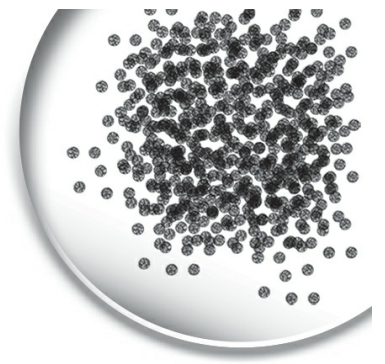


**LOUIS SACHAR**

**FUZZY  
MUD**

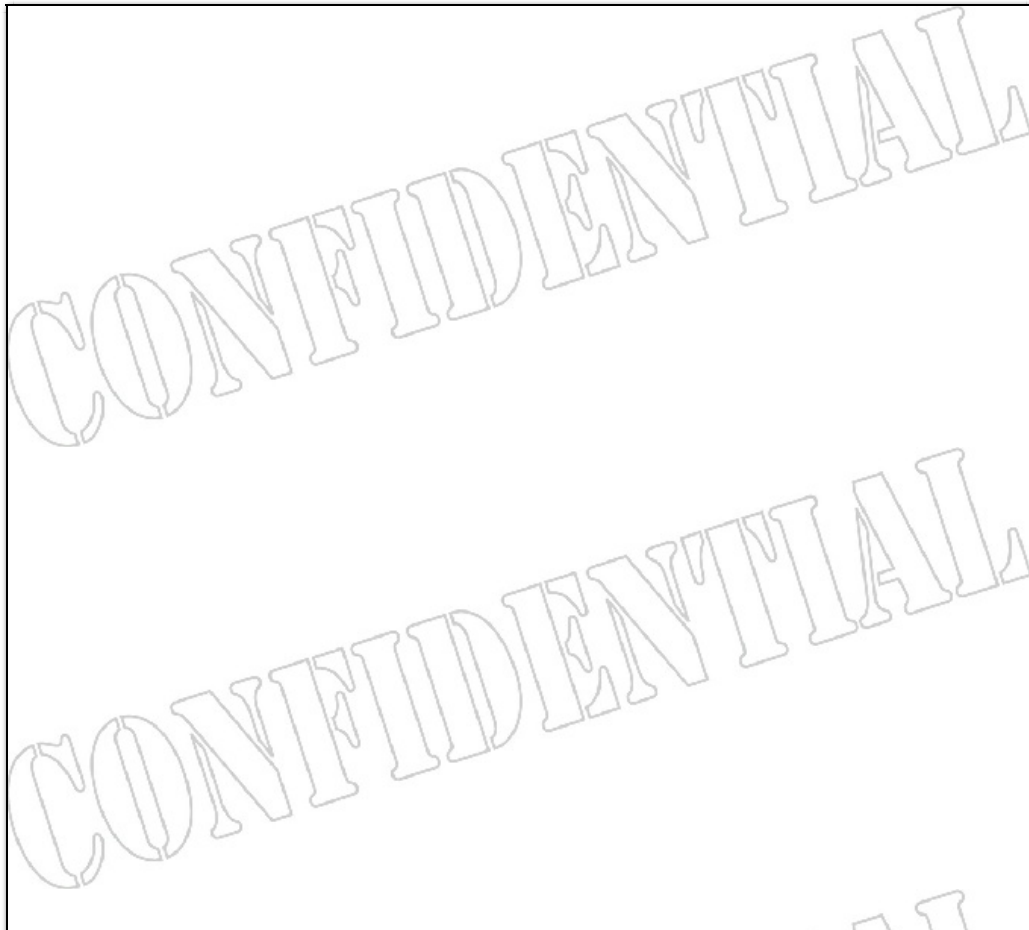
Delacorte Press

# 13



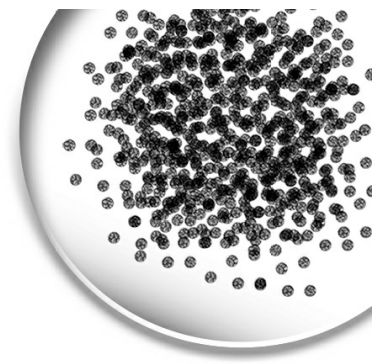
## Disaster Warning

Excerpted from the secret Senate hearings:



CONFIDENTIAL

14



WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3  
9:40 A.M.

Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, the students in Ms. Filbert's class had to write in their journals. Sometimes she let them write about whatever they wanted, but more often she gave them a prompt.

Tamaya preferred the prompts. It was strange, but she found it harder to think of something to write when she could write about anything in the world.

Most everyone else always moaned and groaned when they heard the prompts. It didn't seem to matter what the prompts were. Some people just liked to complain.

Today Ms. Filbert wrote the prompt on the whiteboard, then said it aloud. "How to blow up a balloon."

Along with the usual moans and groans, there were a lot of *Huh?*s and *What?*s. Hands were raised all around Tamaya.

"I don't get it." Jason spoke out without raising his hand. "You just stick it into your mouth and blow."

"Oh, you mean like this?" asked Ms. Filbert.

Tamaya watched, wide-eyed, as her teacher took a red balloon and placed the whole thing inside her mouth. Ms. Filbert took a big breath, then blew, spitting the balloon out onto the floor.

Everyone laughed, including Tamaya. She smiled at Hope, who sat next to her, then tried to catch Monica's eye on the other side of the room. Monica was looking back at her, sharing her amazement.

Ms. Filbert scratched her head, as if she were greatly confused. "That didn't work," she said.

"No, you don't put the whole balloon into your mouth," said Jason, again

without raising his hand. “Just one end.”

Ms. Filbert slapped herself on the forehead. “Well, why didn’t you say that in the first place?”

She chose another balloon and this time put only one end into her mouth—the wrong end.

“No, the other end!” called Monica.

Ms. Filbert turned the balloon around.

“Now blow,” said Monica.

Once again, Ms. Filbert spit the balloon onto the floor.

All around Tamaya, kids were shouting instructions, trying to tell Ms. Filbert what she had done wrong. Others were repeating to their friends what they’d just seen, even though their friends had just seen it too.

Ms. Filbert held up two fingers and waited for everyone to quiet down.

“Don’t tell me,” she said. “*Write it.* Pretend that what you write is going to be read by someone who never, ever saw a balloon before in her whole life. And she’s none too bright neither.” Ms. Filbert knocked on the side of her head, as if testing to see if it were hollow.

Tamaya laughed. Her mind was already working on her how-to-blow-up-a-balloon instructions.

“So your instructions have to be clear and precise,” Ms. Filbert continued. “Later, you can read them aloud, and we’ll see how many balloons I manage to inflate.”

