THE CURIOUS CASE OF THE TEDDY BEAR

The first mistake Cassidy Josephine Decker made was to say yes.

Her grandfather had warned against as much; it was one of the few things Cassidy Jo remembered about him. “Saying yes can become a habit,” he’d told her a few years ago, when Cassidy Jo was just 4 or 5 years old. “Just like biting your fingernails. Or picking your nose.” She’d put her hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle as he continued: “The more you say yes, the easier it becomes. And the harder it gets to say no.”

 Now eight years old, Cassidy Jo sure wishes she had listened. When that stupid reporter from KROW-6 had called a few weeks ago, asking to interview her for the TV news, she should have said no. The reporter just wanted to do a story on Cassidy Jo. (*No.)* And her favorite stuffed animal, Pup-Pup. (*No.*) In her mother’s trailer. (*No!*) It’ll only take a few minutes. (*No!!*) Just sign this release form. (*No!!!*) Show Pup-Pup to the world and answer a few questions. (*No! No! No! No! Noooooo!!!!!!*)

 What Cassidy Jo said was: “Yes.”

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 And so she’s lost in the woods, her arms wrapped tightly around Pup-Pup as she hides in the shadows of two large trees. The leaf-covered ground beneath her is damp, and Cassidy Jo’s socks are soaking wet and her feet are sore from running. Two men are chasing her, both more interested in Pup-Pup than in Cassidy Jo. That news reporter – the stupid, stupid news reporter – had announced to the entire metro area that Preston Ulysses Puppy, aka Pup-Pup, was the last of its kind. The final remaining plush toy from an exclusive line of stuffed animals called The Lovey Collection. There were only 50 original toys way back in 1986, and they were all the rage. Now, all these years later, Pup-Pup was the last known member. It was worth, the reporter told everyone tuned into KROW-6, “somewhere in the neighborhood of $250,000 from online collectors. It’s *that* rare.”

 Two days after it aired, while Cassidy Jo’s mother was out looking for work, because she was *always* out looking for work, two men came knocking on the door of the trailer. One was wearing a suit, although the tie was all wonky and the buttons on his shirt were off line, and the other looked like he needed a shave and had his hair pulled back in a ponytail while holding a hat in his hands in front of him. They offered Cassidy Jo $10,000 in cash for the stuffed dog. Cassidy Jo told them Pup-Pup wasn’t for sale, which didn’t seem like what either one of them wanted to hear. “Twenty thousand,” said the guy in the suit. The other guy looked at him funny, as if to say, *What are you doing?* But the suit guy just waved him off.

 “What I meant by ‘not for sale,’” Cassidy Jo said calmly, her arms wrapped around Pup-Pup, “is: Not. For. Sale.” This didn’t seem like what the two guys at the door had wanted to hear either, and so the guy with the ponytail reached out quickly and got a hand on the stuffed dog. Cassidy Jo pulled away, kicked the guy in the shin, and tried to slam the door. The suit guy got his arm in there, and so Cassidy Jo took off running through the trailer, back to her mother’s bedroom, and jumped out the window. She ran off into the woods, wearing only her socks. She knew the area well, having gone there on days when the trailer was too small and she was looking for something to do.

 Crouching between the trees, she can hear them trodding into the wooded area with whatever care they can muster. The sound of sticks cracking under their feet echoes through the afternoon silence. They’re bickering with each other, well within earshot, and a word comes to mind that Cassidy Jo learned in school during morning vocab lesson:

 *Oblivious (adj.): not aware of or not concerned about what is happening around one.*

 Cassidy Jo wasn’t sure what the word meant at the time, but now it makes sense. She looks down at Pup-Pup. His ears are tattered, and part of one foot is mangled, but to her, he’s perfect. His small dark eyes look back up at her, and in that moment she swears she sees a tear welling up in his eye. It’s as if he’s asking: *Why all this fuss about me?*

 She looks up and sees moving branches. The two men are quieter now. They’re moving closer. She can feel them more than hear them. She can feel the breathing of the woods around her.

 She clutches Pup-Pup and holds him to her chest. As close as she possible can.

CHAPTER 2

 Cassidy Jo was 3 years old when her mother first took her to the storage shed, looking for things to pawn. Her mother hadn’t worked in several months and had to take items to the pawn shop just to pay the bills. She was rummaging around through old family lamps and picture frames when Cassidy Jo saw something that immediately caught her eye. It was a photograph of her mother, standing with a man who had his arm draped around her mother’s shoulders. As Cassidy Jo reached for the photograph, her mother slapped her hand away and grabbed the photo.

 “Who’s that?” Cassidy Jo asked, recoiling.

 Her mother tore up the photo and placed the pieces in her back pocket.

 “None you mind,” she said.

 “But I just –“

 “None you mind,” her mother said again, more sharply. Then she leaned over and took Cassidy Jo’s face into her warm hands. “When someone tells you that, you pay attention. Y’hear?” She ran her fingers through Cassidy Jo’s curly hair. “You don’t ask too many questions in life,” her mother continued, staring at her with deep, green eyes. “Some answers bring knowledge, others bring pain.”

 Cassidy Jo was too young to understand what that meant, but she did know enough to drop the subject of the photograph. She continued to dig around until she fell upon another sight that drew her attention. Beneath an open box of scarves and winter hats, she saw a clear, circular package about the size of a shoebox. She could see inside the unopened box a pair of brown ears. She reached and grabbed the box, pulling it toward her. Holding it inches from her face, Cassidy Jo looked into the dark eyes of a stuffed dog. It stared back at her, as if to say: *Please, love me.* Written on the top of the box were words she did not understand. There were large letters, spelling out EXCLUSIVE. And beneath that: THE LOVEY COLLECTION.

 Knowing not to ask another question, Cassidy Jo turned to her mother and held up the box. “A dog,” she said. Her mother turned to her. Her face softened for the first time in weeks. A smile came to her mother’s face.

 “Oh, that,” she said. Her eyes brightened, the way adults do when they’re thinking of things they don’t talk about. Cassidy’s mother took the box from her gently, looked at the dog and chuckled. “My Uncle Tony bought this for me, way back in the day,” she said. “Told my mom he got it from some distributer.”

 “What a disbritter?”

 “Distributer. It’s some kind of a sales thing.” Cassidy’s mother turned the box over. “I guess these things were supposed to be worth something. There were only so many of them available.” She turned it back over. “So Uncle Tony told me not to open it.” She shook her head and chuckled. “A stuffed animal in a box that you can’t open,” she said. “I’d say that’s worth nothing at all. Totally worthless, huh?”

 She dropped the box onto the floor. Cassidy Jo scooted over and grabbed the box again. Her mother had turned away, going through a box of CDs.

 “Mom?” Cassidy Jo asked, looking into the cute dog’s eyes.

 “Uh-huh?” her mother asked distractedly.

 Cassidy Jo stared at the dog, which looked back lovingly.

 “I have him?”

 Her mother looked at her. Cassidy Jo ducked her head, knowing she’d probably asked one too many questions.

 But instead of scolding her, Cassidy Jo’s mother just took the box from her hands and shrugged. “If it was ever worth something,” she said. “It’s not anymore.” And then she opened the box, took out the stuffed dog, and handed it to Cassidy Jo.

 Taking it in her arms, Cassidy Jo immediately felt the soft, cool fur against her skin. She squeezed the dog in her arms and swung from side to side.

 “I love him,” she said, although up to that moment she’d never known what love was.

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 Cassidy Jo took Pup-Pup everywhere with her. To the store. To her friends’ houses. To school. As the years passed and the money ran out, the Deckers moved from the suburbs to the city to a small trailer park outside of city limits, and over time it felt as if Pup-Pup was her only friend. Cassidy Jo made a few friends in kindergarten, moved to a new school for first grade, and moved again midway through her second-grade year. The girls at her school already had plenty of friends, and they looked at her strangely when she arrived. They asked a bunch of questions about her strange dog. One girl, this blond brat named Melanie, asked why she didn’t “leave your ratty bear at home.” It was the first time in her life that Cassidy wanted to punch somebody.

 At night, Cassidy Jo would talk to Pup-Pup. She would ask him questions like what it was like spending all that time in storage and if he had any brothers and sisters. Then Pup-Pup would ask her questions, like: “Why don’t the other kids like you?” and “What happened to you dad?” Questions Cassidy Jo didn’t have the answers to.

 Some nights, even Cassidy’s mother ignored her. She’d fall asleep in front of the television or just stay out late with friends. But Cassidy Jo always felt like, as long as Pup-Pup was there, she was loved by someone.

 Sometimes, she’d sit on the couch with him and watch her mother cook. And clean. And cry. Her mother would come and go, looking for work. Sometimes she’d get a part-time job, but inevitably she’d lose it. She just couldn’t seem to make and save enough money to get out of this trailer park. One night, while sitting on the couch watching her mom do dishes, Cassidy Jo leaned in to Pup-Pup’s ear and whispered: “I’m going to help her get out of here one day. I promise.”

CHAPTER 3

 She waits until the two guys have their backs turned, and then she makes her move. Without letting go of Pup-Pup, Cassidy Jo quietly rises and hops over the leaves onto rocks or logs or patches of dirt. She knows this wooded area leads up to the freeway, and she can hear the cars off in the distance. She hurries while clutching Pup-Pup against her chest.

 Cassidy Jo has made it about 50 feet when she hears one of them call out: “Hal, there she is!” She turns and sees the ponytail guy pointing at her. He’s frozen, waiting for the other guy, who comes running as Cassidy Jo turns and continues on toward the clearing. She can hear them behind her, calling out and saying things that they think might bring her back, lies like: “We’re not going to hurt you!” and “C’mon, we just want to talk!” She keeps moving. If her mother has taught her anything, it’s that she has to keep moving. And not to trust men.

 She stumbles and loses her balance, taking one arm off Pup-Pup to catch herself but not letting go. They’re gaining on her, and now she can hear their breathing as they give chase. She can also hear the cars ahead and wonders if they’ll stop if she runs out onto the highway.

 Cassidy Jo trips again, only this time she can’t catch herself. She keeps her arm wrapped around Pup-Pup as she falls to the earth, hitting her head on a log. She turns onto her back and sees them, coming at her with rage in their eyes. She sits up, and they slow. The guy in the suit, his tie now loose and wrapped over his shoulder, puts out a hand to stop the guy with the ponytail.

 “It’s okay,” the suit guy says. He holds his hands out, waving as if he’s harmless. Cassidy Jo feels blood trickle off her forehead but doesn’t wipe it away because she doesn’t want to let go of Pup-Pup. “Just give us the dog,” he says, “and no one gets hurt.”

 She looks down at Pup-Pup. She takes in a deep breath. Slowly, she holds it out for him. He steps carefully toward her. He holds out one hand. She stands slowly, still holding the dog out, and when he’s close enough to reach it she tosses Pup-Pup over her head. As he watches the dog fly, she kicks him in the crotch.

 Then she turns, as the other goon starts chase, and runs to get Pup-Pup. She grabs him off the top of a tree stump and continues on, hearing the ponytail guy on her trail.

 “Don’t let her go!” the other one yells from the distance.

*Anxiety (n.): a feeling of worry, nervousness, or unease, typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome.*

 Cassidy Jo gasps for breath as she runs through the trees. She clutches her stuffed dog like a mother holding a baby. She couldn’t imagine life without Pup-Pup. His fur is filled with her tears. Whenever she feels that sense of *anxiety*, she breathes him in for comfort.

 She hears a thud behind her and turns to see that the ponytail guy has tripped and fallen. He gets up and resumes chase, and behind him his buddy is now in pursuit. The sound of the highway is closer, and Cassidy Jo can see light of a clearing through the trees. Her socked foot lands in a puddle but she refuses to stumble.

*Adrenaline (n.): a hormone secreted by the adrenal glands, especially in conditions of stress, increasing rates of blood circulation, breathing, and carbohydrate metabolism and preparing muscles for exertion.*

 As Cassidy Jo reaches the edge of the woods, she can barely breathe. But something inside her has kept her going. She’s spent her entire life watching her mother fight on, through unemployment and eviction and days when she didn’t have enough money to feed her two-person family, and so Cassidy Jo doesn’t know how to give up. She’s never seen it up close.

 She bursts through the trees and into the sunlight, where a small hill leads up toward the highway. She looks down and sees a three-foot-long stick, which she grabs without breaking stride. She keeps running, although the slope of the hill slows her. The men break through the trees and are right on her tail. She slogs up the hill and feels a hand wrap around her ankle. She falls but does not let go of the stick or the stuffed dog. She flips onto her back and sees the suit guy standing over her, breathing hard. She scampers backward, shoves Pup-Pup into her shirt, and takes the stick in both hands.

 “OK, young lady,” the suit guy says, his oil-salesman charm no longer present. “Give us the dog, and nobody gets hurt.” He groans and rubs his midsection, where she kicked him. His buddy joins him, both of them standing over Cassidy Jo. “I’ll tell you how this is going to end,” he continues. “We’re going to have the dog. That’s a fact. The easier you make it, the better for you. *And your mother*.”

