

LOUIS SACHAR

**FUZZY
MUD**

Delacorte Press

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Also by Louis Sachar

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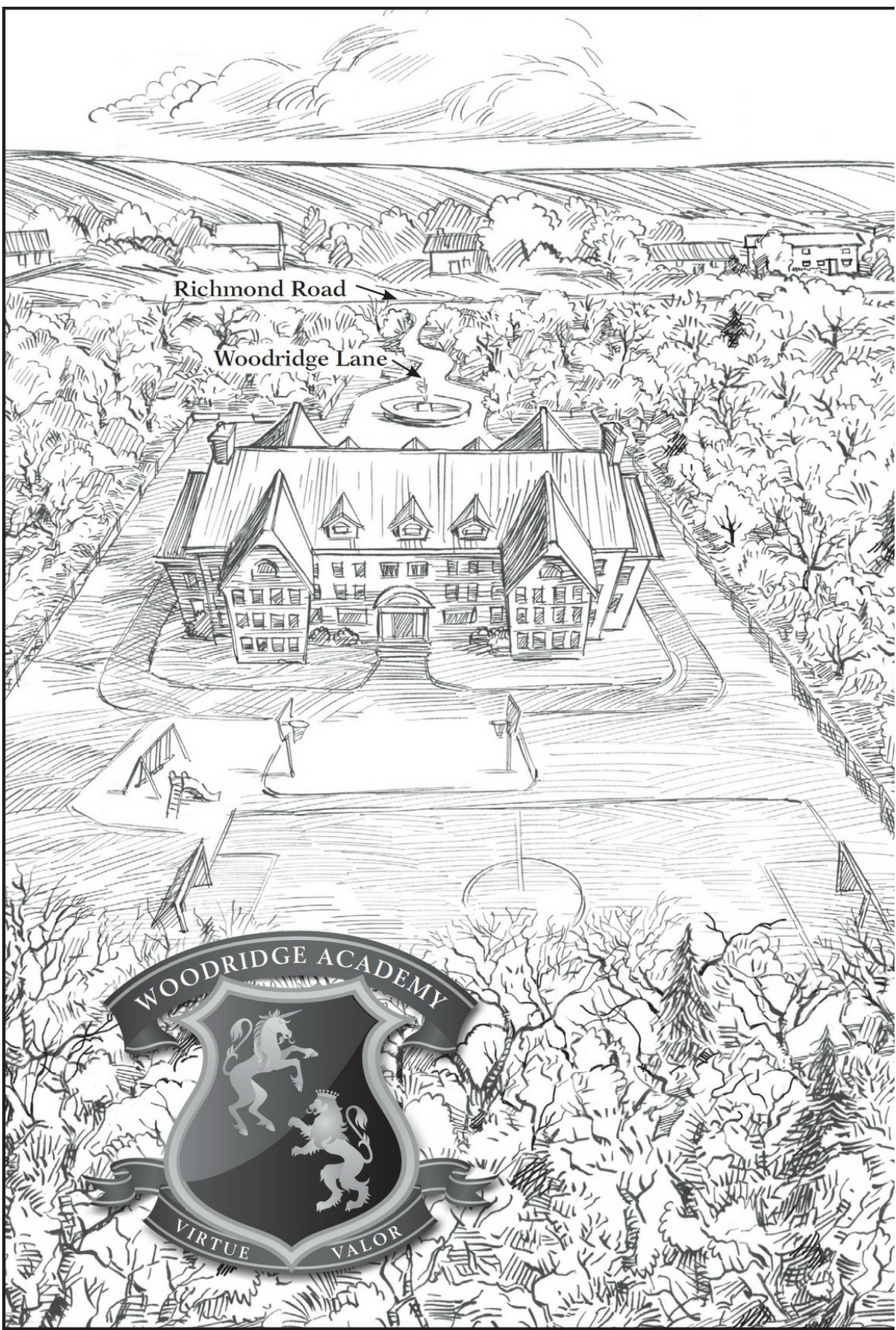
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1

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 2
11:55 A.M.

Woodridge Academy, a private school in Heath Cliff, Pennsylvania, had once been the home of William Heath, after whom the town had been named. Nearly three hundred students now attended school in the four-story, black-and-brown stone building where William Heath had lived from 1891 to 1917, with only his wife and three daughters.

Tamaya Dhilwaddi's fifth-grade classroom on the fourth floor had been the youngest daughter's bedroom. The kindergarten area had once been the stables.

The lunchroom used to be a grand ballroom, where elegantly dressed couples had sipped champagne and danced to a live orchestra. Crystal chandeliers still hung from the ceiling, but these days the room permanently smelled of stale macaroni and cheese. Two hundred and eighty-nine kids, ages five to fourteen, crammed their mouths with Cheetos, made jokes about boogers, spilled milk, and shrieked for no apparent reason.

Tamaya didn't shriek, but she did gasp very quietly as she covered her mouth with her hand.

"He's got this superlong beard," a boy was saying, "splotched all over with blood."

"And no teeth," another boy added.

They were boys from the upper grades. Tamaya felt excited just talking to them, although, so far, she had been too nervous to actually say anything. She was sitting in the middle of a long table, eating lunch with her friends Monica, Hope, and Summer. One of the older boys' legs was only inches away from hers.

"The guy can't chew his own food," said the first boy. "So his dogs have to

chew it up for him. Then they spit it out, and then he eats it.”

“That is so disgusting!” exclaimed Monica, but from the way her eyes shone when she said it, Tamaya could tell that her best friend was just as excited as she was to have the attention of the older boys.

The boys had been telling the girls about a deranged hermit who lived in the woods. Tamaya didn’t believe half of what they said. She knew boys liked to show off. Still, it was fun to let herself get caught up in it.

“Except they’re not really dogs,” said the boy sitting next to Tamaya. “They’re more like wolves! Big and black, with giant fangs and glowing red eyes.”

Tamaya shuddered.

Woodridge Academy was surrounded by miles of woods and rocky hills. Tamaya walked to school every morning with Marshall Walsh, a seventh-grade boy who lived three houses down from her and on the other side of their tree-lined street. Their walk was almost two miles long, but it would have been a lot shorter if they hadn’t had to circle around the woods.

“So what does he eat?” asked Summer.

The boy next to Tamaya shrugged. “Whatever his wolves bring him,” he said. “Squirrels, rats, people. He doesn’t care, just so long as it’s food!”

The boy took a big bite of his tuna fish sandwich, then imitated the hermit by curling his lips so that it looked like he didn’t have any teeth. He opened and closed his mouth in an exaggerated manner, showing Tamaya his partially chewed food.

“You are so gross!” exclaimed Summer from the other side of Tamaya.

All the boys laughed.

Summer was the prettiest of Tamaya’s friends, with straw-colored hair and sky-blue eyes. Tamaya figured that was probably the reason the boys were talking to them in the first place. Boys were always acting silly around Summer.

Tamaya had dark eyes and dark hair that hung only halfway down her neck. It used to be a lot longer, but three days before school started, while she was still in Philadelphia with her dad, she made the drastic decision to chop it off. Her dad took her to a very posh hair salon that he probably couldn’t afford. As soon as she got it cut, she was filled with regret, but when she got back to Heath Cliff, her friends all told her how mature and sophisticated she looked.

Her parents were divorced. She spent most of the summer with her dad, and one weekend each month during the school year. Philadelphia was on the opposite end of the state, three hundred miles away. When she returned home to Heath Cliff, she always had the feeling that she’d missed something important while she’d been gone. It might have been nothing more than an inside joke that her friends all laughed at, but she always felt a little left out, and it took her a while to get back into the groove.

“He came *this close* to eating me,” said one of the boys, a tough-looking kid with short black hair and a square face. “A wolf snapped at my leg just as I was climbing back over the fence.”

The boy stood on top of the bench and showed the girls his pant leg for proof. It was covered in dirt, and Tamaya could see a small hole just above his sneaker, but that could have come from anything. Besides, she thought, if he’d been running *away* from the wolf, then the hole would have been in the back of his pants, not the front.

The boy stared down at her. He had blue, steel-like eyes, and Tamaya got the feeling that he could read her mind and was daring her to say something.