The complainers were moaning and groaning again, but Tamaya was up for the challenge. She picked up her pencil, thought a moment, then wrote:

*You start with a flat balloon. You want to fill it with air from your lungs.*

The rest of the class was still buzzing about their teacher’s spitting balloons.

From across the aisle, Hope tapped Tamaya on the shoulder. “What happened to your sweater?” she whispered.

Tamaya’s heart sank. She’d hoped it wasn’t so noticeable. “What do you mean?” she whispered back.

“It’s all torn.”

Tamaya shrugged. “Who cares?” she said, trying to prove she wasn’t the Goody Two-shoes that Hope thought she was.

She returned to her journal, reread what she had written, and then added, *Look for the end with the hole.*

No, she didn’t like that. A hole was the last thing you wanted in a balloon! For all she knew, Ms. Filbert might stick a pin into the balloon, just to put a hole there!

She tried to think of what else to call it. The knobby round thing?

She tried to erase what she had written but instead made an ugly gray smudge on her paper. Tamaya’s pages were always clean and neat, and she had excellent handwriting. She tried rubbing harder but not hard enough to tear the page.

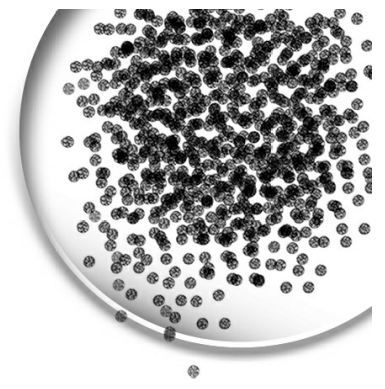
A red drop fell on top of the smudge.

At first, Tamaya was more worried about her journal being ruined than anything else. But when she looked at her hand, she was horrified to see it was covered with blisters and blood.

She dropped her pencil. It rolled across her journal, leaving a red track behind it, then continued across her desk and fell to the floor.

“Ms. Filbert!” called Hope. “Tamaya’s all bloody!”





## Down in the Dungeon

There was still no sign of Chad when Marshall walked into his classroom and took his seat. His relief quickly turned into anxiety, however. He turned his head toward the door every single time he heard it open. He knew Chad would come waltzing in at any moment, telling everyone about what had happened in the woods, and about how Marshall had needed a little fifth-grade girl to protect him.

Even after class started, and Chad still hadn't shown, Marshall's anxiety only grew worse. He tapped his foot throughout morning announcements. In a way, he hoped Chad would hurry up and get there. Let him do what he was going to do, say what he was going to say, and get it over with. The worst part was the waiting.

When first period ended, Marshall moved very cautiously through the hall, certain that Chad was waiting behind every corner. He made it safely to algebra, and when he saw that Chad's desk was empty, he finally was able to relax, but just a little bit.

Math had always been Marshall's best subject, and without Chad's eyes burning a hole through the back of his head, he was able to concentrate for the first time in weeks.

Mr. Brandt put a pair of simultaneous equations on the whiteboard. Marshall mentally went through the necessary steps to solve them just as his teacher worked them through for the class.

Mr. Brandt put up two more equations. "Anyone want to try?"

Chad or no Chad, Marshall still didn't dare raise his hand.

Perhaps Mr. Brandt had caught something in Marshall's expression, an alertness in his eyes. "Marshall," he said. "You want to give it a go?"

Marshall flinched at the mention of his name, then slowly rose. As he

made his way to the front of the room, he heard none of the usual snide whispers. No legs stuck out trying to trip him.

He took the marker from Mr. Brandt, studied the two equations for a moment, and then wrote a new equation, combining elements from the other two. He felt his confidence grow as he replaced letters with numbers.

Behind him, the door opened.

It couldn't even have been called a squeak, just an old door rotating on its hinges, but Marshall recognized the sound the moment he heard it.

His confidence left him as his legs turned to jelly. He tried to concentrate on the equations in front of him, but now it was all just a confused jumble of numbers, letters, and mathematical signs.

He heard the click-click of hard shoes on the floor. That didn't sound like Chad. He slowly turned.

The headmistress, Mrs. Thaxton, was walking purposefully toward the front of the room, a stern and determined look on her face.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, Mr. Brandt," she said, then turned her back on Marshall in order to face the class. "I'm afraid I have some very disturbing news."

Marshall didn't know where he was supposed to go. He didn't want to have to cross in front of Mrs. Thaxton in order to return to his desk. Instead, he slowly edged away from the board, toward the side wall.

She spoke slowly and deliberately. "One of your classmates, Chad Hilligas, is missing. He hasn't been seen since he left school yesterday afternoon. As far as we know, he never made it home."

Mrs. Thaxton took a breath, then continued. "If any of you know anything about where he might have gone, or what has happened to him, I need to know immediately."

Nobody said a word.

As Marshall stood at the side wall, his thoughts were a swirling mass of confusion. He had become paralyzed at the mention of Chad's name. He could hear the pounding of his heart echoing inside his head.

"Does anybody remember seeing Chad after school yesterday?" asked Mr. Brandt.

"If you saw or heard anything?" coaxed Mrs. Thaxton.

Marshall knew he ought to say something, but it seemed impossible.

Laura Muscrantz slowly raised her hand.

"Yes, Laura," said Mr. Brandt.

"I saw him."

"Where?"

"On Richmond Road."

"Did he say anything to you?" Mrs. Thaxton asked her.

"No, I was in my mom's car. We just drove past. You asked if we saw him. That's all."

Marshall wondered if Laura would have noticed him too, if he had been there.

"Did you notice which way he was heading?" asked Mrs. Thaxton.

"If you leave the school and turn right. I think. We drove the other way, so I didn't see him after that."

"Did anyone else see or talk to Chad?" asked Mrs. Thaxton. "Either after school or perhaps earlier? Did he say what his plans were for after school?"

Cody raised his hand, then quickly lowered it, but not before Mr. Brandt noticed. "Do you know something, Cody?"

"He kind of told me what he was going to do, but I feel weird saying it."



“What did he tell you, Cody?” demanded Mrs. Thaxton. “This is not the time to worry about being embarrassed or *feeling weird*.”

“Okay, you asked.” Cody shrugged. “He said he was going to beat up Marshall.”

Muffled laughter came from the back corner of the room, but one look from Mrs. Thaxton silenced whoever had laughed.

“Sorry, man,” Cody said, looking at Marshall. “That’s what he said.”

For the first time, Mrs. Thaxton turned to notice Marshall, standing awkwardly against the wall. “Marshall, what do you know about this?”

All he could manage was a shrug. It took all his effort just to keep from trembling.