 The last part makes Cassidy Jo take pause. *Your mother*. They know where she lives. Even if Cassidy Jo were to get away, they could take out their anger on her mom. It’s almost enough to make her hand over the dog.

 Almost.

 “Twenty,” the girl says.

 “Come again?” says the ponytail guy. He cracks his knuckles.

 “You said $20,000,” she said, sitting up. “Let me see the money.” Cassidy Jo has exactly zero plan of actually making the deal, but she’s trying to buy time. It’s all she’s got.

 The guy in the suit loosens his tie, pulls it through the loop, and tosses it in the grass of the hill with a chuckle. “Yeah,” he says, scratching his head. “You see, that deal’s off the table. You didn’t accept.” He folds his arms across his chest. “So we’ve got a new deal now. Give us the dog, and we don’t break your legs. Sound fair?”

 She stands up quickly and holds the stick on her shoulder, bending her knees in a stance she learned during a year playing T-ball the summer after kindergarten. “I may be 10,” she says, lying about her age, “but my IQ isn’t 10.”

 The ponytail guy laughs at that, while the other one smiles and says: “Well, ain’t that cute.” She digs her hands into the stick, tightening her grip, and scowls at the guy in the suit. He rolls his eyes. “Look, sweetie,” he says.

 “Don’t call me Sweetie,” she says through her teeth. She remembers a time a year or two ago when some landlord came trying to collect rent, and her mother had told him the same thing.

 “OK, *Little Lady*,” the suit guy says. “Look here. You can stand there with that stick and all, but understand that there’s only one of you and two of us. Simple math says you can only use that stick on one of us, and-“

 Before he finishes his thought, she swings with all of her might and takes out his knee. The suit guy collapses, and the dude with the ponytail looks down at him in shock. She throws the stick at him, misses, and turns to head on up the hill. She sees a fence there and pulls Pup-Pup out of her shirt to secure him. She starts climbing with one hand, but only gets halfway up before the ponytail guy grabs her leg. She kicks at him but can’t break free.

 “Easy, missy,” he says.

 She throws Pup-Pup over the fence, again trying to buy some time. Only she throws it farther than she had planned, and Pup-Pup sails onto the shoulder of the highway. She closes her eyes and wishes she could make herself fly over the fence – not so much to escape the men but to rescue Pup-Pup from traffic.

 “Well,” the ponytail guy says, “I wish you wouldn’t have done that.” He pulls hard enough that Cassidy Jo comes down. The other guy joins his buddy and stands over her, his fist cocked.

 “Go ahead,” she says. “Hit an 8-year-old girl.”

 “Thought you said you were 10,” the ponytail guy says.

 “Like that makes it okay,” she says.

 The suit guy is huffing and puffing, his face red with exhaustion and anger. He loosens his fist and drops his hand to his side. He reaches down, grabs Cassidy Jo by the shoulders, and picks her up. He pins her against the fence and stares into her eyes. “Fisher,” he says, talking to his partner without taking his eyes off Cassidy Jo, “climb over the fence and get that dog. I’ll hold her while you do it.”

 The ponytail guy starts to scale the fence, but his foot slips and he falls with a thud. Cassidy Jo lets out a laugh, and he jumps to his feet, his hand in a fist.

 “Still 10 years old, champ,” she says, causing him to loosen his hand.

 He spits into a pile of leaves and turns back toward the fence. He starts to climb it.

 “You got quite a mouth on you, young lady,” the guy in the suit says. “And quite a swing. A regular Bryce Harper, huh?”

 Cassidy Jo doesn’t know who that is, but she takes the cue to set another lie.

 “Learned from my brother,” she says, although Cassidy Jo is an only child. “He just got out of prison last week. He was on his way home from work when you guys came. He’ll probably –“

 “How ‘bout you stop jabbering now?” he says. “I’ll tell you what’s going to happen. I’m going to let you go, and you’re going to run back to your mom or your brother or whoever lives in that trailer. You’re going to tell them you got lost, and you lost your little stuffed dog. And that’s all you’re going to say about this. If you say anymore, there’s a pretty good chance you’ll never see your mom again. Understand?”

 And with that, Cassidy Jo drops her head and starts to cry. Not just a little tear that runs down her cheek, but actual sobs.

*Hyperventilate (v.): breathe at an abnormally rapid rate, so increasing the rate of loss of carbon dioxide.*

 The suit guy relents a bit and relaxes his grip.

 “Oh, for Pete’s sake,” he says, taking in a deep breath. He lets go of one shoulder, and she collapses to the ground in tears. The other guy, the one with the ponytail, is just getting to the top of the fence. “Listen, kid,” the suit guy continues. “I’m sorry about your dog. This isn’t your fault. You just happen to be what we call collateral damage.”

 “What’s that?” she says through her sobbing.

 “It’s like … well –“ And before he can say anything else, Cassidy Jo swings with a large rock that she found on the ground while faking her crying fit, and she catches him in the groin again. The guy groans and falls backward, rolling down the hill.

 Cassidy Jo tosses the rock and shouts: “How’s that for collateral damage!” Then she starts scaling the fence. The ponytail guy is carefully descending the other side. Cassidy Jo has mastered the climbing wall at school, so she’s up and over so fast that their feet hit the ground on the other side at the same time. She races him to Pup-Pup, and although the ponytail guy gets there first, she wraps her hands around Pup-Pup and pulls him away. She wraps her arms and body around him like a ball carrier protecting a football. He’s trying to get his hands back on the stuffed dog but can’t. She’s wrapped around Pup-Pup, swinging her body so that he can’t get a grip. She doesn’t know how long she’s doing this, but at some point the other guy, the one in the suit, arrives and joins in the battle.

 The two guys are yelling at her as they try like heck to pull the dog free.

 “Stop moving!”

 “Just give the dog up and no one gets hurt!”

 “You’re a feisty one, huh?”

 Cassidy Jo just keeps moving. She’s hunched over at the waist, her arms wrapped so tightly around Pup-Pup that there’s no way to get a hand on him. One of the guys actually resorts to tickling her, which works for a minute but eventually just leads her to tighten her grip.

 They’re going at it like this, all three of them, until suddenly they hear the screeching of tires. All three of them, still hunched over and reaching into the center, look up. A pickup truck has skidded to a stop just a few feet away.

 “What in Sam Hill?” the truck driver shouts as he gets out of the car. He’s a big guy, probably over six feet, and he has a scraggly beard and a tank top. “I nearly ran you three morons over! What in the …” And then he notices Cassidy Jo. He tilts his head, like she’s a wounded animal or something. “What’s going on here?” he asks.

 The guy in the suit steps away from the pack.

 “Hello, there, sir,” he says. “Seems to be a misunderstanding. You see, our daughter here seems to have dropped her stuffed dog over the other side of the fence, and we were just –“

 “Your *daughter*?” the trucker says. He looks at Cassidy Jo, who makes eye contact and tries to tell him with her mind that the suit guy’s lying. The truck driver looks at the ponytail guy, the guy they call Fisher.

 “Well, she’s not really *our* daughter,” says Fisher. “I mean, we’re not like *that.* I mean, we’re like cousins and stuff.”

 “Shutup, Fisher,” the guy in the suit says, seeing an opportunity. He takes a step toward the truck driver. “It’s true, we’re husband and husband,” the suit guy says, trying to sell the lie. “Had a sweet little peach of a daughter 10 years ago, and –“

 “I’m eight,” Cassidy Jo says.

 “Yes, eight,” the suit guy says. “My, how time flies. Or, slows down. Or … you know what I mean. Clearly, she’s eight. Of course.”

 The trucker takes a step toward the suit guy and looks down at him. “My bad,” the truck driver says. “None of my business, right?” He’s using the kind of voice that adults use with kids, only he’s talking to another adult. Cassidy Jo is confused. “May I extend my apologies,” the truck driver says, holding out his hand in offering a handshake, “to you, your husband and to …” He looks at Cassidy Jo. “What’s the girl’s name?”

 The suit guy and Fisher look at each other. Neither answers right away. They both look at Cassidy Jo, who pulls Pup-Pup free and steps away from Fisher. The two guys look at each other again, then back at the truck driver.

 In unison, they say:

 “Agnes.”

 “Penelope.”

 At this, the truck driver clenches his jaw. Slowly, with an arm about the size of a sled, he reaches up and grabs the suit guy by the shirt. “Seems like something funny’s going on here,” he says. Without turning his head, he asks Cassidy Jo: “These your dads?”

 “Just met them,” she says, clutching Pup-Pup.

 “That’s what I thought,” the trucker says. He reaches back a turkey-sized fist, but before he can take a swing, a second car pulls up to the side of the road. It’s a cop car. Cassidy Jo buries her face in Pup-Pup and takes in a long, sweet breath of relief.

 The ponytail guy tries to run, but he doesn’t get far.

CHAPTER 4

 Wanda Wollport has been living in Poplar Grove for her entire miserable life, and things have never, ever changed. Twenty-six years old, she still lives with her parents and depends on food stamps to feed herself and her eight-year-old son. Her mom is still on her case all the time, her dad spends more time at work than he does at home, and the city around her looks just like it did on the day she was born. She spends her days arguing with her mother and her evenings arguing with her son, and she lies in bed at night wondering how she’s going to get out of this situation.

 She’s been dating the same guy for six years, and Floyd barely works and doesn’t like the idea of being a father. Wanda can’t even get him to drive her son Caleb to Hopewood Elementary every once in a while.

 Wanda is sitting at home one night, her legs across Floyd’s lap while Caleb plays a videogame in the back bedroom. The news comes on, and some reporter starts telling the story of a little girl who’s got a golden-goose of a stuffed animal. “Somewhere in the neighborhood of $250,000 from online collectors,” the television reporter says. “It’s *that* rare.”

 Wanda sits up on her couch, all ears. Her boyfriend Floyd leans forward.

 “This eight-year-old is quite a lucky girl,” the reporter is saying. “Who knew that her favorite little doll would be worth that much?”

 “It’s not a doll,” the little girl says, clutching the stuffed dog in her arms as she scowls.

 “It’s a dog,” Floyd mutters, staring at the television. “A stuffed dog.”

 “Worth a quarter million dollars,” Wanda says, scooting closer to him on the torn couch.

 “Holy moly,” Floyd whispers.

 Wanda looks at him. “If only …” she says.

 They hear a voice from behind them.

 “Hey,” says Caleb, Wanda’s little 8-year-old. He’s holding his videogame and a chocolate chip cookie. “That’s, um, what’s-her-name. I know her.”

 Wanda and Floyd swing around in unison with large eyes. “You know her?!” they say together.

 Caleb shrugs. “She’s new this year,” he says. “She’s in my class.”

 Their eyes go from the smile to each other. Floyd breaks out in a grin. Wanda feels her heart beating. “Well, well, well,” she says. “Looks like it’s time for Caleb to make a new friend.”

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 Caleb Wollport shows up at school the next day dressed in a collared shirt and ironed pants. His hair is carefully parted to one side. He’s carrying a flower, picked from his grandmother’s garden. He gets out of his mom’s boyfriend’s car and says: “What’s all this about again?” He pulls at his collar. “I feel like a piece of steak in a bowl of goulash.”

 “Just trust us, honey,” Wanda says from the passenger seat. “You can always use new friends. And, besides, it’s never fun to be the new kid.”

 Caleb looks as sharp as he’s ever looked, but that’s not saying much. He’s been a scrubby kid who’s just as likely to eat a Mud Pie as he is to eat a … well, pie of mud. His hair is parted perfectly, but his outfit is a bit tight – a byproduct of being the biggest third grader, in both height and girth, at Hopewood Elementary.

 “Listen, son,” Floyd says from the driver’s seat, leaning across Wanda as if she’s not even there. It’s the first time he’s ever referred to Caleb as *son*. One of the first times he’s ever referred to him as anything other than *lazy butt* or *fat slob*. “Get a playdate with that girl or don’t bother coming home, you hear?”

 Caleb looks at the flower in his hand like it’s a skunk.

 “I’ll do what I can,” he says. Then he puts a finger in his nose and rummages around.

 “For Pete’s sake, woman,” Floyd whispers to Wanda. “Is he the best we got?”

 Caleb pulls a winner from his nose and examines it. He rolls it, flicks it and looks at his mother.

 “Caleb, honey,” she says softly, fighting to keep her voice calm. “How ‘bout you go in there and try to act a little differently than usual today. Just for today, huh?”

 Caleb tugs at his collar again and says: “How so?”

 Floyd rolls his eyes and takes in a deep breath. Floyd played football in high school but had a propensity for fumbling whenever he was handed the ball. He’s already been fired from all three gas stations in town due to sleeping in late. He’s not a prize, by any stretch, but compared to Caleb he’s the King of Sweden.

 “How ‘bout you do this for me, Caleb,” Floyd says. “Whatever you usually do in school? Today, do the exact opposite. That sound like a plan?”

 Caleb looks at him and tilts his head.

 “What, honey?” his mother asks. “What is it?”

 “Well,” he says. “I was just thinking about eating a Hershey bar with nuts. Does that mean I should eat a Hershey bar *without* nuts?”

