercise, and bugs, plus already being tired from trying to sleep on a train, he was exhausted. His legs felt like they weighed a thousand pounds each and his whole body itched from bites and sweat and thorn bush scratches.

"What is it?" Maria asked. She looked as awful as Pete felt. Sticks and seeds decorated her hair like weird holiday ornaments; sweat stains soaked her armpits, her back, and the spot between her boobs. There were burrs stuck to the laces of her sneakers that would be a real pain to get rid of later. He wished he could feel sorry for her, but he didn't have the energy.

"I heard something. Voices." Benny was handling the heat and the hike better than either of them. Although he looked just as dirty and sweaty, he still had the same energy in his step as he'd had when they started off. Pete wondered if he was naturally like that, or if all the time he'd spent as a runaway had hardened him. *The world's toughest workout. Why go to a gym? Just run away from home!*

Pete had to put his hand over his mouth to keep from laughing. Couldn't take the chance of anyone hearing them.

Benny took the compass from his pocket and held it up. He'd been checking it periodically throughout the day, and the needle had never varied. Pete wished it would also tell distance as well as direction. If they had to walk several more days like this he didn't think he'd make it. Especially without food.

"Damn, this thing is really cold. Colder than before."

Pete frowned. Something about Benny's statement tickled his brain. Like it was important, but he couldn't imagine why. The compass was always cold. It probably felt colder because Benny's hand was so hot now.

Still, the words kept nagging at him, even as Benny put the box back in his pocket.

"It's pointing right to where I heard the people talking. You two stay here. I'm going to sneak up and see what's going on."

Staying put was the last thing Pete wanted to do. If watching TV and reading books had taught him anything, it was you should never split up. Something bad invariably happened to the people who stayed behind. Like bad guys sneaking up on them. That thought made him turn around and glance back.

The trail was empty.

Of course, that didn't mean anything. There could be a dozen people hiding in the bushes and trees around them.

Don't be stupid. Who would be doing that?

The answer was, nobody. They had no one following them, had seen no one the entire time they'd been walking, unless you counted passing cars when they crossed a road. Even if the kids they were after really were up ahead, they'd have no idea anyone was coming for them. Why would they even think Benny and his friends would have come for their stuff after all this

time?

Still, as the minutes wore on, Pete's tension grew worse. The normal sounds of the day—birds chirping, insects buzzing—seemed too loud. Every rustle in the branches caused him to jump a little.

"He's been gone too long," Maria poked him on the arm. "Should we go look for him?"

Pete wanted to say yes, but he couldn't. The words refused to leave his mouth. His legs locked up and the rest of his muscles followed, freezing him in place.

"What is with you?" Maria prodded him again. His throat tightened even more, cutting off the words before he could form them. The buzzing of the woods grew louder, a thousand million crickets chirping all around him, accompanied by a high-pitched ***hummmmm*** that he couldn't ever remember hearing before. Colored spots appeared in his vision, swirling around like rainbow amoeba. The super-sweetness of bananas and ice cream replaced the smells of grass, dirt, and sweat. A tightness formed in his chest, a giant fist squeezing his lungs.

Air. He needed air. His chest wouldn't expand far enough so he tried to breathe faster. He had no breath to scream with, to ask for help. He couldn't even tell if Maria was still talking to him; the constant ***hummmm*** drowned everything else out.

And then it all disappeared.

The pressure on his chest released and he heaved in a huge lungful of air. His vision cleared and the humming faded away. The earthy scents of the field returned, washing away the impossible scent of a banana split.

"Pete, what the hell? Are you—"

"Geez, shut up!" Benny's hoarse whisper made them both jump. "Follow me." His face was red and sweaty, as if he'd been running. He moved past them back the way they'd come.

Maria looked at Pete, but he shook his head. Whatever had affected him was gone now.

"I'm fine." He knew what she was thinking. He'd had one of his episodes. But he felt sure it wasn't that. Sure, epileptic seizures could be triggered by heavy exertion. And sometimes before you got one, you could experience weird stuff, like hearing or smelling things that weren't there. His doctor had told him about it, and he'd read it on the internet, too. But his were never like that. When they happened, they just happened. One minute he'd be fine, the next he'd open his eyes and he'd be on the floor, with everyone looking at him. No memory of passing out or trembling.

That wasn't a seizure. It was something else. A major freak out. I was scared.

Can't let it happen again.

Benny led them at a fast past for several minutes before coming to a halt at a spot where the path widened. To their left, the ground fell away in a sharp slope.

"We're gonna hide down there until dark," he said, pointing at the hill.

"You found them?" Maria asked, and he nodded.

"Yeah. They got a little camp set up. We'll wait until they fall asleep, then sneak in and take everything we can carry. Then we hightail it out of there. If we're lucky, we'll be on a train before they even wake up."

"What if we're not lucky?"

Benny's sour expression was all the answer Pete needed, but the teenager replied anyhow.

"Then we probably get our asses kicked."

"Well, that wasn't much help." Assistant Special Agent Billingsley resisted the urge to kick a clod of dirt as he and Wilkins headed back to their car. They'd just finished talking to Elmer Godin, owner of EG Ranch. They'd arrived a few minutes after the local cops, two home-grown officers who'd basically showed up just to do introductions and provide back up for the search. They'd obviously just skimmed the info on the case, hadn't even gotten the kids' names right the first time.

For his part, Godin had told them his father had built the lean-to at far end of his property decades ago, but he rarely went out there.

"Used to use it when I hunted ring-necked pheasant, but I stopped that a few years back. Too old to be sitting out there in the cold."

When they questioned him about kids using it to sleep in, he admitted he knew runaways sometimes hid out there.

"Just don't have the time or energy to check it every day. The ranch hands roust 'em if they come across 'em."

Wilkins had asked if there was a way to drive out there. Godin shook his head.

"Nope. That pasture was never used for nuthin' but huntin'. Now it's gone wild. Don't even bring the horses down there. After I'm gone, my kids'll probably sell it to some developer, make a quick buck. That's the way they think today."

After getting directions on how to find the lean-to, and double-checking them against the picture on Wilkins' tablet, they'd gotten formal permission from Godin to go search his property and, if necessary, arrest anyone trespassing on it.

Now they were just stopping at their car to remove their jackets—the heat was worse than ever—and go over their strategy.

"Remember, they're kids," Billingsley said, including the two local cops in the discussion. "We don't want to hurt them. They've done nothing wrong except trespassing and petty theft. Plus, we don't know if the Rhodes kids are there or not. If they are, we take them all back. Pete and Maria go with us. Anyone else is totally in local jurisdiction. We have no interest, unless it turns out they were holding the Rhodes children against their will."

Everyone nodded their understanding and Wilkins checked his tablet.

"We head that way." He pointed southeast into the wild grass.

"Let's go. The sooner we find them, the sooner we can get out of this damned heat."

Half a mile away, Devlin jumped off the top of the Camry.

"They just went into the field. The old man told me there's a shed or something way down at the far end, close to where the property meets the tracks, and the brat is holed up there with some other runaways. If we cut straight down from here, we can beat them to it."

Without waiting for an answer, Devlin pushed his way into the tall grass. Mosquitos and gnats assaulted them and seeds and leaves stuck to sweaty skin. When Lee complained, Devlin rounded on him so fast they almost collided.

"I don't want to hear a goddamned word. This freakin' kid and his bitch of a sister have been a thorn in my side for almost a year, and now they're messing with my chance to be rich for the rest of my life. You think I like this? It's our job. And if you wanna keep breathin', you'll shut up and do it. Either that, or you can call the Big Man and tell him you quit."

"Hey, I'm no quitter," Lee said, holding up his hands. "I'll keep quiet. Jeez."

For the next half hour, they walked in silence.

Despite the heat, the bugs, and the burning lump of fury in his stomach, for Devlin it was

the best thirty minutes he'd had since Pete took off.

Mainly because he spent it picturing what he'd do to Maria and her brother when he found them.

"We're getting close." Agent Wilkins held up his hand for them to stop. "I think we should spread out from here. The lean-to is at the edge of a small clearing, no more than twenty feet or so across."

Billingsley motioned at the two officers, whose names were Jimenez and Rosanski. "You two go to the left, Wilkins and I will approach from the right," he whispered. "Keep your radios as low as possible and no one engages until I give the signal."

"Wait." Wilkins went over to Rosanski and brushed something off his waist. When the other three frowned at him, he said, "Burrs. You don't want them getting stuck in your hand."

"Thanks, man," Rosanski said.

"Are you done?" Billingsley moved off to the right, hunched over to stay below the tops of the grass. After several yards, he turned back to Wilkins. "How much further?"

"We should almost be at the clearing," the shorter agent replied. For once, Billingsley envied the man's compact stature. He wouldn't have an aching back later from walking bent over.

Sure enough, two minutes later they had to stop short to avoid stepping out of the high grass and into a dirt field. On one side sat the lean-to, which looked large enough to hold four or five grown adults comfortably. The once-red paint had faded and peeled away to show mostly bare wood, and ants and weather had done a good job of weakening the structure so that it tilted several degrees to the left. On the other side of the parking lot-sized clearing was a well-used dirt

path, which Billingsley guessed led to the train tracks.

The door to the lean-to was closed, and no sounds came from within.

Billingsley signaled for Wilkins to step back. “Let’s find out where Rosanski and Jimenez are. I want us to enter the clearing at the same time.” He lifted his radio out, checked the volume, and then clicked it on. “Jimenez. Rosanski. Are you in position for—”

From somewhere in the weeds beyond the lean-to, a loud crackle of static broke the silence, followed by squealing feedback and Billingsley’s highly amplified words.

“Shit!” Billingsley said, and clicked off his radio. His curse shouted back to them and then the electronic shrieking cut off.

At the same time, the door to the lean-to flew open and three teenagers rushed out. Each of them sprinted in a different direction, disappearing into the grassy forest.

“After them!” Billingsley shouted.

“Which one?” Wilkins hesitated.

“It doesn’t matter.” Billingsley took off across the dirt field. Wilkins went after one of the other kids. Shouts behind the lean-to told them Rosanski and Jimenez were giving chase as well.

Billingsley swore to himself as he ran. Grass whipped his face and broken stalks stabbed him through his shirt and pants. Within a few yards the sounds of footsteps ahead of him faded away, and he came to a place where the grass was trampled down in every direction. He stopped, unsure of which way to go.

A muffled groan came from somewhere to his left. He turned and headed that way. A minute later, he found Rosanski and Jimenez unconscious on the ground, their heads bloody.

“Hell.” He pulled out his radio, no longer worried about keeping silent. “Officers down, I repeat, officers down. Wilkins, do you copy? I’m with Rosanski and Jimenez. Both need medical

attention."

"Where are you?" came Wilkins' voice.

"About fifty yards southeast of the lean-to," Billingsley said. "I'll keep the line open. Keep talking and follow the sound."

By the time Wilkins arrived, both officers had regained consciousness. They were groggy but didn't appear to be badly hurt.

"Someone jumped us from behind," Rosanski said. He'd already admitted it was his radio that gave them away, and that he was sure he'd had the volume on low, not high. "Next thing I know, you're waking me up and my head hurts like hell."

Jimenez gave the same story and had the same lump on his head to back it up.

Worse, both their guns were missing.

"Those kids are long gone now," Wilkins said, after they called Elmer Godin, who said he'd send a couple of his men out with quads to pick them up. The EMTs would be waiting when they got back. "Probably grabbed a train or found a new spot to hide."

"Yeah." Billingsley wished he could take his frustrations out on something, or someone. Like a certain inept police officer. But he had to maintain his composure in front of the others. It would be bad optics for people to see an FBI agent throw a tantrum. "We'll put out another APB on them and hope someone spots them again."

"What are you gonna tell the parents?"

Billingsley groaned. He'd forgotten about the Rhodes, waiting back at their hotel. Damn this case. And the fact that he'd been put in charge of it. "The truth. But it's going to wait until I've had a shower and a gallon of water."

Devlin waited until he was sure the cops were gone before texting Lee and Tommy to meet him back at the lean-to. That gave him time to release his frustrations by kicking and punching the ground until his fists were bruised and his legs ached.

Couldn't anything go right? They'd had the punks right in their sights when out of nowhere one of the cops' radios had gone off and spooked them. He and Tommy had surprised the two local cops, but the kids had gone in all different directions. Then the damn feds had come back and it was time to hide again.

His cell went off. Even before he looked, he knew it had to be the Watcher. He always knew exactly when things went sour. Preparing himself for another tongue-lashing, Devlin answered.

"You're in luck," the voice said, before Devlin could even start his explanation. "I sensed the Compass moving and alerted my contact in your area, who made sure your only chance of finding the boy wasn't lost. Follow the teenagers. To the northeast. They will lead you to the Compass. Get it. No failure."

The line went dead. Devlin was still staring at it when Lee and Tommy emerged from the grass.

"What's next?" Tommy asked. Devlin frowned as he considered the old man's words. Contact in their area? That radio that had coincidentally spooked the kids Pete and Maria had been traveling with, and now those same losers were going...where? Why would they stay behind if Pete and Maria had left?

Did the old man even have cops working for him?

Follow them. Get the Compass, and then the Key. Stop worrying about the other stuff.

Devlin fingered the pistol he'd taken from the cop he'd bashed with a rock.

Compass. Key. And then Maria and her snot-nosed brother would pay for all the trouble they'd given him. He pointed at two of the paths the fleeing kids had made.

"We start walking."

CH 17

When his wife's phone finally rang, Ed Rhodes breathed a sigh of relief.

As the day wore on, he and Kristen had grown increasingly anxious. Especially her. Waiting in the hotel room for the FBI's call was like torture. They couldn't go out because they wanted to be ready at a moment's notice to go pick up their children. They were too agitated to eat, although they'd sent out for pizza. Neither of them had finished a full slice. Ed had made two coffee runs, which was probably the worse thing for Kristen's nerves. As the afternoon wore on, she started pacing the room. From the door to the bed and back again, while he sat in the one lumpy chair and stared at the TV, with no memory of what he watched two minutes earlier.

Their attempts at conversation had dwindled, and for the last hour neither of them had even spoken.

"Hello?" She listened for a moment and then the hopeful look faded from her face. "Oh, hello, Doctor. What? Just a moment."

She put the call on speaker and held the phone out. "It's Doctor Jha."

Ed hit the mute button on the TV. Mita Jha was Pete's oncologist, the one who'd successfully treated him for his cancer. In all the excitement, they'd forgotten they were waiting for the results of Pete's latest checkup. Every report they'd gotten for the last seven years had been clean, so they never even got nervous about his visits.