“Did you encounter Chad on your way home yesterday?”

He shook his head.

“Did you know he was looking for you?”

“No,” he said.

“You didn’t see him at all?”

“I just walked home like always. He wasn’t there.”

Mrs. Thaxton took a long hard look at him. “Do you know why he wanted to fight you? Did something happen earlier?”

He shook his head.

“Chad’s been picking on Marshall all year,” said Andy. “For no reason.”

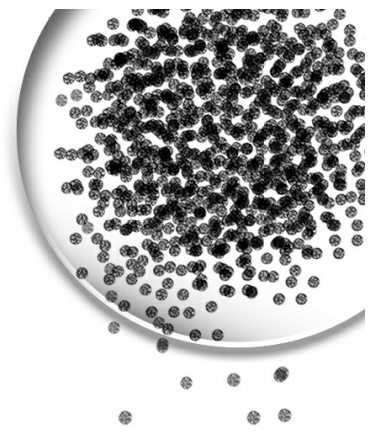
“Marshall never did anything,” volunteered Laura. “Chad’s just mean.”

Mrs. Thaxton took another long look at Marshall, then turned her attention back to the rest of the class. “If anybody thinks of anything else, any little thing Chad might have done or said, or something somebody else might have said about Chad, please let Mr. Brandt or me know. If you need to talk in private, I will be in my office. Please think hard, and don’t be afraid to come to me. I will keep anything you tell me strictly confidential.”

She walked out of the room. Then all eyes fixed on Marshall.

He quickly returned to his seat. The equations remained on the whiteboard, unsolved.

# 16



WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3  
10:15 A.M.

Using cotton balls and hydrogen peroxide, Mrs. Latherly cleaned the blood off Tamaya's hand. "You mustn't scratch it," she admonished.

"I didn't," said Tamaya.

"The more you scratch, the worse it will get," said Mrs. Latherly. "It will just cause the rash to spread. Plus, anytime you break the skin, there's the possibility of infection."

"I didn't scratch it," Tamaya repeated.

She was seated in a plastic chair in an alcove inside the office. The alcove contained the office printer and the coffee-maker. The medical supplies were on a shelf next to the printer.

Mrs. Latherly spent most days answering phones or working on a computer, but whenever anyone got sick or needed first aid, she was the person to see.

"Maybe I rubbed it a little," Tamaya admitted. "But it doesn't itch. It feels tingly. You know how like when your hands are really cold, and then you stick them under warm water? The way they get all prickly. That's how it feels."

"Uh-huh," Mrs. Latherly said as she took a first-aid box off the shelf, but Tamaya didn't think she was really listening.

She watched Mrs. Latherly unlatch the lid, then take out various tubes, read the labels, and put them back. Tamaya really wished Mrs. Latherly would hurry. She still hoped she could get back to class in time to finish her journal entry.

In her mind, she imagined Hope and Jason and Monica taking turns reading their how-to-blow-up-a-balloon instructions to Ms. Filbert. She

could see the balloons flying out of her teacher's mouth and jetting in circles around the room while everyone laughed.

*It isn't fair*, she thought. *Why do I always have to miss out on all the fun stuff?*

It seemed to be that way all the time. She'd missed Hope's limousine birthday party because it had been her weekend to be in Philadelphia. And then Katie, her only sort-of friend in Philadelphia, had invited her to go horseback riding in the country with her and her family, but that too had been for the wrong weekend.

Mr. Franks, the assistant headmaster, stepped into the alcove. "Hi, Tamaya," he greeted her. "You're not sick, are you?"

"No, just a rash."

"Good. We don't want to ruin your perfect record." He winked at her.

Tamaya could feel her face get warm, and she tried very hard not to blush. All her friends agreed that Mr. Franks was movie-star handsome. Summer swore he had a tattoo on the back of his neck, which was why he always wore a jacket and tie. Summer didn't know what the tattoo was, but it was definitely something *inappropriate*. If Mrs. Thaxton found out about it, he would be fired.

Mr. Franks bent down to pour himself a cup of coffee, and Tamaya tried to get a peek at his neck. She couldn't see anything. She doubted he really had a tattoo. After all, how could Summer know about it, and not Mrs. Thaxton?

"Hold out your hand," said Mrs. Latherly.

Tamaya waited for Mr. Franks to leave the alcove. She didn't want him to see her ugly rash. "I tried some of my mother's hand cream," she told Mrs. Latherly. "It didn't work."

"This will," Mrs. Latherly assured her.

As Mrs. Latherly applied the ointment, Tamaya read the label on the upside-down tube. *Hydrocortisone 1%*. She took heart in the words *Maximum Strength*.

"Do you have any pets?" Mrs. Latherly asked.

"Cooper, my dog."

"Do you think you might be allergic to Cooper?"

"No!" she exclaimed. That would be horrible. Cooper was the best part of going to her dad's. He slept on the same bed with her, and she often woke up with the dog licking her face.

"Has Cooper had any kind of problems lately, with fleas or ticks or mange?"

"I hope not," said Tamaya.

Mrs. Latherly looked confused. "Has he or hasn't he?"

Tamaya explained that she saw Cooper only one weekend a month.

Mrs. Latherly seemed exasperated. "Tamaya, I'm trying to determine what might have caused your rash. If you haven't been near Cooper, then it obviously didn't come from him."

"Sorry," Tamaya said. She felt stupid.

It felt confusing sometimes, having two different homes. It was like she had two different lives; two half lives. And the two added together didn't quite equal a whole life. She felt like she was missing something.

Mrs. Latherly wrapped Tamaya's hand with gauze. "Is there anything else you might have touched recently that you can think of?" she asked. "Maybe some kind of cleaning product?"

Tamaya wondered if she should tell Mrs. Latherly about the strange mud.

She didn't want to get Marshall in trouble. Still, she knew it was important to tell the truth to a doctor or nurse, even if Mrs. Latherly was just a part-time school nurse.

"Well, there was this fuzzy mud," she admitted.

"Have you eaten peanuts or peanut butter?" asked Mrs. Latherly, showing no interest in the mud.

Tamaya's mind remained fixed on the fuzzy mud. It all had happened so quickly, but replaying it in her head, in slow motion, she could see herself picking up a handful of the tar-like muck. She vaguely recalled that it had felt warm, although she couldn't be certain that she wasn't just embellishing her memory.

"Have you recently eaten any peanuts or peanut butter?" Mrs. Latherly asked again.

Tamaya forced herself to focus on the question. "I had a peanut butter and jelly sandwich yesterday," she said. "It might have been the day before."