She swallowed, then said, "You're not really allowed in the woods."

The boy laughed, and then the other boys laughed too.

"What are you going to do?" he challenged. "Tell Mrs. Thaxton?"

She felt her face redden. "No."

"Don't listen to her," said Hope. "Tamaya's a real Goody Two-shoes."

The words stung. Just a few seconds earlier, she had been feeling so cool, talking with the older boys. Now they were all looking at her as if she were some kind of freak.

She tried making a joke out of it. "I guess I'll only wear one shoe from now on."

Nobody laughed.

"You are kind of a goody-goody," said Monica.

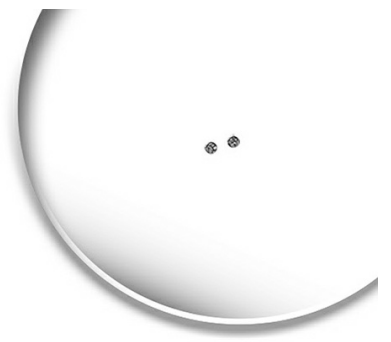
Tamaya bit her lip. She didn't get why what she had said had been so wrong. After all, Monica and Summer had just called the boys *disgusting* and *gross*, but somehow that was okay. If anything, the boys seemed proud that the girls thought they were disgusting and gross.

When did the rules change? she wondered. *When did it become bad to be good?*

—

Across the lunchroom, Marshall Walsh sat amid a bunch of kids, all laughing and talking loudly. On one side of Marshall sat one group. On his other side sat a different group. Between these two groups, Marshall silently ate alone.

2



SunRay Farm

In a secluded valley thirty-three miles northwest of Woodridge Academy was SunRay Farm. You wouldn't know it was a farm if you saw it. There were no animals, no green pastures, and no crops—at least, none that grew big enough for anyone to see with the naked eye.

Instead, what you would see—if you made it past the armed guards, past the electric fence topped with barbed wire, past the alarms and security cameras—would be rows and rows of giant storage tanks. You also wouldn't be able to see the network of tunnels and underground pipes connecting the storage tanks to the main laboratory, also underground.

Hardly anyone in Heath Cliff knew about SunRay Farm, and certainly not Tamaya or her friends. Those who had heard of it had only vague ideas about what was going on there. They might have heard of Biolene but probably didn't know exactly what it was.

A little more than a year before—that is, about a year before Tamaya Dhilwaddi cut her hair and started the fifth grade—the United States Senate Committee on Energy and the Environment held a series of secret hearings regarding SunRay Farm and Biolene.

The following testimony is excerpted from that inquiry:



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TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 2
2:55 P.M.

After school, Tamaya waited by the bike racks for Marshall. The racks were empty. Most of the students at Woodridge Academy lived too far away to ride their bikes, and there were no school buses for the private school. A line of cars extended from the circular driveway up Woodridge Lane toward Richmond Road.

As Tamaya watched the other kids climb into cars and drive off, she wished she had a ride too. She was already dreading the long walk home. It would feel even longer with a backpack full of books.

Her face still burned with shame every time she thought about what had happened in the lunchroom. She was mad at Hope for saying what she'd said, and even madder at Monica, who was supposed to be her best friend and who should have stuck up for her.

So she was a good girl? *So what?* What was wrong with that?

Being good was partly what Woodridge Academy was all about. The students all wore school uniforms: khaki pants and blue sweaters for boys, plaid skirts and maroon sweaters for girls. Embroidered on each sweater, right under the name of the school, were the words *Virtue and Valor*.

Besides learning about history and math and all that, the students at Woodridge Academy were also learning to be *virtuous*. The school was supposed to teach them how to be good people. When Tamaya was in the second grade, she had to memorize a list of ten virtues: charity, cleanliness, courage, empathy, grace, humility, integrity, patience, prudence, and temperance. This year, she was learning their synonyms and antonyms.

But if you actually tried to be good, Tamaya thought bitterly, everyone acted like you were some kind of freak!

Marshall came out of the building. His hair was a mess, and his sweater,

stretched out of shape, seemed to hang crookedly.

She didn't wave. He came toward her, then trudged on past with hardly a glance.

Marshall had a rule. They weren't supposed to act like friends around school. They were just two kids who walked to school together because *they had to*. They definitely were not boyfriend and girlfriend, and Marshall didn't want anyone thinking they were.

Tamaya was surprised, however, because he wasn't going the usual way. Normally they headed up Woodridge Lane and then turned right on Richmond Road. Instead, Marshall was heading toward the side of the school.

She adjusted her backpack, then caught up to him.

"Where are you going?"

"Home," he said, as if she'd just asked a really stupid question.

"But—"

"I'm taking a shortcut," he snapped.

That didn't make any sense. They'd walked the same way every single day for the last three years. How could he suddenly know a shortcut?

He continued around the side of the school toward the back. He was taller than she was, and was walking quickly. Tamaya struggled to keep up. "How do you suddenly know a shortcut?" she asked.

He stopped and turned on her. "I don't *suddenly* know about it," he told her. "I've known about it my whole life."

That didn't make any sense either.

"If you want to take the slow way home, that's up to you," Marshall said. "No one's making you come with me."

That wasn't really true, and he knew it. Her mother didn't allow her to walk home alone.

"I'm going with you, aren't I?" Tamaya said.

"Well, then quit being a baby about it," said Marshall.

She stayed with him as he crossed the blacktop, then went out onto the soccer field. All she'd done was ask how he knew a shortcut, she thought. How was that "being a baby"?

Marshall kept glancing behind him. Every time he looked back, Tamaya instinctively did too, but she didn't see anything or anybody.

Tamaya still remembered her first day at Woodridge. She'd been in the second grade, and Marshall had been in the fourth. He had helped her find her classroom, pointed out where the girls' bathroom was, and personally introduced her to Mrs. Thaxton, the headmistress. The new school had seemed like a big, scary place to her, and Marshall had been her guide and protector.

She'd had a secret crush on him all through second, third, and fourth grades. Maybe it still lingered a little bit inside her, but lately he'd been acting like such a jerk, she wasn't sure she even liked him anymore.

Beyond the soccer field, the ground sloped down unevenly toward the chain-link fence that separated the schoolyard from the woods. As they moved closer to the fence, Tamaya could feel her heartbeat quicken. The air was cool and damp, but her throat felt dry and tight.

Just a few weeks before, the woods had sparkled with bright fall colors. Looking out the window from her classroom on the fourth floor, she'd been able to see every shade of red, orange, and yellow, so bright some days that it had looked as though the hillside were on fire. But now the colors had faded and the trees looked dark and gloomy.

She wished she could be as brave as Marshall. It wasn't just the woods that scared her—and what might or might not have been lurking within. Even more than that, Tamaya was scared to death of getting in trouble. Just the thought of a teacher yelling at her filled her heart with fear.

She knew that other kids broke the rules all the time, and nothing bad ever happened to them. Kids in her class would do something wrong, and then her teacher, Ms. Filbert, would tell them not to do it, and then they'd do it again the very next day and still not get in trouble.

Still, she was sure that if she went into the woods, something horrible would happen to her. Mrs. Thaxton might find out. She could get expelled.

A dip in the rocky ground created a gap big enough to crawl through under a section of the fence. Tamaya watched Marshall take off his backpack, then push it through the gap.

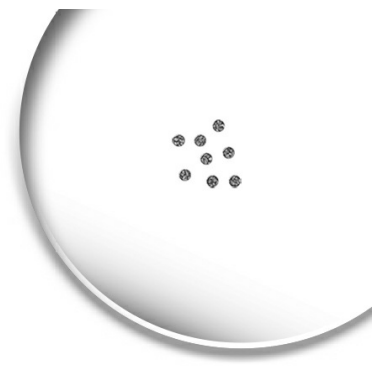
She took off her backpack too. Ms. Filbert had once said that courage just meant pretending to be brave. "After all, if you're not scared, then there's nothing to be brave about, is there?"

Pretending to be brave, Tamaya shoved her backpack through the gap. There was no turning back.

Now who's the goody-goody? she thought.

She wiggled under the fence, careful not to snag her sweater.

4



Marshall Walsh

Marshall Walsh wasn't as brave as Tamaya thought.

