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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 3
EVENING

Marshall walked between Tamaya and Chad, an arm guiding each of them. He wore only one shoe, having given the other to Tamaya. It was way too big for her, but she was glad for the protection, even if it flopped a bit with every step she took.

She could still see blurry shapes up close, just like Chad had described, but only if they were right in front of her face. She had lost track of time. She had no idea how far they'd gone or how much farther they had to go.

"Do you know the way?" she asked Marshall.

"I think so."

"Look for a white tree with a branch that sticks out. It points the way back."

"There are a lot of white trees."

"Also a big tall tree with wood planks nailed to it," she told him. "That's Chad's tree. That's how he saw us yesterday."

"I have more than one tree," said Chad. "I climb up one, and then I see one that seems taller, so I climb that one. I want to try to find the highest tree out here."

"That's cool," said Marshall.

"You think? I figured you'd all think it was stupid. Like I was a little kid or something."

"No, that's way too scary for a little kid," said Marshall.

"Too scary for me!" Tamaya agreed.

"You? No way!" said Chad. "You're not scared of anything. I'll take you guys up sometime. There are some boards at the top you can sit on."

Once again, Tamaya could hear renewed energy in Chad's voice as he

talked about his tree.

“You can see for miles,” said Chad.

For miles? That was nice to imagine, considering she and Chad couldn’t even see *for inches*.

Marshall stopped suddenly. Tamaya felt him tighten his grip on her arm.

Chad must have felt it too. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“Shh!” Marshall whispered. “I hear something.”

Tamaya listened. It sounded like the scattering of leaves and dirt. Something was moving, some kind of animal, or maybe several animals.

“Chad,” she whispered. “When you were up in your tree, did you really ever see the crazy hermit and his black wolves?”

“I saw a guy with a beard. No wolves.”

The sound grew louder. There was definitely more than one animal. A dog barked. It was coming toward them. More barking, from more than one dog.

A dog barked right in front of Tamaya. She cringed, but then Marshall said, “It’s not going to hurt you. I think maybe we’re rescued.”

From a distance, she heard a man’s voice call, “They went this way!”

She bent down and tentatively reached out to soft, warm fur. A wet tongue licked her face.

“Oh, don’t do that,” she said, not wanting the dog to get her rash.

“They’re here!” someone shouted, and the next thing she knew there were lots of voices talking all at once. “Are you injured?” “How’d you get here?” “Did someone hurt you?”

“They’re both blind,” Marshall said. “There’s something bad in the mud out here.”

She heard what sounded like someone talking on a phone. “We got ’em. All three, two boys and a girl. We’re going to need an ambulance. No, they say they weren’t abducted, but we’ll keep searching.”

Tamaya felt a hand on her shoulder. “You’re safe now,” said a man’s voice. “I’m going to carry you back to the school, and then you’ll be taken to the hospital.”

“Careful. I’m all covered in mud,” she warned.

The man chuckled and said, “A little mud never hurt anyone.”

She felt his arms wrap around her, and he lifted her up off the ground.

Tamaya was too cold, and too tired, and too sore to try to explain. It was too late now anyway. She let herself sink into his warm wool coat. He’d find out about the mud soon enough. They all would.

As he carried her out of the woods, she asked the name of the dogs.

“The one that you were petting is Missy, short for ‘Miss Marple.’ We also have Nero, Sherlock, and Rockford. All named after famous detectives.”

“Cause they’re good at finding people?”

“They’re the best.”