"Ed, Kristen, I've got Pete's results here. Has he been feeling okay the last few days? No signs of weakness, no bruising, no vomiting?"

"What's the matter, Doctor?" Kristen's voice took on that tone Ed knew so well. The one that said she knew there was bad news coming. Ed's heart sped up; Kristen had that Mom ESP

and over the years she'd rarely been wrong.

"Pete's white cell count is very high, and so is his blast count." Jha read off some numbers, but Ed didn't hear them over the words shouting in his head.

Cancer-Cancer-Cancer

"—need him to come in as soon as possible so we can determine if this is a return of his leukemia or a different type of cancer and start treatment immediately. I have an opening—"

"No." Kristen looked at Ed, her eyes wide. A single tear ran down one cheek. "No."

She dropped the phone and ran for the bathroom. Slammed the door shut. The sound of her vomiting reached Ed through the thin wood.

"—hello? Mrs. Rhodes? Did you say—"

Ed picked up the phone. "I'm sorry, Dr. Jha. We... we have a bit of a problem. Pete isn't with us right now. He... he and Maria... they ran away from home. It's a long story. We're waiting for the police to pick them up right now."

There was a pause, and then the doctor spoke. "This is very serious, Ed. Pete's condition... this can't wait. If he wasn't showing symptoms before, he will be soon. That could include internal bleeding, fainting spells, vomiting, dehydration..."

"We'll do everything we can to get him there tomorrow, or the day after at the latest. We're in Virginia right now." Ed ended the call before the doctor could say anything else. He was about to set it down when it rang again.

"Dr. Jha, I told you—"

"Mr. Rhodes, this is Agent Billingsley. We have a problem."

"No," Ed responded. "We have a much bigger one."

All his life, Pete had always loved summer best. Not just because of the fine weather—although that was definitely a huge part of it—but because of the long days. The sun came up early in the morning and it didn't get dark until after eight. That meant extra hours for having fun. Exploring with Marko. Playing outside. Watching a ball game. He tried his best to fill up the days, because once night came, it meant all the real fun stopped. You went home, ate dinner, maybe watched some television or read a book, and went to sleep.

This was the first time he could remember where he couldn't wait for night to arrive.

Hiding in the brush for hours sucked. But Benny's plan made sense. They needed to wait until the other kids were asleep before they snuck in.

They'd spent the rest of the afternoon and early evening basically staring at each other. If they spoke, it was in whispers and only briefly. The only sounds were the weak breeze through the grass and branches, and the non-stop buzz of mosquitos and flies looking for a quick meal.

The heat, lack of water, and long walk had left all of them tired, sweaty, and cranky. Pete kept trying to sleep, thinking it would take his mind off everything for a while and help him get rested for the escape they'd have to do later. Except the bugs had other plans. Each time drifted off, either something bit him or tickled him. The constant waving of his hands to keep them away only exhausted him even more. When he tried laying down and putting his sweatshirt over himself as a blanket, it only made things worse. Instead of mosquitoes, ants crawled on him. And under the jacket there wasn't any breeze. It was like an oven.

Every hour or so, Benny would sneak off and check on the other kids' camp, to make sure they hadn't left. Each time he came back, he just shook his head and sat down again. He'd close his eyes and not open them unless it was to say they were making too much noise slapping

at the insects.

A couple of times, Pete's legs trembled out of nowhere and he had to press down on them to stop it. That worried him. Even though he'd been taking his medicine like he should, he was afraid all the walking was too much. If he had a real seizure now, what would Benny and Maria do? He wasn't even sure Maria remembered how to help, to make sure he didn't bite his own tongue off. He wished Marko was with them. Marko always knew if a seizure was coming, even before Pete did. It was his gift. That, and being the best friend anyone could want.

Thinking about Marko brought new tears to Pete's eyes, and it surprised him when he realized he hadn't cried about his dog since...

Since I really knew he was back and helping me.

In a way, it was like Marko wasn't dead anymore. Just somewhere else. Like when Pete had to go to school and they were separated all day. He wouldn't even think about Marko much, because in the back of his mind he knew the dog would be waiting when he got home.

This was the same.

Marko was out there someplace, watching, showing up to help when he could. And soon they'd be together again at the Rainbow Bridge.

If we ever get there. Unless I get the compass back from Benny, I'll never find it. Or Marko.

A faint whimpering sound reached him. Marko! The same kind of cry he used to make in his sleep sometimes, when he was having a bad dream. Or if Pete went somewhere and didn't take him. On those rare instances, Marko would lay on his blanket and stare at Pete with big, sad brown eyes as Pete opened the door. And whimper.

"I'm sorry, boy," Pete said, just like he used to when Marko was alive and making him

feel guilty. “I’ll get there as soon as I can. I promise. You just have to wait a little longer and then—”

Someone shook him, hard. Pete opened his eyes. He’d drifted off without knowing it. Had he really heard Marko again or just dreamed it.

“Time to go,” Benny said. Against the dark background of the night sky, he was nothing but a dim gray ghost. Another shape moved nearby. Maria, brushing herself off.

Pete stood up and almost fell as the world tilted around him. Benny caught his arm.

“You okay, kid?”

The dizzy spell passed and Pete nodded. “Yeah. Stood up too fast, that’s all.”

Maria approached him. “Are you all right?”

“I’m good,” he said. He heard the worry in voice, knew it would only get worse if she thought he wasn’t feeling well. He stepped away from her and then stopped. In the dark, he had no idea which way to go.

“Follow me,” Benny said.

It only took them fifteen minutes to reach the other camp. Pete smelled it before they saw it; the sour, harsh odor of a campfire put out with piss. The same way Benny and his friends did it if they weren’t near a stream or pond, so that you didn’t waste your water.

Benny motioned for Maria to join him. He’d already told them his plan earlier in the evening. He and Maria would duck in, grab anything that was in easy reach, and then get back out. Because of his smaller size and lack of fighting ability, Pete would keep watch.

Peering past Benny and Maria as they stepped into the small, packed-down area where the thieves had made camp, Pete counted five of them. He thought one might be a girl, because she had long hair. There were several backpacks and a small duffel bag next to the sleepers. Pete

held his breath as Benny picked up the largest pack in one hand and a smaller one in the other. Maria took the duffel. Benny angled his head, a signal for 'let's go.'

Pete smiled. They'd done it. Now all they had to do was sneak away and—

Nearby in the darkness, a branch snapped with a loud crack. Someone cursed.

One of the sleeping teenagers sat up and saw Benny and Maria.

"Someone's takin' our stuff!"

From somewhere in the brush, a familiar voice called out.

"Get the kid! Kill everyone else."

Devlin cursed as his foot came down on the branch. They'd followed the trails and caught up with Pete, Maria, and their dirt bag friend just in time to see them sneaking into some other runaways' camp. It looked like they'd be outnumbered, so he whispered to Lee and Tommy that they'd wait and grab the kid and the Compass after they were done with whatever they were up to. Which appeared to be stealing shit.

Why the hell they'd be doing that, he had no idea. He'd been taking up a position where he could jump out at them as they moved down the trail when his wrong step gave them away.

"Someone's takin' our stuff!" someone yelled. Any hope of surprise ruined, Devlin shouted, "Get the kid! Kill everyone else!"

Pete was still frozen in shock by the teenagers waking up when Devlin and his two buddies burst out of the woods. Rough hands grabbed him and an arm went around his neck, choking him. Devlin waved a gun in the air and yelled for everyone to sit down. The other teenagers, who'd been up and ready to fight, went to their knees. Benny and Maria just stood

there, eyes wide, still holding the packs they'd taken.

"Who the hell are you?" one of the runaways asked. Devlin pointed the gun at him.

"Your worst nightmare if you don't shut up." He swung the gun around at Maria. "This is the end, bitch. I'm done playing games. I shoulda' done this a long time ago. Say—"

A massive body hurdled out of the trees and slammed into Devlin, knocking him to the ground. The gun went flying. Lee, who also had a gun, turned just as someone swung a large stick right at his nose. There was a loud *crack!* and the stick snapped in half. Lee fell down, holding both hands to his face.

"Rufus! Big G!" Benny dropped the packs and joined his friends, who'd recovered the guns and now held them on the teens who'd previously stolen their stuff. "What are you doing here? Where's Allie?"

"Here," said a familiar voice behind Pete. Something went 'thump' and the boy holding him let go with a loud groan. Pete collapsed, gasping for breath. Colored stars danced in his vision. He heard Maria call his name.

Then nothing.

CH 18

Pete woke to freezing cold water being splashed on his face.

"Hey!" He sat up and then immediately regretted it as his vision doubled and the world felt like it was spinning.

"Easy, kid," a boy's voice said. Benny. Someone put a bottle of water in his hands and helped him take a drink. He gulped it down, unaware until then of how thirsty he was. When he finished, the dizzy spell had passed and he could see normally again. Faces stared at him. Maria, Benny, Rufus, Big G, and Allie.

"What... what happened? Where are we?" Pete looked around. They were in the woods, but not the same woods.

"Safe, don't worry. Those assholes won't find us," Rufus said.

"Yeah, they might not even be awake yet," Big G added with a laugh.

Pete rubbed his head. It ached, and so did his throat. "Someone was choking me. And Devlin was there, how did..." He had to stop and drink more water as his throat threatened to close.

"They followed us." Maria proceeded to fill him in on what he'd missed. Big G and the others getting chased by the cops. Devlin showing up. The fight at the runaways' camp where Rufus and the others surprised Devlin and his crew in the nick of time.

"Left those jerks unconscious," Rufus said, slamming his fist into his palm. "Me and Big G took down two of them, and Allie gave the guy who had you a bootful of pain."

Pete glanced at Allie as everyone laughed.

"Kicked him square in the nuts," she said, lifting one foot to show off her heavy hiking

boot.

Maria told him how they'd either knocked out or tied up everyone and then made their escape, with Big G carrying Pete and his pack.

"We're a couple miles away now," Benny said. "On the other side of the river. Figured everyone'll be looking for you by the trains, so we went the other way."

"Hey, kid." Rufus knelt in front of Pete. "You done good. We got all our stuff back and more." He held up a mean-looking pistol that gleamed in the moonlight seeping through the branches.

"Here," Benny said, holding out his hands. Pete's heart jumped when he saw what Benny had. His pack! And his compass! He took them and slipped the compass into his pocket.

"Thank you."

"No, thank you." Benny and Rufus stood up. "You not only kept your promise, but you proved that magic compass is real. Which means maybe the rest of your story is true, too."

Rufus gave him a half-smile. "Yeah. Trust me, it was tempting to keep that compass. More for some of us than others." He gave a quick look at Allie, who shrugged. "But it sounds like you need it more than we do."

"If we can't ride the trains, though, how are we gonna get to Tennessee?" Pete asked. He was starting to feel better, his energy returning. His stomach ached with hunger, but he figured he'd worry about that later.

"We have other problems," Maria said. "In all the commotion, I dropped my phone back at that other camp. Which means Mom and Dad will really be worried sick when they don't hear from us anymore. So the cops will probably be looking for us everywhere. And Devlin won't give up, either. He said..." she stopped and bit her lip. Benny continued for her.

"He said he was gonna kill everyone but you," he told Pete. "Guy is major psycho. You need to stay as far away from him as you can."

"But he always seems to know where we are." Maria sounded like she wanted to cry.

"Maybe he bugged your parents' car or something," Allie said. "Or tapped their phone."

"Yeah, he's gotta be getting inside information somehow." Benny shrugged. "It don't matter. Figure whatever your parents and the cops know, so does he. So no more calls, nothin'."

"They already know we're going to Tennessee. I told them."

"Then you're gonna have to be real careful. Stay away from the trains. Cops'll be watching."

Big G waved his hand. "I got an idea. There's a truck stop only about a mile from here, on the highway. Maybe they can hitch a ride."

Benny looked at Maria, and then Pete.

"Well, what are we waiting for?"

"Devlin Kim."

Devlin looked up as someone banged on the cell bars. "Yeah?"

"You made bail. Stand up and back away from the door." The officer waited while Devlin complied. Another cop repeated the process with Tommy and Lee in the next cell. Although this time their hands weren't cuffed, they were still forced to walk ahead of the officers, who both kept their hands close to their batons. Devlin understood their caution; he and his companions were suspected of ambushing two police officers and an FBI agent. Not to mention what had gone down at the motel. Now they'd been arrested on top of all that. Yet they

were being let go.

The old man must've pulled a few strings besides paying the bail money.

On the heels of that came another thought.

He is going to be majorly pissed off about this.

How many failures was this now? Three? Four? Devlin wasn't sure he could count them. He'd already been warned he was running out of chances.

"Take a seat over there," one of the cops said, pointing at some plastic chairs off to one side of a room containing several desks and a caged area with a uniformed lady cop behind the barrier. The two officers went over to her and handed her some paperwork. She told them to wait and disappeared into another room.

Tommy started to ask him something but Devlin shushed him.

"Look," he whispered, nodding with his head. On the other side of the room, the Rhodeses were exiting an office, together with the two FBI agents from the farm. Devlin tried to hear what they were saying, but they were too far away. He was able to read their lips a little, though. Something about Tennessee and a relative.

"Kim, come here." The lady cop was back with a plastic bag in her hands. Devlin cursed his continued bad luck. Now he'd never hear the rest of the conversation. He signed for his belongings and hurried outside just in time to see the FBI agents drive off. The Rhodeses were standing by their rental car, looking at something on Mr. Rhodes's phone. Devlin pressed himself to the side of the building and listened as the man spoke to his wife.

"—a mile from—spend the night—in the morning."

"Gotcha," Devlin whispered. He waited until they left and crossed the parking lot to the impound area. The police had brought the Camero there. Devlin's car was nowhere to be found.

Screw 'em. We don't need it now.

It cost Tommy a hundred dollars to get his keys. When he bitched, Devlin reminded him the Big Man would reimburse them for their expenses. Before Tommy could start the car, Devlin's phone rang.

Speak of the devil...

Before the Big Man could tear him a new one, Devlin started speaking right away.

"Listen, I know we screwed up, but I got good information. The kids are still going to Tennessee. Some relative's house. I know what hotel the parents are staying at. All we have to do is follow them and we find the kid."

There was a silence that stretched on for several seconds. Then the villainous voice said, "Very well. This is your last chance. But you must get the Compass and the Key before the boy reaches his destination. Do you understand?"