 Floyd rolls his eyes again and revs the engine.

 “Sweetie, just get the playdate,” Wanda says. “You’ve got nice clothes, you’ve got a flower. What more could a girl want?”

 Under his breath, Floyd mutters: “A guy who’s underwear has been changed in the past week.”

 Wanda elbows him and smiles at Caleb. “You can do it,” she says. “We know you can.”

 ###

 Cassidy Jo is sitting in the back row of Ms. Pollidor’s class, listening intently but distracted by the guy three rows up who keeps looking back at her. Cassidy Jo has never known a boy to have a crush on her, but her mother warned her this might happen at some point. She just didn’t expect it this *soon*. She tries to ignore the guy and reaches into her desk, feeling the warm, familiar comfort of Pup-Pup’s fur. Three days have passed since those two goons tried to take him from her, and she’s never been as appreciative of Pup-Pup as she is right now.

 He was there when she moved from Orlando to Memphis. He was there during the long car ride to Poplar Grove. He was there on her first day of school, when all the other kids ignored her.

 She thinks back to the day she first discovered Pup-Pup. She remembers very little of that day, but she does recall finding a photograph of a man that she assumes now was her father. She wonders where he is. And why he left.

 “Pssst.”

 She looks up to see the chubby kid, reaching out his hand with a folded up note. It makes her blush. She doesn’t want to make a scene or get caught by the teacher, so she just shakes her head.

 “Psssssssst!” He says it even louder. Cassidy Jo groans. The whole class turns to look at her, and she feels warmth overtake her face.

 “Excuse me,” Ms. Pollidor says. “What’s going on back there, Miss ...” She pauses and looks at the class roster. “Miss Decker, is it?”

 “Yes, Ma’am.” The chubby kid panics and drops the note on the floor between them.

 Ms. Pollidor sets down her chalk and starts walking slowly up the aisle.

 “Is there something you wanted to share with the rest of the class?” she says. Cassidy Jo shakes her head. She wants so badly to stick her face in her desk and bury it in Pup-Pup’s fur. Ms. Pollidor looks down at the folded piece of paper and stops. She leans over, picks it up, and returns to the front of the room.

 She clears her throat and reads:

 “You’re the new girl, right? My mom said I need more friends. Do you like flowers? My name is Caleb.”

 Except the way the note actually is written, it says:

 *You’re the new gurl, rite? My mom sed I need more frends. Do you like flours? My name is Caleb*.

 The class giggles. Caleb blushes. Cassidy Jo wishes she could disappear.

 Ms. Pollidor folds the note back up and sets it on her desk. She dismisses the class early for recess. Everyone except Caleb and Cassidy Jo. “You two,” she says, “stay behind.”

 The other kids file out, many of them staring or giggling as they leave. Cassidy Jo sits restlessly, trying not to look at Caleb. Ms. Pollidor shuts the classroom door and calls them to the front. Cassidy Jo sits in a front-row desk next to Caleb and turns her back to him.

 “This is disappointing,” Ms. Pollidor says, picking up the note and waving it at them. She sits on top of her desk with one leg on the floor. “I can say this isn’t the first love note that’s –“

 “It’s not-“ Caleb starts, but Ms. Pollidor stops him with the wave of a hand.

 “This is unacceptable behavior,” Ms. Pollidor says. Ms. Pollidor likes to use big words like “unacceptable” and “behavior.” Cassidy Jo has noticed that it takes her twice as long to explain things as necessary. Cassidy Jo believes that the school day would be half as long if Ms. Pollidor would just talk normally. “Boys and girls,” she continues, “they expend such a significant percentage of their mental capacity considering the needs of one another that they miss out on what’s important.”

 Cassidy Jo can feel the warmth in her face. She wants so badly to interrupt, to tell Ms. Pollidor that she wasn’t doing anything wrong. She was just sitting there, minding her own business.

 “What I’m saying,” Ms. Pollidor says, getting off the desk and beginning to pace in front of them, “is that infiltrating valuable educational time with shenanigans is not just a corruption on your own learning but also on the learning of those around you.” She turns to the chalkboard, grabs a piece of chalk in each hand, and turns back to Cassidy Jo and Caleb. “If you’re going to insist on wasting our valuable classroom time with romantic correspondence,” she says, holding out the chalk, “then let us see how it feels to have time taken from you.” She hands one piece of chalk to Caleb, then another to Cassidy Jo. “I want each of you, side by side, to write this statement, ‘I will not pass notes in class,’ one hundred times on the board.”

 Cassidy Jo gasps. “One hundred …?!”

 “Silence,” Ms. Pollidor says sharply. “Take the chalk, and do this exercise in *complete silence*.”

 Cassidy Jo takes the chalk, drops her head, and shuffles to the chalkboard. She stands next to Caleb, this boy she barely knows, and starts writing … *in complete silence.* Cassidy Jo wants so badly to say something. But she knows she can’t. She has six words she *needs* to say but isn’t allowed to. She looks over at Ms. Pollidor, who is now sitting at her desk correcting papers. She has a stern look in her eye. Ms. Pollidor’s body language says *Don’t bother me*. And so Cassidy Jo just keeps writing. She doesn’t get to say the six words she *needs* to say.

 *I’m going to miss my bus.*

 ###

 When Ms. Pollidor finally excuses them, Cassidy Jo grabs Pup-Pup out of her desk, yanks her backpack and storms out of the room *in complete silence*. She runs out to the front of the school and is not surprised to find that all the buses are gone. She closes her eyes and fights back tears. She leans against a wall and shoves her face into Pup-Pup’s fur, seeking relief from all the voices of worry in her head. Her mother’s trailer is about 3 ½ miles away. She doesn’t have a phone to call her mom and worries that she wouldn’t be home anyway.

 Cassidy Jo considers her options and then realizes that she doesn’t have many. She remembers another thing her grandfather has told her often: *The first step is the hardest. When in doubt, just start moving.* She heeds his advice and makes her way to the sidewalk. She thinks for a second, forgetting which way is home, and then just decides to follow the way the bus would go. She’s spent so many afternoons looking out the window that she figures she should be able to retrace the path.

 She goes two blocks, pressing Pup-Pup to her face, when a car pulls over the curb. She tries to ignore it; her mom has warned her countless times about the dangers of talking to strangers. Then she hears someone call out to her by name.

 “Hey, Cassidy Jo!” the voice says. “That’s you’re name, right?”

 She turns and sees Caleb, that loser that got her into this whole mess, hanging out of the back window. In the front seat, there’s a woman with disheveled hair who’s staring at Cassidy Jo like a tiger looks at a rabbit. In the driver’s seat is a guy – the kind of guy Cassidy Jo’s mom probably had in mind when she taught her not to talk to strangers. He’s got hair to his shoulders, a mesh baseball cap that says “When Life Gives You Lemons, Throw Them at the Liberals,” and a dirty white tanktop. He’s also looking at Cassidy Jo like he wants something. His gaze goes from her face to Pup-Pup.

 She turns away from them, pulling Pup-Pup into her chest. The woman in the passenger seat rolls down the window a few inches.

 “Hi,” she says, “I’m Caleb’s mom. Do you need a ride home?”

 Cassidy Jo shakes her head and keeps walking. The car drives slowly alongside her.

 “How far you walkin’?” Caleb calls out. She wants to turn and shout at him, to scream: *This is all because of you!* She wants to call him bad names, like ugly and fat and stupid. She wants to spit in his face.

 “It’s not safe to walk out here like this, a girl your age,” the driver guy says. He looks like he hasn’t shaved in a week. He grins and is missing a tooth. What Cassidy Jo thinks is: *What’s not safe … is YOU*!

 She shakes her head from side to side again and clutches Pup-Pup. As crazy as she knows it sounds, she feels like Pup-Pup can somehow protect her from danger.

 *Irrational (adj.): not logical or reasonable.*

 Cassidy Jo closes her eyes, wishing they would go away but knowing they won’t. When she opens her eyes, she sees Caleb’s mother smiling at her. She has a pretty face but bad teeth.

 “No, thanks,” Cassidy Jo says. “I’ll walk.”

 She continues on, and the car stays where it’s parked. Cassidy Jo hears them back there arguing with each other, but she can’t quite make out what they’re saying. She hears somebody say “Nin Come Poop” and a few seconds later, “… our last chance.” She keeps walking until she’s out of earshot.

 She makes it to the corner before the car pulls up alongside her again. Caleb is now quiet in the backseat, his window rolled up. His mother’s window is all the way down, and her arm leans against it, elbow out.

 “Listen,” she says. “We were going to stop at the DQ on the way home, because Caleb needs a Blizzard.” She takes in a deep breath, cups the back of her other hand over the side of her mouth as if to protect it from Caleb, and says: “Well, he doesn’t *need* one, clearly, but he wants a Blizzard. And it’s a nice enough day. So we thought: What the heck? Anyways, we thought maybe you’d like to –“

 “No, thanks,” Cassidy Jo says and continues on her way.

 “But we’re buying,” Caleb’s mother calls out.

 Without turning back, Cassidy Jo turns the corner and says: “Did I stutter?”

 She walks about 20 more feet before the car turns the corner, this time at a higher speed, and screeches to a stop a few feet in front of her. The driver jumps out, mumbling something under his breath about “to do a man’s job,” and makes a bee-line for Cassidy Jo. He reaches for Pup-Pup, and Cassidy Jo quickly turns away. Her heart is pumping. She can feel her face get flush with anger and fear.

 “Leave me alone,” she says. If he hears, he doesn’t respond. He just wraps his arms around her, getting his hands on the stuffed dog, but Cassidy Jo bites his bicep. It takes like sweat and Frito’s.

 “Ahhhh!” the guy screams, letting her go. Cassidy Jo tries to think of what her mother taught her about these situations. She kicks the guy in the shin, then yells: “Help!”

 In a panic, Caleb’s mother scoots over to the driver’s seat and throws the car into Drive. She peels out, leaving Cassidy Jo and the strange man in the tank top. He’s leaning over in pain.

 “I’m not trying to hurt you,” he says.

 “You’re trying to hurt my dog!”

 “I’m just trying to borrow him,” he says. “He’s sure a handsome one.”

 She yells again, calling for help. A car going the other direction slows and stares at them. The guy in the tank top reaches out one more time for Pup-Pup, but he misses. The driver rolls down the window, shouts: “What’s going on?” And the guy in the tank top runs off into a yard, disappearing between the trees.

 ###

 By the time Cassidy Jo gets home, her mother is already there. She has the phone in her hand and drops it on the couch.

 “Where have you been?” Cassidy Jo’s mother exclaims. Lynda Decker has a way of overreacting, and Cassidy Jo can sense another unnecessary meltdown coming. She is, after all, *only* a couple of hours late.

 Because she knows the truth would only lead to more questions, Cassidy Jo leaves as much out as possible.

 “I got in trouble,” she says. “But it wasn’t my fault.”

 Cassidy Jo’s mom folds her arms across her chest. Cassidy Jo realizes this is a story she’s heard before. She *rarely* gets in trouble, and when she does, it’s *never* her fault.

 “What happened?” Mrs. Decker asks.

 *Skeptic (n.): a person inclined to question or doubt.*

 Cassidy Jo presses Pup-Pup against her face and slips her arms out of her backpack, letting it fall to the floor. She feels a sense of relief being home, being safe, and there’s a part of her that wants to break into tears and fall into her mother’s arms. But her mother has enough to worry about. So she tries to make up a story in her head. She opens her mouth before she knows exactly what she is going to say.

 And then her mouth clamps shut with a knock at the door. Cassidy Jo freezes with panic. She thinks about Caleb and his weird family, imagining them standing outside with rifles. She pictures the two strange men who’d shown up at her trailer that one day while her mother was out looking for work.

 Cassidy Jo reacts by backing away from the door, by stepping quietly toward the back bedroom.

 “Cassidy Josephine,” her mother says. “What’s with you? Answer the door.”

 Cassidy Jo just shakes her head from side to side and continues her backward tiptoe toward the back of the trailer.

 “My goodness,” her mother says, stepping toward the door.

 “Mom, no!” Cassidy Jo says, but it comes out as a squeak. Her mother is already opening the door. It opens with a creak.

 Cassidy Jo hears a woman’s voice. It is sweet, like maple syrup. It makes Cassidy Jo stop backing away.

 “You’re the Deckers, yes?” the voice is saying. Cassidy Jo moves forward, leaning her head to see around the open door.

 “I’m Lynda Decker, yes,” her mother says. Cassidy Jo moves behind her mother and peeks around her. “And this is Cassidy Jo,” her mother says. Cassidy Jo can see that the woman is holding a plate of brownies. She is smiling. Cassidy Jo has seen her somewhere before.

 “What a beautiful daughter,” the woman says. “I’ve seen her outside playing. My, how she’s grown.”

 Mrs. Decker’s voice lowers. “And who are you?” she says.