He used to have lots of friends. He used to like school. He had taken band in the sixth grade, and his music teacher, Mr. Rowan, had written on his report card that what he lacked in talent, he made up for with enthusiasm.

Marshall plays the tuba with gusto.

He wasn't enthusiastic about anything anymore. Each day brought him nothing but more misery and humiliation. And it had all started with a new kid in his class, Chad Hilligas.

Students attended Woodridge Academy for one of two reasons. Either they were really smart, or else their parents were really rich. Tamaya was one of the smart ones. Marshall was an in-between. His parents weren't rich, but they both had good jobs, and they considered education to be extremely important. They cut back in other areas, like family vacations and going out to restaurants.

The reason Chad Hilligas came to Woodridge was entirely different. He'd been kicked out of three schools in the last two years. The social worker assigned to his case believed that if he was placed in a more positive environment and made to wear a school uniform, he would stop fighting and become a more conscientious and motivated student. If his parents hadn't agreed to pay for him to go to Woodridge Academy, he would have been put in a school at a juvenile detention center.

So Chad had started with everyone else in September. The boys in Marshall's class were in awe of Chad. The girls seemed drawn to him too, even if he also scared them a little bit. And for the first few weeks of this year, Marshall had been right there with everyone else, hanging on every word Chad said, nodding along in agreement, laughing at his jokes.

Some people were terrified of being expelled from school. Chad bragged about it.

“My fourth-grade teacher kept giving me a hard time, so I locked her in the closet.”

“What’d she do to you when she got out?”

“Nothing. She’s still in there.”

And Marshall had laughed right along with everyone else.

Chad claimed he’d been kicked out of five schools, not just three. He was always coming up with new stories about things he had supposedly done. The more he got in trouble, the more everyone seemed to admire him.

Marshall remembered the moment Chad had turned against him. Chad had been telling about the time he had ridden his motorcycle to school.

“Did anyone see you?” Gavin asked.

“Yeah, they saw me,” Chad replied. “I rode it right up the steps of the school and into the principal’s office!”

“No way!” Marshall exclaimed.

Chad stopped talking and slowly turned to Marshall.

“You calling me a liar?”

Everyone became very quiet.

Marshall hadn’t meant it that way at all. He just as easily could have exclaimed, “Awesome!”

“No.”

“You all heard him,” Chad said. “He called me a liar. Anybody else think I’m lying?”

Marshall tried to explain, but Chad shredded his feeble words with a cold, hard stare.

For the rest of the day, that stare seemed to follow Marshall wherever he went. And for what seemed like no logical reason to Marshall, slowly but surely, everyone else seemed to turn against him too.

“Whose side are you on?” Chad would ask. “You’re either with me or you’re with Buttface.”

At first, Marshall tried to pretend that nothing was wrong. He’d walk right up to a group of his friends and try to join in whatever they were doing, but one glance from Chad would send him away, his eyes cast down in shame.

Snide whispers followed him wherever he went, along with not-so-accidental bumps in the hallways. He became afraid to speak up in class. His grades got worse. Often when taking a test, he could feel Chad’s stare burning through the back of his neck, and his mind would go blank.

In other schools, where seventh-grade students changed classrooms every period, Marshall and Chad might have had only one or two classes together. There were only forty-one seventh graders at Woodridge, however, and it was Marshall’s bad luck that Chad was in every one of his classes except his last period, Latin.

Marshall had a brother and sister, twins, who were four years old. Even when he’d had friends and lots to do, he’d always been happy to look after them when necessary, or even when it wasn’t necessary. Daniela and Eric liked to pretend they were lions in the circus. They’d crouch on top of the kitchen barstools and growl, and Marshall would be the lion tamer.

Since losing his other friends, Marshall no longer liked playing with the twins either. It made him feel like a loser. When his parents questioned him about his bad grades, he blamed it on them. “How am I supposed to study when they’re roaring at me all the time?”

It was the same with Tamaya. Everyone picked on him all day at school,

and now he took it out on the only person who was nice to him. He'd hear himself say mean things to her and hate himself for it, but he couldn't seem to stop.

As bad as it had been for Marshall lately, today it had gotten even worse. He'd answered a question in class, right after Chad had given the wrong answer.

Afterward, as he was heading up the stairs on his way to Latin, Chad grabbed him from behind, pulled him down three steps, and shoved him against the railing.

"Listen, Buttface, we need to settle this once and for all."

"Settle what?" Marshall tried.

"After school, on the corner of Woodridge and Richmond Road," Chad told him. "And you better be there, you thumb-sucking coward."

Marshall and Tamaya always walked right past that corner on their way home. They'd been going the same way every day for three years. But today, he suddenly knew a shortcut.



TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 2
3:18 P.M.

By the time Tamaya made it to the other side of the fence, Marshall had already disappeared through the trees. She picked up her backpack and hurried after him, slipping her arms through the straps as she ran. Ducking under a low branch, she spotted him climbing over a small mound of boulders. “Wait up!” she called.

Again, he disappeared from view.

Her knee banged against one of the boulders as she scrambled over the mound. He was waiting for her on the other side, hands on hips, an annoyed look on his face. “What’s the point in taking a shortcut if I have to keep stopping and waiting for you to come pokeying along?”

“I’m not pokeying,” Tamaya insisted.

“Well, hurry up, then,” said Marshall. He turned and started off again.

She stuck close to him as they followed a path that zigzagged through the trees. It had rained the night before, and damp leaves stuck to Tamaya’s sneakers. Leaves continued to fall around them, one here, one there, gently drifting downward.

They must have missed a zig or a zag somewhere, because after a while it became clear to Tamaya that they were no longer on any kind of path. She had to fight her way through tangled branches and then step over a thick patch of thorny bushes.

“You think we should turn back?” she suggested.

Marshall’s answer was short and blunt. “No.”

Tamaya pretended to be brave. Every little noise made her heart leap. She got down on her hands and knees and crawled under a very low branch. “Is this the shortcut?” she asked as she straightened back up.

Marshall didn't answer. He just kept moving forward.

Her sock was torn, and her skirt was splotted with dirt. She didn't know how she'd explain that to her mother. One thing she couldn't do was lie. She would never lie to her mother.

Her parents had divorced back when she'd been in the first grade. They had been living in an apartment in Philadelphia at the time. It was a different apartment from the one her dad lived in now.

Even back then, everyone always talked about how smart she was, which had surprised her, because it wasn't something she gave much thought. She was who she was, and that was all. She'd been given an aptitude test, and then she and her mother had moved to Heath Cliff so she could attend Woodridge Academy.

One thing she wasn't smart about was her parents. She couldn't figure out why they'd separated and why they didn't just get back together. After the divorce her mother seemed very sad for a long time. On Tamaya's last visit to her father, he said to her, "You know I still love your mother very much. I always will." But when she repeated those words to her mother and suggested that maybe they should all live together again, her mother got all sad again.

"That will never happen," she told Tamaya.

Even now, as Tamaya was scared to death that she and Marshall might be lost in the woods *forever*, she couldn't help but think that maybe if she did get lost, her mom and dad would come looking for her *together*. She was imagining what it would be like when they found her, and how they'd all hug each other, when a small animal darted right in front of her.

She stopped. "What was that?" she asked Marshall.

"What was what?"

"You didn't see it?" She wondered if it could have been a fox. "Some kind of animal practically ran over my foot!"

"So?"

"So, nothing," she muttered. She didn't know why he was being so mean.

They came to an old dead tree lying on its side. Much of its bark had rotted away. Marshall climbed up on it and looked around. "Hmmm," he muttered. He looked back the way they had just come.

"Are we lost?" Tamaya asked.

"No," Marshall insisted. "I just need to get my bearings."

"You said you knew a shortcut!"

"I do," he answered. "I just have to find the exact place where it starts. Once I find the starting point, we'll be home in a snap." He snapped his fingers as if that proved it.

Tamaya waited. She heard something crackle behind her, but when she turned around, there was nothing there.

Marshall hopped down from the tree trunk. "This way!" he declared, as if he knew exactly where he was going.

Tamaya scooted around the tree and followed. She had no choice.