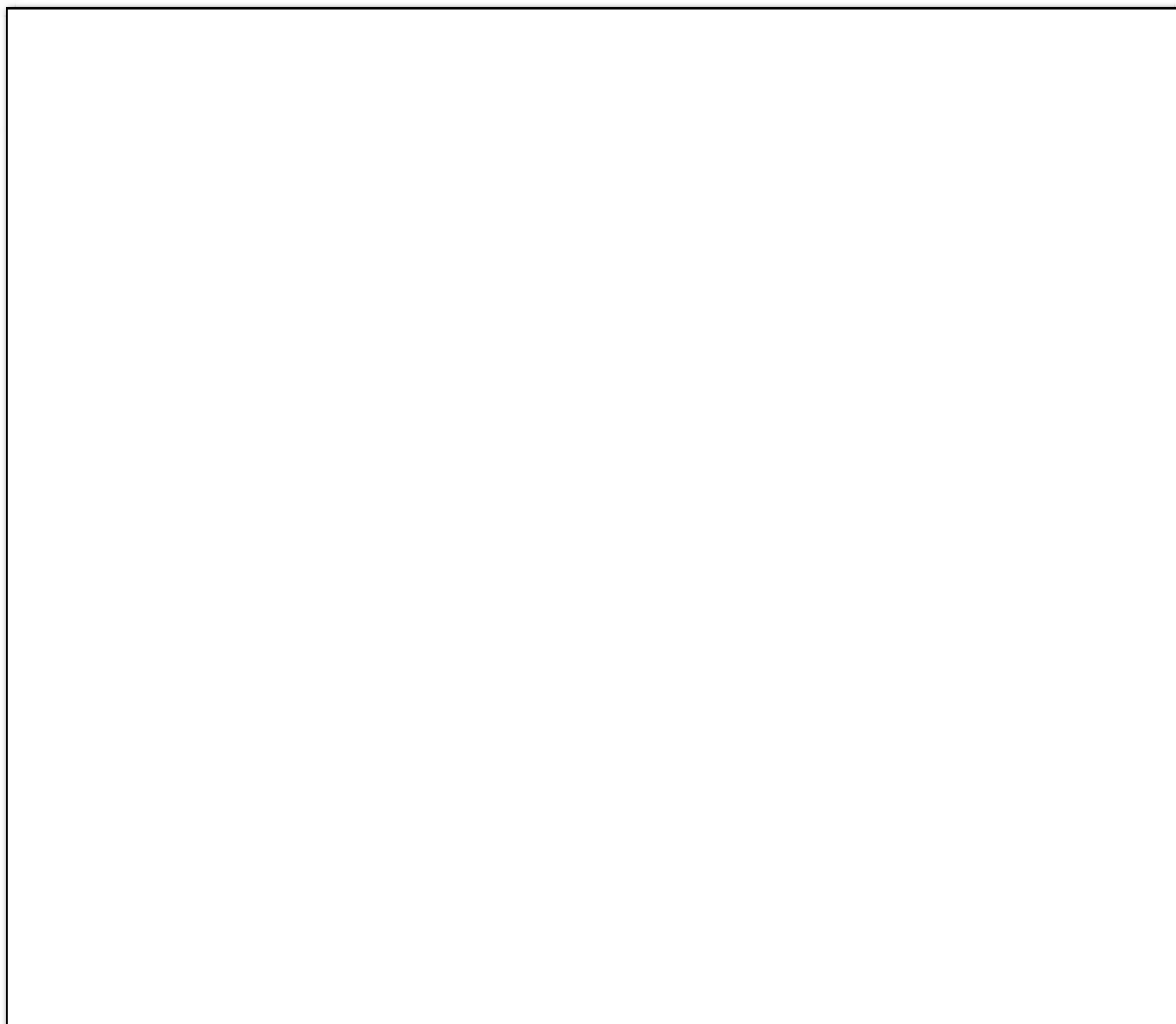
“I love dogs,” said Tamaya.