 The older woman’s smile grows bigger. “Oh, heavens,” she says. “My apologies. I thought maybe you’d … Forgive me. Where are my manners?” The woman giggles. Holding the brownies in one hand, she reaches out the other. “Gladys Middlebury,” she says. She has a pleasant voice. Her hair is pulled up into a bun, and for some reason she’s wearing what appears to be a church dress. “I live in the trailer two doors down,” she says. Mrs. Decker takes her hand and offers a smile for the first time. “I’ve kind of watched your darling daughter grow up,” Gladys Middlebury says. Cassidy Jo’s mother moves her body and pushes Cassidy Jo into the space between her and Gladys. She’s holding Pup-Pup to her face like she does when she gets worried. “Oh, and her darling little stuffed dog,” Gladys Middlebury says. She reaches out to touch Pup-Pup, but Cassidy Jo pulls the stuffed dog away, as if her hand was on fire.

 “Cassidy Jo!” her mother calls out. But the older woman just pulls her hand back and giggles.

 “Oh, it’s okay,” she says. “Never come between a girl and her stuffed toy.” She holds up the brownies. “Fresh-baked,” she says. “May I come in?”

 Cassidy Jo is waiting for her mother to say the obvious answer: No. They’ve lived in this trailer for almost a year, and never once have any of the neighbors come to visit, much less this Gladys Middle-whatever woman. Cassidy Jo can’t help but to notice that the woman is staring at Pup-Pup. She pulls it down from her face, then moves it behind her back.

 “Certainly,” Cassidy Jo’s mother says, to her surprise, “come on in.” She pulls Cassidy Jo back gently, making room for this old, strange neighbor to come inside. Mrs. Decker even offers a hand to help her up the stairs, then takes the brownies from her.

 “Thank you,” Gladys says. “Oh, thank you so much.” Cassidy Jo moves behind her mother again.

 “Excuse the mess,” Mrs. Decker says.

 Gladys takes a seat in a chair. Cassidy Jo, clutching Pup-Pup to her chest, leans against her mother as the two of them move to a spot on the couch. She can’t help noticing that Gladys watches Pup-Pup for a moment before her eyes fall on Mrs. Decker. Cassidy Jo’s mother sets down the plate of brownies but does not offer one to Cassidy Jo.

 “Excuse the intrusion,” Gladys says. “I just realized that we’ve been living together for … well?”

 “We moved here about a year ago,” Cassidy Jo’s mother says.

 “Oh, has it been a year already? My, my. And we’ve never formally met. Such a shame. Such an awful, awful shame.” Gladys Middlebury runs the palms of her hands along her thighs, as if ironing her skirt. “Such is the way society has become,” she says. “You know the faceless people you meet on the computer line better than the people who live 25 steps away.” She chuckles. *Computer line?*

 “Yes,” Cassidy Jo’s mother says, “we should have-“

 Gladys waves her hand in front of her face. “No one’s fault,” she says. “You know, it wasn’t that long ago that I brought a dessert to every new family that moved into the park. But then they just kept coming and going. Coming and going. Too fast for me to track. Too many people. This world’s gotten so big.”

 She falls silent. Cassidy Jo’s mother clears her throat. Cassidy Jo can hear a clock ticking in the kitchen. “Well,” Cassidy Jo’s mother says. “To what do we owe this visit?”

 Gladys Middlebury looks from Mrs. Decker to Pup-Pup and then her eyes meet Cassidy Jo’s.

 “Just being neighborly,” she says. She goes back to rubbing her legs, slowly and gently.

 Cassidy Jo’s mother squirms in her seat. Cassidy Jo can see she’s uncomfortable. Cassidy Jo raises Pup-Pup to her nose and breathes in.

 “Such a beautiful daughter,” Gladys says. “Takes after her mother.”

 “Thank you,” Mrs. Decker says. Cassidy Jo is silent except for a small sniffing noise.

 “You know,” Gladys says, leaning forward and looking at Cassidy Jo. “I have a daughter, too. She’s old now. Forty-three, if you can believe it. Time flies, y’now.” She grins. “That’s quite a dog,” she says, nodding toward Pup-Pup. “My daughter, Sarah is her name, she had a stuffed dog that looked a lot like that. Sure brings back some memories.” She reaches out, leaning forward more, as if she’s going to grab Pup-Pup. Cassidy Jo pulls the stuffed animal away and hides it behind her back. Gladys chuckles and pulls her hand back slowly. “Oh, my,” she says. “Quite protective. I get that.” She rubs her hands together and places them back on her lap with a smile pasted on her face like a photograph. “Sarah was the same way. She took that dog everywhere. *Everywhere*, I tell you.” She turns her head to a window, looking out into the darkness of the night. Her smile fades. “Sarah’s all grown now,” she says. “It’s been years since I’ve seen her. Since anyone’s seen her.”

 “So sorry,” Cassidy Jo’s mother says.

 Cassidy Jo takes in a deep breath and says, for no particular reason, “Yeah, my dad did that. He just went away.”

 Gladys turns her head quickly and looks at Cassidy Jo. “You didn’t deserve that,” she says. Her face is all serious, her eyebrows pressed down so her eyes squint. “Nobody deserves to be left behind.”

 With that, Gladys stands up unexpectedly. She runs her hands down her long dress one more time and takes in a breath. “Well,” she says. “It’s been so nice.” She makes her way toward the door, placing a hand on the doorknob.

 “Um …” Mrs. Decker says, then looks at Cassidy Jo and shrugs. “Are you, um, leaving? So soon?”

 Gladys Middlebury, her back to them, nods her head silently. She opens the door, slowly takes the steps down, then turns and looks back at them.

 “Your father,” she says. “Do you remember him?”

 Mrs. Decker stands and walks to the door. Cassidy Jo is sitting alone on the couch. She places Pup-Pup on her lap and lowers her head. She shakes it from side to side.

 “I’m so sorry,” Gladys says softly. She turns away, then she adds: “I remember every single thing about my Sarah. Every single thing.”

 Then she disappears out into the darkness.

 When Mrs. Decker closes the door, Cassidy Jo looks around the trailer and feels like it was all just a dream. Then her eyes fall on the brownies, as if to confirm that this strange neighbor was actually there. She reaches slowly for a brownie, but Mrs. Decker lightly slaps her hand away.

 “I want one,” Cassidy Jo says.

 Mrs. Decker picks up the plate and takes it into the kitchen. “Not tonight,” she says. Then she opens the trash basket and quietly dumps the brownies in with all the other garbage.

CHAPTER 5

 Caleb is dressed in his normal attire at school the next day, and Cassidy Jo does her best to avoid eye contact with him even though she can feel him stealing glances back at her throughout the day. She has Pup-Pup safely tucked into her desk and rests her elbows on the closed top.

 Ms. Pollidor is rambling on about subjects and verbs when the bell for recess rings. Cassidy Jo feels a wave of worry in her stomach at the sound of it. Recess was never her favorite time of day, even before the whole Caleb thing, and now she’s even less excited about it.

 So she feels a sense of relief when the other kids start filing out the door and Ms. Pollidor calls her to the front.

 “Mr. Hagman wants to see you,” she says. When Cassidy Jo tilts her head, Ms. Pollidor adds: “The principal.”

 Cassidy Jo nods her head, looks back at her desk, then starts for the door. She stops, goes back to her desk, and grabs Pup-Pup. She puts him in her backpack and heads back for the door.

 “You’re pretty attached to that thing,” Ms. Pollidor says without looking up. Cassidy Jo stops but doesn’t say anything; “Perhaps if you worked harder on developing friendships with human beings and spent less time obsessing over your stuffed dog, maybe you would find life to be more, shall we say, *pleasant*.”

 Without turning around, Cassidy Jo grips the straps of her backpack and says: “My life is plenty pleasant.” She takes one step, then adds: “And he’s not a *thing*.”

 Mr. Hagman’s office is two hallways away, and by the time she gets there she feels like she might throw up. She has no idea why the principal has asked for her, and it dawns on her that his office is the one place in the world where she’d rather be at recess.

 She’s never met Mr. Hagman, and he’s not like she expected. He’s short, with balding hair and thick glasses. He smiles and has yellow teeth. He’s rubbing his hands together. She thinks she’s in trouble, but he’s greeting her like a salesman.

 “Miss Decker,” he says. His voice sounds like he needs to blow his nose. “Have a seat, please.”

 She obeys, clutching Pup-Pup against her chest. Mr. Hagman is sitting behind a large desk. In front of him is a photograph of his family, with two children who appear to be a few years younger than Cassidy Jo.

 She squirms in her seat. She’s never been to the principal’s office at any of her schools, and she’s pretty sure she’s about to get in big trouble. She’s heard about kids who’ve had to sit in detention after school. She’s heard of worse than that.

 *Expel (v.): to force out.*

 “Welcome, Cassidy,” he says. He grins. “Please, relax.” She feels like telling a kid to relax in the principal’s office is like telling a grown man to squeeze through a mouse hole. “Cassidy, right?” he says.

 “It’s Cassidy Jo.”

“Cassidy Jo, yes.” He looks at a piece of paper on his desk. “Cassidy Jo Decker,” he says. “You’re in Janice Pollidor’s third-grade class, I see.” He looks at Cassidy Jo, then at Pup-Pup. “That’s quite a dog you’ve got there,” he says.

She nods.

“Pretty special to you, huh?”

She nods, pulling Pup-Pup closer to her face.

Mr. Hagman reaches for the photo of his family. He grabs it with both hands, looks at it, then smiles.

“We all have special things,” he says, still looking at the photo. He turns it around, showing it to Cassidy Jo. “These are my kids,” he says. “Mandy and Manny.”

“How do you tell them apart?” she asks without thinking.

Mr. Hagman recoils, as if she’s slapped him across the face.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “It’s just their names. Like, when you call for Mandy, does Manny come running? And the other way around?”

Mr. Hagman sets the photo back on the desk. He moves it slightly, making sure it was in exactly the same spot as before.

“Yes,” he says. “Something we hadn’t thought of when we named them. They started out as Amanda and Manuel. Anyhoo, they are extremely special to me.” He points to the girl in the photo. “Mandy, she’s my baby girl. She’s my angel. Whatever she wants, I give it to her. Fathers are like that. I can tell without knowing you that your father is the same way.”

“I don’t know my father,” Cassidy Jo says quickly. It just falls out of her mouth, like she has no control. She presses Pup-Pup against her mouth.

“Well,” Mr. Hagman says, “that’s a shame, isn’t it?” He clears his throat. “Anyhoo,” he says again. She’s not sure what that means. She wonders why he can’t pronounce *anyhow* like regular people. “I have always been there for my little angel, for my girl Mandy. She really is the light of my life.” He looks at Pup-Pup again. “Mandy’s life is almost perfect. But one thing she doesn’t have is a perfect little stuffy. Like your little dog there … what’s her name?”

“Pup-Pup,” Cassidy Jo whispers from behind the stuffed dog. “And he’s a he.”

“*He*,” Mr. Hagman says, laughing. “Well, he certainly is a special one.” He leans back and reaches into his pocket. He pulls out a wallet and opens it between them. “I can tell, just looking at the way you love that stuffed dog, that my little Mandy would feel the same way.” His fingers are fumbling through bills. “I’m so certain that I’m willing to give you one hundred dollars for it. That’s a lot of stuffed animals you could buy.” He pulls out four $20 bills.

“That’s eighty dollars,” Cassidy Jo says. “And Pup-Pup’s not for sale.”

Mr. Hagman pushes the money back into his wallet and reaches into a drawer, pulling out a checkbook.

“Of course,” he says. “My mistake. One hundred dollars, or eighty, as it may be, was a modest offer.” He smiles and looks at her. “You’re quite a negotiator, Cassidy Decker.”

“Cassidy Jo.”

“Cassidy Jo, yes,” he says. He opens his checkbook. “Well, personally I think it’s ridiculous to pay this much for a *stuffed animal*” – he chuckles – “but in this case, I understand your reluctance. So I’m willing to write a check for five hundred-“

“He’s *not* for sale,” Cassidy Jo says. She pulls Pup-Pup away from her mouth when she says it, and her voice is louder than she’s intended. Mr. Hagman’s eyes get big and wide, like she’s used a curse word in his presence.

He takes in a deep breath and leans forward. There’s a vein protruding down his forehead, and she can see a bead of sweat on his temple.

“Let me ask you something, young lady,” he says. “Did you not have to stay after school for passing notes in Janice’s class the other day?”

“Yes,” Cassidy Jo says. “I mean, sort of. I was just-“

He holds up a hand. His jaw muscles tighten. Cassidy Jo swears that the color of his eyes have gone from blue to some evil shade of green.

“Well, I’m not a child,” he says. “But I was. And I’ve sat in a seat like the one you’re sitting in, believe it or not.” He chuckles, but that evil look in his eye does not fade. “Well, I’ve learned a thing or two since then. And one thing I learned is that when you’re in a position where someone of power, someone like a *school principal*, is asking you to do something, you listen to them.” He leans back, picking up his checkbook and a pen. “What I’m asking you to do is to sell me that cute, little stuffed animal, at an ungodly price, so I can give my sweet little Mandy the kind of lovie that she’s never had. Does that make sense to you?”