They made their way down the side of a hill until they came to a ravine, then followed the ravine upward. Tamaya's backpack felt heavier with every step. She kept thinking she heard something or someone behind her, but when she looked back, there was never anyone there.

Marshall continued to walk quickly. She constantly had to run to catch up but soon would lag behind again. Each time, it became harder to catch up.

Out of breath, she watched him disappear around a curve in the hillside. She shifted the weight of her backpack, gathered what strength she had left, and started to run after him.

Something grabbed her from behind. She felt her sweater being pulled up against her neck, choking her.

She twisted free, then screamed as she fell to the ground. Rolling over, she looked up, but there was nobody—no deranged hermit, no bloodstained beard, just a tree limb with pointy branches.

Marshall came hurrying back down to her. “Are you okay?”

She felt more embarrassed than anything else. “I just fell,” she said.

She realized her sweater must have gotten caught on the branch. That was all.

Marshall continued to look down at her. “I’m really sorry, Tamaya,” he said finally.

He seemed really worried.

“I saw a rocky ledge up the hill,” he told her. “You wait here. I’m going to climb up to it. I should be able to get a good view from up there.”

“Don’t leave me,” she pleaded.

“I won’t. I promise.”

He took off his backpack and set it down next to her. “I’ll be right back.”

She watched him head back up the hill and disappear again around the curve. She took off her backpack and set it next to his. She was too worn out to follow.

She took off her sweater to see how badly it had been damaged. It was worse than she’d thought. There was a hole almost as big as her fist just above the right shoulder. She definitely didn’t know how she’d explain that to her mother.

Even though she had been given a full scholarship to Woodridge, her mother still had to pay for the school uniform. The sweater had cost ninety-three dollars.

It wasn’t fair.

She would never admit it to her friends, but she loved the school uniform. Monica, Hope, and Summer thought it made them look like dorks. They could go on and on about what they would wear on the last Friday of each month when they got to wear “real clothes.” But Tamaya always felt proud to put on her sweater with the words *Virtue and Valor* written in gold, and the year 1924. It made her feel important, like she was a part of history.

As she was thinking about this, she found herself staring at a large puddle of some kind of fuzz-covered mud. Her mind barely registered it at first, but the more she gazed at the odd-looking mud, the more it drew her attention.

The mud was dark and tar-like. Just above the surface, almost as if it were suspended in midair, there was a fuzzy yellowish-brown scum.

Something else struck her as strange about the fuzzy mud, although it took her a moment to realize what it was. There were no leaves on top of the mud. Leaves had fallen everywhere else. They completely surrounded the mud puddle, right up to its edges, but for some reason, no leaves had landed on top of it.

She looked back up the hill. There was still no sign of Marshall.

Her gaze returned to the fuzzy mud. It was possible, she thought, that the leaves had sunk down into the mud, but the mud seemed too thick for a leaf to fall through it. She wondered if that fuzzy scum somehow swept the leaves off to the side.

A noise crackled from below. She turned toward the sound, and then heard it again. Something was moving through the trees.

She rose to one knee, ready to run, then caught a glimpse of someone wearing a blue sweater and khaki pants. It was the boys’ school uniform.

She stood and waved her arms. "Hey!" she shouted.

The figure stopped.

"Over here!" she called.

As he came toward her, she recognized him as the boy who had sat next to her in the lunchroom. He was the one who had stood on the bench and said a wolf had bit a hole in his pant leg. She wasn't sure, but she thought his name might have been Chad.

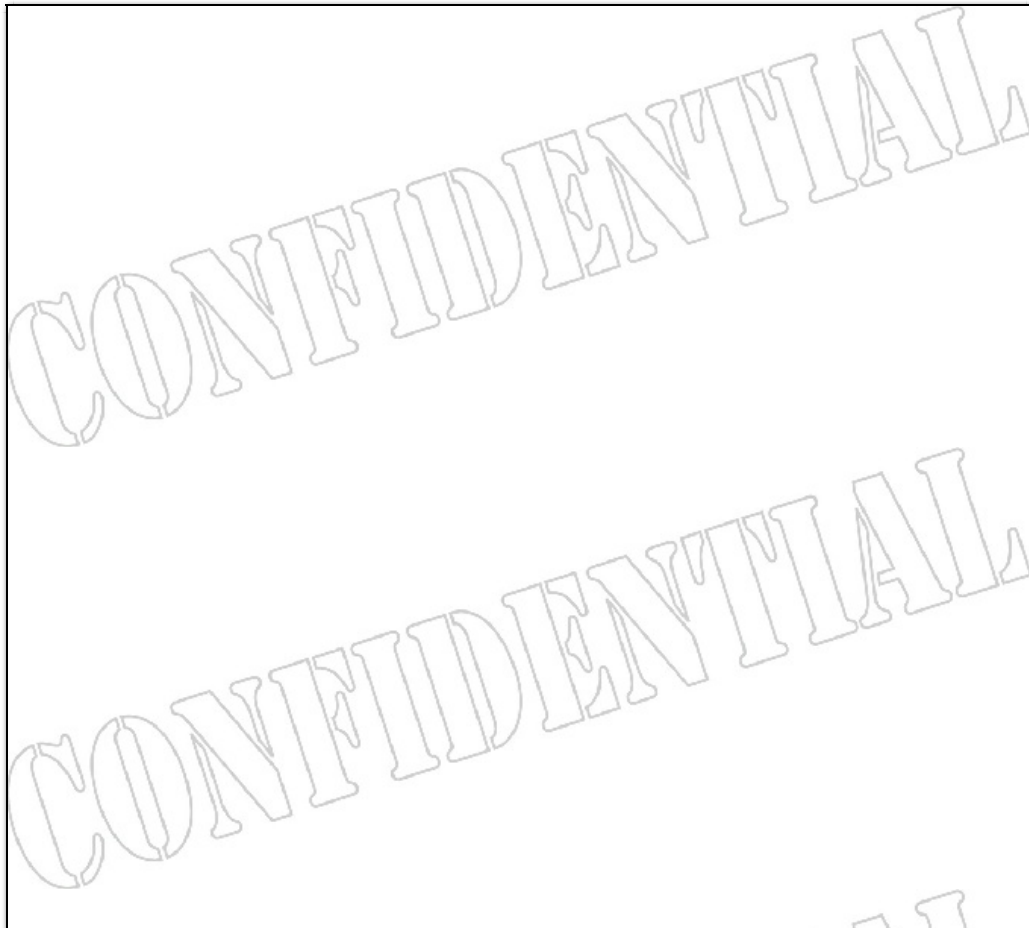
She looked back up the hill and shouted, "Marshall! Marshall, we're saved!"

6



The Ergie

The following is another excerpt from the secret inquiry into SunRay Farm:



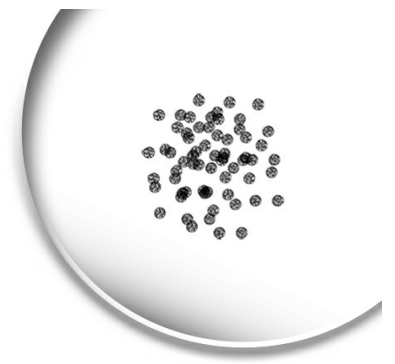
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7



TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 2
4:10 P.M.

“Be careful not to step in that,” Tamaya warned as Chad Hilligas made his way around the strange mud. “What do you think all that weird fuzzy stuff is?” she asked.

She might as well have been speaking a foreign language, the way Chad looked at her. He spit on the ground, then looked her in the eye and demanded, “Where’s Marshall?”

His tone was nasty, but Chad was her only hope, so she had to be nice to him. “He’s climbing up on a ledge trying to find the way back home. We got lost. When I heard you coming, at first I thought you might have been that crazy hermit you were telling me about, but then I saw your blue sweater, so...” She shrugged and smiled.

Chad spit on the ground again, then walked past her, heading after Marshall. He stopped as Marshall appeared from around the side of the hill.

Marshall hesitated just a second when he saw Chad, but then continued on down, as if nothing were the matter. “Hey, Chad,” he said.

Tamaya sensed something was wrong. She could hear it in Marshall’s voice.

“I waited for you,” Chad said.