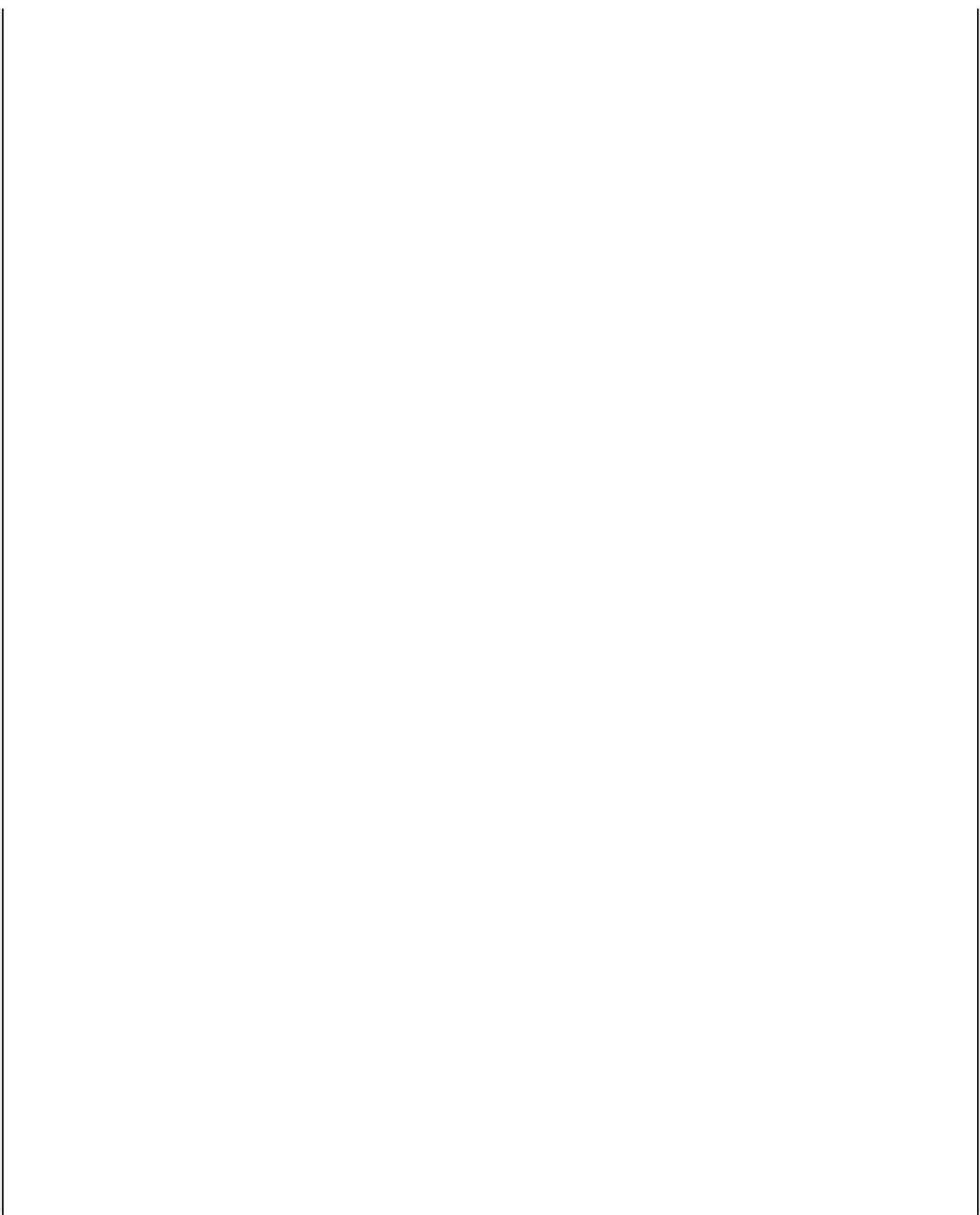


32

Turtles

The following is excerpted from the Heath Cliff Disaster Hearings, held three months after Tamaya was carried out of the woods:







33

Frankengerms

The man who rescued Tamaya did find out soon enough. The whole world found out about the mud.

Within hours of the children's rescue, everyone who had been involved in the search began showing signs of the rash: redness, small bumps, a tingling sensation. By the next morning, many of these bumps had turned into blisters, and people awoke to find a mysterious powder the color of their skin on their bedsheets. As it turned out, the powder was their skin, or what was left of it after the mutated ergonyms ate "the good parts."

One week after Tamaya, Chad, and Marshall were found in the woods, there were more than five hundred cases of the rash in the town of Heath Cliff. After two weeks, the number had grown to fifteen thousand.

Many people didn't seek treatment until it was too late. One of the most insidious things about the rash was that there was no pain, just a mild tingling sensation. Normally nerve cells send a pain message to the brain, but the microorganisms ate through the portion of the cell that transmits the message. It was like a telephone line had been cut. The nerve cells were screaming, "Help! Alert! Danger!" but the brain never got the message.

About the same time that Tamaya, Marshall, and Chad were being loaded into an ambulance, the searchers found the dead body of a person who had been living in the woods, a man with a very long beard.

The three lost children were rushed to Heath Cliff Regional Hospital. Samples of the mud were taken from Tamaya's hair and clothes and sent to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, and to the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. Photos of her hand

and arm, as well as Chad's face, were emailed to those agencies as well.

The doctors at the hospital searched the medical books and Internet but could find no record of this type of rash. There was no known cure. The best they could do for Tamaya was to keep her extremely clean.

She was thoroughly washed. Her hair was cut off and her head was shaved. For the next few weeks she was given round-the-clock sponge baths. Every two hours, morning, noon, and night, a nurse would wash her with rubbing alcohol. After each bath she had to rinse her mouth with a special mouthwash. It stung and tasted terrible, and she had to keep it in her mouth for a minute before they allowed her to spit it out. She didn't mind one bit. It tasted strong.

Her mother, and then later her father, came to visit, although they weren't allowed to touch her. She told them she was sorry, but they kept on telling her how proud they were of her.

Later, as the epidemic spread through Heath Cliff, all visitors were banned from the hospital, including her parents. She could still talk to them on her cell phone, which her father had given to her.

Her vision didn't deteriorate any further. If she held her hand in front of her face, she could see it was her hand, but that might have been because she already knew it was her hand. Her doctor tried various other shapes and objects. She could correctly identify a circle, a square, and a triangle, but when he held up a woman's high-heeled shoe, she guessed it was a banana.

She asked often about Marshall and Chad. She heard Marshall was doing fairly well, but she wasn't allowed to see him.

Chad was in very serious condition. That was all she could find out about him. She was told that if he had arrived at the hospital even twenty minutes later, he probably wouldn't have survived.

She never complained. Sometimes, when she felt scared, she'd repeat to herself the ten virtues that she'd been made to memorize at Woodridge Academy: *Charity. Cleanliness. Courage. Empathy. Grace. Humility. Integrity. Patience. Prudence. Temperance.* Partly, she thought that if she was really, really good, then the rash would go away and she'd be able to see again. Deep down, she was also preparing herself for the worst. In case she didn't get better, she wanted to be able to face the world with courage, patience, and grace.

She learned to recognize her different nurses, not only by their voices but also by the sounds they made when they entered her room to give her another sponge bath. Everyone continued to assure her that the best scientists in the country were working on a cure.

Everyone acted so calm and reassuring around her. It was only when she talked to Monica that she found out that the rest of the world was totally freaked out.

"The fuzzy mud's everywhere!" Monica told her. "School's closed. Not just Woodridge. All schools. No one goes outside. I'm not even supposed to talk to you, because my mom's afraid the frankengerms will come through the phone!"