“Not,” Cassidy Jo says, and now her throat is dry and her voice dribbles out like a hoarse whisper. “For. Sale.” She drops her head and presses Pup-Pup against her chest, wrapping both arms around him like a vice.

Mr. Hagman uses the pen to write a check, rips it off, then pushes it across the desk toward Cassidy Jo.

“I’m going to look past your petulance for the moment,” he says. “Do you know what petulance is, young lady?”

She shakes her head from side to side. She can feel tears welling up like water balloons.

“Petulance,” he says, “is what puts kind little girls like you into places like the principal’s office. And into detention. And, eventually, into places like jail. You ever seen the inside of a jail, Cassidy Jo?”

She shakes her head again, then the tears begin to fall, down her cheeks and into Pup-Pup’s fur.

“Well, they’re not fun places,” he says. “People who don’t listen to authority figures, that’s where they end up. Do you understand?” This time, she nods her head. “So you don’t have a father,” he says.

“I have one,” she whispers. “I just don’t … know him.”

“Whatever,” Mr. Hagman says. “The point is, your mother probably has trouble paying the bills. This is a hard town for single mothers. I can’t help but wonder what $500 would mean to her. I mean, it could pay rent. Could keep the two of you from becoming homeless. Have you ever been homeless, Cassidy Jo? Well, it’s worse than jail.”

Cassidy Jo can feel her arms squeezing Pup-Pup even tighter. She feels him waving the check in front of her.

“Do the right thing,” he says softly. “For you. For Mandy. And for your mother. Let’s not be selfish. Let’s not be petulant. Just do the right thing, Cassidy Jo.”

Still squeezing Pup-Pup, she pushes back her chair, stands up, and runs out of his office. She doesn’t look back as she goes.

 ###

When Mrs. Decker arrives home that night, so tired that she kicks off her shoes and lies next to Cassidy Jo on the couch, the little girl is ready with a list of questions.

“Mom?” she says. “How come I don’t know Dad?”

Mrs. Decker’s eyes are closed, but she opens one to steal a glance at Cassidy Jo.

“Not tonight, hon,” she says. “We’ll talk in the morning.”

“But-“

“Not tonight.”

Cassidy Jo pouts but does not give up. “Okay,” she says. “Well, tell me this. How long do we have to stay in this place?”

“This trailer?” Cassidy Jo’s mother says without opening her eyes.

“This town.”

Mrs. Decker rolls onto her side and mumbles. “Don’t start, Cassidy. Please, not tonight.”

 ###

 Later that night, hours after her mother has fallen asleep, Cassidy Jo lies in bed and tries to ignore the sounds outside. She thinks of Mr. Hagman, and of that kid Caleb’s family, and of those two creepy guys who showed up at her door one night. She sees them whenever she closes her eyes, and she can hear the wind tapping fingernails against the aluminum trailer. She opens her eyes and sees moonlight spilling into the bedroom. A shadow moves, and Cassidy Jo, clutching Pup-Pup, squints to see what looks like a woman’s head. It quickly moves away, as if it had been caught spying on her.

 Cassidy Jo can’t be sure, but she thinks it was that old woman who came by with brownies the night before.

CHAPTER 6

 Rico Rinaldi is combing his mustache when the telephone rings on a Friday morning. He’s expecting it to be a woman, primarily because women are the only people who ever call Rico Rinaldi. And they do it often. He sets down his mustache comb and picks up the phone.

 “Guess who?” the voice on the other end says. A female voice, of course. Rico doesn’t recognize it. The voice belongs to an older woman. He strokes his mustache out of habit. “It’s me, silly,” the voice says. “Gladys Middlebury. You dated my daughter back in the day. Remember?”

 The truth is that Rico doesn’t remember. He’s dated a lot of people’s daughters over the years, and, at 35 years old, he’ll probably date a lot more before he’s finished.

 “Oh, yes, of course,” Rico says because he’s a man of charm.

 “Well, listen,” this older woman’s voice says into the phone. “I’ve got a business opportunity for you.”

 Rico smiles. He plays with his mustache. He moves the phone from one ear to the other while watching himself in the mirror.

 “I’m listening,” he says.

 ###

 Cassidy Jo plays sick the next day. She can’t stand the idea of having to face Caleb Wollport again, and she darned sure doesn’t want to get called back into Mr. Hagman’s office. Her mother takes her temperature. It’s 98.6, but Cassidy Jo cries until her mother relents.

 “But you’ll have to entertain yourself for a few hours,” Mrs. Decker says. “I made plans to go over to your grandfather’s for lunch.”

 “Can I-?”

 “Don’t start, Cass,” her mother says. “If you’re sick, you’re sick. Go back to bed. Get some rest.”

 Cassidy Jo follows her mother’s advice and climbs under her sheets with Pup-Pup and a book. About an hour later, she hears her mother leave out the door of the trailer, and Cassidy Jo rushes out of the bedroom to make sure the door is locked. She’s holding Pup-Pup in her hand and looks down at him with sad eyes.

 “Why does everybody want to take you away from me?” she asks. Pup-Pup looks back at her, as if to say: *I’m so sorry.*

 She makes herself breakfast. She puts Pup-Pup in a chair and pretends to feed him eggs. She talks to him about her favorite foods and what a jerk Mr. Hagman was and her favorite books. She puts away her dishes, takes Pup-Pup back to the bedroom to read some more, and then she drifts off to sleep.

 Cassidy Jo awakens to a banging on the aluminum door. She hides under the covers, but the knocking continues. She tiptoes out of the bedroom and peeks through the curtain. A man she doesn’t know is standing there, holding a bouquet of flowers. He makes eye contact with her, waves and smiles.

 Cassidy Jo falls to the floor, wishing he hadn’t seen her. She squeezes Pup-Pup, wishing the man would go away. He knocks again. Cassidy Jo crawls to the door, stands, and opens it a crack. She peeks out.

 “Hello,” the man says. He’s got a mustache and a big smile. His hair is slicked back. “I’m looking for …” He glances down at the palm of his hand. “Are you, by chance, Lynda?” he asks.

 “She’s my mom,” Cassidy Jo says. “I’m just a kid. I shouldn’t even be talking to you.”

 Speaking to the crack in the door, the man says: “Oh, okay. Well, I, um …” He turns and looks to his left. He checks his watch. “No school?” he says.

 “I’m sick.”

 “OK,” he says. “I get it.” He starts to walk away, then he turns and comes back. “Do you know when she’ll be back?” he asks.

 “Depends. Who should I say wants to know?”

 The guy holds one finger up in the air, signaling *one minute*. Then he turns and walks away. She closes the door.

 ###

 “Alone?!” Gladys Middlebury is saying. Rico nods, standing there on the stairs of her trailer, with flowers in hand.

 “Her mother’s not there,” he says. “So unless her dad’s home from work …”

 Gladys nods and rubs her hands together in thought.

 “I mean, I tried,” Rico says, holding out the flowers for her to take back. “I think you owe me at least $20 for the effort.”

 Gladys stops rubbing her hands together and her eyes get wide.

 “That’s it,” she says. She pushes the flowers back to him. “I’ve got a new plan,” she says.

 ###

 There’s another knock on the door by the time Cassidy Jo gets back in bed with her book and Pup-Pup. It sounds like the last knock, only not as aggressive. She peeks out the curtain again, and the guy with the mustache is standing there. He’s smiling again.

 She cracks open the door.

 “Is your name Cassidy Jo?” he asks.

 “Depends.”

 He clears his throat. “Well,” he says. “I was actually here to see the both of you.” He holds out the flowers. “I don’t know if you remember me,” he says, “but I’m your father.”

CHAPTER 7:

 Floyd has basically been driving the streets for two days since Caleb’s mother kicked him out. He’d had to walk all the way home after that day he jumped out of the car and tried to grab that little girl’s stuffed animal, and by the time he made it, she’d already packed up his car and placed a note on the windshield.

 *I was so wrong about you*, it said. *You can’t do ANYTHING right.*

 He spent one night in his car, the next at his cousin Tony’s. Floyd doesn’t know what the future holds, but he has a pretty good idea that he can turn things around. All he has to do is to get Wanda Wollport, Caleb’s mother, what she wanted.

 He shows up at the elementary school and tells the secretary in the office that his niece has a dentist appointment. He says her name is Cassidy Jo, and she’s in the third grade. The secretary taps a few keys on the keyboard and says that Cassidy Jo is home sick today. Floyd acts all concerned.

 “Is she at her mother’s house today?” he asks, leaning against the counter while turning on as much charm as he can muster. “Or her father’s? I can’t remember who has custody on Fridays.”

 The secretary starts to say something, and he can tell by the look on her face that it’s not going to be helpful. So he interrupts her.

 “Is the address the one on Bellwether?” he asks, making it up as he goes. “Or the other one?”

 “Excuse me?” the secretary asks, looking at the screen.

 “Well, since I’m supposed to be picking her up, I’d better get over there to make sure she’s all right. The address you have, it’s on Bellwether, right?”

 “The address on the screen says Valley View Trailer Park,” the secretary says, confused.

 “Yeah,” he says. “That makes sense.”

 And with the information he needs, he heads off on his way. He’s going to get that dog, and win back Wanda Wollport, no matter what it takes.

 ###

 Cassidy Jo is sitting on the couch next to the guy who claims to be her father. She’s holding Pup-Pup and can’t help but to notice that he keeps stealing glances at the stuffed dog.

 “My, how you’ve grown,” he says. “You’ve grown into such a beautiful young lady.”

 “Thank you,” Cassidy Jo says. She’s staring at her father, thinking that he’s not like she pictured. She can’t remember how she pictured him; she’s just happy to finally be sitting with him. She wants to give him a hug but feels weird about it. He’s her father, sure, but he’s also a stranger.

 “I’ve missed you,” he says. “You knew I’d come back, right?”

 Cassidy Jo doesn’t really know what to say, so she just nods her head. Her *father*. She has so, so, so many questions to ask him. She wants to touch his face. To tell him she’s missed him. She wants to give him a big hug.

 “You and me, kid,” he says. “Father and daughter.”

 She presses Pup-Pup against her chin and gives the stuffed dog a small peck on the top of his head.

 “Still love that dog, huh?” he says. “I remember that little guy.” He reaches out slowly to grab it, but Cassidy Jo pulls Pup-Pup away.

 “Whoa,” the guy says, laughing and fiddling with his mustache. He holds his hands up, palms out, an act of surrender. “I’m not gonna take the thing,” he says. “C’mon. I just wanted to see it again. Y’know, for old time’s sake?”

 “He’s not a *thing*,” Cassidy Jo says quietly. What she’s thinking is about the storage space, about the day she found Pup-Pup and also found the photograph of that man. The man she thought might be her father. Cassidy Jo can’t remember what the man in the photograph looked like, but she can remember, as clear as day, seeing Pup-Pup for the first time. She thinks: *Why would my father say he remembers my Pup-Pup, when he left before I discovered him?*

 The guy reaches for Pup-Pup again, more slowly this time. He’s smiling at Cassidy Jo. “Sure is good to see the two of you again,” he says. “Now let me just hold the –“

 They’re interrupted by a sound at the door. Cassidy Jo’s mother walks in, her head down, and when she looks up to see Cassidy Jo and the man sitting on the couch, her eyes show shock. Not the kind of shock that says: *Where have you been all these years?* But the shock that says: *Who is this strange man sitting on the couch with my daughter?* As Cassidy Jo looks at her, the guy reaches quickly, plucking Pup-Pup from her arms.

 “Who the h-?” Mrs. Decker says, dropping a bag of groceries to the floor. Cassidy Jo tries to get Pup-Pup back, but the guy uses his forearm to push her away. He’s stronger than Cassidy Jo expected, and she falls backward onto the couch.

 “Look,” he says, and his voice has totally changed.

 *Sinister (adj.): giving the impression that something harmful or evil is happening or will happen.*

 “I’m not trying to hurt nobody,” the guy says. *Anybody*, Cassidy Jo thinks. Even an 8-year-old would know that the word is *anybody*, not *nobody*. “I just wanted the dog.”

 Cassidy Jo’s mother turns toward the kitchen, reaching for something in the knife holder, and all at once the guy jumps up from the couch, clutching Pup-Pup like a football, and runs for the open door. Mrs. Decker turns with a long knife in her hand, but he’s out the door before she can catch him. She turns and looks at Cassidy Jo.

 “Are you okay?” Mrs. Decker says. Cassidy Jo is struggling to get up and off the couch.

 “Don’t worry about me,” she says. “Pup-Pup!”

 As she stands, her mother sets down the knife and grabs her by the shoulders. “I’m so sorry,” her mother says.

 “Get out of my way!”

 “Who was that man?” Mrs. Decker asks. “How’d he get in?”

 Cassidy Jo tries to slap her mother’s hands away, but Mrs. Decker just wraps her in a hug.

 Cassidy Jo can’t look at her. Her whole body is shaking. Without Pup-Pup, she feels like she’s missing an arm or a leg.

 “He said he was my dad,” Cassidy Jo mumbles, trying to squirm free.