“I know,” Marshall said. “I was on my way there, but then Tamaya said she knew a shortcut through the woods. What was I supposed to do? I have to walk home with her.”

“My mom won’t let me walk home alone,” Tamaya explained.

Chad glanced at her, then turned back to Marshall. “You trying to make me feel like a fool, just standing there on the corner waiting for you?”

“No.”

Chad stepped toward him, then pushed him backward. "You think I'm a fool, don't you?"

Marshall regained his balance. "No."

With sudden ferocity, Chad lunged at him. He slugged Marshall in the face, and then in the side of the neck.

Tamaya screamed.

Marshall tried to protect himself, but Chad hit him twice more, then grabbed him by the head and threw him to the ground.

"Leave him alone!" Tamaya shouted.

Chad glared at her. "You're next, Tamaya," he said.

Marshall tried to get up, but Chad's knee caught the side of his head, knocking him back down.

Tamaya didn't think. She just reacted.

She reached into the fuzzy mud and grabbed a handful of thick and gooey muck. She ran at Chad, and as he turned toward her, she shoved it into his face.

He lunged at her, but she was too quick, stepping to the side.

Chad stumbled past her, then bent over and covered his face with his hands.

For a moment, Tamaya was too scared to move.

Marshall scrambled to his feet. He grabbed both backpacks and shouted, "Run!"

Tamaya ran as hard as she could, for as long as she could, until it felt like her lungs would explode. She didn't know if Marshall had seen the way home or if they were running deeper into the woods. She didn't care, just so long as she got away from Chad.

She was still running when her foot caught in a tangle of vines, and the next thing she knew, she was sprawled across the dirt. Her heart pounded, and her hands stung from the fall. She took several long deep breaths as she tried to make herself get back up, but she just didn't have any strength left.

She was afraid to look behind her.

Marshall had stopped running after he'd heard her go down. She saw him heading back toward her, still holding both backpacks. She could tell from the way he walked that Chad must not have been too close. She turned. Chad was nowhere to be seen.

She pushed herself up into a sitting position as Marshall approached.

"You okay?"

"I think so."

Her knees were scraped and bloody, and her left wrist hurt from when she'd fallen, but she didn't think there was anything seriously wrong. Besides, Marshall was a lot worse. Dried blood and snot was caked beneath his nose. Sweat dripped off his face.

"You think he's still coming?" she asked him.

"I don't know. But if not today, tomorrow."

Tamaya knew that was true. Chad's words still echoed inside her head. "You're next, Tamaya." And that was before she had smashed mud in his face.

She got back up to her feet and took her backpack from Marshall. They continued walking the way they had been going.

"Is this the way?" she asked. "Were you able to see anything from the ledge?"

"Not really," said Marshall.

"So what'd you do, anyway, to make him so mad?"

“I answered a question in class.”

Tamaya didn't get it. “So?”

“It's different in the seventh grade. You're not supposed to act like you know anything.”

The sky was beginning to turn dark. Tamaya worried that it wouldn't be long before they wouldn't be able to see anything.

“Look, smoke!” Marshall declared.

“Where?”

“It's smoke from a chimney,” he told her.

She tried to follow where he was pointing, and then she saw it too, gray smoke against a gray sky.

They hurried toward it, although, for all Tamaya knew, it could have been coming from the home of the crazy hermit. She imagined them as Hansel and Gretel going to the home of the evil witch.

As they got closer to the source of the smoke, however, she saw that there wasn't just one isolated home but a whole street of houses, with parked cars and front lawns.

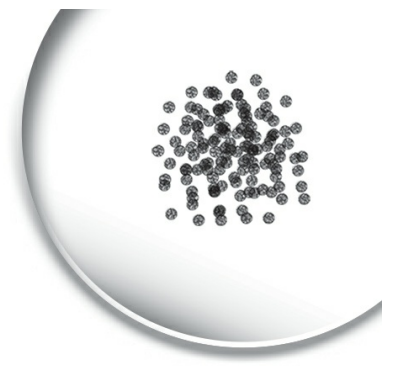
Tamaya stepped over a short metal barrier onto a road. She felt like getting down on her hands and knees and kissing the asphalt, but Marshall might have thought that was too weird.

She glanced back at a road sign that read DEAD END.

The streetlights came on as they were walking away from the woods. Tamaya suggested that they knock on somebody's door to see if they could get a ride home, but Marshall said they didn't need to. He knew the way. It wasn't too far.

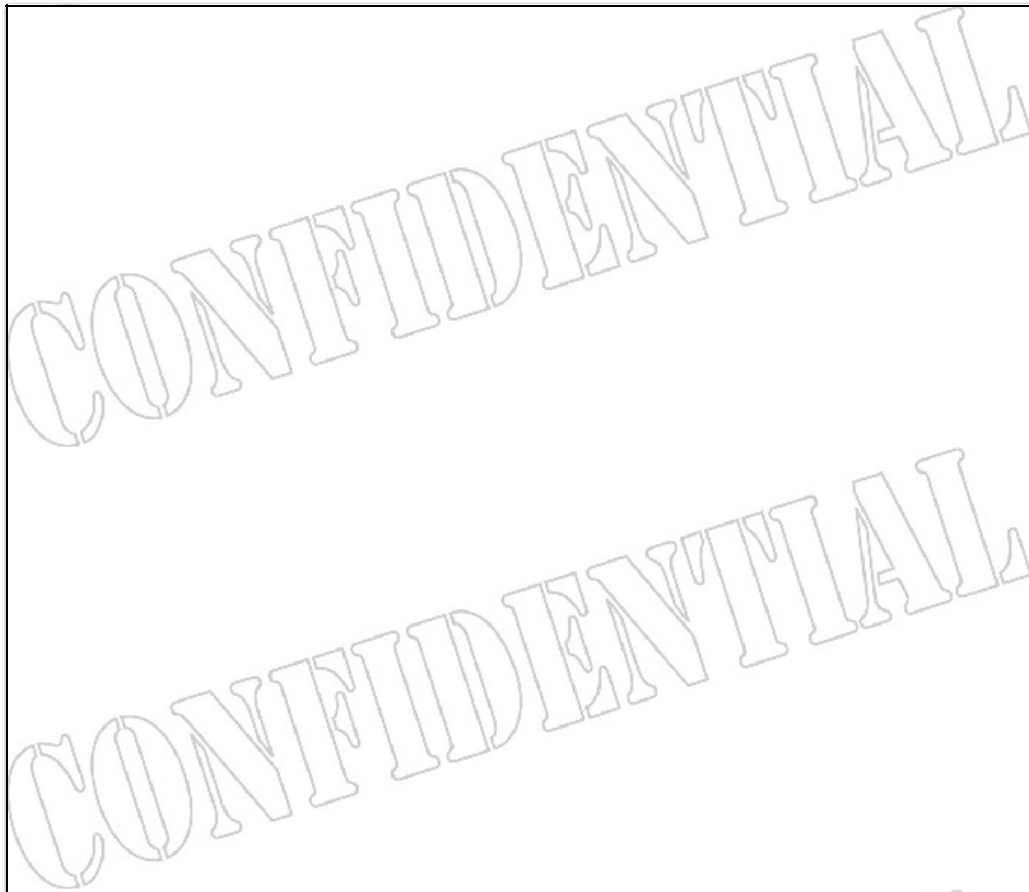
Tamaya's right hand began to tingle, and she rubbed it with the other. It didn't exactly hurt. Her skin just felt sort of fizzy, like a freshly opened can of soda.

8



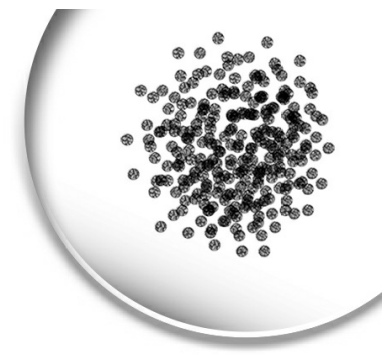
One Little Ergonym

The following is more of Jonathan Fitzman's testimony from the secret Senate hearings:



CONFIDENTIAL

9



TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 2
5:48 P.M.