—

Everyone called it "fuzzy mud," the term Tamaya had used when she'd arrived at the hospital. Even the scientists, who could be seen throughout Heath Cliff dressed in their hazmat suits, called it that. Dr. Humbard, a former employee of SunRay Farm, appeared on all the cable news shows, which was probably why the mutated organisms were now being called *frankengerms*.

The hospitals ran out of room, and schools were turned into rash

treatment centers. Cots were set up in the classrooms and cafeterias. Sheets were hung to provide privacy for the round-the-clock sponge baths, administered by dedicated nurses who also wore full hazmat suits.

The president ordered that Heath Cliff and the surrounding area be put under quarantine. No one was allowed to leave, whether or not they showed symptoms of the rash. The airport and railroad stations were closed. The Pennsylvania National Guard patrolled the roads and highways.



34

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 23

Miss Marple lay in a crate in Dr. Robert Crumbly's office. Dr. Crumbly stood alongside the crate, a hypodermic needle in his hand. He was glad the poor dog was sleeping. She didn't suffer when she was asleep.

Part Australian shepherd, part chow, and part who-knows-what, Miss Marple used to have thick, gray fur with white, black, and brown spots. Most of her fur had fallen out. Her naked skin was covered in blisters. She'd become deaf and blind.

In her dream, Missy was running through the woods. All senses were on full alert as she searched for the lost children. Leaves flew up as she dashed over them. She barked in joyful triumph and licked the lost girl's face.

To Dr. Crumbly, the triumphant barks of her dream sounded like pathetic whimpers. He carefully opened her crate so as not to wake her.

He worked alone now. Two of his vet techs had come down with the rash, and he'd ordered the others to stay home. He wore gloves and boots but not a hazmat suit. He didn't want to scare the animals.

Miss Marple somehow sensed his presence. Her tail gave a weak thump against the bottom of her crate.

"Hey, girl," he said, and petted the dog, wishing he didn't have to wear gloves. He thought, at the very least, the dog deserved to feel a warm, human touch.

He readied the needle.

Animals suffered from the rash worse than people, since they didn't take baths. It wasn't only dogs and cats. Dr. Crumbly had seen many different infected animals, including hamsters, rabbits, a ferret, and even a skunk named Penelope.

Sadly, he'd been unable to do anything for them except put a final end to their suffering. Over the past two weeks he'd put down more than twenty pets.

There had been one animal, however, that had shown no ill effects from the fuzzy mud. Dr. Crumbly owned a land turtle named Maurice. Maurice had gotten stuck in a patch of fuzzy mud in his backyard, and he'd had to pry him out with a shovel. Three days later, the turtle still hadn't shown any symptoms of the rash.

Peering through the microscope in his small office laboratory, Dr. Crumbly had compared samples of Maurice's skin with skin samples he'd taken from some of the infected animals. He'd discovered an enzyme in Maurice's skin cell that didn't appear in any of the other animals' skin cells.

Miss Marple turned her head toward him.

"You're a good dog," he said.

He inserted the needle into her right hind leg, injecting her with a concentration of the turtle enzymes.



35

MONDAY, DECEMBER 6

Tamaya was the first human test case. Her parents had spoken to the doctor in charge of the experiment, who had cautioned them that just because the cure had worked on animals, there was no guarantee that it would work on people too. Still, what choice did they have?

Tamaya tried not to let her hopes get too high, although she was very glad to learn that Miss Marple had made a full recovery. She loved that dog.

She received two injections of the turtle enzymes each day. Various doctors and nurses were constantly coming into her hospital room to check on her. They always asked her name, which began to bug her after a while. She realized there were lots of other patients and the doctors were very busy, but still, it was a very important experiment. *They could at least remember her name!*

She mentioned that to Ronda, her favorite nurse, who just laughed.

“They know your name,” Ronda told her. “They’re just testing your memory. Human beings don’t normally have these types of enzymes in their bodies, and the doctors are worried about possible bad side effects.”

“Maybe I’ll grow a shell, like a turtle,” Tamaya joked.

Ronda laughed again. “That’d be cute,” she said. “And practical,” she added.

“Whenever I get tired, I could just duck inside my shell and go to sleep,” Tamaya agreed.

Tamaya’s other nurses tried to be cheerful and positive around her, but she could tell they were faking it. She didn’t blame them. She realized how horrible she must look with no hair and her skin all blistered. But Ronda didn’t fake it. She talked and joked with Tamaya like she was just a normal person.

Besides asking her to say her name, her doctors also had her tell them her address and phone number. They asked her who George Washington was. They had her do math problems in her head: five times seven, twenty-six divided by two.

They listened to her heart and lungs. They took her temperature and checked her blood pressure. They made her walk around in a circle and touch her toes.

She began to get better at identifying the various objects her doctor held in front of her face. Still, that didn't mean the treatment was necessarily working. After weeks of practice, her brain might simply have learned how to decipher the blurry images. She also hardly noticed the tingling sensation anymore, but again, that could have been because her brain had learned to block it out.

"How long did it take for Miss Marple to get better?" she asked one of the doctors.

"People and dogs are different," the doctor replied, not answering the question.