"You may be allergic," said Mrs. Latherly. "Next time you see your doctor, have your mother ask for an allergy test. In the meantime, I wouldn't eat any more peanut butter sandwiches."

"My mom makes her own strawberry jam," Tamaya offered up. "Out of real strawberries. Maybe I'm allergic to that."

"Maybe," said Mrs. Latherly.

"She's taking me to the doctor after school."

"Good."

Mrs. Latherly wrapped each of Tamaya's fingers separately, then her palm and wrist.

"How does that feel?"

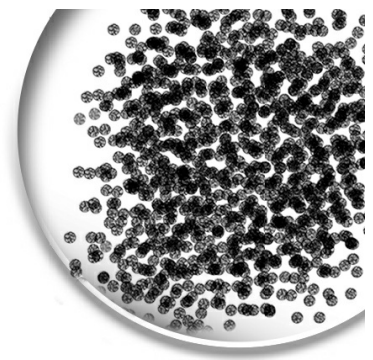
Tamaya tried to wiggle her fingers. "Like I'm a mummy," she joked.

Mrs. Latherly smiled. "I'd like to give you an allergy pill too, but I need to get your mother's permission. I'll call her at work. Check back with me after lunch."

Tamaya said she would.

"And remember, no more scratching!"

17



WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3  
10:45 A.M.

By the time Tamaya made it back to Ms. Filbert's, the class had already moved on to math. There were two inflated balloons taped to the bulletin board. She learned later that only Sam and Rashona had succeeded with their how-to-blow-up-a-balloon instructions. And, according to Hope, Ms. Filbert had had to fudge just a little bit to get those to work.

Throughout the morning, Tamaya felt a pang of disappointment every time she glanced up at the two balloons. She was sure she could have had a balloon up there too, and with no fudging.

She had to write left-handed, which was nearly impossible. Even if it was math, she had a terrible time just trying to make the number two.

"So what's wrong with your hand?" Hope asked her.

"I'm not supposed to eat peanut butter," she whispered.

"Peanut butter makes your hand bleed?"

She shrugged. She didn't want to talk about it. Not with Hope. But she didn't think her rash had anything to do with peanuts or peanut butter.

It had to be the fuzzy mud.

—

Plastic bags were no longer allowed at Woodridge Academy, and no one past the second grade would be caught dead holding a lunch box. Tamaya and her friends carried their lunches in reusable cloth sacks.

Monica's sack was black with a rhinestone peace sign. Hope's was also

black, with a red heart. Tamaya's was plain white, frayed around the edges from its many trips through the washer and dryer.

The girls headed down the stairs toward the lunchroom. "If they ask you about why your hand is all bandaged," Hope said, "don't tell them it's a rash."

Tamaya didn't know who "they" were. She figured Hope was just talking about the other kids in the lunchroom.

"Rashes are gross," Monica agreed.

"Tell them you stabbed yourself with a pencil!" said Hope.

"That's gross too," Tamaya pointed out.

"But it's the kind of gross that boys like," said Monica.

Tamaya still didn't know what they were talking about.

Summer, who was in the other fifth-grade class, was waiting for them just outside the lunchroom. "What happened to you?" she asked when she saw Tamaya.

"She stabbed herself with a pencil," Monica answered, before Tamaya could say anything.

Summer looked very worried. "Why?"

"Just because," said Hope.

"Not really," Tamaya whispered.

The four girls entered the lunchroom. "Act like you don't know they're there," Monica said as she set out toward the same table where they had sat the day before. The older boys were already there. The lunch period for the upper grades began fourteen minutes before that for the middle grades.

Tamaya was relieved not to see Chad with the group of boys, although she was curious where he was. Looking around, she didn't see Marshall either. She hoped nothing bad had happened.

"Don't look at them!" Monica sharply whispered.

"We're just sitting where we always sit," said Summer.

"If they happen to be there too," said Hope, "well, that's just a coincidence."

Tamaya bit her lip. She wondered when her friends had decided that they'd sit next to the boys again. Or maybe they hadn't talked about it. Maybe it was one of those things she was *just supposed to know*.

The girls stepped over the benches and sat down at the table without even glancing at the boys. Tamaya kept her eyes down.

"What happened to her?" asked one of the boys.

Summer turned. "Oh, hi," she said, as if just noticing the boys were there.

"Tamaya stabbed herself with her pencil," said Monica. She smiled at the boy.

"It went right through her hand," said Hope. "In one side and out the other!"

"Cool."

Tamaya examined the contents of her lunch and didn't look up. She knew they were all staring at her. If she could have, she would have crawled inside her sack.

"Didn't it hurt?" asked the boy next to her.

Tamaya's heart was beating very fast as she continued to concentrate on her lunch. She had a sandwich, a juice box, a granola bar, and a container of sliced fruit.

"Course it hurt," said Summer. "What do you think?"

The boy touched Tamaya's other arm, just above the elbow. "Why?" he

asked.

It took all her courage to turn and look at him.

“Why not?” she replied.

The boy continued to stare. He was obviously very impressed.

She smiled.

At least nobody thought she was a Goody Two-shoes anymore.

“So, did you guys hear about Chad?” asked one of the other boys.

Tamaya felt as though she’d been jolted by a thousand volts of electricity.

“What about Chad?” she asked.

“He’s gone,” said the boy next to her.

“He’s been missing since yesterday afternoon,” said another. “He never made it home.”

All the boys were talking at once.

“The police are looking for him.”

“He’s probably in jail somewhere.”

“He’d already stolen, like, ten cars.”

Tamaya’s head was spinning. Again, she looked around the lunchroom for Marshall.

“If he was in jail, then wouldn’t the police know where he was?” asked Hope.

“Not if he didn’t tell them his name.”

Tamaya’s feeling of dread returned, stronger than ever. It wasn’t her rash, or her ruined sweater, or having to lie to her mother, or the fear of being beaten up by Chad. It was worse than all of that.

It was this.

She stood up. Then a rush of dizziness made her grab the edge of the table.

“Are you all right?” asked Summer.

Taking her lunch, she nearly fell over the bench as she stepped away from the table. She had to find Marshall!

“Where are you going?” asked Monica.

As she moved through the lunchroom, desperately looking for Marshall, she could hear different groups of kids talking about Chad.

*“He climbed up on top of the school and is trapped up there and can’t get down.”*

*“He joined a motorcycle gang and is on his way to Mexico.”*

*“He got into a knife fight and is lying in some hospital with amnesia. He can’t even remember his name.”*

Everybody seemed to think that whatever had happened to Chad, it had to be his own fault. He was a bad kid, and bad kids do bad things, and then bad things happen to them.