"Sure thing," Devlin said, breathing an internal sigh of relief as he hung up. He'd expected shouting and threats.

"How do you know what hotel they're at," Lee asked, climbing into the back seat.

"I don't. But how many hotels can there be within a mile of here? We just have to check all the parking lots and then wait."

Devlin got into the passenger seat and promised himself this would be the end of it. No more screw ups. Grab the kid, do whatever to the parents.

And as for Maria... by the time I'm done with her, she's gonna beg me to kill her.

Section III

The Last Battle

If it should be that I grow weak,
And pain should keep me from my sleep,
Then you must do what must be done,
For this last battle cannot be won.

You will be sad, I understand,
Don't let your grief then stay your hand,
For this day more than all the rest,
Your love for me must stand the test.

We've had so many happy years,
What is to come can hold no fears,
You'd not want me to suffer so,
The time has come, so let me go.

Take me where my needs they'll tend,
And please stay with me to the end,
Hold me firm and speak to me,
Until my eyes no longer see.

Please do not grieve – it must be you,
Who had this painful thing to do,
We've been so close, we two, these years,
Don't let your heart hold back its tears.

"The Final Battle," Author Unknown

CH 19

"I don't feel good."

For Pete, the words were an understatement. His head was pounding and his body ached even worse. Everything hurt, right down to his bones. And either he had a fever or someone had turned the heat to High in the truck. His was sweaty and his lips were dry.

"What's the matter? Are you car sick?" Maria asked.

"Hey, no puking in the truck. You gonna hurl, you tell me so I can stop." The driver took his eyes off the road just long enough to check Pete out.

"Not my stomach. I think I have the flu or something." Even talking hurt. Each word was like someone hitting his brain with a hammer.

"Maybe you need some food. When's the last time you had something to eat or drink?" the driver, who'd told them his name was Jim, asked.

Pete tried to remember, but the drumming in his head made it hard to think. Maria answered for them.

"We had some water and candy about six hours ago. Before that... maybe a day?"

"Jesus, no wonder. I'll pull over at the next stop."

Pete nodded, hoping it was close. The truck's cab seemed to be closing in on him. Every bump in the road bounced him up and down. The worn seat provided no cushion for his butt. On one side, Jim's burly frame wasn't so bad. He stunk of coffee, sweat, and dirty clothes. But at least he was kind of soft. Not like Maria, whose bony elbow and hip kept jabbing him. Pete wished they could've found a different truck, one that smelled better and was newer.

Not that they'd had much choice.

Benny had warned them that a lot of truckers wouldn't give rides to runaways, especially young ones. "Taking kids across state lines'll get you arrested pretty quick," he'd said. He and Big G had moved from truck to truck, Pete and Maria following. They'd picked out the oldest ones in the lot. Then it was a matter of waiting for the drivers to come out. The first three had said no way. Jim had been the fourth. He'd only agreed because he was on his way to Memphis and it wouldn't be out of his way.

"I don't believe yer story for one second," he'd said. Benny had told all the drivers the same tale. That Maria and Pete had run away from their grandparents' house to go see their dying mother who was in a hospital. "Heaven's Gate's in the middle of nowhere between Dover and Buchanan, up near the Kentucky border. Ain't no hospitals there. But you two look okay. Whatever's goin' on, I believe it's serious enough for you to be on the road."

Maria had cried a little when Benny said goodbye to them. Pete had felt his own tears wanting to escape. Benny and the others were heading to Florida. Their train was due to come through in the morning. "Good luck," he said, and gave them each a hug.

Then it had been a rush to climb in the truck before anyone saw them.

"Let's go, time's a-wastin'" Jim had said. "Got about twelve hours, give or take. We'll detour around the major cities, case anyone's lookin' for you. I can get you to about thirty miles from where you need to go without fallin' too far behind on my schedule."

The first couple of hours had been fine. Pete had alternated between dozing and listening to Jim's radio, which played the same classic rock songs their father listened to.

Then, about an hour ago, the aches had started. They'd gotten worse and worse, until he finally had to admit he was sick.

I can't be. Not now. They were so close. Less than a day away from Uncle Nate's house

and the Rainbow Bridge. After everything else they'd been through, he never thought a stupid flu would be the thing that stopped him.

I won't let it. I don't care how bad I feel.

And boy, did he feel bad. Dizzy, too, like when that guy tried to poison him. The rocking and vibration of the truck didn't help. And when he closed his eyes, it only made things worse.

"Do you need to take an extra pill?" Maria asked.

Pete shook his head and then wished he hadn't as everything seemed to tilt. This wasn't a seizure. He remembered a kid in school talking about the terrible headaches her mother got. Migraines, she called them. They were so bad her mother would have to lock herself in a dark room with cold clothes on her face and take special medicine. Sometimes she'd be in there all day.

Maybe that's what this is. A migraine. Could anyone get them?

The truck slowed, and Jim said they were pulling off.

Finally. I need fresh air.

The moment the big truck came to a halt, Pete asked Maria to get out. When he tried to climb down after her, he almost fell. She had to help him, and then walk with him to a nearby bench. He sat down and let the cool night air wash over him. He took deep breaths. Even with the heavy scents of car exhaust, it was so much better than the stuffy atmosphere of the truck.

"Here." Jim handed him a can of soda and a sandwich wrapped in wax paper. "I keep some food and stuff in a cooler behind the seat in case I get a craving between stops."

Pete stared at the sandwich. He couldn't tell if his stomach wanted it or not. He took a small bite. Peanut butter and jelly, one of his favorites. When it didn't make him sick, he ate some more. Then washed it down with cola. Eat, sip. Eat, sip. He did it slowly, afraid of

throwing up. Halfway through, he realized the dizziness was gone. And his head felt a little better.

It was working!

He wolfed down the rest of the sandwich and drank the soda in three big gulps. Jim laughed as Pete let out a loud belch. “Sounds like someone was hungry.” He passed over a large candy bar and Pete tore the wrapper off. Four chewy mouthfuls of peanuts and chocolate later, it was gone.

“Feel better?”

“Yeah, I do.” Pete took a deep breath. His headache had almost disappeared. And although he still felt a little achy, he had energy again. Enough to stand up and walk to the bathroom by himself without even wobbling. When he came back, Maria was just finishing her sandwich. She handed him the rest of her soda and he drank it down.

“You still look pretty bad,” she said, frowning at him. He knew it, too. He’d seen himself in the bathroom mirror. Pale, dark bags under his eyes. And he knew what had her so worried.

“I’m fine,” he said. “Just tired. Run down. It’s not the epilepsy. All the walking, and not much sleep. You know me. I’m not an athlete. And I don’t live on junk food like you,” he added.

She didn’t look convinced, but Jim stood up.

“You can sack out in the truck. C’mon, we need to get movin’. I’ve got a schedule to keep.”

It turned out there was a small sleeping area in the truck cab, behind the front seats. And even though the mattress smelled of sweat and old farts, Pete didn’t care when he stretched out and pulled a thin blanket over himself.

Five minutes after they rolled back onto the highway, he was sound asleep.

Assistant Special Agent Ray Billingsley smelled it before he even reached the front porch.

Death.

“Oh, geez, that is ripe,” Agent Wilkins said, holding his arm across his face. The faint morning breeze did nothing to disperse the foul odor of rotting flesh.

They were standing in front of Nate Rhodes’ residence, a small, single-family house on a quarter acre of land at the end of a private road. The house, more of a bungalow really, backed up against a large national park on the outskirts of town. They’d gotten the address from Ed Rhodes. He’d told them Pete and Maria were likely heading there to see their uncle. It had to do with the silly idea they had that there was some kind of magical bridge capable of bringing dead pets back to life. The uncle, who’d once been a semi-successful stage magician, had apparently sent Pete a note telling him to come.

However, since finding out about the uncle’s part in the whole running away mess, Ed hadn’t been able to get hold of his brother. Not answering calls, texts, or emails.

“We’re not waiting around anymore,” Ed had told them. “We’re tired of being a step behind.” Their plan was to go to the house and wait for the children to show up. Billingsley admitted it was the smartest move. The kids had proven to be way more resourceful than anyone expected. And if they got found before they reached Heaven’s Gate, the parents could come get them. Which was why Billingsley decided it was such a good plan, he and Wilkins would do the same thing.

“We can get there faster than you,” he’d told the Rhodes, while informing them of his

mirror intentions. “First thing in the morning, we’ll talk to your brother, if he’s there, and be ready for the kids when they arrive.”

Kristen Rhodes had asked if the FBI could bring them along, and Billingsley had been tempted, but Wilkins had nixed the idea. “Can’t put civilians in a helicopter unless it’s a real emergency.”

Now, covering his face with a handkerchief to try and block the stench of decay, Billingsley wished he’d called ahead for the local police. Let them deal with a putrid corpse. Because there was no pretending anything else could cause that vile an odor.

“I hate this part of the job,” Billingsley muttered. If they’d had their own car instead of a rental, there’d be menthol rub to put in their nostrils. He nodded to Wilkins, who looked ill. “Ready?”

“Yeah.”

Billingsley approached the door. Knocked, even though he knew there’d be no answer. No living person could remain inside a closed up house with that horrific stench for long without passing out. He stepped back and kicked the cheap wooden door right next to the knob. The lock gave way and the door flew open, releasing a noxious wave that nearly sent both men to their knees. Only years of training allowed Billingsley to maintain his composure. Knowing the crime scene techs would need all possible evidence, he shut the door behind them to prevent any flies or other bugs from escaping, even though all he wanted to do was let it air out.

It didn’t take long to search the house and discover Nate’s body on the bedroom floor.

Satisfied that, at least on first glance, there’d been no murder committed, he motioned for them to exit the house. Outside, after taking several deep breaths that did nothing to clear the corruption from his nose, he called it in to the local PD.

"We'll let them and the ME do their thing, and after the house airs out we can collect all the evidence we need and set up watch outside the house for the kids."

"You don't have to ask me twice. It's gonna take at least three showers to get this smell off me. When are you gonna tell the family?"

Billingsley groaned. Once again, delivering the bad news fell on his shoulders.

This day just keeps getting better, he thought, as he took out his phone.

Devlin sat up in the backseat of Tommy's car as Tommy and Lee burst out of the diner and hurried across the parking lot. They both wore excited looks on their faces, which told Devlin they had good news even before they got in the car.

"It worked, just like you said." Lee closed the passenger door and passed a bag of food to Devlin, who tossed it aside.

"What'd they say? Do you know where they are?" Devlin had been pissed when the Rhodes pulled into the diner in between the breakfast and lunch hours. There'd only been a few cars in the parking lot, which meant he couldn't go inside without risking them recognizing him. So he'd sent in Lee and Tommy, who they'd never met, instead. But that meant waiting in the car for a half hour without any idea of what was happening.

"Sure do," Tommy said, starting the car. "They're on their way to Tennessee to see their uncle, but they don't know the old guy's already dead."

"That's good—wait, where the hell are you going?" Devlin asked, as Tommy pulled out of the lot. "We still have to follow them, you idiot."

"Nope." Lee held up a napkin with scribbled writing on it. "We heard them say his name,

and the town where he lives. Some little shitburg called Heaven's Gate. Figured we can either look him up online or you can get the address from the Big Man."

"Yes!" Devlin pumped his fist in the air. Finally, things were going their way.

"It gets better," Lee said. "The kid is sick. Real sick."

"Yeah, we know. He throws fits."

"Uh-uh." Tommy shook his head. "Turns out he's got cancer, too. He might die, maybe pretty soon. That'd really take care of our problems."

"No, we've gotta do it ourselves, and get the key first. Can't take any chances."

Besides, he wanted the pleasure of putting their lights out permanently. And not just the kid. The whole damn family.

Five minutes later, he had the address from the web and they were on the highway. With any luck, they'd get to the house way before the parents.

Happy at the turn of events, Devlin texted the information to the Watcher and then opened his dinner and took a big, sloppy bite of his burger. He was already looking ahead to when the whole shit-show was over. In a few days, he'd be eating steak and lobster on a goddamn yacht.

And the Rhodes family would be rotting in holes in the ground.

Several states away, the Watcher paced the length of his living room. Back and forth, over and over, the most exercise he'd gotten in months. The text from that screw-up Devlin should've eased his anxiety, but he couldn't relax. The Guardian and his brainless sidekicks had botched things too many times for him to have any confidence in them now. If they failed to get

to this uncle's house—a magician, how appropriate!—before the police or the Chosen One, all his decades of planning, of waiting, would be for naught.

The kid's dying. Devlin's text had ended. *He might not even make it to Tennessee. But we'll be there just in case, don't worry.*

Don't worry. How many times had that moron uttered those words, only to create even more problems? And *might not make it* wasn't the same as *wouldn't make it.*

Even his spy on the inside had proven to be less than reliable, with information coming in too late more than once. He hadn't even—

The Watcher's phone buzzed with an incoming message.

Speak of the devil.

—The boy and girl are heading for Heaven's Gate, Tennessee. The boy has cancer but doesn't know. Will head them off before the parents arrive.—

A day late and a nickel short. Something the Watcher remembered people saying back when he was a child. He couldn't count on Devlin, and he couldn't count on his little birdie. There was a very good chance they'd both fail to stop the boy.

And if that happened, what could he do from nearly halfway across the country? There'd be no chance of implementing a last-ditch plan.

What good is it to have all these resources at your control if you don't use them?

"So use them, sonny-boy. That's what they're for." He heard the words in his father's voice. Just like the day he'd said them, when the Watcher had told his old man he wanted to do more than just look at the guns in his case.

And he had. Several times.

Decision made, he placed the first of several calls.

"Hello, I'd like to buy a ticket to Nashville, Tennessee."

The truck stop just outside of Paris, Tennessee was the smallest and cleanest of the three rest areas Jim had paused at. Each break had lasted no longer than the time it took for everyone to use the bathrooms and get something to drink—soda for Maria and Pete, black coffee for Jim. Only one had been for gas. That had taken the longest. After nearly twelve hours on the road, most of which Pete spent sleeping or trying to sleep in the little compartment behind the seats, the cab reeked of Jim's coffee breath and body odor. Pete wondered if all truck drivers smelled as bad. And where did they shower if they didn't stop in motels?

"Okay, kids, this is as far as I can take you. The road to Heaven's Gate runs northeast from here, and I have to go south to Memphis. I'd take you closer, but I'm already falling behind schedule."

"How far is it?" Maria asked. Jim consulted his phone, pulled up a map.