 “*That* guy?!” Mrs. Decker shouts, looking out the door. “I’ve never seen him before. Never.”

 ####

 Floyd sits outside the sign for the Valley View Trailer Park and waits. He’s not sure what exactly he’s waiting for, but he’s ready for anything. He wears a cowboy hat, sunglasses and a fake beard. His plan is to wait until he sees something that looks like the little girl, but the only person who’s come or gone while he’s been here is some woman who walked into the park with a bag of groceries.

 Floyd thinks maybe he should get out of the car and go into the trailer park. Maybe he’ll find a bush to hide in. Or a tree to hide behind. Something closer than this. A place where he can be more ready.

 Then he hears a scream. He sits up in his driver’s seat and watches as some strange-looking guy comes running out the front entrance like some football player trying to score a touchdown. Floyd sits up even straighter, noticing that the guy’s not carrying a football but something *fuzzy.* Something that looks like a stuffed animal. Something that looks like …

 Floyd shoots up in his seat so suddenly that his head hits the roof of the car. He winces and starts to reach for the door handle, but then he realizes he needs a plan. Last time he had a chance at the dog, he just jumped out and pounced. That idea resulted in disaster. He nearly got arrested, and he got kicked out of his girlfriend’s house. This time he has to be more careful, be more *smart.*

 As he tries to plan his next move, the guy starts heading right for him. Floyd freezes. He thinks of ducking but knows it would be too suspicious. He balls his fists and readies for a fight. The guy crouches, still holding the stuffed dog, and prepares to leap on Floyd’s car. It doesn’t make any sense.

 ###

 Cassidy Jo frees herself and makes for the door, but her mother stops her. “No,” she says. “Too dangerous. You wait her. I’ll go catch him.” Her mother grabs the knife again and heads out the open door. She runs down the stairs, then stops, turns around, and goes back up to close the door. She locks it. Cassidy Jo knows she’s wasting valuable time. She runs to the window and looks out.

 “Stop, thief!” her mother is shouting. She’s running toward the entrance of the trailer park, heading out and away from the safety of the park. Cassidy Jo closes the curtain and quietly unlocks the door. She can’t just sit and wait. Pup-Pup needs her help. She chokes back the tears and opens the door.

 ###

 Wouldn’t you know it. Rico has pretty much executed the perfect crime, so perfect that he’s decided to leave that Gladys woman out of the picture and keep the $250,000 dog for himself. But then, just as he arrives at his getaway car, some idiot has parked right next to him. Some weirdo in dark sunglasses and a cowboy hat is staring right at him, and Rico has no other choice than to jump on the guy’s hood, slide across, and land next to his car.

 He gets into his own car, starts the engine, and that’s when he hears the girl’s mother calling out for him. “Stop, thief!” she’s saying.

 Rico turns and looks at the weird cowboy guy, who’s still staring at him. He motions for the guy to roll down his window. The girl’s mother comes running out of the entrance, with a knife in her hand.

 The cowboy guy rolls down his window, and Rico says: “Hey, man. That’s my crazy girlfriend. You know how they are.” He uses a finger to circle his ear. “*Loco*,” he says. “Anyway. Do a brother a favor and move your car before we both get killed.”

 He rolls up his window. The cowboy guy backs up, and just as the woman is getting closer to Rico’s car, the cowboy guy does the unthinkable. He drives *at* *her*.

 ###

 Cassidy Jo arrives at the entrance just in time to see a car drive at her mother. Her mom recoils, drops the knife, and starts shouting. Cassidy Jo can see the guy with the mustache as he backs his car out, peels the tires in dirt, and drives off.

 With Pup-Pup.

 She falls to the dirt, and the tears flow out. She looks up to see the other car turn around and drive off. She recognizes it from somewhere. She covers her face with her hands and weeps. She sits like that for several seconds, the sobs so uncontrollable that Cassidy Jo can’t breathe. She feels a comforting arm around her shoulders. She hears her mother whisper into her ear: “I’m so sorry, Cass.”

 And then Cassidy Jo remembers where she knew the other car from. *Caleb!*

 She opens her eyes and looks up, but both cars are gone.

 ###

 Floyd tries to keep a safe distance but won’t let the guy out of his sights. The guy’s driving 60 miles per hour past signs that announce a 30-mile-per-hour speed limit. The guy’s taking turns so fast that two of his wheels go up into the air.

 The guy is driving circles around the neighborhood, not seeming to go much of anywhere. He finally ends up out on Main, where the red lights slow him down. Floyd waits a few cars back, his heart beating. He waits until the light turns green, then they’re off again. The guy weaves in and out of traffic, picking up speed. They drive like that for about a mile-and-a-half, then suddenly, unexpectedly, the guy slows down.

 ###

 Out of *gas*?

 After all this, after pulling off the perfect crime and escaping in epic fashion, now Rico’s car is out of gas. For Pete’s sake.

 The car chugs to a stop along the side of the road, and Rico slams the steering wheel. He looks at himself in the rearview mirror, flattening his mustache in place before slicking back his hair. He wonders what to do next. He readjusts the mirror, then he sees a car slow in to stop behind him.

 A good Samaritan. What luck.

 Rico tucks the stuffed dog under the passenger seat and gets out of the car. He lifts his head up and stops in his tracks.

 Walking toward him is the weird cowboy guy.

 ###

 “Hey there, buddy,” Floyd is saying. The guy stops and holds his hands up.

 “I don’t want no trouble,” the guy says. He’s got a thick mustache, and even from a few feet away Floyd can smell his cheap cologne.

 “Trouble?” Floyd asks, trying to sound all innocent. But at the same time, he’s sizing the guy up. The guy looks more like a lover than a fighter. “I’m just trying to help, brother. Seems you’ve got some car trouble?” Floyd sneaks a glance into the back seat of the car, looking with his eyes but careful not to move his head. He doesn’t want to raise the guy’s suspicions.

 “Out of gas,” the guy says. “Listen, weren’t you back there at that trailer park, just sitting there in your car?” Floyd shrugs. “I slid across your hood,” the guy says. “Looked you dead in the eye.”

 “Oh, yes. Yes, that was me. I was just dropping off my, um, girlfriend. Seems you were in a bit of a pinch yourself.”

 “Crazy ex,” the mustache guy says. “Like I told ya. Now, about getting me to the gas station.”

 “Don’t believe I offered,” Floyd says. The guy flashes a smile. It’s quite a smile, he must admit. He’s guessing this guy with the mustache has had to fight off the women for most of his life.

 “So, you just gonna leave me sitting here, by the side of the road?”

 Now Floyd is the one smiling. “Well,” he says. “What’s it worth to ya?” The mustache guy sighs and pulls out his wallet. Floyd steps forward, places a hand over the wallet, and closes it. “I know something better,” Floyd says.

 The mustache guy looks at him strangely. He’s staring at Floyd, who takes another look toward the car. This time, he’s not trying to hide it. He looks back at the mustache guy and raises his eyebrows.

 “How ‘bout we go halvsies,” he says.

 “Halvsies? On what?”

 Floyd closes his eyes and shakes his head. “C’mon,” he says. “We both know what.”

 The mustache guy looks toward the car. Floyd tries to follow his gaze. The guy appears to be looking toward the passenger seat.

 “Yeah, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the mustache guy says, but he doesn’t sound very convincing. “Anyway, it’s a nice afternoon. Maybe I’ll just walk.”

 “And leave the car here?” Floyd says, smiling. “That’d be risky, huh?”

 The mustache guy meets his gaze again. Floyd can tell that now he’s the one doing the sizing up.

 “Who are you?” he asks.

 Floyd just nods and takes off his cowboy hat, setting it on the hood of his car. “Just a man with similar interests,” he says. Then he cracks his knuckles.

 The guy with the mustache takes the first swing.

CHAPTER 8:

 Arnie Campanella is listening to Taylor Swift on the radio as he pulls his tow truck into the lot. The car on back rattles. He’s singing along, which he only does when he’s alone in the car. His brother, Gary, would beat him senseless if he knew he was listening to the “teenage bubble-gum garbage.” Gary prefers old-school rock, like Rush and The Who and Billy Squier. “Ain’t nobody these days can hammer an electric guitar like Squier,” Gary likes to tell Arnie. So Arnie lets him play his Billy Squier CDs when they’re in the car together, but when he’s alone, he likes music he can sing along to.

 He’s singing about blank spaces and love stories and never, ever getting back together when he hits a bump and the car in back jolts. Arnie can’t stop thinking about how crazy his day has already been. He gets a call from a police dispatch, sending him out to the east side of town because two morons were getting arrested for fighting on the shoulder of the road. Then as one of the guys was getting hauled into the cop car, he kept screaming about something he needed to get out from under the passenger seat of the car. Drugs, probably. Or maybe a gun. Who knows?

 As Arnie slows and backs the car into an open spot at the tow lot, his curiosity get the best of him. He turns off the music, then lowers the car, unhitches it, jimmies open the passenger door and reaches under the seat. He touches something furry and recoils, thinking he’s stumbled onto a pet. He grabs a flashlight out of the bed of his tow truck, returns to investigate, and finds the dark eyes of a stuffed dog staring back at him. He chuckles and whistles a tune about haters who are going to hate, hate, hate. Arnie grabs the stuffed animal, pulls it free and stares into its face. He shakes it back and forth, thinking: *What’s so important about this thing that the guy nearly knocked out a cop to retrieve it?* He has to admit, the thing’s pretty cute. If he wasn’t a 27-year-old single male who was hoping to lose about 60 pounds and start dating again, he might even take it home for himself. Instead, he thinks of Gary’s daughter Bella. Of how Christmas is just around the corner.

 `”Thing like this’d probably cost fifteen, twenty bucks at Walmart,” he says. Then he tosses it into the cab of his tow truck and heads inside to fill out paperwork.

 ###

 Cassidy Jo can’t stop crying and shaking. Shaking and crying. She feels like she’s cried so much that she shouldn’t have any tears left. *It’s like losing your best friend*, she thinks. And then: *Your ONLY friend.*

 Her mom is doing her best to console her, but nothing she says can turn off the tears.

 “We’ll find him?” *How?*

 “They can’t be that far away.” *Who?*

 “This too shall pass.” *What?!*

 “Put your faith in God.” *WHY?*

 Was God not the one who led that stupid, evil man who pretended to be her father onto their property? Wasn’t He the one who took her real dad away? Wasn’t He the one who kept making her mom lose her job and move to a new town? Cassidy Jo had been putting a lot of faith in God over the years, and all he was getting back was sadness. She wished she could bottle up all her tears and dump them on God’s head.

 “Why?” Cassidy Jo mutters through her sobs. She can barely breathe. She can’t believe Pup-Pup’s gone. Who’s going to get her through the night? Her mom loves her, but she’s not soft and cuddly. She can’t look into Cassidy Jo’s eyes and make all the pain go away like Pup-Pup could.

 She blows her nose in a Kleenex and looks up at her mother. They’re sitting on the couch, the same couch where that horrible, nasty man came and spewed all his lies.

 “Mom,” Cassidy Jo says “Is this what it felt like when Dad left?”

 Her mother strokes a tear from Cassidy Jo’s cheek and sighs.

 “That’s complicated,” she says.

 *Complicated (adj.) consisting of many interconnecting parts or elements; intricate.* That’s what the dictionary says, anyway. What it means in parent language is: *I don’t feel like answering that question right now, and as your mother I have veto power, so change the subject.*

 “Everybody leaves,” Cassidy Jo says. “Everything I ever loved, it goes away.”

 Cassidy Jo’s mother strokes her hair. “I’m still here,” she says. “I’m not going anywhere.”

 Cassidy Jo wipes her eyes and sits up straight, looking her mother in the eyes. “How come he stopped loving you?” she asks her mom. “How come he loves you enough to have a baby with you one day, then he goes away the next day? I could never, ever, EVER do that to Pup-Pup.”

 “And I would never, ever do that to you,” Cassidy Jo’s mother says. “I could never stop loving you. But there are different kinds of love.”

 “So Dad didn’t love me?”

 Cassidy Jo’s mother takes her cheeks in her hands. “Him leaving had absolutely nothing to do with you, Cass,” she says softly. “If anything, you’re the reason he stayed as long as he did. He wanted to try.”

 “How come he never calls? Or writes? Or Snapchats?”

 Cassidy Jo’s mother sighs and drops her hands into her lap. She looks down at them. “Like I said, it’s complicated,” she says.

 “Then explain it.”

 Her mother is silent for a few seconds. Cassidy Jo can see that it’s starting to get dark outside. Her stomach grumbles but she doesn’t feel like she could eat anything. She wonders how far that evil man with the mustache has gotten with her Pup-Pup.