Nobody suspected that it was a good kid who was really to blame. *A Goody Two-shoes with perfect attendance who had done only one bad thing in her whole entire life!*

Tamaya went down the hall and pushed open the door. She felt a welcome blast of cold air. She took a deep breath as she looked out past the soccer field to the woods.

Chad was out there somewhere. She was sure of it.

How else could she and Marshall have gotten away from him so easily? It was because she had smashed the glob of fuzzy mud into his face. Deep down, she must have known it all along.

She looked at her bandages, covering not only her rash but also her guilt.

Whatever was happening to her hand, Chad's face had to be ten times worse.

She spotted Marshall. He was playing basketball with a group of boys. She had never been so relieved to see anyone.

"Marshall!" she shouted, then ran toward the game, calling his name two more times.

He glanced at her as she neared the court, but then kept on playing.

"I have to talk to you!"

He ignored her.

Boys were running up the court. The basketball flew through the air and bounced off the rim, and then the boys were running the other way.

"Oh, come on!" she exclaimed.

She knew he didn't want her talking to him at school, but that didn't even make sense anymore. For the last two days she'd been eating lunch with other older boys. If they weren't embarrassed to be seen with her, why should he be? It wasn't like anyone would accuse him of having "cooties."

"It's important!" she yelled to him.

Someone threw him the ball. He caught it, took a quick look at her, and then dribbled twice and passed it to someone else.

The boys were all down to their shirts. She stepped over their crumpled blue sweaters as she moved up and down the sideline, staying even with Marshall, trying to catch his eye. He wouldn't look at her.

She studied her bandaged hand and thought, *Maybe I really do have cooties.*

The ball clanked off the edge of the backboard and was coming her way. She raced after it and caught it on the third bounce.

A boy came toward her, hands out, expectantly.

"I have to talk to Marshall," she said.

"C'mon, girl. Just give me the ball," said the boy.

Tamaya held the ball against her chest, wrapping her arms around it.

"What's your problem, girl?" he demanded.

Marshall came toward her. "Quit being a pest," he said.

"Chad's missing," she told him. Although, as she said it aloud, she realized he must have known that already.

"So?" he asked.

He put his hands on the ball. She held tight for a moment, then loosened her grip and let him take it.

She waited by the court for the game to end, her eyes constantly returning to the woods. The lunch period for the upper grades ended fourteen minutes before the one for the middle grades. When the bell finally rang, she hung back as the boys were retrieving their sweaters, then slowly approached Marshall.

"What?" he snapped.

"We were the last to see him," she said. "We have to tell someone."

The other boys were heading back to the building.

"No, Tamaya," Marshall said firmly. "You can't tell anyone, ever. Look, he's the one who hit me. I didn't hit him. Besides, it's got nothing to do with us, anyway. He ran away from home or something."

She held up her bandaged hand. "Look at my hand!"

"I know, you told me. Your mom's taking you to the doctor."

"Look at it!" she screamed as she pulled at the bandages and ripped away the medical tape.



As the gauze pulled loose, a powdery substance sprinkled out, the same powder that had been in her bed earlier.

Marshall stared. Even Tamaya was stunned by how much worse her rash had gotten, just since Mrs. Latherly had treated it. Huge blisters, bleeding and crusted over, now covered the entire area, from the tip of her fingers down past her wrist. Smaller bumps extended halfway to her elbow.

“That’s...really bad,” said Marshall.

“The mud in the woods,” Tamaya said. “I think it’s dangerous. I picked it up with this hand, and then smashed it into Chad’s face.”

She was afraid she was about to cry, but fought it off. “*Into his face!*” she screamed.

“So?”

“Why do you think he didn’t chase after us? He’s still out there, and it’s *all my fault!*”

“You don’t know that for sure,” said Marshall.

“I have to tell Mrs. Thaxton.”

“No, you can’t!” Marshall insisted. “I already told her that I didn’t see Chad yesterday. What are you going to say? We walked home together, and you saw him but I didn’t? Think about it, Tamaya. ‘Oh, now I remember, Mrs. Thaxton. I did see Chad yesterday. He beat me up in the woods. I just forgot.’ ”

“I have to tell somebody.”

“It’s just mud. And anyway, I heard he joined a motorcycle gang and is on his way to Mexico.”

“You *know* that’s not true,” said Tamaya.

“I don’t *know* anything,” said Marshall. “And neither do you.”

He turned away from her. She stared after him as he headed to the building. He never looked back once.

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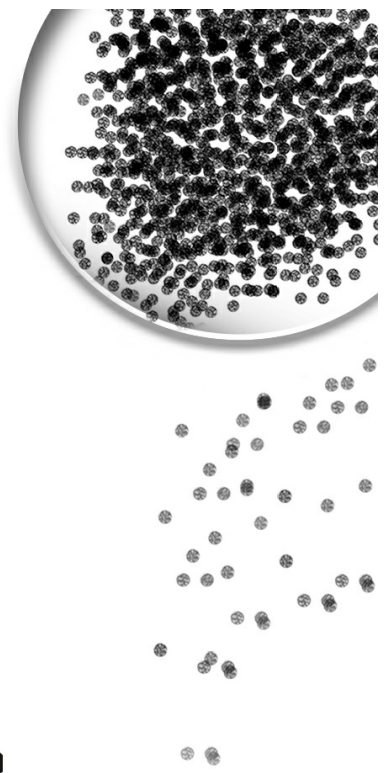
Fourteen minutes later, Tamaya was still out by the basketball court when the bell rang for her to go in. She didn’t know what to do. She didn’t want to get Marshall in trouble, but *somebody had to do something!* She remained there, motionless, as kids all around her returned to the building.

Once again, she gazed out into the woods. She took a step toward the soccer field. Then another.

She walked slowly at first, but her pace increased with every step. She tried not to think about Ms. Filbert or Mrs. Thaxton. She started to run.

Her lunch sack swung from her hand. She was glad she still had it. Chad must be hungry.

# 18



WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3  
1:00 P.M.

It had been more than a month since Marshall had played basketball with his friends. A month since he'd had any friends, and all it had taken was a day—*just one day*—without Chad.

“Marshall never did anything,” Laura Musscrantz had said. “Chad’s just mean!”

Those may have been the sweetest words he'd ever heard in his whole life.

Still, as he sat at his desk in Mr. Davison's class, three seats away from Chad's empty desk, he couldn't get the image of Tamaya's grotesque hand out of his mind; torn strips of bloody gauze had dangled from her blistered flesh. He saw her eyes too. They pleaded with him to do the right thing.

*Man, just when things are finally going good for me, he thought. Why do girls always have to go and ruin everything?*

He knew the right thing to do. He had known it when Mrs. Thaxton had come into his classroom and told everyone that Chad was missing.