She asked him about Chad but was told that Chad had been moved to another part of the hospital. She worried about what that meant.

She slept at odd times, never for very long. She was constantly being awakened, if not for a sponge bath, then for a shot or more tests.

One night, or it might have been during the day, she had a very odd dream. There was a man in her room. He didn't seem to be a doctor, but she didn't know who he was. He said his name was Fitzzy.

"That's a strange name."

"I'm a strange person," he said with a laugh.

Every time he spoke, his voice came from another part of the room. He could have just been moving around, but it gave Tamaya the impression of some kind of floating spirit.

"You want anything?" he asked.

"No thanks."

"You sure?" he asked. "When I say anything, I mean *anything*! I'm about to become really rich. Like, the richest man in the world, maybe."

There was a sudden clattering noise.

"What was that?"

"Nothing," he said.

It sounded like he was down on the floor now.

"I just knocked over a jar of those wooden things you stick into your mouth and say *ah*."

"It sounds like you're putting them back into the jar."

"I don't want to make a mess."

"You probably should throw them away," Tamaya told him. "I don't think you should put them in somebody's mouth after they've been on the floor."

"Oh, yeah," he agreed.

She heard them being dumped into the garbage.

"So, can I buy you anything?" His voice was very close now.

"No thanks."

"I don't want anything either," he said. He sounded sad. "You'd think someone with lots of money would want to buy something, wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't."

His voice was now far away.

"I just like figuring things out. I like science. You like science?"

"It's okay."

"What's your favorite subject?"

"Reading, I guess," she told him. "I like to write too. I think I want to be a writer someday."

"That's good. You can still do that, can't you? I mean, even if you can't see? You can talk into a computer and it will write for you."

"I don't know. I write different than I talk."

"I know what you mean. I think different than I talk. It's like my brain's filled with all these ideas, but sometimes I don't even recognize the words that come out of my mouth."

"You make sense to me," said Tamaya.

"That's good. You sure I can't buy you anything? A piano? A grandfather clock?"

"I just want to get better."

"Me too. I want everyone to get better. I wanted to help people, not start a worldwide epidemic."

He sounded very sad. Tamaya wished there were something she wanted. "Oh, I know!" she suddenly remembered. "I need a new school sweater."

—

She woke up sometime after that while Ronda was giving her a sponge bath. She thought about her dream and laughed.

"What's so funny?" Ronda asked.

"Nothing." *A grandfather clock? A piano?*

The sponge bath felt nice.

Often, she didn't know if her eyes were open or shut. It was something she had to think about. She opened them now.

The world was full of light and color. Ronda had red hair and dark eyes. The walls were yellow.

Tamaya started to tremble.

"What's wrong?" Ronda asked.

Everything still looked very blurry, but it was a well-lit blur.

"Tamaya, are you okay?" Ronda asked again.

She was afraid she might still be dreaming. She spoke tentatively, almost afraid that if she spoke, the world would go dark again.

"Ronda, I can see you," she said, and when the world didn't disappear, she trembled even harder. "I can see."

Ronda began shaking too. She hugged Tamaya very hard, which was against the rules.

"You need to call your mother!" she declared. "I'll get the doctor. You call your mother!"

She hugged Tamaya again, and then got her cell phone for her from the table by the bed.

"What time is it?" Tamaya asked. "Are you sure it's not too late?"

"It doesn't matter what time it is," Ronda said. "Call her now!"

—

At three-forty-five in the morning, Tamaya's mother was startled awake by the ringing of the phone. Instantly her heart filled with terror. It took all her courage to answer it, as she tried to prepare herself for the worst.

“Yes?”

“Hey, Mom, guess what?”

A decorative border of small black dots surrounds the page. In the top right corner, there is a circular inset showing a close-up of a snowflake.

36

Snow

Two days later, the first snow fell. Tamaya still couldn't make out the individual snowflakes, but she was able to see zigzagging streaks of gray and white outside her hospital window.

It was beautiful. The whole world looked beautiful to her, even the bright green Jell-O that came with her lunch, with coleslaw magically suspended inside.

Ronda led her onto the outdoor patio next to the cafeteria. Wearing a ski hat over her closely cropped hair, she lay on the cement and caught snowflakes with her tongue.

—

It snowed for four straight days. Tamaya learned that Marshall had begun getting Dr. Crumbly's injections and that he was showing great improvement. Nobody seemed to know anything about Chad, and she was afraid to push it, afraid what she might find out.

Her doctor gave her large black-framed glasses that were too big for her face. Seeing him clearly for the first time, she nearly fainted. With soft brown eyes and curly hair, he was even cuter than Mr. Franks.

"I get all flustered and tongue-tied when he looks at me," she told Monica over the phone. "It's a good thing I didn't know what he looked like before. Everyone would have thought I had all kinds of horrible side effects. I probably would have forgotten my own name!"

Monica laughed.

"You don't sound so scared anymore," Tamaya noticed.

"I know. I think it's all the snow. I mean, I know the mud's still there,

underneath, but everything just seems safer. And I'm just so happy you're almost all better!"