Weeds and clumps of grass poked through the cracks in the sidewalk. Tamaya crossed the street, sighed, then started up the wooden steps of her front porch. The middle step wobbled beneath her foot. Marshall's stupid shortcut had made her more than two hours late. Of course, she realized there never had been any shortcut, but that was the stupidest part about it. If he was afraid of Chad, he would have been safer walking along normal streets, with lots of people and cars around.

Her house was dark. Her mother occasionally worked late, and Tamaya hoped with all her heart that this was one of those days.

She wore her house key on a chain around her neck, but when she reached for it, all she could feel was the empty chain. Filled with panic, she almost broke the chain as she tugged on it. Rotating it around her neck, she found the key.

She breathed a huge sigh of relief. Somehow it had twisted back behind her. Still, she knew her troubles were far from over.

She unlocked the door. "Hello?" she called as she opened it. "I'm home!"

There was no answer. So far, so good. No questions, no lies.

Tamaya switched on lights as she moved quickly through her house toward her bedroom. The rooms were smallish, and each was painted in bright bold colors; a red-and-blue kitchen, a yellow living room, a green hallway. Tamaya's room was turquoise with a yellow closet door and a yellow window frame. She dropped her backpack and collapsed onto the bed, but only for a moment.

Her right hand still felt all tingly. She went into the bathroom and examined it under the light. Tiny red bumps were sprinkled over her palm and fingers.

She washed with antibacterial soap and hot water—as hot as she could stand. Using a washcloth, she cleaned the dirt and blood off her arms and legs.

She was putting a Band-Aid on her knee when the phone rang. She wondered if her mother had been trying to call her for a long time. She rushed into her mother’s bedroom and answered just before the fourth ring.

“Hello?”

“Hi, sweetie. Sorry I’m running so late.”

“That’s okay,” she said. Guilt pumped through her veins.

“How does pizza sound to you?”

“Good.”

“You all right?”

“I’m fine,” Tamaya said, trying her best to sound normal.

“Mushroom, peppers, and onions okay?”

“No onions.”

“I’ll tell them to just put the onions on my half.”

Tamaya didn’t argue, even though she knew her half would still taste oniony.

“I’ll be home as soon as I can. Love you.”

“Love you too,” Tamaya said. She waited until she heard the click on the other end, then hung up.

She finished with the Band-Aid, then returned to her bedroom, where she changed out of her dirty clothes and into flannel pajamas. There was no reason that should make her mother suspicious, she thought. Now that the nights were colder, she and her mother both liked getting into their soft and cozy pajamas, although usually *after* dinner. They’d drink hot apple cider and either watch TV together or, more often lately, work side by side.

She gathered up her dirty clothes and took them to the laundry nook.

There was nothing suspicious about her doing her own laundry either. She’d been doing it ever since she’d needed her favorite purple top for Monica’s birthday party last year. Once when Marshall and his mother had been at her house, Tamaya’s mother had said, “I suppose if Tamaya waited around for me to wash her clothes, she’d have to go to school naked.”

Tamaya had been so embarrassed and so mortified by what her mother had said, *in front of Marshall*, that she’d run to her room and hadn’t come out until after Marshall and his mother had left. Even now, she blushed thinking about it.

She dumped her dirty clothes into the washing machine, added soap, set the temperature, and then started it up. Listening to the swish of the water, she imagined she felt something like the way a murderer felt after he successfully destroyed all the evidence.

Her right hand was still tingling like crazy. She went into her mother’s bathroom and searched the drawers and cabinets, not sure what she was searching for. She came across a blue jar of something called “restorative hand cream.” The label said it was for dry, cracked, and irritated skin.

Tamaya removed the lid and dipped her fingers into the white, chalky ointment. She smeared it all over the bumpy spots. It felt cool and soothing. It seemed to work almost immediately. The bumps didn’t look as red, and the tingling wasn’t as bad.

From the other side of the wall, she could hear the rattle and buzz of the garage door opening. Her mother was home.

Her mother set down the pizza, kissed Tamaya on the cheek, and said, "Help yourself. I just need to answer this one email."

The pizza box smelled of onions. Tamaya had to pick off a few strays before putting a slice on her plate. She had to do it all left-handed, so as not to get any of the restorative hand cream on her food.

One email turned into six, but that was fine with Tamaya. The more her mother was wrapped up in work, the fewer questions Tamaya would have to answer.

Her mother had made a salad as she'd read through her emails. She rarely did only one thing at a time.

"So, did Ms. Filbert like your report?" she asked as she set the salad on the table.

"We ran out of time," Tamaya told her. "She didn't get to mine."

"That's too bad," her mother said. "You worked so hard on it."

Her mother's hair and eyes were dark like Tamaya's, but she had lighter skin. She liked colorful clothes. Her green eye shadow matched her blouse.

Tamaya shrugged. "I'll do it tomorrow. No one cares about Calvin Coolidge anyway."

Tamaya would have preferred to give her report on a different president, but by the time Ms. Filbert had gotten around to calling on her, all the good presidents had already been taken.

That was typical. Tamaya had sat quietly with her hand raised, but then someone else had shouted out, "I want Lincoln," and then someone else had claimed Washington. Ms. Filbert had assigned those presidents to the shouters, even though she had just told the class, "Sit quietly and wait until I call on you."

It was Ms. Filbert who had suggested Calvin Coolidge to Tamaya when it had finally been her turn. "He was a lot like you, Tamaya," she had said. "They called him Silent Cal because he was known for being quiet."

Ms. Filbert had said "being quiet" as though it were some sort of abnormal behavior. *You're the one who just told everyone to sit quietly*, Tamaya had thought.

—

After dinner, Tamaya and her mother were working side by side on the living room sofa. The TV was on, but they were hardly watching. Her mother had a computer on her lap, and Tamaya's notebook paper was on the coffee table next to her history book.

She wasn't supposed to just look things up on the Internet. Tablets and smart phones were prohibited at Woodridge Academy. The headmistress, Mrs. Thaxton, wanted the students to do it the old-fashioned way. Even calculators were off-limits.

Tamaya's mother looked up from her laptop and asked if Tamaya had washed her hands after dinner. "You have pizza sauce on you."

Tamaya looked at her hand. It wasn't pizza sauce. Despite her mother's hand cream, the red bumps had returned. They had gotten bigger, and there seemed to be more of them. The tingling sensation had also returned, although she hadn't noticed it so much until now.

She couldn't keep it from her mother any longer. "It's not pizza," she said. "I think I might have some kind of rash."

She held out her hand.

Tamaya and her mother each had the same habit of biting their lower lip when thinking hard. Her mother was biting it now as she examined

Tamaya's rash.

"It feels all funny too," Tamaya told her.

"Do you know how you got it?"

"I noticed it after school" was all she could say. She had promised Marshall not to tell her mother or anyone else about the woods. "I put some of your stuff on it."

"What stuff?"

"Restorative hand cream? In a blue jar?"

"Good," her mother said. "I use it all the time. It absolutely works miracles."

Tamaya was glad to hear that.

"I've got a meeting tomorrow morning," her mother told her, "but if you want, I can cancel and take you to see Dr. Sanchez."

"No, it's not that bad," Tamaya said. "I'll put more of the hand cream on it before I go to bed."

"We'll see how it looks in the morning," her mother said.

—

Later, Tamaya thought that maybe she should have agreed to let her mother take her to see Dr. Sanchez. At least she wouldn't have had to worry about Chad ambushing her on the way to school.

"You're next, Tamaya."

Still, would a seventh-grade boy really beat up a fifth-grade girl at school, with teachers all around? She doubted it. He might just push her down or something, but then she could blame her torn sweater on him. Then Chad's parents would have to buy her a new one. In a way it was sort of true. If it weren't for Chad, her sweater wouldn't have a hole in it.

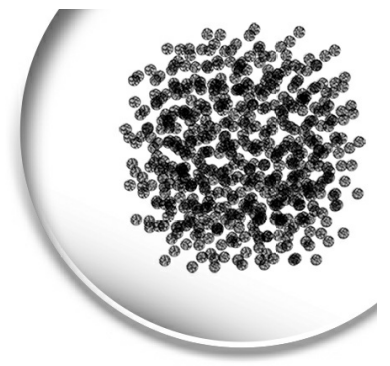
Once again, she examined the hole in her sweater. She had tried looping some of the threads back through the hole and decided that maybe it wasn't all that noticeable.