The only reason he hadn't told her the truth right then and there was because he didn't want to get Tamaya in trouble. That was what he told himself. He had kept quiet for Tamaya's sake.

But deep down, he knew that was not the truth. He had remained silent because he was scared. Scared and ashamed.

Not that it mattered anymore. He knew it was just a matter of time before Tamaya told someone, either her teacher, Ms. Filbert, or else Mrs. Thaxton.

The classroom phone buzzed, and the sound seemed to vibrate deep down into his bones. As he watched Mr. Davison speak into the phone, he tried to read the expression on his teacher's face. His leg trembled beneath his desk.

Mr. Davison hung up, and Marshall quickly cast his eyes downward, pretending to concentrate on his open book.

“Marshall, Mrs. Thaxton would like to see you in her office.”

He'd been expecting that, but the words still came as a jolt. His chair squeaked as he pushed back from his desk. He stood up, and then walked out of the room, desperately trying to appear calm.

He started up the stairs. Nothing made sense anymore. Chad beat him up, yet he was the one who was getting in trouble!

Everyone was so worried about *poor Chad*. “Where’s Chad?” “Did you see him?” “Did you talk to him?” “What did he say?”

*Chad’s missing? Good! He’s gone, and I’m glad he’s gone!*

Did that make him a bad person?

He reached the top of the stairs. The office was to the right, but Marshall’s eyes were drawn the other way, down a short hallway to a door with a window. Daylight shone through the window.

He stared at the door for a long moment. Maybe it was time people started worrying about *poor Marshall*, he thought.

He stared a moment longer, but then turned and headed toward the office. Tamaya was right. It was time to tell the truth.

Mrs. Latherly had her back to him and was bent over as she placed a folder in a filing cabinet.

“Mrs. Thaxton asked to see me,” he said.

The school secretary straightened up. “Oh, hi, Marshall. We’re glad you’re here.”

He wondered what she meant by that. She sent him on back to Mrs. Thaxton’s office.

The headmistress’s door was open. He could see her sitting at her desk, staring out the window.

He stepped inside and cleared his throat. “You wanted to see me?”

She turned. “Do you know where Tamaya is?”

It wasn’t the question he’d expected, and for a moment he wondered if it was some kind of trick.

Mrs. Thaxton’s face quivered. “Do you?” she demanded.

“Ms. Filbert’s class?”

“She’s not there. She never returned after lunch. I know you two spend a lot of time together.”

“Not a lot. We walk to school together. You know, because we live on the same street. Her mom won’t let her walk to school alone.”

The words were coming out of his mouth as his mind was busily trying to come to grips with what was happening. “Monica’s her best friend,” he said. “Maybe she knows.”

“I spoke to Monica. She said Tamaya suddenly left the lunchroom, for no reason, and never came back. Where were you at lunch?”

“Outside, playing basketball.”

“Did you see her?”

“Um, let me think. I think I might have seen her by the court.”

“Did she say anything to you?”

“Now I remember. The ball bounced away, and she got it, and I went and got it from her.”

“She didn’t say anything about leaving school early?”

“Well, this morning she told me her mom was picking her up after school to take her to see a doctor. She’s got this really bad rash. Maybe her mom

picked her up early?”

“Mrs. Latherly left a message for her mother. We’re waiting to hear back.”

“Tamaya’s pretty good about following rules,” Marshall pointed out. “She wouldn’t just leave without telling someone.”

“I know,” said Mrs. Thaxton. “That’s exactly what worries me.”

Marshall waited, but for a long time Mrs. Thaxton didn’t say anything. She was looking at him, but it felt more like she was looking *through* him, as if she had forgotten he was still there.

“You can go now,” she said at last.

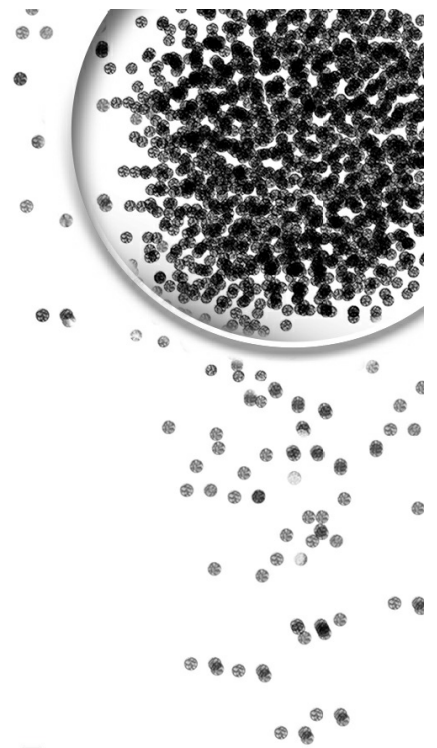
He didn’t have to be told twice.

—

A short while later, Mrs. Thaxton announced over the PA system that the school was being put on lockdown. Students and teachers were to remain in their classes with the lights off and the doors locked. No one would be allowed to enter or leave the building.

But by then, Marshall had already slipped out the side door. Like an escaping prisoner, he had dashed across the grass, frantically climbed over the fence, and then disappeared into the woods.

# 19



WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3  
1:10 P.M.

Leaves continued to fall around Tamaya as she wandered through the trees, hoping to see something, *anything*, that looked familiar from the day before. Then, at least, she'd know she was going in the right direction. But nothing stood out to her.

Normally she was very observant. She was good at noticing small details, but yesterday she had been so scared that she hadn't been able to focus on anything. All her concentration had been devoted to keeping close to Marshall. The only thing she remembered seeing was the fuzzy mud. If she could find that, then maybe Chad would be nearby.

She tried to keep track of everything now: tree stumps, twisted branches, rock formations. There was a tree with several planks of wood hammered into it. She made mental notes of everything she saw so that after she found Chad, she'd be able to find her way back. She stopped often. She'd turn around, and then retrace her steps in her mind.

"Chaaaad!" she shouted.

She didn't have a very loud or strong voice. Ms. Filbert was constantly trying to get her to *pro-ject*. "You have a lot of good ideas, Tamaya. You need to speak with authority." Whenever it was her turn to read aloud in class, everyone always complained that they couldn't hear. And out on the playground, sometimes she'd shout at Monica or Hope, and they wouldn't hear her, even though they were just on the other side of the dodgeball circle.

She tried again, this time putting extra oomph behind it. "Chaa—aad!"

The extra oomph just made her voice crack.

She spotted a tree with white bark and just a few dead leaves left in its branches. One of the branches seemed to be pointing the way back to

school. She fixed it in her memory.