 “Here’s the best way I can think to explain it,” Mrs. Decker says, still looking down at her hands. “Pretend I brought home pizza every night, but when you reached for a slice, I told you that you couldn’t have any. Night after night after night, you smell the cheese and pepperoni. Your mouth starts watering. You can almost taste it. But then I take it away.” She looks up at Cassidy Jo and her lips purse. “Eventually, hon, you’d probably prefer that I stop bringing the pizza home at all. If you can’t have it, then why see it, or smell it, or think about it? Your life is better without it. You move on, and life moves on.” She takes Cassidy Jo’s hands in hers. “That’s kind of how it is with your father,” she says. “It’s better off – for you, for me, for everyone – if he’s not coming and going in your life.”

 Cassidy Jo swallows hard. She realizes that, for the first time since Pup-Pup disappeared, she’s not crying. But she feels even more sad now.

 “So, is Dad, like, a pizza delivery man?” she asks.

 Cassidy Jo’s mother smiles, like she’s said something funny, except Cassidy Jo wasn’t trying to be. Her mother leans over, kisses her forehead, and says: “Like I said, it’s complicated.”

 Cassidy Jo feels her mother’s arms wrap around her. She has one more question to ask, but she doesn’t want to. It’s this: *Am I better off if Pup-Pup never comes back?* Although Cassidy Jo never asks the question.

 She doesn’t want to know the answer.

 ###

 She’s asleep in her mother’s arms when another gentle rapping on the door startles her. Cassidy Jo thinks it’s happening in a dream, but when she lifts her head she sees her mother moving briskly toward the kitchen, reaching for the knife. She puts a finger to her lips and turns toward Cassidy Jo, signaling for her to be quiet. Cassidy Jo lies down on the couch and hides her face behind a pillow.

 She hears her mother opening the door and peeks over the pillow with one eye. The door swings open, and Cassidy Jo can see Gladys, the older neighbor. She’s smiling and raising her eyebrows.

 “Helloooooo,” she says. She places a hand on her chest. “Gladys,” she says.

 “Yes, I remember,” Cassidy Jo’s mother says. Her voice is stern, but tired.

 “May I …?”

 “What do you need, Gladys?” Cassidy Jo’s mother says without letting her inside. Cassidy Jo sees the woman’s smile fade.

 “Well,” the woman says. “I just wanted to make sure everyone was okay. I heard commotion earlier today, and-“

 “We’re fine.”

 The woman turns her body so that she can see Cassidy Jo on the couch. She waves, and Cassidy Jo pulls the pillow up to cover her face.

 “You’re sure everything’s okay?” Gladys asks.

 Cassidy Jo peeks out again.

 “Good night, Gladys,” Cassidy Jo’s mother says, but when she goes to close the door, Gladys places a hand out so it won’t shut.

 “The dog,” she says. She pushes the door open and is smiling again. “Whenever I’ve seen little Cassidy Jo, she’s got her dog. Is it …?”

 “Good night, Gladys,” Mrs. Decker says, louder this time. And when she shuts the door, she makes sure it slams.

 ###

 Cassidy Jo twists and turns for most of the night, unable to sleep. Her arms feel empty without Pup-Pup. When she closes her eyes, she sees him. She can’t imagine life without him. She sits up and looks out the window, out into the darkness.

 “Pup-Pup,” she whispers, “where are you?”

She falls back onto the couch and stares at the ceiling of the trailer. She hasn’t prayed since she was 5 years old, when she prayed for God to bring her dad back. When he didn’t come, she never talked to God again.

She can hear her mother snoring in the other room. She looks toward the door of the bedroom, then toward the front door of the trailer. She stands up, looks again toward the bedroom and her snoring mother, and she slips out the front door.

 ###

 Floyd gets out of jail a little after midnight. He’s got a black eye (from the fight with Rico) and a swollen lip (from some jerk in jail who said he snored too loud). The first phone call he makes is to Caleb’s mother. She sounds as if she’s just woken up, and he can tell she’s not happy to hear his voice, but he quiets her with one sentence.

 “I’ve got the stuffed dog,” he says. He says this not because he actually *has* the dog. But he knows where it is. He knows how to get it. This is information he doesn’t necessarily need to explain at this time, so he just says it again: “I’ve got the stuffed dog.”

 Within 15 minutes, she arrives in her mother’s car. She’s wearing one of his hats.

 “Where’s Caleb?” he asks.

 “Asleep,” she says. “Let’s make this quick.” She looks him up and down. “Where’s the dog?” And then, almost as an afterthought: “Where’s your car?”

 “It’s all waiting for us,” he says. “I just need you to take me there.”

 Caleb’s mother frowns. She sighs and reaches for the stickshift, as if she’s going to pull away and leave him there, on the side of the road, in the middle of the night. She looks away from him.

 “That dog,” he reminds her, “could make us so much money that we can buy anything we’ve ever wanted.”

She closes her eyes, tightens her jaw, then says: “Get in.”

 He leads her to the spot where Rico’s car broke down. It’s dark, and in her headlights he can’t see the cars.

 “Slow down,” he says.

 “Floyd, it’s late. Just bring me to the dog, and let’s go home.”

 He leans forward, squinting. Maybe they took the wrong exit. Maybe they already passed it. Maybe he dreamed the whole thing.

 “It was here,” he whispers.

 Caleb’s mother slows to a stop. She looks at him. “Where’s the dog, Floyd?”

 He takes off his hat and runs his fingers through his hair. He groans.

 “It was right here,” he says. “In a car. It was-“

 “Get out,” she says. She opens the door for him. After he gets out, she drives away, the tires squealing as she goes.

 He’s still rubbing his hands through his hair when a taxicab pulls up. The door opens, and that guy Rico starts to get out. They make eye contact.

 “You.”

 “*You!*”

 ###

 Gladys decides she’s going to go look for Rico herself. If he’s gone, and the dog’s gone, that can only mean …

 She jumps on a bicycle in the middle of the night and heads out of the trailer park. There’s a single car parked outside, and she barely notices it as she pumps her legs on the bike. A man in the passenger seat rolls down his window and calls out: “Hey, ma’am!” She slows and looks back. The guy’s holding out a $10 bill. She walks her bike to the car.

 “Question for you,” he says. He’s got a baseball cap pulled down over his forehead, like he’s trying to disguise himself from someone. In the driver’s seat sits a big guy with a ponytail who just nods when she comes to the window. “You seen any cops around here lately?” the guy in the passenger seat asks.

 “Who wants to know?” Gladys asks.

 “Well,” the guys says. “There’s this girl who lives in that trailer park with you. She’s got this stuffed dog, maybe you know her.”

 Gladys plucks the $10 bill out of the man’s hand, sets her bike on the ground and gets in the back seat.

 “Drive,” she says.

 The guy in the passenger seat turns to the driver, the one with the ponytail, and he says: “You heard her, Fisher. Drive.”

 ###

 Fisher drives through the night as his partner Gary chats with the woman in the backseat. She explains to them that she knows the girl they’re talking about, that the valuable stuffed dog has been stolen, and that she knows who has it.

 “If we find it,” she says. “*When* we find it, I’m going to need you two to rough this guy Rico up. Then we’ll take the dog, sell it, and we’ll split the profits.”

 Fisher thinks that $250,000 divided by three isn’t as much as $250,000 divided by two. Then he realizes that $250,000 divided by three is better than zero.

 “So where are we going?” Fisher’s buddy asks.

 “Just drive,” the woman in the backseat says.

###

 She’s not sure exactly where Rico lives, so she thinks about calling her daughter to ask. But it’s the middle of the night. She doesn’t want another person involved in this. She remembers what kind of car he was driving, but trying to find a ’92 Corolla in the pitch black is like trying to find …

 “Stop the car,” she says suddenly. She’s looking out the window, out at a small tow lot, when she sees it. As luck would have it, the lamppost is positioned so that she can see the car. She knows without a doubt that it’s the same one Rico was driving. What are the chances?

 The driver slows, and she points him to the lot. “It’s in there,” she says. “I see it.”

 They pull to the front, and the lot is closed. There’s a fence around it, about 15 feet high, with barbed wire and razors at the top.

 “How do we get in?” the big guy with the ponytail asks.

 “Well,” Gladys says. “We’ve got three brains. And about, what, sixteen-and-a-half feet of people? We can figure something out.”

 ###

 They’re standing face to face, Rico and Floyd, ready to start fighting again. The cab driver is waiting for Rico to pay his fare. As they stand there, a car comes around the corner with the headlights on, and both Rico and Floyd fall to the ground at the same time, thinking it’s the police. A pizza-delivery man drives by without even noticing, and Rico and Floyd look at each other, as if realizing at the same time: *We’re both going after the same thing.*

 “How much money you got?” Rico asks.

 “Maybe fifty bucks,” Floyd says.

 Rico sits up. “We can help each other,” he says. Floyd nods. Rico begins to play with his mustache. “Okay,” he says. “There can only be two, maybe three, tow lots in town.”

 “I know of one on the north side,” Floyd says.

 And together, they get into the taxi.

 ###

 Gladys is on top of the smaller guy’s shoulders, who’s on top of the ponytail guy’s shoulders. She can see the Carrolla clearly but can’t figure out how to get there, not with all this barbed wire and razors in her face.

 “How do you know it’s in there?” the guy in the middle asks as he winces. Her tiny feet feel like 75-pound rocks on his shoulders.

 “It’s worth a shot,” the woman says. She’s wobbling on his shoulders. “Do you have a rubber mat in your car?” she says.

 “Can you hurry up up there?” the ponytail guy says. “My back is killing me.”

 “Shutup, Fisher,” the guy in the middle says. “Quit being a baby.”

 “Oh, I’ll show you a baby,” he says, and as he looks up, the tree of people wobbles and Gladys almost falls.

 “For Pete’s sake!” she says. “Hold still.”

 Gladys can see a car in the distance, the only headlights in the night. She waits for it to pass, but it keeps coming toward her. She ducks her head and sees that it’s a taxicab.

 “Stay still,” she says. “Car coming.” It turns onto the street where the tow lot is, and she says: “It’s coming this way. Just let it pass.”

 Except the car doesn’t pass. It slows down and parks alongside Fisher’s car, with its headlights on the human tree.

 ###

 Cassidy wades out into the darkness of the woods. She has tears streaming down her face. Her arms feel empty. Pup-Pup wasn’t just her best friend; he was her protector. She’s crying so hard that she can barely breathe. She falls to her knees and lets the tears flow into the sticks and dirt.

 In the dark of night, she reaches out and imagines grabbing onto something. Her hand hits a tree. She turns around, leans against the tree, and the tears run out. She sits with her head down, feeling hopeless and alone.

*Depressed (adj.): low in spirits.*

 Her head hanging, Cassidy can feel herself falling asleep. She wishes she could sleep forever. She closes her eyes and never wants to open them again.

 She can feel her body shaking in the cold. She’s shivering and sniffling. She feels half-asleep and half-awake. A dream starts to come to her, where she’s running in a field swinging Pup-Pup through the air as the sunlight wraps around him. She hears the cracking of a stick and something rubbing against her nose. She drops Pup-Pup in her dream and wakes up.

 She opens her eyes into the darkness. She rubs her eyes to adjust to the moonlight. Someone, some*thing*, is standing in front of her. Cassidy Jo scurries and digs her heels into the dirt, trying to back up, but she’s against a tree. Something leans forward, with dark, black eyes that glow in the moonlight. Cassidy Jo’s eyes get big, blink, and she can feel this thing move forward, its nose touching hers. She’s looking right into the shiny, black eyes. She realizes it’s a baby deer.

 She reaches up with a shaking hand and touches the top of the doe’s nose. She runs her fingers across its fur. The deer turns its head, then runs away between the trees.

 ###

 As the taxi pulls into a spot alongside the lot, Rico notices something he never expected: three people, lined up vertically, trying to get over the fence. He leans forward and watches as the three people turn their heads to look at them. The one on the top looks like …

 “Gladys?” Rico whispers.

 “Who?” Floyd says. “What’s going on here?”

 The taxi driver turns off his headlights as the three people scamper to the ground. Rico and Floyd get out so that they’re all facing each other.

 “You,” Gladys says.

 “You,” Rico says.

 “Who?” says Floyd.

 “Just tell me where the dog is,” Gladys says. Her eyes pierce as she looks at him.

 “I don’t know what you’re-“

 “Don’t give me that nonsense,” she says. “You hornswaggled me.”

 “Hornswaggled?” Floyd says.

 “It means promising one thing and then-“ Fisher starts, but his buddy stops him with an elbow to the ribs.

 “You know that dog’s mine, fair and square,” Gladys says.

 “Actually,” Fisher’s buddy says. “We were the ones who saw it first.”

 “Well,” Floyd says, “I was about to take it before the cops showed up.”

 “I’m the one who actually *took* it, morons,” Rico says. “And it *is* my car.”

 The five of them stare at each other, stuck in a standoff.

 Fisher clears his throat. “Technically,” he says, “it belongs to the girl. And until one of us actually has it in our hands …”

 “Shutup, Fisher,” his buddy says.

 “Yeah, shutup, Fisher,” Floyd adds, even though he’s never met the guy.

 They all turn toward the fence and look into the lot. The car sits in the spotlight, as if teasing them.

 “You guys realize I’m the only one who can get the car out,” Rico says.

 “Not if you don’t have enough money,” Gladys says.