"Looks to be about twenty-four, twenty-five miles or so. A long walk, but mebbe you can hitch a ride. Folks up this way are a lot friendlier than back east."

Jim handed Maria two twenty-dollar bills. "Take this. It ain't enough to get you a room nowhere, but it's all I can spare. It'll keep you in food and drink 'til you get where you goin.'"

"You don't have to do that. You've helped us enough already," Maria said, but Pete noticed she took the money. He was glad. They needed it, considering all they had was a couple of buck's worth of change at the bottom of his knapsack.

"Can't let you hit the road with empty pockets. You'd end up in jail as vagrants. Now, my advice is grab something to eat and then get on Route 79 east. This time of day, road should

be pretty busy. Just be careful, you hear?"

"We will." Maria gave him a hug, surprising Pete again. She'd gotten awful huggy the last few days. Back home, you were lucky if she gave you the time of day.

Maybe it's because she's not buried in her phone all the time now.

Without it, and without jerky Devlin, she was actually a nice person.

A distant bark made him smile. Marko was still around, and he agreed.

Then it was his turn to say goodbye. Jim gave his hand a powerful squeeze and smiled.

"I hope you find whatever you're lookin' for, kid."

They watched as Jim drove away, the truck belching smoke and diesel fumes as it picked up speed. When it pulled back onto the highway, Maria put her arm on Pete's shoulder.

"C'mon, let's get breakfast. We still have a long way to go."

CH 20

Assistant Special Agent Ray Billingsley attempted to stretch his tall frame within the confines of the black Chevrolet Blazer they'd been loaned by the Tennessee State Police. Smaller than the Suburbans he was used to, it was impossible for him to fully extend his legs and straighten his back without hitting his head on the ceiling. Wilkins, on the other hand, appeared perfectly comfortable behind the wheel, his head leaning against the doorframe.

Billingsley wished he could get out and walk around a bit, get the circulation going, but they had no idea when or how the Rhodes kids would arrive, or even from which direction. No one had spotted them on any highways or at any rest stops. The general theory was that they'd gotten a ride from someone who was taking them all the way to Heaven's Gate.

Either that, or they'd been kidnapped or worse.

He didn't want to consider that option, but he had to. A boy and girl hitching on the road or begging for rides at truck stops? They were asking for trouble.

Or maybe the boy had collapsed from his cancer and the girl didn't know what to do, couldn't get help. They might be in the woods somewhere, him dying and her unable to leave him. No phone to call anyone.

All because of some ridiculous fairy tale.

Billingsley shook his head and tried to find a comfortable position. He had to pee, too, thanks to the two coffees he'd had with supper at the lousy diner in town. His chicken had somehow been dry and greasy at the same time, and the string beans drowning in butter. He should've done what Wilkins did, just order a burger and French fries, but he was tired of eating junk.

The night was warm but not unpleasantly so, with a honeysuckle-scented breeze blowing through the open windows. They were parked at the beginning of the long cul-de-sac, with Nate Rhodes' house visible at the far end. Considering there was nothing but national park behind the house, he felt confident the kids would approach from the road. Especially if they'd gotten a ride. Even if they managed to sneak in from the left or right sides, they'd be visible as soon as they turned on a flashlight or lit a match. All the windows in the house were open, both to air the hideous reek of bloated corpse out of the place and to ensure no one could move around inside unseen.

Lights appeared on the main road, coming toward them. Wilkins perked up in his seat and Billingsley leaned forward.

"Staties," Wilkins said.

Right on schedule. Every four hours, the State Police relieved them so they could go use a bathroom, grab a bite to eat, and take care of any messages.

The unmarked car pulled in behind them and Billingsley's radio crackled.

"Unit Five-four-zero. Go grab a piss and a coffee, fellas. Dunkin' Donuts and McDonalds by the highway are both still open."

"Roger," Billingsley responded. "See you in a couple of hours."

Wilkins started the car and made a U-turn. As they headed back toward town, he shook his head. "I can't wait to get back to freakin' civilization. It's not even ten, and the whole damn town is closed."

Billingsley grunted. It was a pain to drive almost fifteen miles to the highway, but at least the coffee would be decent. He was just glad they didn't have to return to that awful diner.

Only a couple of cars passed them on the way. He eyed each one. Both had single drivers

and Tennessee plates.

Relax, he told himself. *There's no way they're here yet. And even if they are, either the Staties or us will nab them the minute they show up.*

The list of other possibilities popped into his head again and he pushed them away.

He really wanted this case to end on a positive note.

"Stop here." Maria pointed at a corner coming up. The driver glanced at them in the rearview mirror and frowned.

"This ain't the address you gave me, honey," the old woman said.

"I know. But please, pull over."

The woman eased the car to the side of the road. She'd picked them up as they were walking down the exit ramp at the rest stop, their bellies filled with chicken nuggets and soda. The meal had used up almost half the money Jim had given them, but Maria figured they wouldn't be eating again until Uncle Nate's house, so it might as well be a good dinner. Besides, they'd need their strength for the long walk ahead. Especially Pete, who still looked exhausted despite napping for hours in the truck.

"Hello, you kids okay?"

It turned out the gray-haired woman with the big teeth and friendly smile actually lived in Heaven's Gate. She was retired and drove for Uber part-time.

"I'm off the clock but I'll be happy to give you a ride," she said. "Ten bucks. You won't get a taxi for that."

Maria had almost said no. That would leave them with almost nothing. But then she

thought about Pete. Walking twenty-five miles, or even half that, might make him sick again. Or he could have a seizure.

Uncle Nate can lend us money if we need it. That's what family did, right?

"Sure," she'd said, and the relieved smile on Pete's face told her she'd made the right decision.

On the way, while the driver, whose name was Edna, made a lot of small talk, Maria had time to think about their next steps. Her parents knew they were going to see Uncle Nate. That meant the police probably knew as well. And maybe Devlin; he seemed to know every move they made. There could be all sorts of people waiting for them to get there. And if that happened, they might never let Nate give Pete the key or whatever it was. They'd be in so much trouble their parents might just take them back home.

We can't come this far and not see things to the end. She imagined Marko barking his agreement, like he'd done other times, but they were driving with the windows closed and she couldn't hear anything.

Maybe they were both crazy, but she had to see this through to the end. If you went on an adventure, you had to finish it.

What would Benny and Big G do?

They'd make sure no one was watching the house.

Which meant you didn't just pull into the driveway.

When the car came to a stop, Maria got out and thanked Edna for all her help. Pete looked confused but he didn't object. After Edna drove away, Maria explained why she'd changed their plans.

"I didn't think of that," Pete said. "What do we do if the cops are there?"

"We'll figure something out. C'mon."

It was only two streets to where their uncle lived. As they approached the corner, they saw a black car parked by the curb. There were no houses nearby; it looked like Nate's house was the only one in his circle.

"Take out your compass," Maria whispered. Pete dug it out of his pocket, where he'd carried it ever since getting it back. When he had it opened, she told him, "Ask it to show you where the nearest police officers are."

He did. The box grew cold and frosted over.

The needle pointed right at the black car.

"Damn." Maria pulled him back down the street and behind some trees. "We have to figure out a different way to get to the house. Can you ask the compass to show us the safest direction?"

Pete thought about it and then shook his head. "It might not know the difference between not getting hurt and not getting caught."

"Right." Maria looked around. It was all woods behind Uncle Nate's house, and empty fields on either side, as if the town had planned to build more houses on the street but never got around to it. Then she had an idea. "We go back a street. Follow it to the end. Go into the woods there and then come around behind Uncle Nate's house. They can't see us if we're in the backyard. Then we just have to figure out how to get inside."

"What if they've got guards in the house?" Pete asked.

Maria shrugged. "Then we're caught. We don't have any other choice. We can't just hide forever and hope they go away. If Mom and Dad aren't already here, they will be soon. And they'll never leave without us."

Pete bit his lip. She knew what he was thinking. The last time they'd gone into the woods, Devlin and his buddies had jumped them.

Somewhere in the darkness, a dogged barked three times.

Marko. Telling us to hurry. She didn't know how she knew, but she did.

Pete smiled. "Marko says we should do it." He pocketed the compass and followed her as she ran up the road the next cross-street. It was longer than Uncle Nate's, with almost twenty houses on it. They cut through peoples' backyards, climbed over fences, and tried not to make any noise. By the time they reached the first trees marking the woods, Pete was wheezing and had to stop. Maria waited until he caught his breath and then motioned for him to stay right behind her as she did her best to move from tree to tree.

"No more running," Pete whispered.

"Shhhh." She held a finger up to her lips. Very little light made it through the branches from the sky or road. It was hard to tell how far they'd come. She tried to remember what the distance had been from Uncle Nate's street to the one before it. Fifty yards? A hundred? She couldn't even use time as an estimate because they had to walk much slower in the woods to avoid stepping on anything or hitting their faces on branches.

The night seemed too loud as and too quiet at the same time. Things rustled in the dark, sometimes on the ground and sometimes over their heads. Crickets chirped and tree frogs sang from their hiding places. Each noise set her heart racing and she'd stop, afraid it was someone sneaking up on them. Finally, after what seemed like fifteen minutes, she asked Pete to check the compass.

"Where is Uncle Nate's house?" he asked.

The needle turned to their left. Maria told him to wait, and she crept forward to the last

line of trees.

At the far end of a backyard was Uncle Nate's house. All the windows were dark.

"Do you think he's asleep?"

Maria gasped and barely held back a shout at Pete's voice from right behind her.

"I told you to wait!"

"I was cold."

She bit back a sarcastic comment about it being warm out. He'd gone pale again, and when she touched his arm his skin was clammy. How long could he over-exert himself before he had a seizure? If they could get into the house, he could lie down, even if Uncle Nate wasn't home.

"Okay. We'll try the back door, and then the windows."

Bent low, they hurried across the yard and went straight to the back door. It was locked. Of course. She'd hoped that out in the country people weren't as careful. The windows were open, but too high for them to reach.

"You can boost me up," Pete said. She considered it, and then shook her head.

"What if you fall? Those cops will hear you."

"There's no other way in."

Maria looked around and spotted a possible answer to their problem. "Actually, there might be."

She pointed at the basement windows set into the foundation. They were all cracked open, and even though they weren't full-size, they were large enough for a young boy or a skinny teenage girl to crawl through. As long as they could open one all the way.

Pete caught on and pulled on one. It swung down flat. He poked his head inside.

"Do you see anything?" Maria asked.

"It's pretty dark. Not a big drop. Just like our basement. My height." Without waiting, he slid forward and disappeared. Maria heard a dull thump. Before she could ask him if he was alright, his voice reached her. "It's okay. Nothing here."

She swung her legs into the rectangular hole and slid forward. The drop was no worse than jumping off their front stairs.

She'd expected the cellar to be pitch dark, but two nightlights, plugged into walls at either end of the basement, gave just enough light so that you wouldn't trip or walk into something. Everything was shades of gray; some large, irregular shapes that were probably furniture. A few boxes stacked to one side. And a set of stairs.

"Let's go." She climbed the steps, wincing each time one of them creaked loudly under their weight. At the top, she paused and listened by the door. After a minute, she turned the knob and slowly opened it.

A nasty odor reached them and she was glad they hadn't just eaten. It reminded her of driving by a dead animal on the highway.

"Eeww, gross," Pete whispered, and pulled his shirt over his face. Maria copied his idea. Pete reached for a light switch but she stopped him.

"The cops'll see it."

"But we can't see anything."

Maria looked around. Pete was right, but also wrong. There was light. A clock glowing over the stove in the kitchen, and another on a coffee maker. In the other direction, a nightlight and an ancient VCR cast a very faint glow through a small living room. She was able to make out furniture, dark shapes on the walls that were probably pictures, and a hallway that led further

into the house.

In the center of the hallway was a closed door.

She went over and opened it. As she'd guessed, it was a closet. She felt around inside. If it was anything like her mother's hall closet, there'd be—

"Yes!"

"What?"

She pulled out a flashlight and flicked it on. The sudden brightness was like a silent explosion in the dark and she quickly aimed the beam at the floor. It still provided enough light for them to see by.

Maria crept down the hall, Pete right behind her. If their uncle was home, the only places left in the tiny house where he could be were the bathroom and bedroom. As they walked, the rotten odor grew worse. The bathroom was empty, with a bunch of towels on the floor and several medicine bottles on the sink. A few feet further, the bedroom door stood open. Trying to breathe as little as possible, Maria aimed the light inside.

An unmade bed with crumpled sheets occupied one side. There was a large, dark stain in the middle of it and she quickly aimed the flashlight away. Another stain covered a big part of the carpet. Past that was a simple desk with papers on it.

And a box. Just like the one with the compass.

"Look!" Pete said. He pushed past her and opened it. Inside was an envelope. He held it to the light. *For Pete* was written in shaky script across the front.

"Open it," Maria whispered, but he was already using his finger to tear open the top. He pulled out a single sheet of paper, his hands shaking.

Pete, here is the Key. Together with the Compass, they will take you to wherever

you need to be and open all the doors.

"What does that even mean?" Maria asked. Pete shook his head and looked inside the box. A single key rested inside. He picked it up. It was only a couple of inches long, and much thinner than a house key. The top had a shape almost like a three-leaf clover, and inside the widest part were symbols, like on the compass. A rainbow, a star, a half-moon, a dollar sign, and a door. The shaft of the key was simply a straight rectangle, with no jagged edge and a flat tip. The whole thing was dark, like iron, but clean and smooth without a hint of rust.

When Pete held it up, it reminded Maria of a Celtic cross, only without all the fancy designs.

"It's cold, just like the compass," he said.

Somewhere outside, a car door slammed. The sound reached them clearly through the open bedroom window.

"Someone's here!" Pete shoved the key and the letter into his pocket.

"Out the back door," Maria said, turning off the light. They hurried to the kitchen, keeping their hands on the walls to guide them. Maria unlocked the door and they ran outside.

Right into the arms of two large men.

"End of the road, kids. We've got you now."

CH 21

Pete stared out the window of the black SUV and struggled to hold back his tears. Next to him, Maria looked as sad and angry as he felt. She'd even tried to help him escape from the two FBI agents, kicking one and shoving the other while yelling "Pete! Run!"

It hadn't worked.

The agents, whose names were Billingsley and Wilkins, took them by the arms and led them to their truck. Since then, they'd been standing outside, talking to each other and on their phones. With the windows up, Pete couldn't hear what they were saying. Not that it mattered.