Tamaya had another reason for not wanting to go to the doctor in the morning. It was something she'd never admit to her friends.

She had never missed a day of school. At the end of each school year, she'd been presented with a certificate for perfect attendance. Those certificates didn't mean quite as much to her now as they had when she'd been in the second and third grade, but still, she hated to spoil her perfect record.

Before going to bed, she said her prayers, and on this night, she included Chad Hilligas. She didn't pray for anything bad to happen to him. She asked God to help Chad find the goodness that lived inside his heart.

10



WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3
2:26 A.M.

Tamaya slept. Marshall did not. As much as Chad had tormented him, he tormented himself even more.

He lay in bed, desperate to fall sleep. He knew he'd have to be alert to deal with Chad, but sleep seldom comes to those who are desperate for it. It is something that has to be eased into gently.

He'd gotten in trouble for coming home so late from school. He was supposed to have looked after the twins, and when he hadn't shown, his dad had had to leave work early.

"The only way we can afford to keep you at Woodridge is for everyone to do their part," his father had reminded him.

"Good. I'll go to another school, then," Marshall had answered. "I hate that place."

It didn't make any sense to Marshall. If his parents couldn't afford it, and he hated it, then why not let him go to another school? But that argument only made his parents angrier. Then, on his way back to his room, he'd accidentally stomped on the twins' hippo village, which had just caused more yelling.

"You're lucky I didn't step on you!" he'd told Daniela.

The whole thing was his parents' fault, Marshall decided. His birthday was September 29, and back when he was four years old, his parents had had to make a choice: either he could start kindergarten as one of the youngest kids in the class or he could wait a year and be one of the oldest. If they had waited, he'd be older, bigger, and stronger, and Chad Hilligas wouldn't even be in the same grade.

"How many members are in the U.S. Senate?" That was the question Mr. Davison had asked Chad.

“Twenty-nine?” Chad had guessed.

Andy was the one who had laughed, not Marshall. “How can there only be twenty-nine senators?” Andy had pointed out. “There are fifty states!”

But then Mr. Davison had said, “Marshall, will you kindly tell Chad how many senators there are?”

Right then, Marshall had known he was doomed. He had considered giving a wrong answer, and maybe he should have, but who knows? If he’d said something like “twenty-eight” or “a million,” Chad might have thought Marshall was mocking him.

Instead, what Marshall had done was stare down at his desk and very quietly say, “One hundred, I guess.”

It was only a short time later that Chad had nearly thrown him down the stairs. “We need to settle this once and for all. And you better be there, you thumb-sucking coward!”

Now, as he lay wide-awake at two-thirty in the morning, Marshall tried to convince himself that since Chad had finally beaten him up, he wouldn’t bother him anymore. They had settled it *once and for all*.

Except he knew the opposite was more likely. Now that Chad had tasted blood, he would come back for more. And he would come after Tamaya too.

He imagined walking to school with her. She’s yammering away about Monica or Calvin Coolidge or something, when Chad grabs her hair, spins her around, and punches her in the face!

“Leave her alone!” Marshall shouts.

Tamaya is on the ground, crying. Chad is about to hit Tamaya again, but Marshall grabs his arm. “I said, leave her alone, Buttface!”

Chad shoves him. He shoves Chad back. A crowd gathers.

Chad comes at him with all he’s got, punching wildly, but Marshall holds his ground, ducking and hitting back.

At first, Marshall hears everyone rooting for Chad, but as the fight continues, he starts to hear a few of his old friends root for him. “*Get ’im, Marshall!*” “*You can do it, Marshall!*”

And then...

As Marshall tried to fall asleep, he imagined the fight ending in different ways. Sometimes he was the winner, leaving Chad beaten and bloody, begging for mercy. Other times, Chad won, but only after a long, hard-fought battle.

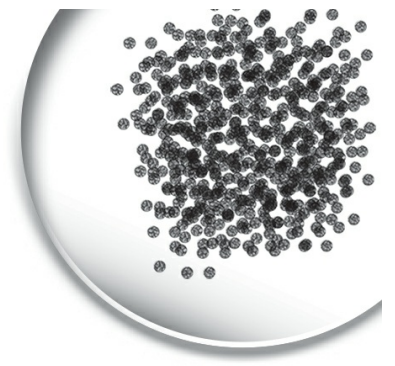
He envisioned himself lying on the pavement, barely able to move. Two pretty girls from his class, Andrea Gall and Laura Muscrantz, kneel by his side and tell him how brave he was as they dab the blood off his face with wet paper towels. Laura kisses his cheek.

But even as he imagined all this, he knew it would never happen.

If Chad attacked Tamaya, the best he could hope for was that a teacher would break it up before Tamaya got hurt too badly. Then maybe Chad would be expelled, and then maybe after Chad was gone for a while, the other kids would like him again.

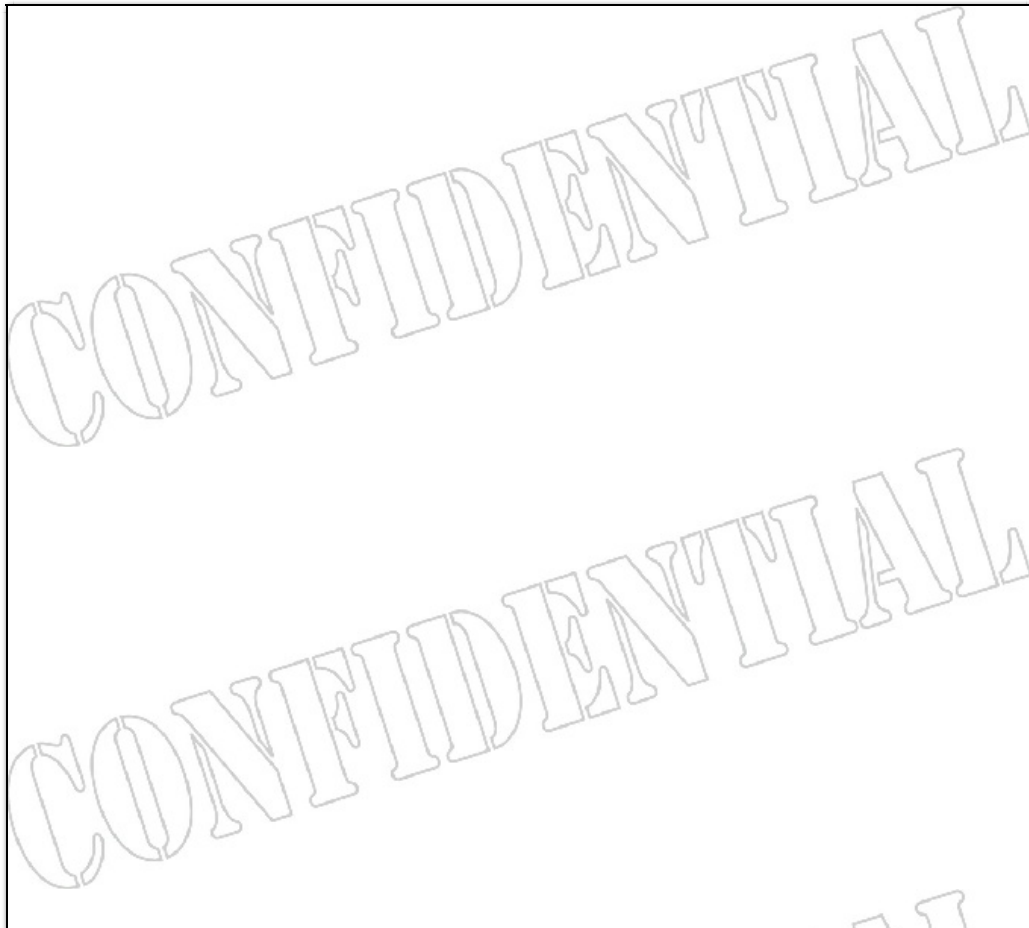
That was his best hope, and he hated himself for it, because he knew it was the pathetic hope of a coward.