A little beyond the tree, she noticed a dark muddy area. There was a layer of scummy fuzz floating just on top of the mud.

She slowly made her way toward it.

She didn't think it was the same mud puddle from the day before. She remembered now that that had been on the side of a hill. The ground around here was fairly level.

She hooked her lunch sack onto a branch, then moved close to the mud. Just like before, there were no leaves on top of the mud, but they had fallen all around it. She knelt beside the edge of the puddle and could feel warmth radiating from the fuzzy mud. Her skin tingled, but that might just have been the heebie-jeebies playing with her mind.

She picked up a leaf, about the same size as her hand. Holding it by the stem, she slowly lowered it into the fuzz. When she lifted it back up, the top half was completely gone. She let it drop, then backed away as she stood up.

She was getting her lunch sack when she saw another puddle of the fuzzy mud just a little farther off. Beyond that, she could see what looked like two more.

She returned to the white tree, its branch pointing the way back to school.

It wasn't too late to go back. If she hurried, she might not get in trouble. She could go see Mrs. Latherly, take the allergy pill, and get her hand rebandaged. Then Mrs. Latherly could give her a note, excusing her for being late to class.

The tree branch pointed one way. Tamaya went the other.

"Chaaaaaad!" she hollered. This time her voice didn't crack. She continued deeper into the woods.

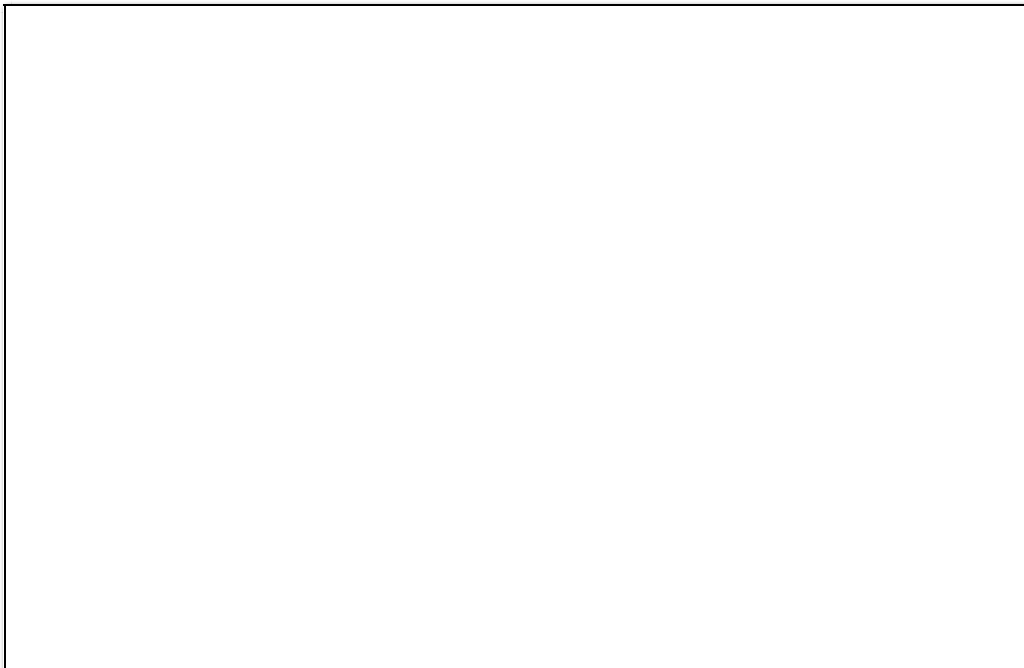
# 20



## Three Months Later

In February of the following year, three months after Tamaya went back into the woods to search for Chad, the Senate Committee on Energy and the Environment held a new set of hearings. These hearings were not secret. By this time the entire world knew about SunRay Farm, Biolene, and the disaster that had occurred in Heath Cliff, Pennsylvania.

Dr. Peter Smythe, deputy director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, gave the following testimony at these Heath Cliff Disaster Hearings:









# 21

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3  
1:21 P.M.

A dead tree lay on its side, partially propped up by its broken branches. An image flashed in Tamaya's head of Marshall standing atop a tree that had fallen over. She hurried toward it.

Up close, the tree seemed larger than she remembered. There was a thick branch sticking almost straight up from the trunk, with lots of smaller branches coming off it. She doubted it was the same tree.

Some of the bark crumbled away as she grabbed the base of the largest branch. She pulled herself up, then looked around, just as Marshall had done. Ahead, the ground sloped steeply down to a gully. Rising up from the other side of the gully were two hills.

One of those hills could have been where they'd left Chad. She cupped her hands around her mouth, like a megaphone, and tried to make her tiny voice project across the vast woodlands. "Chaaaaaaaad!"

Her eyes scanned the two hillsides, hoping to see Marshall's rocky ledge, but all she could see were trees and more trees. She hopped down.

The ground went splat beneath her left foot.

Even before she looked, she realized what she had done. She stared down in horror at her left foot, ankle-deep in fuzzy mud. She tried to step free, but her foot wouldn't budge. The mud held tight. She could feel the warmth oozing through her sock.

Her right foot had landed safely, just on the edge of the mud puddle. She took a long stride back toward the fallen tree and grabbed one of the small dead branches. Its rough and pointy edges ripped through her blisters as she desperately pulled with all her might.

The branch broke at the same moment her foot pulled free. She nearly fell backward into the mud but managed to force her momentum sideways

and landed on the dry, leaf-covered ground.

She instantly yanked off her sneaker, and then her muddy sock. She now had mud on her fingers, and she wiped them on her sweater and skirt.

She took off her sweater and used it as best as she could to clean her leg and foot. She pulled the cloth back and forth between her toes and continued to rub even after she didn't see any more of the mud on her. She was more worried about what she couldn't see.

She left her muddy sweater on top of the dead tree. Lunch sack in hand, one shoe off, one shoe on, she continued down the slope toward the gully.

“Chaa-aaaa-aad!”



22

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3  
1:45 P.M.

At the beginning of each school year, a parent or guardian of every student at Woodridge Academy was required to fill out a bunch of forms. Among other things, they were to provide the school with their various telephone numbers and emergency contact information.

Those numbers were now being called grade by grade, in alphabetical order. From inside her office, Mrs. Thaxton could hear Mr. Franks and Mrs. Latherly as they made one call after another.

“There’s been an incident...”

“Your child is perfectly safe. We’re just taking extra precautions....”

“No, we need *you* to personally pick up your daughter. Your babysitter’s name is not in our files. If you want to fax or email your signed authorization...”