We were so close! But now Uncle Nate was dead—Agent Billingsley had told them, saying he was sorry, it was cancer—and they were about to lose their last chance to find the Rainbow Bridge.

Billingsley and Wilkins opened their doors and got in. Wilkins started the truck and they headed for the main road.

"Where are you taking us?" Maria asked.

"To the police station," Billingsley said, turning to look at them. "Your parents will be here in a couple of hours. You kids oughta be ashamed. They've been so worried sick about you, especially you, Pete. The doctors said you need to get home right away."

"Why?" Pete crossed his arms. "I'm fine. I haven't had any seizures."

"It's not that. You might—"

Bright lights appeared in the dark and there was a huge crash. The truck spun around in a dizzyingly fast circle and the driver's side window shattered. Metal screamed and brakes squealed. Pete slammed into the door and then bounced off the back of the passenger seat, only

his seatbelt stopping him from falling to the floor. Maria shouted. The truck hit something and Pete's head struck the ceiling.

The truck came to a stop.

Pete barely had time to catch his breath and then someone pounded on Maria's door.

"I've got you now, bitch!"

Devlin Kim.

Pete recognized the voice and his face, even through the tinted glass. Maria shouted at him to go away. Devlin smiled and held up a key.

"I've got one, too, Maria. Opens anything." He touched it to the door handle and all the doors unlocked. He opened Maria's door. She tried to back away but her seatbelt stopped her. Devlin leaned in.

"End of the line, kids. You're uncle's dead, and you're next. But first, you have some things I want. So hand them—"

Hands grabbed him and pulled him away from the car. Billingsley threw Devlin to the ground. Devlin rolled over and whipped a knife out. He stabbed the FBI agent in the leg. Billingsley stumbled back and two people tackled him. Pete saw they were Devlin's no-good buddies, Tommy and Lee.

Pete unbuckled his belt and opened his door. "C'mon!" he shouted at Maria. She slid across the seat and followed him as he ran toward the woods. There was a break in the trees and a sign for a hiking trail. Pete sprinted down the trail until Maria grabbed his shoulder and said they should hide, they'd be too easy to follow on the trail.

"Okay." He let her take the lead and they pushed their way through trees and brush until they reached a stand of pine trees.

"I've got an idea," she said, and pointed up. "They won't think to look up."

The close-growing branches made it an easy climb, easier even than the tree in their backyard. When they were about twenty feet high, they found a thick branch to sit on.

"Now what?" Pete asked.

"I don't know," Maria answered. "We don't even have your pack. Devlin will get the key and the compass."

"Nuh-uh." Pete took both boxes from his pockets. "I learned my lesson the last time."

"Then I guess we just wait. After Devlin's gone, we'll use the compass to find the bridge."

The Watcher slammed his fist against the hood of the rented SUV.

Failure! Again!

"You're done," he shouted into the phone. "I'll get the boy myself. Take your little friends and go home. I'll deal with you later."

He closed the connection while Devlin Kim was still trying to explain what happened. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered except the boy now had the Key and the Compass. As soon as he figured out how to use them...

I can't let that happen. There's still time.

"Hurry," he said to the driver as he got back into the SUV. "I want us in Heaven's Gate yesterday."

As they drove, he pulled up a map on his phone. The boy had the Compass, but he had the power of the internet and several important people who owed him favors. Maybe that would

be enough.

Devlin resisted the urge to scream and throw his phone away as the connection went dead.

"I guess that's it," Lee said. He and Tommy had heard everything. "Let's go home."

"We're not going anywhere." Devlin kicked one of the FBI agents. Both of them lay on the ground, hands cuffed behind their backs. "We are getting the Key and Compass."

"Right, then we'll be in good with the Big Man again."

"Screw him." Devlin headed for the FBI agents' SUV. Tommy's car was too smashed to drive. "We're keeping them for ourselves. If we've got both of them, who needs him? We'll go anywhere and have all the money we want."

"Yeah, but we don't know where the kid's going next."

"No, but we know someone who does."

Pete and Maria waited another hour after Devlin and his buddies stopped searching and returned the way they'd come. Neither of them said a word the whole time, and Pete had started to think they'd have to spend the entire night in the tree when a dog barked three times somewhere in the dark of the woods.

"Marko," Pete said. "I think that means it's safe now."

Maria muttered something Pete didn't hear and started climbing down. Pete followed, his hands aching from holding on to the tree for so long and his butt asleep from the branch digging

in to it. By the time they reached the bottom, they were both covered in sap and had bark and pine needles stuck to their clothes, their hair, and their arms.

"Now what?" Pete asked. He thought Maria would say they follow the trail, but she surprised him.

"We need food and water. And showers. We don't know how far this bridge of yours is from here. We should go back to Uncle Nates, get what we need, and then start looking."

"What if the cops are still there?"

Maria pointed at his pocket. "Ask your compass."

"Oh, yeah." He took it out, wondering why he hadn't thought of that. The last few hours seemed like a bad dream. Finding out Uncle Nate was dead. Devlin and his friends after them again. While they'd been stuck in the tree, he couldn't stop wondering why Uncle Nate hadn't left better clues. He had to have known he was sick. Had he died before he could write all the instructions? Had he intended to tell Pete everything in person? Why hadn't he just explained everything when he sent the compass?

Pete held the compass up. "Is it safe to go back to Uncle Nate's?"

The metal grew cold and the needle swung back and forth. He tried again.

"Are the police still after us?" The needle went left and right, left and right.

"That's a big help," Maria said. "Ask again."

"I'm trying." Pete stared at it. He had no idea what other question to ask. And he was tired. And hungry. All he wanted to do was have something to eat and go to sleep and not wake up for a week. It was all too much, everything was too hard, it wasn't fair, he was just a kid and—

"Why won't it pick a direction?"

A direction.

Pete groaned. He must really be tired. The answer was right there. It was a compass, not a fortune teller.

"Which way to the safest place for us to take a bath?"

The needle spun a circle and then pointed directly east.

Right down the path, back to Uncle Nate's house.

Way off in the distance, Marko barked.

With a sigh of relief, Pete put the compass away and started walking.

And hoped he could make it all the way back without collapsing first.

Devlin Kim was just finishing his third cup of coffee when two state police cars roared past the diner, lights flashing and sirens screaming. He put his cup down and signaled for the check. They could've been responding to anything, but the fact that they were Staties, they were heading in the direction of the uncle's house, and in a dinky town like Heaven's Gate nothing bad probably ever happened at seven in the morning, told him it was time to get moving.

"Finish up. We're leaving," he said to Tommy and Ed.

"Why?" Tommy asked, through a mouthful of food. Bits of egg sprayed out as he spoke.

"Every cop in the state will be looking for us in a few minutes. We gotta find a place to hide."

That proved more difficult than he'd thought. In a town as small as Heaven's Gate, it was hard to steal a car. Everyone knew everyone. And there was only one motel, a rundown Super 8. Devlin figured the Rhodes would have to stay there when they arrived in town, but trying to find

a way to watch it without being seen was almost impossible. Until he noticed the empty strip mall across the street. Only three stores, and all of them out of business. He used his Key to get into the one that didn't have all the windows boarded up. The inside was empty and smelled of sawdust and mold, but it was better than nothing. Someone had taped brown paper over the windows, which meant they couldn't be seen. All he had to do was tear a few holes and they had a perfect view of the motel. The store even had a bathroom with running water.

"Now what?" Tommy asked, after they'd found some old boxes and set them up by the window. He'd been nervous and fidgety ever since he figured out the cops would especially be looking for him, since it was his car they'd left by the two feds.

"Now we wait. When the Rhodes show up, we pay them a visit."

And after that, I'll have the Key and the Compass all for myself.

Pete knew he was dreaming, but he didn't want to wake up.

In his dream, Marko was still alive and barking with joy as he chased a stick. They were in a big field, the sun was shining, and the day was that perfect warm that only happens at the end of June and beginning of July, before it gets so hot you start to sweat as soon as you step outside. Pete's body felt strong and he wasn't the least bit tired. No bad guys or police were after him and he wasn't going to get in trouble when his parents found him

But he knew if he opened his eyes, all that would go away.

The dream started to break apart. First Marko disappeared, then the smell of tall grass and wildflowers. The only thing that remained was sun.

A toilet flushed somewhere.

All his aches and pains came back. He groaned as he sat up. They'd slept on the two worn out couches, not wanting to spend any time in the bedroom where Uncle Nate had died.

"Hello, sleepyhead." Maria came out of the bathroom, drying her hair with a towel. The smell of shampoo followed her. She was smiling, but it looked forced. Pete figured she was still worried someone would show up, even though he'd told her he was sure Marko would alert them if the FBI or Devlin came back.

"Hi." He tossed his blanket aside and moaned again. All his muscles hurt, like when you got the flu. Just like when they'd been in Jim's truck. Food had helped then; maybe that's what he needed now. When they'd gotten to the house, they'd eaten some crackers and cookies from one of the cabinets and then both fallen right asleep. That had been...he didn't even know. He could see through the windows it was daytime, but sky was a dull, uniform gray. Was it morning or afternoon?

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Almost two-thirty."

Wow. He'd slept for more than eight hours, but it felt like only three or four. He'd be perfectly happy eating something and going right back to bed.

"What's for breakfast?" He stood up. The room tilted for a minute and he steadied himself by gripping the arm of the couch.

"Not much, unless you want moldy bread and spoiled milk. Whatever you do, don't open the refrigerator. I already made that mistake." Maria waved her hand in front of her face.

They went through all the cabinets and managed to put together a meal of cookies, Ritz crackers, baked beans, and peanut butter.

"You know, a week ago if you told me this was what I'd be eating for dinner, I'd have

said you were nuts," Maria said, dipping her chocolate chip cookie into the peanut butter. "Now it tastes like heaven."

"We should save the rest. We don't know how far it is to the Rainbow Bridge."

"It didn't look far on your map." Maria finished her cookie and washed it down with water. "Uncle Nate wouldn't want to walk miles every time he had to go there."

Pete hoped she was right. He wished they still had the map, but it was in his pack along with his medicine. Although he felt better with food in his stomach, he still wasn't looking forward to more miles of walking.

But I'll do it, he thought. To see Marko again, he'd do anything.

Maria closed the cookie and cracker boxes and put them in a grocery bag she found in a closet. Then she sat down across from him.

"Listen, before we go, we need to talk. You left your pack in that FBI agent's truck. Your medicine was in it. You need those pills. Uncle Nate has a phone." She pointed at the old-style phone hanging on the kitchen wall. "We can call Mom and Dad. They can bring you more medicine, and then we can—"

"No!" Pete stood up. "You know they'll make us go home. They won't let me find the bridge. If you wanna stay, fine. But I'm going."

"Okay!" Maria held up her hands in surrender. "I'm just worried about you."

"Well, don't be. Like you said, it can't be far. And once we find it, we can bring Mom and Dad there, show them I was right. Then they'll have to let us keep going back."

"I don't know about that. It's Mom and Dad. But whatever. Go shower. I'm gonna see if I can get on Uncle Nate's computer and find another map or something that can help us."

Pete considered skipping the shower and taking another nap, but that would just worry

Maria even more. And after he was done, he had to admit he felt a lot better. The hot water seemed to wash away his aches along with days of dirt and sweat. He felt more awake, too.

It sucked that they had to put on their same dirty clothes, but everything in Uncle Nate's drawers and closets was way too big for either of them. And his washing machine wouldn't turn on when Maria tried it. Instead, she sprayed their shirts with some air freshener so at least they didn't smell so bad.

When they were ready to go, Pete took out the compass and asked which way to the Rainbow Bridge. The needle spun once and pointed right at the path they'd taken earlier.

"Well, let's get this done," Maria said. "The weather doesn't look great."

The gray sky had turned noticeably darker. The chance of rain had turned into a real threat.

"Put this on." Maria handed him a red square. It felt like a cheap plastic tablecloth but when he unfolded it, he found it was a disposable poncho, like the kind you bought at baseball games. It had no sleeves, but it would keep their heads and bodies somewhat dry.

He hoped.

Looking like twin Little Red Riding Hoods, they crossed the yard and entered the woods again.

I'm coming, Marko. I'll be there soon. I promise.

The answering bark was only in his head, but he knew his old friend had heard.

CH 22

"They're here."

Devlin shot up, instantly awake, at Tommy's words. He'd dozed off on the floor, using his jacket for a pillow. He went to the window and peered through one of the holes they'd made in the paper.

Sure enough, Mr. Rhodes was getting out of the same rental car as before, with a couple of small suitcases in his hands. There was no sign of his wife. Devlin figured she was waiting for him in the lobby.

Rhodes crossed the parking lot and went in the main entrance.

"Okay, we give them a half hour to get settled then we pay them a visit."

"How will we know which room they're in?" Lee asked.

Devlin took out his knife and flicked open the blade.

"The clerk will tell us."

Ray Billingsley was buttoning his shirt when his phone buzzed. Curtis Wilkins, who was seated by the window of Billingsley's hospital room, picked it up and glanced at it.

"It's Ed Rhodes."

Billingsley took the phone, listened for a moment, and then said "Okay, we'll see you in an hour."

"They're in town?" Wilkins asked, tossing his newspaper down as Billingsley slipped into his jacket.

"Yeah. Staying at the Motel 6 at the other end of town. We'll meet them at that crappy diner after they get settled in."

Billingsley headed for the door, silently cursing Devlin Kim with each limping step. The knife wound hadn't been bad but he'd lost a lot of blood laying on the ground until Wilkins regained consciousness. Then they'd had to roll next to each other and fumble around until they could get the handcuff keys off Wilkins' belt. After that, he'd bandaged it up with his tie, but they'd had to wait close to another half hour for the ambulance to arrive. And, since Heaven's Gate didn't have a hospital, it'd been forty-five additional minutes until they got him to the emergency room.

He'd ended up spending the night and getting two bags of blood, along with fifteen stitches.

While he'd been stuck in bed, he'd vowed that no matter what, Devlin Kim would spend a long time behind bars.

"Good. When I get my hands on Kim, that asshole's gonna wish he stayed in New York."

Billingsley glanced back at his partner. Wilkins looked angrier than he'd ever seen him. Billingsley understood his reaction. The kid had been a thorn in their side the whole time. Screwing up their arrest in Virginia. And then last night not only attacking them and letting the kids escape, but knocking him out and stealing both his car and his gun.

Getting suckered like that by a teenager didn't look good on an FBI agent's record.