11



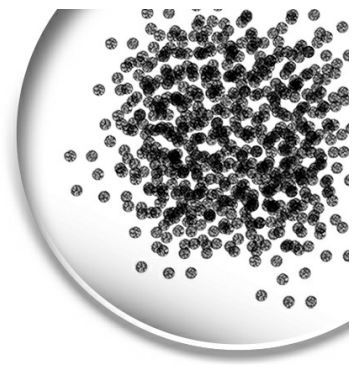
Poof!

Excerpted from the Senate's secret hearings:



CONFIDENTIAL

12



WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3
7:08 A.M.

Tamaya awoke to her favorite song. Cold air came through her window, purposely left open just a crack, making the warmth of the covers that much cozier.

Her music came on at 7:08 every morning, because eight was her favorite number, and Monica's favorite number was seven. Her best friend, Monica, also woke up each day at that exact time.

Tamaya's thoughts drifted back to last year. There was a huge fireplace in the back of her fourth-grade classroom. Her teacher had filled it with pillows, and when the students finished their work, they were allowed to go into the fireplace and read. The fireplace was so big, there was room in there for at least four kids, and she and Monica were usually the first two back there, side by side, reading their books and trying not to giggle.

As Tamaya was thinking about this, a growing sense of dread slowly crept into her memories. The image of the pillowed fireplace gave way to the woods, her torn sweater, and Chad. His cold eyes staring at her as he said, "You're next, Tamaya."

Her hand tingled. She brought it out from under her covers to have a look. At first she thought the rash had cleared, but as her eyes adjusted to the light, she realized the red bumps were still there, covered in some kind of powdery crust.

There was powder on her pillow too, and when she pulled back the sheets, she could see it all over the bed. It was a pinkish-bronze color, the same color as her skin.

She leapt out of bed and hurried to the bathroom.

The powder washed right off, but the rash had spread. Red bumps coated her entire hand and continued down to her wrist. Some of the bumps had

turned into blisters.

Looking at herself in the mirror, she could see a crusty area on the right side of her face. She splashed it with water, and then scrubbed the entire area very hard with a soapy washcloth and very hot water.

There didn't appear to be any bumps on her face. It looked a little red, but that could have been from her scrubbing so hard.

Her mother's jar of miracle hand cream was in Tamaya's bathroom. The night before, she had dabbed a little bit on each bump and then gently rubbed it in. Now she went whole hog! She dug her fingers deep into the chalky ointment and pulled out a big glob of the stuff. She smeared it on thickly over the entire area.

She returned to her bedroom, where she bundled up her sheets. Then she took them to the washing machine. She set the temperature gauge to hot.

"You're washing your sheets *now*?"

Tamaya spun around.

Her mother was already dressed, wearing a cranberry-colored skirt and jacket. Her eye shadow was the same color as her clothes.

"Because of my rash," Tamaya told her. "So it doesn't spread."

"Let me see."

Tamaya held out her hand.

"It looks a little better, I think," her mother said.

Tamaya knew that was because it was covered up by the hand cream, but she didn't say anything. Her mother's breath smelled like toothpaste and coffee.

"Tell you what," her mother said. "You tell Marshall I'll be picking you up right after school today. I can give him a ride home too, if he wants, but then I'm taking you to see Dr. Sanchez."

Tamaya nodded, glad that her rash would get treated.

She put on her backpack, positioning the straps so they covered the hole in her sweater, then walked quickly through the house and on out the door before her mother could get too good a look at her. She still didn't know how she'd explain the hole.

She reached Marshall's house just as he was coming outside. He was wearing his old glasses.

He had switched from glasses to contacts over the summer. She liked his glasses better. She had thought his face looked blank without them.

"You're wearing your glasses," she said.

He shrugged, then said, "I lost my contacts in the woods."

"Oh."

In her mind she could see Chad slugging him in the face, his contacts flying out of his eyes, although she realized it might not have happened that way at all.

She could see no bruises on his face. He just looked tired and washed out, like he hadn't slept for six days.

He dragged his feet as he walked. On other days, Tamaya had to struggle just to keep up with him, but as they continued slowly up the sidewalk, she began to worry that they might be late.

Her tingling sensation had become more of a prickling. It felt as if her hand were being stabbed by a thousand very tiny needles.

“Oh, my mom’s picking me up after school,” she told Marshall. “She’s taking me to the doctor, ’cause I got a rash or something in the woods.”

She showed him her hand, but he hardly glanced at it.

“You didn’t tell her we went in there, did you?” Marshall asked.

“No.”

“Because if you did, we’d both be in big—”

“I said I didn’t tell her.”

“Good.”

“She can give you a ride home too, if you want.”

“Yeah, whatever,” Marshall said, but she knew he was glad for the ride, glad to be safe from Chad.

They turned onto Richmond Road. There was a lot of early-morning traffic, and once again Tamaya realized how much safer Marshall would have been if they had just walked home the usual way. She wouldn’t have torn her sweater. He wouldn’t have lost his contacts. And she probably wouldn’t have gotten the rash either, she thought, although she wasn’t really sure how she’d gotten that.

As they walked alongside the woods, that feeling of dread she’d had when she’d first woken up returned. It seemed to grow a little heavier with each step.

She couldn’t pinpoint exactly what it was she was dreading. She didn’t think she was all that afraid of Chad, as long as other people were around. It was something different. Something worse. It was as if she knew something terrible was about to happen, but it was so bad, her brain wouldn’t allow her to think about it.

They reached Woodridge Lane. “This is where I was supposed to meet him,” said Marshall.

There was an area of weeds and dirt between the sidewalk and the fence. Tamaya figured that Chad must have climbed the fence and gone into the woods when Marshall didn’t show up.

“At least there would have been people around,” Tamaya pointed out. “It was worse in the woods.”

“Don’t remind me.” He kicked at the ground.

Tamaya felt sorry for him. She didn’t like feeling that way. She liked it better when she used to look up to Marshall.

“Chad’s just a big jerk,” she said.

“I don’t care about him,” Marshall muttered.

“A big fat jerk!” she repeated, loud enough so that if Chad was hiding nearby, he would definitely hear her.

They turned onto Woodridge Lane. The woods were on both sides of them as they headed toward the school.

Tamaya quickened her pace. “We’d better hurry so we’re not late,” she said, but Marshall continued to lag behind.

She walked faster and faster, and then something inside her made her want to run. It wasn’t just the fear of being tardy. She felt scared—although of what, she didn’t know.

She was out of breath when she reached the line of cars backed up from the school. Only then did she stop running.

She heard someone call her name.

Merilee, Monica’s little sister, was hanging halfway out the window of her mother’s Mercedes, waving to her.

Tamaya waved back using her left hand. She tried to keep her right one hidden. She waited by the curb as Merilee, and then Monica, climbed out of

the car.

“Where were you yesterday?” Monica asked. “I kept trying to call.”

Tamaya wanted to tell Monica everything but didn't dare risk it. She knew Monica would tell Hope, and then it would be all over the school. “I don't know,” she said. “In and out.”

“You need to get a cell phone,” Monica told her.

“They're not allowed at school,” Tamaya reminded her.

“You can use it after school,” said Monica.

“I was in and out too,” said Merilee. “And then I went in again, and then I went back out.”

Monica told her sister to shut up. “So, you'll never believe who I saw yesterday,” she said to Tamaya.

“Mr. Beauchamps,” said Merilee.

“Shut up. I'm telling her. Mr. Beauchamps. He was jogging, right in front of my house! He sees me and says, '*Bonjour, Mademoiselle Monique.*' I swear I almost lost it.”

Mr. Beauchamps had been their French teacher since the second grade.

“You wouldn't think a bald guy would have such hairy legs,” said Monica.

Tamaya forced herself to smile.

Marshall was relieved to see Tamaya safely enter the building with her friend Monica and with no sign of Chad. He wasn't sure what he would have done if Chad had attacked her. He liked to think he would have tried to protect her, but he also knew he might not have.

He reached the front door. The seventh grade was located in the basement. It had been the servants' quarters, but everyone at school called it the dungeon.

It felt like a dungeon to Marshall. He trudged on down the stairs, doomed to whatever torture and misery awaited.