Tamaya could hear a crack in her best friend's voice. It sounded like she was crying. Tamaya started to cry too. Then they both laughed at the fact that they were crying. They stayed on the phone a while longer, crying and laughing at the same time.

—

One day in late December, Tamaya's doctor was checking her pulse while she watched television.

A TV set hung from the ceiling in the corner of her hospital room. She could feel her heart rate quicken at his touch. She hoped it didn't throw off his measurements.

Her TV program was interrupted by a breaking news story from Heath Cliff, Pennsylvania. Her doctor let go of her wrist and picked up the remote. He raised the volume.

A man was standing in the back of Woodridge Academy, near the edge of the woods. He was surrounded by news reporters. The bar across the bottom of her TV identified him as Dr. Peter Smythe, deputy director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. It felt odd watching something on TV that was happening right at her school. Snow was falling outside her hospital window, and she could see it falling on the man on TV. Tamaya thought he looked more like a lumberjack than a doctor. He had a thick bushy beard and held a shovel.

The man dug his shovel through the snow, and then, with his bare hand, reached down and pulled out a big glob of black goo.

"Fuzzy mud," he said. Ice crystals stuck to his beard, and Tamaya could see his frozen breath as he spoke. "I'm holding in my hand more than a billion of your so-called frankengerms."

Tamaya felt all tingly again, watching him hold the mud just like she had once held it.

"And I'm happy to report that every last one of them is dead," the man said. "The organism cannot survive subfreezing temperatures."

Tamaya and her doctor looked at each other. *Could this really be true?*

Several of the reporters applauded, and Tamaya could hear cheers coming from other rooms in the hospital.

"Does this mean the crisis is over?" a reporter asked.

Before Dr. Smythe answered, the bar at the bottom of the TV screen had already proclaimed CRISIS OVER! FRANKENGERMS ALL DEAD!

Tamaya wondered how they could know for sure. Maybe the frankengerms were just hibernating, like bears.

"How do you know they're not simply lying dormant?" a reporter asked, almost as if she were channeling Tamaya's thoughts. "How do you know they won't wake up again when the weather turns warmer?"

"We've examined them in our labs. I've personally looked through a microscope and seen the disintegrated membranes. I assure you, they will not *wake up*."

Still, Tamaya wondered, how could he know they were *all* dead? Maybe somewhere beneath all that snow, there was one that was still alive.

"Of course, the CDC will continue to monitor the situation," Dr. Smythe said. "Although extremely unlikely, it is possible that another mutation could have occurred. Somewhere out here there may be one mutated ergonym capable of surviving the freezing cold. We'll know more after the snow melts."



37

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 30

The quarantine was lifted.

Under the direction of the National Institutes of Health, Dr. Crumbly's cure was mass-produced. It successfully treated more than sixty thousand people and animals afflicted with the Dhilwaddi Blister Rash—the now official name of that particular medical condition. Medical books were being updated with before-and-after photos of Tamaya Dhilwaddi's skin.

Two weeks after being discharged, Tamaya and Marshall returned to the hospital, this time as visitors. Tamaya brought jars of homemade strawberry jam, belated Christmas presents for her doctor and nurses. Marshall carried a plastic food container.

Tamaya still wore glasses, but Monica had given her new ones for Christmas. The frames were neon green and semitransparent. Monica told her they were *très chic*, French for “very stylish.”

Tamaya's hair had begun to grow back. She wore a pink cap over what she called her fuzzy head. She had some scars on her hand and arm, which her doctor said would fade. There was a pockmark on her face, which her friend Summer insisted only made her prettier.

“In order to be perfect, everyone woman needs an imperfection,” Summer had told her.

This sounded like an oxymoron to Tamaya, but it was still nice to hear.

After Tamaya gave the strawberry jam to Ronda, Ronda said she had

something for her too.

She handed her a flat box. Tamaya opened it to find a new school sweater.

“How’d you know?” She couldn’t remember ever telling Ronda about the sweater. “You shouldn’t have. It’s way too expensive.”

“It’s not from me,” Ronda explained. “The box arrived here for you yesterday. I’ve been trying to figure out how to get it to you.”

Tamaya discovered a small card, which read, *For a girl of extraordinary virtue and valor*. It was signed *Your friend, Fitzy*.

“Who’s Fitzy?” Marshall asked, reading over her shoulder.

“I thought I dreamed him,” Tamaya answered, mystified. “Good thing I didn’t ask for a piano!”

“What?” asked Marshall.

—

Chad Hilligas was one of the few rash patients still in the hospital. The skin on his face had been so badly damaged, he had been put in a ward usually reserved for severe burn victims.

The door opened as Tamaya knocked. “Hello?” she said as she entered. Marshall was no longer with her.

Chad was sitting up in bed, wearing green pin-striped pajamas. A ray of sunlight shone through the window, highlighting a shaft of dust particles and casting a glare across his heavily scarred face. He wore a pair of the hospital-issued black-framed glasses.

Tamaya was happy to see the glasses. If he’d been blind, there would have been no need for them.

“Tamaya!” he said.

She was afraid he might hate her again, because of what she’d done to him, but he seemed glad to see her.