“No decision has been made yet about tomorrow. We will be sending out a mass email.”

Mrs. Thaxton knew she should have been making the calls too, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it. She had just gotten off the phone with Tamaya’s mother, who had telephoned the school after receiving Mrs. Latherly’s message.

No, she had not picked Tamaya up after lunch. Yes, she knew about the rash and was planning to take Tamaya to the doctor, but not until after school. *What’s this all about? Where’s Tamaya?*

Mrs. Dhilwaddi was on her way home now. Their best hope was that Tamaya had decided to go home after lunch without telling anyone. But they also knew Tamaya wouldn’t have done that.

Mrs. Thaxton’s chin trembled, and her eyes were blurry with tears. She

blamed herself for not putting the school on lockdown the moment she'd heard that Chad Hilligas was missing. She should have done it right then! Better to overreact than to underreact.

But she knew the type of boy Chad was. Whatever had happened to him, wherever he was, she hadn't thought it had anything to do with the rest of the school. Not that she hadn't been concerned about him. She had been very concerned. She just hadn't taken his disappearance as a danger sign for the other students.

She remembered when Chad and his mother first came to her office. His mother wrote out a check for the tuition, handed it to her, and then, right in front of Chad declared, "He's your problem now."

Tamaya was different. She was the exact opposite of Chad. She was respectful of her teachers and considerate of others. She followed the rules. She was the type of student a teacher might easily ignore, and that, Mrs. Thaxton now realized, might be why she had gone missing without anyone noticing.

Mrs. Thaxton shut her eyes very tight. She knew she needed to be strong in this time of crisis.

*Two missing children. Two missing children, in two days.*

She did not yet know that a third child would also be discovered missing. She assumed Marshall was safely back in class. Mr. Davison assumed he was still with the headmistress.

No one was worried about *poor Marshall*.



23

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3  
2:00 P.M.

The ground was mostly soft under Tamaya's cold bare foot, but she had to step carefully to avoid the sticks and sharp rocks buried beneath the fallen leaves. Her rash had spread the full length of her arm, and she could see small red bumps on her other hand now too. She tingled all over, although she couldn't be sure if that was caused by the mud or by her own heebie-jeebies. It seemed wherever she looked, there were more mud puddles.

Yet, as bad as it was for her, she knew it had to be ten times worse for Chad. At least she'd been able to go home yesterday. She'd been able to take a bath and change her clothes.

"Chaaa—" she started to shout, then gasped and brought her hand almost to her mouth. Just ahead lay some kind of dead animal, half covered in muck and fuzz. She quickly turned her head away.

It could have been a raccoon, or possibly a small dog. The mud made it hard to know, and she didn't want to look.

She made a wide circle around it, carefully watching every step before gently setting her foot down.

She wondered if there was anybody else, anywhere, who knew about the fuzzy mud. She had tried to tell Mrs. Latherly, but the school nurse had been more worried about peanut butter! Even Marshall hadn't seemed to get it.

Was it possible that she was the only one in the whole world who knew? The thought scared her, but it was also what made her keep going.

*If not her, who?*

She was determined to make it to the hills on the other side of the gully. "Chaaa-aaad!" she shouted. "Are you out here?"

As the slope of the hill became steeper, she needed to grab onto branches to keep from losing her balance. She bounced from tree to tree, down toward the gully.

There were fewer trees close to the gully, and the ground became even steeper. Tamaya could see down directly into the gully. It was more than half filled with fuzzy mud.

She eased herself into a sitting position and rolled up the top of her lunch sack so nothing would spill. She slid down toward the mud, using her sneakered foot as a brake to keep from going too fast.

The ground was too steep, and she started to turn sideways. She pulled at a clump of weeds to steady herself, but the weeds ripped out of the ground and she flipped over onto her stomach. Her knees scraped across jagged rocks; then her foot slammed into a large boulder, finally stopping her.

She clutched another clump of weeds to try to hold herself in place as she carefully moved her other foot to the boulder for more support. Looking over her shoulder, she saw that she was only a few feet from the edge of the gully. A thin layer of fuzzy scum rose up from it, like smoke.

Not too far away, she could see the flat top of a rock embedded in the dirt. It would make a good jumping-off spot. It looked to be about a six-foot jump from one side of the gully to the other.

She moved, crablike, along the slope toward the flat-topped rock. She dug her fingernails into the dirt to keep from slipping.

She knew she'd have to move quickly. If she hesitated for even a half second, she could end up in the mud.

She pushed herself up, spun around, and slammed her sneakered foot down on the rock. She jumped and hit the other side only inches above the mud. Using her momentum, she scrambled upward, away from the gully.

It wasn't until she was walking again, following a dry creek bed, that she noticed the pain from all the bruises on her hands, arms, knees, and legs. Her shirt had rolled up a bit during her slide, and she had scratches and scrapes on her stomach as well. Still, she knew her pain was nothing compared to Chad's.

"Chaaa-aad!"

The creek bed wound its way upward between the two hills she had seen from the other side of the gully. She kept looking from one hill to the other, hoping to see Marshall's rocky ledge. Although she knew that even if she found it, that didn't mean Chad was still nearby.

"Chaaaaad!" Her throat was dry, and her weak voice had gotten even weaker.

For a second she thought she heard something. She stopped and listened.

The woods were silent. Looking back the way she had come, she wondered if she'd ever find her way out of there. She didn't want to have to cross the gully again.

She heard a noise. Twigs were breaking, and then footsteps. The steps were uneven, like someone was stomping and staggering.

Then she saw him. He crashed his way through a tangle of twigs and thin branches.

She froze.

"I'm here!" he called, but his voice was little more than a raspy whisper.

He took several deep, uneven breaths, then continued to push his way toward her. "I'm here," he repeated weakly.

His face was a mass of blisters, crusted with pus and dried blood, and so badly swollen, she could hardly see his eyes.

She started to bring her hand to her mouth, then stopped herself, not

wanting to get the rash on her lips or tongue.

He came closer. "Where'd you go?" he called from only a few feet away. He sank to his knees. "I'm right here," he whimpered. "Where'd you go?"

She felt overwhelmed with feelings of horror, revulsion, and pity. When she spoke, she spoke softly.

"Are you hungry?"



24

## The Situation in Heath Cliff (Three Months Later)

Three months after Tamaya found Chad in the woods, Jonathan Fitzman was subpoenaed to testify at the Heath Cliff Disaster Hearings.

Donna Jones, a lawyer from SunRay Farm, was seated by Fitzzy's side. Ms. Jones had instructed Jonathan Fitzman never to use the word *disaster*. Instead, he was to refer to it as "the situation in Heath Cliff."