At least they had the gun back. One of the teens had apparently dropped it during their escape in the stolen FBI SUV.

What a mess. And he still had no idea how Devlin and his crew kept showing up. It couldn't be the Rhodes kids, they didn't even have a phone. The parents certainly wouldn't be

passing them information. More than once, he'd wondered if someone in the FBI was a mole, but that didn't make sense, either. How could a teenage hoodlum have a secret contact inside the agency?

Well, soon it wouldn't matter, he thought, as he got into the passenger seat of the new SUV they'd requisitioned from the staties. It's the end of the road for everyone. They had the map that Peter Rhodes had left behind, and a little work with a top secret version of Google Earth had allowed them to locate an actual natural bridge less than three miles from Nate Rhodes' house. The Rhodeses agreed that it had to be where Peter and Maria were headed. The plan was for them to meet up, grab some food, and then all go to Nate's house together. The staties would meet them there and a full search party would set off after the kids.

With any luck they'd have the kids back with their parents and Devlin and his delinquent pals in custody before nightfall.

And if Devlin Kim suffered a few bruises while resisting arrest, so much the better.

Devlin motioned for Tommy and Lee to stay to either side of the motel door. Room 125 was on the first floor. The desk clerk had been very happy to give them that information, while Devlin held the knife to his neck. They'd left him unconscious and tied up in a closet for his helpfulness.

Now, Devlin was glad to see the door didn't have one of those security peepholes. That made this even easier. He knocked twice and said in a loud, deep voice, "Mr. Rhodes? Officer Twitchell, Tennessee State Police. We have a message for you about your children."

"Just a minute," came a woman's voice from inside, followed by footsteps. A second

later the door opened.

"Have you heard from—Oh!" Her eyes went wide as Devlin, Tommy, and Lee all stepped forward. Devlin shoved her back into the room and Tommy shut the door behind him.

"Hey, what's going on?" Mr. Rhodes came out of the bathroom, still in the act of brushing his teeth, and saw them. He tried to go for his phone but Devlin grabbed Mrs. Rhodes' arm and twisted it up behind her back. In a flash, he had his knife out and the blade pressed against her throat.

"Don't do it, Ed," Devlin said. "One of you get the phone."

Tommy crossed the room and took it. Then he pulled the motel phone cord from the wall. In the meantime, Lee dumped Mrs. Rhodes' pocketbook onto the bed and found her phone. He also went through her wallet and held up a handful of cash, which he pocketed.

"Now, here's how this is gonna go down," Devlin said, while Tommy and Lee pushed Mrs. Rhodes into a chair and held her there. "You're gonna tell me where your pain in the ass children are going or the pretty lady here is going to have a second mouth."

He pressed the knife a little tighter and Mrs. Rhodes whimpered. He wished he could just cut her right there, but they needed the information more. Plus, a murder rap would have every cop in the state after them in an hour.

And until he had the Key and Compass, he couldn't be sure he'd get away.

"We don't know," Mr. Rhodes said, his face a mix of fury and terror.

"That's too bad." Devlin swiped the knife down and cut a shallow line across his captive's arm. She yelped and then cried out as he twisted her other arm higher while he returned the blade to her neck.

"See that?" He turned her so the tiny stream of blood on her arm was in plain sight. "Next

time she loses her nose. Now, tell me with the little bastard is."

Devlin was glad to see the anger disappear from the man's face and fear take over. Now they were getting somewhere. But he still wasn't talking.

"Last chance." He raised knife, stroked it along her lip to her nose. Tears ran down her cheeks and her whole body trembled.

"Okay!" Mr. Rhodes held up his hands. "I'll tell you."

"Make it fast."

"In the woods behind my brother's house. A couple of miles back. There's a river, and a stone bridge. They're looking for the bridge. But you have to let the police find them. Pete is..."

"He's sick," Mrs. Rhodes whispered. "He has cancer. He needs a doctor."

"No shit, Sherlock. Guess what? It don't matter anymore. This time tomorrow they're gonna be dragging the river for his body. And your bitch-ass daughter, too. I'll make sure of that."

She let out a wail and he and pushed her face-down on the comforter, muffling the noise. Her husband tried to get up and Tommy smashed a fist into the side of his head. His eyes rolled up and he fell onto the floor.

"Gimme something to tie them up," he told Lee.

Five minutes later, Mrs. Rhodes lay on the floor, her wrists and ankles bound by telephone cord wire. Mr. Rhodes was strapped to the cheap desk chair with the shower curtain and two pillow cases. Both of them had washcloths stuck in their mouths.

"See ya around," Devlin said, as they left the room. "Maybe at Maria's funeral."

The horrified look in Mrs. Rhodes' eyes kept him smiling as he used his Key to steal their car and they headed off to Nate Rhodes' house again.

Comin' for ya, kiddies. Playtime's over.

"Something's wrong." Billingsley checked his watch for the third time in ten minutes. Outside the diner, the first drops of rain had started to fall. From the way the sky looked, there was a good chance they'd be getting a real monsoon in a short while. Not a good day to traipse through the woods, but they had no choice. "They should've been here fifteen minutes ago. Try their phone again."

Wilkins hit redial on his cell. After four rings, it went straight to voice mail. Just like the previous time.

"You think they went to the uncle's house by themselves?"

"I wish." Billingsley shook his head. "The way this case has gone? C'mon, let's head for the motel."

Halfway there, a call came over the state police truck's radio.

"Any units near Heaven's Gate. Ten-Forty-Seven reported. Repeat, Ten-Forty-Seven, possible injury."

A familiar churning started up in Billingsley's stomach. He grabbed the mic.

"This is Assistant Special Agent Billingsley of the FBI, in Heaven's Gate. What's the situation."

"Hello, Special Agent Billingsley. We just had a call from the Motel 6, the desk clerk reported that he'd been assaulted."

"We're on our way there now. ETA three minutes."

"I knew it," he muttered, as Wilkins stepped on the gas. "I friggin' *knew* it. Kim. It has to

be him and his buddies."

Wilkins said nothing, but his clenched jaw spoke volumes. He brought the truck to a screeching stop by the front office. Billingsley leaped out the door, gun ready. and ran for the entrance, ignoring the sharp pains shooting up his leg.

A quick check showed the office empty except for the clerk, who lay on the floor, his head bloody and a cordless phone by his mouth. His hands were bound behind his back and his ankles tied.

"Had to dial with my goddamn nose," he said.

"What'd the want?"

"Lookin' for someone." The clerk moaned as Wilkins untied him.

"The Rhodeses."

"Yuh-huh. Room 125."

"Call for backup and an ambulance," Billingsley told Wilkins, and then took off down the sidewalk. When he got to Room 125, he rammed his shoulder against the door, putting his full weight into it. The second time, the hasp splintered and the door flew open.

"Jesus Christ."

The rain was coming down nice and steady by the time Billingsley pulled into Nate Rhodes' driveway. The weather reports said it would get worse before it got better, with a strong chance of localized flooding.

Not the kind of day—or night—for two kids to be out in the woods.

Valuable time had been wasted at the motel, first making sure the Rhodeses weren't hurt, then trying to arrange for additional officers to aid in the search. Unfortunately, there'd been a

multi-car accident on the highway about thirty miles away and every available state and local police officer was needed there. Which left Billingsley with two choices: wait for reinforcements or head out right away and let the other officers catch up later.

It only took one look at Mr. and Mrs. Rhodes for him to make up his mind. Those people had been through enough. Devlin Kim planned on killing their children, and Billingsley had no doubt the teenage psychopath would do it.

So he'd gotten them all into his SUV—there'd been no talking them out of waiting—and headed right for the uncle's house.

Luckily, there was still no sign of Kim or his buddies. But that didn't ease Billingsley's concern. Those assholes were proving to be smarter than the looked, and he fully expected they were either already after Pete and Maria, or soon would be. It was going to be a race, one that he intended to win.

"All right, remember what I told you," he said to the Rhodeses, while Wilkins passed out FBI rain slickers. "You stay behind us at all times. Do not engage with Kim or anyone. That's our job. Yours is to stay safe for your children."

"We've got it." Ed Rhodes gripped his wife's hand. "Let's stop wasting time."

Billingsley nodded and they entered the woods, just as the heavens opened and the rain became a downpour.

When this is over, I am putting in a for a very long vacation.

Pete rubbed his arms together under his poncho and tried to wiggle his toes inside his sneakers while he walked. His entire body was soaked and despite the warm, humid weather he

was cold and couldn't stop shivering. His toes were numb and he couldn't tell if his nose was dripping or if it was rain on his face. Or both. His wet clothes felt like they weighed a thousand pounds and every step was like trying to walk with someone sitting on his back. Plus the trail had turned to pure mud, making their footing dangerous. They'd both slipped and fallen a couple of times.

All of it meant they'd been forced to walk a lot slower than they wanted, which in turn meant getting even colder and wetter. And now the sun was starting to go down. In a couple of hours it would be night and they'd have to stop, because they wouldn't be able to see a thing.

We have to reach the bridge before then.

Two miles had never seemed so long. Pete was starting to wonder if Maria had read the map wrong, that it was five miles. Or maybe ten. He wasn't sure he could make it that far. His whole body hurt and he just wanted to collapse right there. He remembered other times he'd been sick, how his mother would tuck him under the blankets on the couch and make him some nice, hot tomato soup while he watched TV. And Marko would always jump up to snuggle with him, adding even more warmth.

He wished he could just go back in time, so that none of this ever happened. Not running away, not being stuck in the cold rain. And Marko not dying.

But that's why you're doing this. To bring him back. To be with him again.

Up ahead, Maria came to a stop.

"Listen," she said, raising her voice over the sound of rain hitting the leaves and ground.

He was about to ask what was wrong when he heard it, too.

A roaring sound, almost like waves on a beach or....

The stream!

The map had showed the path coming to a stream and then turning to parallel it. And a little further up was the bridge.

The Rainbow Bridge.

“We must be close.” Maria took his hand and they tried to walk faster. The mud kept sucking their feet down, and Pete was afraid it would pull his sneakers right off. Then the trees opened up, revealing a sharp drop that led down to the stream. Only it wasn’t a stream.

It was practically a raging river.

Although only about thirty feet across, the stream looked more dangerous than any actual river Pete had ever seen. The rushing water churned and boiled as it flowed past. There wasn’t a single calm spot; every inch seethed with white fury as it sped downstream. It reminded Pete of the adventure movies where people in rafts got stuck in white water rapids and they were flung all over the place. Only this looked worse. No raft or canoe could ever stay upright in it.

Logs and sticks flashed by. When Pete peered down, he could see how the violent flow was carving pieces of the bank away on both sides. The flooding rain had added probably a couple of feet of depth to what was usually a gentle creek, and there was no way to tell how deep it was, or what the waters hid.

“We need to go right,” Maria said, pointing the way. The path followed the edge of the miniature cliff. She backed up as far from the drop as she could without hitting any trees. Pete did the same. Falling would mean almost certain death.

They’d only taken a few steps when a figure stepped out of the woods in front of them and threw back the hood of his sweatshirt.

“End of the line, kids.”

Devlin Kim held up a knife and smiled.

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"This was almost too easy." Devlin stood on the trail, unfazed by the rain pummeling them. Tommy had his arms wrapped around Maria so tight she couldn't move if she wanted. She'd tried to wriggle free but Devlin had threatened to let Tommy throw her off the cliff if she didn't calm down. Lee had a similar grip on Pete, who hadn't bothered to fight back. He looked totally defeated. Despite her anger, Maria felt the same way.

No matter what they did, Devlin was always a step ahead of them.

"Once I got the location of the bridge from your parents, we came right here. I knew you'd go looking for it, even in the rain. We caught up with you like half a mile ago and cut through the woods to get ahead of you."

He walked up to Pete, mud and water squelching from under his shoes. Still holding the knife in one hand, he reached into Pete's front pocket with his other and pulled out the two boxes with the key and compass.

"Well, now, looky here. They're finally mine. You should've just given them to me when you had the chance, cancer-boy."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Maria asked. Devlin grinned and poked Pete in the chest with the handle of his knife.

"It means Petey here has got cancer again. Your parents found out a couple of days ago. Poor kid ain't got long."

Pete's mouth dropped open and Maria's heart stuttered. Cancer? That couldn't be right. The doctors said he was cured years ago, that it would probably never come back.

Probably isn't the same as never.

Was that why he's been so tired?

Is he dying?

"Which is why this ain't murder." Devlin grabbed Pete by the shirt and dragged him to the edge of the cliff.

"No!" Maria tried to pull free but Tommy's arms were like iron bars.

Pete kicked and shouted but Devlin just laughed and gave him a shove. Pete swung his arms and tried to keep his balance. His foot slipped off the edge.

Then he was gone, his scream drowned out by the rain and the rapids.

Devlin turned and approached Maria, his features twisted into an evil leer.

"Now it's your turn, bitch. First I'm gonna get what you've been teasing me with all this time. Then I'll let the boys have a turn."

Tommy let go of her as Devlin came close. The moment she was free, she slammed her foot right into Devlin's crotch. He cried out and dropped the knife and the two boxes as he fell to his knees. She grabbed for the boxes but he slapped his hand at them, sending one sliding away. She snatched up the other and ran for the cliff. There was only one chance to save herself, and Pete.

When she got to the edge, she jumped.

There was no time to think as the icy torrent rushed up to meet her. She struck hard on her side, like hitting an icy wall that shattered under her weight. Her body went numb and then water filled her nose and mouth and she knew she was drowning, all her swimming lessons forgotten in an instant. Something smashed into her leg and she tumbled over and over as the current grabbed her. Her shoulder struck a rock and the water carried her over it. Her face broke the surface and she sucked in a gasping, choking breath before she went down again. She

slammed into a rough object and clawed at it. Branches poked her arms and she clutched them. Pulling herself up, she took another breath and coughed up water. The current threatened to pull her downstream but she kept her grip on the log she'd collided with.

Pete!

She looked down stream. For a terrifying moment, all she saw was churning rapids. Then there was a flash of red. His poncho! It looked like he was snagged on another tree further down.

Taking in a deep lungful of air, she let go of the log and dove forward. The current sped her along as she did her best to use her hands and feet to avoid the largest of the rocks. In a couple of spots, the water was so deep her feet didn't touch bottom and she guessed she'd gotten lucky and landed in one of those pools when she jumped. Had Pete's guardian angel kept him safe too, or was he already dead, his body broken and—

No. He couldn't be.