“Hi, Chad.” She set down her sweater box, then stuck her hands into the back pockets of her jeans. “How are you doing?”

“I’m not supposed to move my mouth too much,” he said, keeping his face noticeably still as he spoke. “They had to take skin from another part of my body and put it on my face.”

“Oh,” said Tamaya. “You still look like you,” she assured him.

“Just call me Buttface,” he said.

She was shocked. “You mean they...” She covered her mouth with her hand. “At least you think it’s funny. Instead of being all mad and everything.”

“Nothing makes me mad,” he said. “It’s weird. Ever since I could see again, the world just looks a lot better than it did before.”

“I know what you mean,” Tamaya agreed. “Everything’s beautiful.”

“I hope it lasts,” said Chad.

“Me too,” said Tamaya.

She wasn’t sure if Chad meant he hoped the world lasts, or if he hoped it continues to look beautiful. Either way, she agreed with him.

The door pushed farther open as Marshall backed his way into the room. He turned around, holding a tray with three plates of lasagna.

“The nurses let me use the microwave.”

“Happy birthday!” exclaimed Tamaya.

Chad didn’t say anything. He stared at the food, then looked from Marshall to Tamaya, and back to Marshall.

“He’s not supposed to talk,” Tamaya told Marshall, then quietly

whispered, "His butt was transplanted onto his face."

Chad pulled back his covers, then slowly slid down from the bed. He stepped toward Marshall, who set down the tray and nervously backed away.

It might have been all the talk about frankengerms, but with his scarred and rigid face, and his now outstretched arms, Tamaya thought Chad looked a little bit like the Frankenstein monster.

Marshall backed up against the wall. Chad clasped Marshall by the shoulders, pulled him close, and hugged him.

"Thanks, man," Chad said.

Marshall twisted free. "It was Tamaya's idea."

Tamaya laughed at Marshall's awkwardness. She wondered why boys were always so weird about hugging, but then her heart stopped when Chad's eyes fixed on her. He opened his arms wide and said the same three words he'd said to her once before.

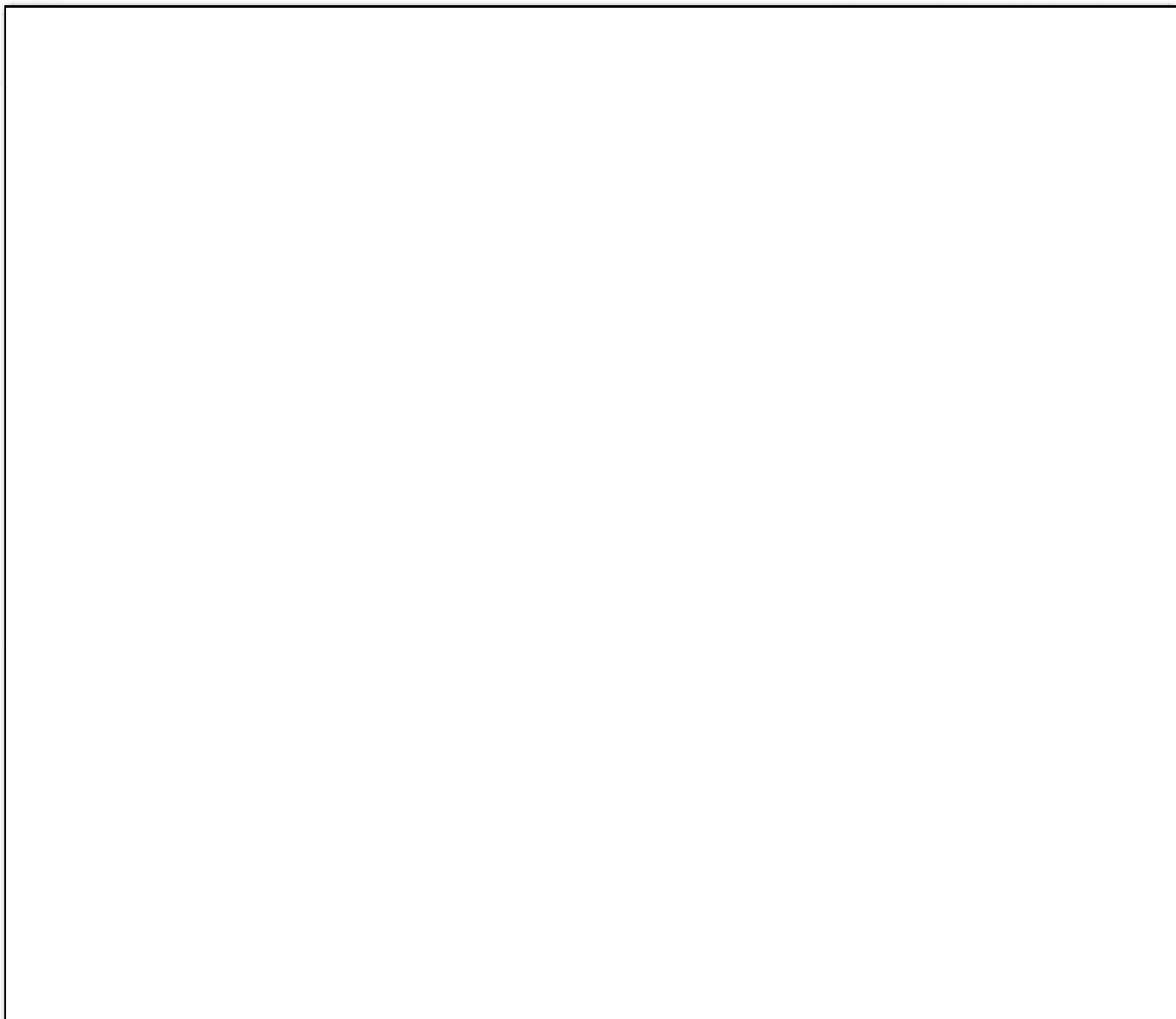
"You're next, Tamaya."