Please be alive. Please be alive.

Then he was right in front of her, half in, half out of the water. She grabbed a branch and climbed onto the log. Once she had her balance, she used her free hand to pull Pete further out of the water. His eyes were closed and his lips gray. When she turned his head, water dribbled out of his mouth and nose but he didn't wake up.

"Dammit, Pete!" There was no way she could check if he was breathing without losing her grip. She'd have to get him to shore.

Only that seemed impossible. The water was too rough. Maybe if she didn't have to carry Pete...

I have to try.

She looped one arm under Pete's. He was a skinny kid, small for his age, but trying to

move him while also keeping her balance against the current was almost too much for her. She managed to keep her feet and slide him off the log without losing him, but that was only because she still held on to a branch with her other hand. If she let go, the water would sweep her away.

Just do it.

She turned her back to the shore and wrapped her arms around Pete from behind. Maybe if she walked backwards...

Maria took a careful step. The water hammered against her legs but she didn't fall. If she lifted one foot at a time, put it down, made sure it didn't slip, she could do it. *It's only twenty feet or so. Just have to—*

Her foot slid on a slime-coated rock. She felt her balance going, she was going to—

Hands grabbed her shoulders and hauled her up.

"I've got you."

"Dammit to hell!" Devlin stood at the edge and watched Maria disappear into the roiling water.

"What? You were gonna toss her in anyhow," Lee said. "What's the difference?"

"She's took the damned Compass!" Devlin smacked Lee across the face. "Now it might be gone forever."

"Hey, guys, shut up a minute." Tommy held up his hand and stared back the way they'd come on the trail. Devlin stepped away from the embankment to hear better. The rain had eased up a bit, no longer a downpour.

Voices.

"It's gotta be the cops," he said. "C'mon. We can't stick around here. We'll wait on the other side of the bridge."

"You really think they're alive?" Tommy asked, as they jogged down the muddy path.

"Nothing else has gone right. I won't believe they're dead until I see their bodies."

"I've got you."

Maria screamed as the hands gripped tighter. She turned, expecting to see Devlin there with a knife to her throat. Instead, a familiar face smiled at her.

"Benny?"

"I'll explain later," he said, taking Pete from her. "Go. I'll bring him."

More figures stood on the stream bank. Maria couldn't believe her eyes. Big G. Rufus. Even Allie. Big G waded out and helped Benny carry Pete onto the muddy shore. They laid him down and Rufus touched his neck.

"He's not breathing."

"No, do something, please, he can't die!" Maria fell to her knees next to Pete.

"Look out." Big G pushed down on Pete's stomach. Once. Twice. On the third time, Pete let out a choking cough and spit up a mouthful of water. Benny turned him on his side and thumped his back. Pete coughed again and then vomited more water.

"We need to get him warm," Benny said. Rufus took a blanket from his pack and wrapped it around Pete's shoulders. After another coughing spell, he was able to sit up.

"Oh, god, I thought I'd lost you!" Maria pulled him close and hugged him. He was shivering, but managed a weak grin.

"I'm hard to kill," he whispered, his voice hoarse.

"C'mon, we'll build a fire."

"No." Pete shook his head. "We need to get across the bridge before..." he stopped and took a couple of deep breaths. "...before Devlin gets there."

"Pete, enough is enough. You're sick. You heard what Devlin said. We need to get you to the hospital fast."

"What's wrong?" Benny asked.

"His cancer. It came back. We have to find our parents. Or the police."

"All right. We can—"

"Stop. I'm not going back. I have to do this." He slowly got to his feet. He wobbled for a moment and Maria reached for him but he slapped her hand away. "I won't quit now. I don't care if I die. I know Marko's waiting for me. More important, we have to stop Devlin from using that key."

Maria looked at Benny and shook her head. He opened his mouth but before he could say anything, a very recognizable bark sounded from somewhere further down the trail.

Marko.

Benny turned his head. So did Allie, Rufus, and Big G.

"You all heard it," she said.

"That's kind of why we're here." Benny put his arm around Pete. "I'll tell you about it on the way. Let's go find that bridge."

Pete's expression fell. "I don't have the compass anymore."

Maria reached into the pocket of her poncho and pulled out the wooden box. "You don't, but I do."

Big G laughed.

"So what are we waiting for?'

"After I left you at the truck stop, I met up with the rest of the crew at the tracks. We were gonna hop the next train to Florida. I was sayin' I wondered if we'd ever hear from you again, if you were gonna be okay, when all of a sudden, the strangest thing happened."

Benny was talking as they walked. They were keeping the pace slow, which Pete knew was for his benefit.

Cancer. You have cancer. You're dying.

He tried not to listen to that voice, to concentrate on the compass in his hands and Benny's story. But it kept creeping back, and it sounded a lot like Devlin.

Dying. Gonna die, cancer boy.

The thought was terrifying, and at the same time it didn't seem real. He couldn't be dying. He was just sick. The doctors got rid of his cancer when he was little, they'd do it again.

Your uncle died of cancer. Right there in his bedroom.

Maybe Devlin was lying. He could've made the whole thing up. He was definitely mean enough to do that.

You know it's true. You can feel it. You can barely walk. Everything aches. Just go home and maybe the doctors can help.

Pete's anger rose up. The voice just wanted him to quit. It was the same voice he heard when he was learning how to ride a bike, or sneaking off into the woods to catch frogs, or throwing a baseball with the kids at the park. Somewhere inside was a part of him that was afraid, afraid to take chances, afraid to get hurt, afraid of everything. He'd always thought it was

because his parents worried so much about him having a seizure if he did too much, or was too far from home by himself.

Now he wondered if maybe it was just part of who he was.

Well, he'd never let it stop him from doing what he wanted, and it wouldn't now.

You can just go to hell, he told it, and focused all his attention on Benny.

"A dog barked."

"Marko," said Pete, and it wasn't a question. Benny had heard Marko before. It made sense.

"Yeah, but here's the crazy part," added Rufus. "We all heard it."

"What?" Maria looked at Benny, who nodded.

"Yep. Clear as day. And then up on the tracks ahead of us, this dog came out of the brush. A Yellow lab. That's what you said Marko was, right?"

"You saw him?" Pete asked.

"I guess. He stood there and barked at us. When I walked toward him, he ran back a few yards and did it again. I asked it if it was your dog, and it sat down. I swear, the damn thing smiled at me."

"We thought he was crazy," Allie said. "It was just a dog. And then..." She shook her head. Big G finished her sentence.

"It just disappeared."

Benny picked up the story. Told them how the yellow dog vanished. And then a second later, the barking came from behind them and the dog was sitting there.

"Like a magic trick," Benny said. "I got this weird feeling it was trying to tell us something, so I told it to bark once for yes and twice for no. Then I asked if it wanted us to

follow it."

"It barked once," Big G said, sounding like he still couldn't believe it.

"Then I asked if Pete was in trouble, and it barked once again. So I asked if it wanted us to meet you at the bridge. It barked once, and then, poof! It was gone."

"So we left that night," Big G finished.

"Not everyone wanted to go." Benny glanced at Allie, who shrugged.

"Magic dog or not, I didn't want to get involved. Nothing personal," she added.

"But you came anyhow," Pete said. "Thank you." His feet slipped in the mud and Rufus grabbed his arm, held him until he was steady on his feet again. Maria gave him a worried look but he shook his head. They were not stopping for anything.

"I don't understand, though. How'd you find us?"

Benny pointed at Allie. "She's got an almost photographic memory. We saw the map, you told us where you were going. Allie remembered it all. That's why we needed her."

"They couldn't do it without me, so I couldn't say no. When we got closer, we looked this place up on the internet and found a picture of the bridge. Figured it had to be the one. But we came from the other direction." Allie pointed ahead of them.

"Wait, you mean you already know where the bridge is?" Pete couldn't believe it. "It's real? You've seen it?"

Benny laughed and gripped Pete's shoulder as they rounded a curve in the trail.

"See for yourself."

The Rainbow Bridge was nothing like Pete expected.

It crossed the violent stream at a narrow point, no more than thirty feet from end to end.

The bridge itself was very simple. Made of wood, with railings on both sides that came up to Pete's waist. It arched in the middle and Pete figured it got its name from the shape. The wood had a weathered look, like it had been there for ages, but it didn't seem rotted or falling apart. There were two signs in front of it. One said Rainbow Bridge and the other No Fishing.

On the other side was a wide, grassy meadow that seemed to stretch on forever.

"This is it?" Maria asked, one eyebrow raised.

Pete held out the compass, which pointed directly at the unremarkable span.

"All right, then, let's see what's at the end of the rainbow." Rufus pulled Big G and Allie to one side and Benny did the same with Maria, leaving Pete by himself.

"Well?" Benny asked.

Pete looked at him. "What?"

Benny bowed and waved his arm like a Pete was a king or something.

"This is your adventure. You should cross first."

Laughing, Pete ran forward and grabbed the railing.

Here I come, Marko! I hope—

The world exploded in a blinding flash of light.

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It's so beautiful.

Pete squinted against the blazing summer sun that had appeared out of nowhere. The moment he stepped foot on the bridge, the clouds had disappeared and the stormy skies transformed to robin egg blue. The meadow was a brilliant green expanse dotted with wildflowers that extended forward, left, and right as far as he could see.

Pete looked back and the rest of the group was just staring at him with confused faces. Rain still fell on them and everything was gray and wet.

"What's wrong, Pete?" Maria asked.

"You can't see it?"

"See what?" Benny frowned.

Before Pete could answer, voices reached them from somewhere back on the path. Out of sight, but not far.

"Someone's coming!" Allie said. "Hurry."

Pete ran across the bridge and heard the other kids follow. Somebody gasped and he heard Big G say "Holy cow!"

When they reached the other side, everyone was smiling and laughing.

Maria gave him a big hug and swung him around. Benny patted his shoulder and Rufus gave his arm a friendly punch.

"It's real," Maria shouted. "You found it. This place is real!"

"I wasn't sure about your story," Rufus said. "I mean, a magic bridge? But what just happened... man, this is like freakin' Narnia."

Pete strode through the knee-high grass, unable to stop smiling. The sun was wonderfully warm on his face and already chasing away the cold and wet from the stream. Birds flew overhead and grasshoppers hummed. Even the air smelled like the best summer day ever, fresh and green.

"Keep moving," Allie said. "Those people are still after us. I got a quick look at them. Bunch of guys in dark suits. Probably cops."

They picked up the pace, and Pete wondered what came next. Doggie heaven was supposed to be on the other side of the Rainbow Bridge, but he couldn't see anything. How far would they have to walk? And there certainly weren't any dogs.

"Marko!" he called out. "Marko, we're here! We made it."

A figure rose up in front of him, and then two more. Pete came to a stop as Devlin Kim pointed his knife at them.

"Your dog ain't here kid, but I am. You've got somethin' that belongs to me. And this time I'm gonna make sure you're good and dead after I get it."

Agent Billingsley came to a stop as up ahead the group of teenagers stepped onto the wooden bridge.

And disappeared.

"What the hell?" asked Wilkins from next to him. "Where'd they go?"

Billingsley shook his head. The last thing he'd seen was the girl—not Maria—pause and give them the finger. Then she'd taken another step and...poof.

Gone.

"Where are they?" Mrs. Rhodes came up to them. "Where are my children?"

There was nothing Billingsley could say. What he'd seen... it was impossible.

Or magic, his mind supplied. He thought about the things Nate Rhodes had written for his nephew. Crossing the bridge to another place, a place where...

No. There had to be another explanation.

"They went across that bridge," he told the Rhodeses. "That grass must be higher than it looks. We should hurry so we don't lose them."

He led the way to the bridge. As they got closer, they saw lots of footprints in the mud, the rain already filling them in. Muddy tracks stained the first few boards of the bridge and then they vanished, too. Just like the children.

Stop it!

"Okay, just like on the path. You two stay behind Wilkins and I." He grabbed the railing and put his foot onto the first board.

Everything he knew and believed about the world shattered.

"I don't think so." Benny stepped up beside Pete. Big G and Rufus joined him. "You gotta come through us, asshole."

"Happy to." Devlin swung his knife back and forth. Behind him, Tommy and Lee pulled out their own switchblades.

Big G let out a roar and charged forward, Rufus and Benny a step behind him. Tommy swung his knife in a wide arc that Big G dodged right before colliding with him. The knife went flying and the two of them went down, throwing punches. Rufus wasn't as lucky. Lee was fast

and sliced him across the arm. Rufus cried out in pain and Benny went to his aid, tackling Lee from behind.

Pete was so caught up watching that he never saw Devlin come up behind him until an arm tightened around his neck and the blade flashed in front of his eyes.

"Gotcha now." Hot, stale breath wafted across Pete's face. "End of the line."

"Devlin Kim. Drop the knife!"

The deep voice boomed across the field. Devlin turned, Pete still held firm in his grasp.

The two FBI agents, Billingsley and Wilkins, stood there, guns drawn. And behind them...

"Mom! Dad!" Maria waved and started toward them, then paused as Devlin pressed the knife under Pete's chin.

"Everyone stay back or the kid dies right here," Devlin shouted. The agents stopped but didn't lower their guns.

Tommy and Lee moved over to stand next to Devlin, while Benny, Big G, and Rufus joined Allie off to one side. Rufus had a hand pressed to his upper arm. Blood dripped from between his fingers.

"Let him go," Billingsley said. "You're in a lot of trouble, but nothing like what happens if you take this any further. Put down the knife and maybe we can work out a deal."

"I don't think so, Agent Billingsley," a new voice said.

Pete gasped as the air by the bridge shimmered and more people appeared out of nowhere. A tall, heavy-set man in a blue suit held a chrome pistol in his hand. The gun and his bald head reflected the sun like both had been shined with wax. With him were three other men, all of them built like football players and holding wicked looking pistols.

One of the men grabbed Maria, who kicked and screamed but couldn't break free. Outnumbered, the agents tossed their weapons away and then stood there fuming while one of the newcomers bound their wrists with thick, black plastic tie wraps. He did the same with Maria and their parents.

"Hello, Devlin," the bald man said, and Devlin's hand trembled so bad Pete was afraid the knife would slip and cut him.

"I told you I'd take care of everything," Devlin said. He thrust his chin out defiantly but Pete heard the fear in his voice. Tommy whispered something about "the big man" that Pete couldn't hear the rest of.

"Very good. Now give me the Key and the Compass." The bald man motioned with his gun.

Devlin switched the knife to his other hand, pressed it against Pete's neck, and then took the compass box from Pete's pocket.

"I don't think so. There's been a change of plans. You fired me, remember? Bad move on your part. I didn't risk my life so you could have all the glory. 'Cause I know if I hand these over, we're as good as dead."

Lee muttered a curse and backed away.

The bald man smiled and just seeing it told Pete the guy was crazy. Like, insane. It reminded him of the Joker from the Batman comics, with his lips stretching almost from ear to ear.

"Devlin, you should think carefully. You and I have invested a lot of time and effort into finding those. A lot of hard work. Don't throw it all away now on a silly whim. My promise is still good."

"Hard work?" Devlin pointed the knife at Maria. "You don't know what it's been like for me. Having to put up with her for the last year? Acting like I wanted to be with her? Playing nice with her stupid family? And this brat."

Devlin squeezed Pete's neck harder, causing Pete to cough.

"The only time I enjoyed myself was messing with their heads. Music too loud when I came by early in the morning. Hiding stuff so they'd have to look for it. Hey, brat, did you know I was the one who left the front door open so the dog would get out? I did it a lot. Laughed my ass off watching you all run after the mutt. I didn't plan on it getting run over, but that turned out even better."

It was Devlin's fault? The heartbreaking loss of Marko rose up again, fresh as if it just happened.

"You killed Marko!" Pete tried to kick Devlin's legs but he had no strength to do any damage. Devlin laughed again and poked Pete's chest with the point of the knife.

"You idiot!" the bald man shouted at Devlin, his face twisting with fury. "How many times did I tell you, never interfere. That was rule one."

"I don't give a damn about your rules, old man." Devlin held up the two boxes. "I'm in charge now. I've got the Key and the Compass. Now I'm gonna—"

A familiar bark sounded nearby.

Marko! Pete wanted to call for his old friend but he could barely take in enough air to breathe. The barking grew closer, and then other dogs joined in, a whole chorus of barks and yips and howls.

"What the...?" Benny's eyes grew wide as he stared at something behind Pete and Devlin. The others all looked shocked as well, even the men with the guns.

Devlin turned, swinging Pete around with him.

A pack of dogs was running toward them. Dozens and dozens of them. All breeds and sizes, from tiny chihuahuas and terriers to giant Great Danes and St. Bernards.

With Marko right at the front!

The pack split in two, half aiming at the bald man and his goons, the other half, led by Marko, racing straight for Pete and Devlin.

“Shoot them!” the bald man cried.

“No!” Pete shouted, but they didn’t listen, just aimed their guns and fired.

Nothing happened.

No dogs fell, none of them yelped in pain. They just kept coming. And then they attacked.

The dogs leaped onto the men and knocked them to the ground. Labs and Dobermans and German shepherds grabbed arms and legs and sat on chests. Toy poodles and Yorkies snarled and tugged at pants and sleeves. The men shouted and fought but more dogs piled on.

Devlin let go of Pete as Marko and his pack got close. Pete’s legs collapsed and he fell, gasping for air. Marko ran to him and licked his face. Despite feeling like he might pass out, Pete threw his arms around his old pal.

“Marko,” he whispered, unable to speak any louder.

It was really him! His fur smelled like summer grass and his breath was sweet like he’d just eaten some dog cookies. His tongue, wet and smooth, was exactly the same as always. He gave a happy whine and nuzzled his head against Pete’s shoulder.

“I knew you’d be here,” Pete said. “I knew you were real.”

Then there were arms around them both. Pete opened his eyes and saw Maria and Benny

had joined them, and they were crying, and he realized he was crying, too.

"Put down the weapons," a new voice said. "They won't do you any good."

"Oh, my God. Nate?"

Pete looked up. His father and mother were staring wide-eyed at a man walking toward them. Pete recognized him from the pictures he'd seen just a day ago.

Uncle Nate.

The same Uncle Nate who'd supposedly died several days earlier.

Only this Nate looked anything but dead. His dark hair fell down to his shoulders, just like in the photos of him from his magician days. He looked young and healthy, no older than his younger brother, who looked as surprised as Pete felt.

The bald man raised an eyebrow and slowly placed his gun on the ground.

"Hello. I presume you are the Keeper? I didn't expect to see you here."

Nate gave a short bow. "I made a living surprising people. And you must be the Watcher. I'm sorry you had to waste your time."

"Not at all," the Watcher said, motioning toward Pete. "It's always good to meet your opponent. You made a good choice."

Nate nodded. "I did."

The Watcher looked at Pete and smiled. Like before, it didn't touch his eyes. "You'll be a worthy adversary, young man. I look forward to the coming years. Until we meet again." He imitated Nate's bow, and Pete understood there was a real threat behind his words. Then he turned and motioned for his men to follow him. The dogs moved away and allowed the men to get up. As they crossed the bridge, they each disappeared when they reached the middle. For the first time, Pete realized that the view of the other side was a mirage, just as the image of the

meadow had been before they crossed.

Magic.

Nate turned his attention to Devlin, Lee, and Tommy, who were still surrounded by too many dogs to count. Devlin still held his knife at the ready.

"You can't win against them. They're already dead. There's no way you can hurt them anymore, and they know it."

"Anymore?" Pete asked.

Nate's face grew sad. "They are the homeless, the abused, the abandoned. The ones who die alone in the streets or in dog fighting rings, laboratories, or shelters. The ones who never had a master to love them, and to love. They guard the entrance to the Rainbow Bridge until such a time that their work is done, and they are replaced by another. Only then can they move on.

"But there's so many," Maria said, sounding close to tears. "How long does it take?"

"Not long, actually." Nate helped Pete stand up. Marko yipped and wagged his tail and pressed himself against Pete's leg. "But the world is filled with uncaring people, and for every dog that fulfils its duty here, there are three more to take its place."

"What about the rest?" Pete asked, while Big G and Rufus used pocket knives to clip the plastic bonds from the wrists of the FBI agents and the Rhodeses. "The ones with masters? Like Marko?"

"They're here, too," Nate said. "I've only been dead a few days, but their numbers are increasing. They're waiting for someone who can guide them home. And only a Keeper can do that."

"So who is this Keeper if it's not you?" Mr. Rhodes asked.

It took Pete a few seconds to figure out why Nate, Maria, and Benny were all staring at

him.

"Me? I'm the Keeper."

Nate patted his shoulder. "Only if you want. You see, each Keeper chooses his or her replacement. I chose you years ago, but I had to be sure. That's why I brought Marko to you. If you hadn't grown up to be such a good friend to him, well, I'd have had to look elsewhere."

"What about the other pets?" Maria asked. "The cats, the rabbits, the birds?"

"That's a good question. There's a different Keeper for every species. One person couldn't handle all the animals. But if it can love, and be loved, there's a Keeper. And before you ask, wild animals don't need a Keeper. They know how to find their Bridge and move on by themselves."

Pete thought about everything as he watched the FBI agents handcuff Devlin and his friends and read them their rights. Agent Billingsley took the Key box from Devlin and brought it over to Pete.

"I believe this is yours, Peter. Try to hang on to it." As they led the three teens to the bridge, Billingsley paused by Mrs. Rhodes. "You've got two amazing children. And... well, I know how hard this has been on all of us, but after seeing this place, and the hope it represents, I can honestly say I wouldn't have missed it for the world."

Then they were gone, too, disappearing as they crossed back into the real world.

Or is this the real world? Pete wondered. And what would happen when they went back? How could he ever go back? Nothing was the same anymore. He'd discovered a whole new reality, been reunited with his dead dog and his dead uncle, and he was...

Sick. Dying.

Marko whimpered and licked his hand.

“What’s wrong?” Nate asked.

“I can’t be the Keeper,” Pete whispered. “I’ve got cancer. I’m dying.”

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"I'm dying." The words echoed in Pete's head and he saw the expressions on everyone's face as they remembered he didn't have long to live. How could he be the Keeper if he only had months—maybe weeks!—to live? Uncle Nate would have to choose someone else. The only thing left for Pete was to go home, find out how much time he had.

At least I'll be with Marko soon.

"Pete, don't give up." Mr. Rhodes shook his head. "The doctors will—"

"What? Dying? Before you even take the job? We can't have that, can we? I might be dead, but I still have a couple of tricks up my sleeve." Uncle Nate took the Key from Pete and pressed it against Pete's chest. The metal glowed and Pete cried out as sudden fire raced through his bones. Then it was gone and Nate was holding the key up. Marko gave a happy bark and ran circles around Pete and Nate.

"What... what did you do?"

Nate winked. "This key can do a lot more than open doors. It can only heal a person once in their lifetime, but that should keep you going for quite a few years. Quite a few," he repeated, with another wink.

"You mean, I'm cured?" Pete looked down at his chest. He did feel better. A lot better, actually. Like his old self.

"It's a miracle!" Mrs. Rhodes burst into tears and Mr. Rhodes put his arms around her. Maria was crying as well, and didn't even complain when Benny hugged her close.

"So, now what?" Pete asked, still trying to grasp that he'd been cured by magic. "Your note said you'd explain everything."

Nate laughed. “I have. All you need to know was transferred to you by the Key just now. I always knew you’d be the right choice. But like I said, I had to be sure.”

“You mean, this was all a test?”

“Sure was. Your whole life’s been a test, and you passed with flying colors. Now it’s time for me to go. Brutus is waiting.”

“Brutus?” Mr. Rhodes frowned. “Wasn’t that the name of your dog when we were kids?”

Nate’s smile grew wider. “That’s right. Sometimes our companions have to wait a long time for us to join them. He’s here, and so is every other dog I’ve ever owned. But it’s okay. They have all the time in the world, and they’re very patient.” He whistled, and a high-pitch yapping sounded. A tiny chihuahua with big eyes and pointed ears separated from the pack and came running over. It danced on its hind legs and twirled around in circles.

Nate motioned for Pete and his parents to join him. They moved away from the others.

“This is going to mean some big changes in your life. You’ll have to leave your home, everything thing you know. The Keeper has to be near a bridge. It doesn’t have to be this one; in fact, it shouldn’t be, since now the Watcher knows where it is. And you’ll have to be careful. There’s bad forces out there who’d just love to get their hands on the Key and the Compass.”

“Like that Watcher,” Pete said. “Or Devlin.”

“And they’re not the only ones. For every good, there is an evil. Two sides of the coin.”

“How will I know which bridge is the right one?” Pete asked. This was all so confusing! But he could feel answers stirring inside him. The answers were there, he just needed to ask the right questions.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret.” Nate leaned down, placed his hand on Pete’s chest, and whispered in his ear. “They’re all the right one. Because the real bridge lies within the Keeper.

It's a part of you, and it will be wherever you are."

When Pete frowned, Nate ruffled his hair. "You'll understand soon enough. I chose this place because it was secluded and I enjoyed the walk each day. But any bridge will do. Any at all. That's the beauty of magic."

"Dammit, Nate, he's just a kid," Mr. Rhodes said, scowling at his brother. "You can't put this on his shoulders. How can he do this? He's got school. And the dangers... how will he know who to trust?"

"I have faith in him," Nate said. "He's got the Compass and the Key. They'll show him what he needs, and take him to it. Besides, he's got you and Kristen, and Maria."

"And us." Benny approached them, his arm around Maria. Rufus, Big G, and even Allie were right behind them. "Us, too," they all said in unison.

Pete thought about Uncle Nate's words, and the mysterious instructions waiting inside his head. The Compass and Key could do so much more than he imagined. He looked at the hundreds of dogs waiting a few yards away. All of them sitting, some with their tongues hanging out. Their expressions excited, happy, anxious. Like Marko when it was time to go out and play, but Pete was taking too long. They wanted to leave, go to their version of doggy heaven. And only one person could open that door.

How could he say no to them?

"Dad, I have to do this." Pete took a deep breath and stared at his parents. "We can't just make them wait until I'm older."

Mr. Rhodes looked at his wife. She bit her lip. Marko whined, and Brutus gave a 'hurry up' yip. She shrugged and gave her husband a rueful smile.

"It looks like I'm outvoted."

Mr. Rhodes turned to Nate. “Can that Compass show me the way to a new job once we get to... wherever?”

Nate laughed. “The possibilities are endless. Now, it’s time for me to go.” He gave each of them a hug, saving his biggest one for Pete. Then he stepped back.

“Go ahead, Pete. You know what to do.”

Pete’s chest tightened with panic. “But I don’t know—”

And then suddenly he did.

It happened without warning. There was no explosion of light, no godly voice in his head. His hands simply knew what to do. He lifted the key and inserted it into his chest, right over his heart.

The real bridge lies within the Keeper.

He turned the Key halfway.

Behind Nate and the gathered dogs, the air shimmered, like looking at a long road on a really hot summer day. The dogs all jumped up and barked with joy, then ran for the hazy curtain that extended from one end of the meadow all the way to the other. As they reached it, they faded away, their happy voices disappearing after their bodies.

Nate stepped back, waving, his body growing indistinct. Brutus and Marko walked with him, turning slowly into ghosts of themselves.

“Wait,” Pete shouted. “What about Marko? Do I have to wait until I die to see him?”

“No worries,” Nate’s voice came back to them. “He’ll be there anytime you cross the Bridge. Why do you think I spent so much time on this side?”

Marko barked once, and then all three of them vanished.

Pete waited, tears running down his cheeks. He trusted Uncle Nate, but it still hurt to lose

Marko again, so soon after he'd found him.

A distant bark echoed over the meadow. With it came a picture in his head. Marko running around in a sunny field. With him were a whole bunch of other dogs, and they chased each other and rolled together in the grass.

They were the ones who were waiting, standing guard, until their owners finally arrived.

The ache in Pete's chest eased a little and he removed the Key. His old friend really would be there if he needed him. All he'd have to do is ask.

"Now what?" Maria came up to him and gave him a hug. Her face was as wet as his.

Pete looked at her, and then at everyone else. Benny, Rufus, Big G, and Allie. His parents. The people who loved him, and who he loved most in the world.

All waiting for him to decide the next steps.

He took out the Compass and opened it.

"I guess it's time to start asking some questions."

Into the Light

I know that you can't see me
But trust me I'm right here
Although I'm up in Heaven
My love for you stays near

So often I see you crying
Many times you call my name
I want so much to lick your face
And take away your pain

I wish that I could make you see
That Heaven indeed is real
If you could see me run and play
How much better you would feel

But someday you will know the truth
That when the time is right
You'll step out of the darkness
And meet me in the light.

"You'll Meet Me in the Light," Author Unknown

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