38

Courage, Humility, and Grace

The following testimony is excerpted from the transcript of the Heath Cliff Disaster Hearings:





Epilogue

For hundreds of thousands of years, human beings lived in a world without Biolene. There was no gasoline, no nuclear power plants, and no electric lights. Water was clean, and the night sky glittered with a million stars.

There were also fewer people in the world.

It is estimated that a thousand years ago, there was a total of about three hundred million people living on earth. World population didn't reach the one billion mark until the early 1800s. But by the 1950s, that number had more than doubled. In 1951, more than two and a half billion people inhabited the planet.

By the 1990s, world population had doubled yet again. And in 2011 it was reported that there were more than seven billion of us eating, drinking, driving cars, using bathrooms, day after day after day.

Which is why, even after the Heath Cliff Disaster, the Senate Committee on Energy and the Environment voted unanimously to support the continued production of Biolene. The committee was presented with a Hobson's choice: either risk worldwide catastrophe or give up on a source of clean, affordable energy. They concluded that the risk of catastrophe was extremely small.

They hoped.

Jonathan Fitzman assured the committee that there would be new safety procedures. This included taking daily samples from the storage tanks in order to test for oxygen-tolerant ergonyms. If even one such ergie was found, all the "little fellows" inside the tank would be destroyed.

Soon, Biolene-powered cars and trucks would fill the highways. SunRay Farm would establish new farms in Michigan, Idaho, and New Mexico—sites chosen either for their cold winters or for their lack of vegetation. Scientists determined that the frankengerms had thrived as well as they had because of all the organic material in the woods. The ergies were especially fond of freshly fallen leaves.

—

One week after returning from Washington, DC, Tamaya still felt a glow of excitement from the experience. Everyone had told her how well she'd done, praising her maturity and poise. Monica kept reminding her that she was famous.

It was scary returning to the woods again. It was scary climbing up Chad's tree, especially wearing clunky snow boots and fat gloves. Chad in front, and Marshall right behind, both promised they wouldn't let her fall. She didn't dare look down.

The climb, the cold, and her fear of heights left her short of breath but also exhilarated when she reached the cross boards that Chad had nailed into place.

"Isn't it great?" Chad beamed.

"Awesome!" Marshall agreed.

Tamaya held tight to the tree as she looked out across the frozen woodlands. The world was so beautiful. She just hoped it would stay that way...after the snow melted.

Tamaya Dhilwaddi

Room 308

Heath Cliff Regional Hospital

December 9

Late Assignment

How to Blow Up a Balloon

1. You start with a flat balloon. (The color doesn't matter.) You want to fill it with air from your lungs.
2. Look for the knobby end. If you stick your finger through it, your finger will be inside the balloon. But don't stick your finger in there!
3. Okay, put the knobby end inside your mouth. Your lips should be tight around the knob so that when you blow, all your air will go into the balloon and not around it.
4. Okay. Hold the balloon between your first and second fingers. You have to hold it loose enough to allow air in, but tight enough so that it doesn't move.
5. Now blow.
6. Repeat step five until the balloon is full.
7. Between blows, you will need to take breaths. Be sure to squeeze your fingers tight around the balloon when breathing in, so that the air can't escape.
8. Okay, now you have to tie the balloon. That's the hardest part! Tightly hold the balloon between your first and second fingers so that no air gets out. There will be a little dangly piece of your balloon left over. Stretch out that part and wrap it once around your finger. Then tie it into a knot by slipping the knobby end between your finger and the part wrapped around it.
9. Remove your finger. Ja-da!



About the Author

LOUIS SACHAR is the author of the *New York Times* #1 bestseller *Holes*, winner of the Newbery Medal, the National Book Award, and the Christopher Award. He is also the author of *Stanley Yelnats' Survival Guide to Camp Green Lake*; *Small Steps*, winner of the Schneider Family Book Award; and *The Cardturner*, a *Publishers Weekly* Best Book, a Parents' Choice Gold Award recipient, and an ALA-YALSA Best Fiction for Young Adults book. His books for younger readers include *There's a Boy in the Girls' Bathroom*, *The Boy Who Lost His Face*, *Dogs Don't Tell Jokes*, and the Marvin Redpost series, among many others.