 Floyd takes a deep breath. He looks up, sees how high the fence is, then he turns to lean his back against the fence and slides down to the ground.

 “Nothing we can do but wait,” he says.

 “Wait?”

 “Until the tow lot opens,” he says. “Then it’s every man, and woman, for themselves.”

CHAPTER 9:

 Arnie Campanella wakes up early and remembers the dog. He’d meant to bring it home and wrap it for his niece. Instead, he left it in the passenger seat of the tow truck. And he’s off today.

 He looks at his clock. The tow lot opens in 20 minutes. He rushes to get out of bed.

 ###

 Cassidy Jo doesn’t really *wake up*. She hasn’t fallen asleep. As the sun rises, she’s back in the trailer, back on the couch, staring out the window, wondering whether she’ll ever see Pup-Pup again.

 She hears her mother stirring in the bedroom. She wonders if there’s anybody who can find Pup-Pup for her.

 When her mother comes out of the bedroom, she sees Cassidy Jo and gets a sad look on her face. She goes to Cassidy Jo.

 “We’ll find him,” she says.

 Cassidy Jo feels tears fill up her eyes. She didn’t think she had anymore. “How do you know?” she asks.

 “Mommies know things.” She rubs Cassidy Jo’s head and kisses her on the forehead.

 “We should have sold him,” Cassidy Jo says quickly.

 “What?”

 “Pup-Pup. As soon as we found out he was worth that much money, we should’ve sold him. We could’ve moved out of this stupid trailer, and there wouldn’t be all this stupid trouble.”

 “Don’t say that, hon.”

 “It’s true. That TV woman said how much we could have gotten for him. Ever since that stupid TV story, we’ve had trouble, trouble, trouble. I wish we would have …” She breaks into sobs. Her mother rubs her back.

 “Cass, don’t ever think that. Don’t ever *say* that. Pup-Pup was a part of the family. We would never get rid of him, no matter how much money they offer us.”

 Cassidy Jo sniffs and looks out the window again. She’d pay any amount of money just to get him back.

 ###

 By the time Arnie gets to work, the gate is open and a cop car is parked outside. Apparently two guys jumped the maintenance man who unlocked the gate, and three knuckleheads tried to rush inside. The cop has all five of them lined up against the fence in handcuffs.

 As Arnie gets out of the car, he hears one of them, an old lady, shouting at some guy in a mustache: “It wasn’t even in there, you moron! You’re about as useful as a flashlight on the beach!”

 Arnie walks past them toward the spot where he parked the truck, but it’s already gone. He heads back inside, and the dispatch man lets him know that Tyrell Paige took the truck out about a half-hour ago. Arnie grumbles to himself that he’ll have to pay for a different present for his niece. He heads back outside, and the same old lady is still grumbling as the cop loads her into the back of his car.

 “All because of a stupid stuffed animal!” she’s saying. “I thought you were smarter than an 8-year-old girl, but, boy, was I wrong!”

 Arnie shakes his head and continues on toward his truck, wondering what a stuffed animal has to do with the arrests of five people.

 He’s in his pickup truck, about two miles away, before it hits him that maybe, just maybe, the stuffed animal she mentioned was the same one he’d put in the cab of his towtruck.

 Arnie heads for home, thinking he’s ready to start taking advantage of his day off, when he decides to pull off for a cup of black coffee at his favorite coffee shop. His favorite barista works on weekends, so he’s hoping she’s on shift. She’s a few years younger than he is, and way too pretty to not have a boyfriend, but Arnie enjoys talking to her and imagining he might have a chance.

 He sees her in the window when he pulls in, so he decides to park his car instead of going through the drive-thru.

 “Hey, there, handsome,” she says when he walks inside, not because he’s handsome but because she knows how to get a good tip. “You hear there’s already been action down at the lot.

 “Wow,” he says. “Word travels fast.”

 “Small town,” she says. “All it takes is a few cop cars speeding past, lights flashing, and people start talking.” She hands another customer a cup of espresso and flashes a smile aimed at Arnie. “The usual?” she asks.

 He nods. He tries to think of something witty to say, but wit isn’t one of his God-given gifts. He knows lug-nuts, not gab.

 “Any idea what’s happening at the lot?” she asks as she fills a ceramic mug.

 “Some pea-brains trying to break into the lot, I guess,” he says. “People will try anything to get their car back, huh?”

 She hands him his coffee. “I don’t drive,” she says. “My boyfriend pretty much takes me everywhere I need to go.”

 Arnie feels a pang in his heart when he hears the word “boyfriend.” He offers her a forced smile, grabs his cup and drops two dollars into the tip jar. “That jar keeps filling up,” he says, “maybe one day you’ll get a car of your own.” It’s the best he can do for flirting. “If the boyfriend thing doesn’t work out,” he says, “give me a call.” *For automotive work*, is what he means. He’s basically trying to say that he’s happy to help her out if she ever gets a car of her own and doesn’t need to rely on her boyfriend’s ride, but as soon as the words come out of his mouth he realizes how creepy they must have sounded. She frowns, he blushes, and she goes to help another customer.

 *Stupid, stupid, STUPID!* he’s telling himself as he takes his coffee to an empty table near the window. He thinks of the things he should have said. The things he still could say. Maybe if he tries to explain himself, she’ll understand. But he doesn’t know how to do it. He sits down, sips his coffee and watches her wait on a woman and her young daughter.

 Arnie tries to take his mind off the barista, so he starts thinking about the drama at the tow lot. The cop car. The five people lined up in handcuffs. The old woman with the loud mouth. He takes another sip of his coffee.

 He’s lost in thought and barely even notices the woman and her daughter sit down at the table next to him.

 “Honey, we’ll find him,” the mother says. Arnie looks over and sees that the woman has an iced drink. The little girl is licking whipped cream off the top of her hot chocolate. She’s a cute little girl, but her eyes look sad.

 “How can you be sure?” the girl asks quietly. She has a white, whipped-cream mustache.

 “Someone will find him.”

 The girl licks more whipped cream off her cup. Arnie sneaks another glance at the barista.

 “How will they know he’s mine?” the little girl asks.

 Her mother leans forward and takes her daughter’s hand in hers. “Honey,” the mother says. “How many stuffed dogs could be missing in this town? We’ll go over to the police station, file a report, and-“

 “That won’t be necessary.”

 The mother and daughter both look at Arnie, who didn’t even realize he’s spoken aloud.

 “Excuse me?” the mother says.

 Arnie takes a sip of his coffee and turns toward them.

 “Sorry to eavesdrop,” he says.

*Eavesdrop (v.): secretly listen to a conversation.*

 “I just couldn’t help overhearing you talk about a lost stuffed dog,” he says. He grins. “I might be able to help,” he says.

 The girl uses her sleeve to wipe the whipped cream from her upper lip. Her eyes are as big as coffee plates. “You know where Pup-Pup is?” she says.

 “I might.”

 ###

 Cassidy Jo sits in the backseat as her mother drives around town with the tow-truck driver in the passenger seat. He’s on the phone with someone from work, asking a bunch of questions about the whereabouts of a guy named Tyrell Paige.

 “The power plant?” the guy says into the phone. “Which lot?”

 He hangs up and directs Cassidy Jo’s mother past a park, through downtown and into the parking lot outside of some huge building. There’s a tow truck loading a car not far away, and Cassidy Jo can feel her heart beating as her mother pulls into a spot nearby. A short, squat guy who’s wearing a uniform is clipping the tow hook under a front fender.

 She spills out of the back seat and follows the guy Arnie toward the truck.

 “Hey, Tyrell!” he calls out. The driver looks at Arnie strangely at first, then his face shows recognition.

 “My man Campanella,” he says. They shake hands. The guy Tyrell looks first at Cassidy Jo and then her mother. His smile fades. “Who’s this?” he says.

 “Listen,” Arnie says. “This little girl seems to have lost her stuffed dog. It sounds a lot like this one I found last night while driving the evening shift.”

 “A dog,” Tyrell says. He thinks for a second, then nods his head. “You left it in the front seat?”

 “That’s the one.”

 Tyrell’s face gets all serious. “Ah, man,” he says. “I threw that thing away. It looked all ratty and-“

 “Hey!” Cassidy Jo shouts. She steps forward and kicks the guy in the shin, hard enough that he winces.

 “My bad,” Tyrell says. “I meant ‘cute.’ It looked *cute*.” He offers a grin. Cassidy Jo feels her anger fade. “But I did throw it away.” Her heart sinks. She thinks she might throw up.

 “Where?” Arnie asks.

 “Where else?” Tyrell says with a chuckle. “The *garbage*. Back at the tow lot.”

 ###

 Mrs. Decker drives like a fireman chasing a fire as they head back for the tow lot. As the car screeches around corners, Cassidy Jo sits in back and imagines Pup-Pup, covered in banana peels and rotting food. Maybe he’ll never smell the same again. Maybe his fur will never be as soft. She fights back tears and holds out hope.

All the cop cars and drama are gone by the time they pull into a parking spot. Cassidy Jo is the first one out of the car, sprinting into the lobby while shouting: “The trash! Where’s the trash! My Pup-Pup is in the trash!”

 The woman behind the counter doesn’t even look up from her computer as she says: “Back of the line, please.”

 “But my Pup-Pup!” Cassidy Jo shouts. There are about 20 people in line. Her mother takes her by the shoulders, and by the time she turns around, Arnie is there to point her toward an exit. Outside, near where the tow trucks are parked, is a large garbage can. Arnie lifts Cassidy Jo on his shoulders, and she looks inside.

 “There’s hardly anything there!” she says. “It’s practically empty!”

 She climbs down and bursts into tears. “Where *is* he?” Her mother wraps her arms around her, and Cassidy Jo cries into her mother’s shirt.

 Then, a voice from behind them. “Whatcha lookin’ for?”

 Cassidy Jo, her mother and Arnie all turn to see a janitor standing a few feet away. He’s chewing an apple.

 “Where’d the trash go?” Arnie asks.

 The guy shrugs. “Palmer took it to the dump at the end of his shift,” he says.

 Cassidy Jo’s eyes get big. *The dump?!*

 “What time?” Arnie asks.

 The guy takes another bite of his apple, shrugs and chews. He swallows and spits into the dirt. “Well, shoot,” he says. “Musta been a couple hours ago?”

 Cassidy Jo didn’t think it was possible, but she actually starts crying harder. She falls to her knees. She feels like she might never get up.

CHAPTER 10:

 Cassidy Jo cried for the rest of the night. And the whole next day. It was a Sunday, and she never left her mother’s bed. A few miles away, Gladys and the four other would-be thieves sat in a jail cell and waited to get out. Arnie goes to the dump on his own but can’t find anyone who’s seen a stuffed dog. He even stood over the edge and stared down into the pile of garbage, imaging the impossible task of sifting through it on the remote chance that they’ll find whatever remained of the stuffed animal.

 Cassidy Jo wakes up on Monday morning, and her mother tells her she’s going to school. “Staying home isn’t an option,” she says. “You can’t mope the rest of your life.” Cassidy Jo argues, but her mother isn’t listening. “You’re going to school,” she says.

 Cassidy Jo arrives a few minutes late, her face red from tears. She’s barely has enough energy to walk and can’t imagine sitting through one of Ms. Pollidor’s boring lessons. Her mother walks her to the door, gives her a kiss, and tells her: “You can do this. You need the distraction. It’s for the best.”

 Cassidy Jo reluctantly walks through the doors, which slam behind her like she’s entered a prison cell. The other kids are moving around her, barely offering a glance, and she breathes a sigh of relief when the bell rings for class to begin. She hurries to Ms. Pollidor’s classroom and feels a pain in her stomach when her eyes meet those of Caleb. He’s got this little grin on his face, and as she passes, he whispers: “Welcome back, cry-baby.” Cassidy Jo turns, her face feeling hot, and lifts her foot.

 She slams down on his toe and screams: “Leave me alone, you big, fat, jerk-face!”

 Before she can sit down, Ms. Pollidor sends her to the office.

 Mr. Hagman. Again. She folds her arms across her chest, puts on a pout, and marches out of the classroom.

 ###

 They say never to go back to the scene of the crime. Gladys, who’s the first one let out of jail the next morning, has probably heard this cliché more than most because she’s been alive for so long.

 She played the little-old-lady part in jail, so they let her out early. And she went back to the scene of the crime.

 Gladys takes another taxi to the tow lot, and as luck would have it, there’s a line of garbage bags out front. She hears a garbage truck in the distance and knows she doesn’t have a lot of time. She thinks maybe the dog’s still in the car, but she takes a chance that it’s already been cleaned out. So she starts tearing and sifting.

 The garbage truck is right up the street when she reaches into a bag of garbage and feels it. The stuffed dog.

 She pulls it out as if she’s found gold in a pile of horse poop.

 ###

 Mr. Hagman closes the door behind Cassidy Jo and breaks out in an evil smile.

 “Well, well, well,” he says, standing and looking down at her. “Here we are again.” The smile fades. He leans over, looking into her eyes menacingly. “Let’s talk turkey,” he says.

 “T-t-turkey?” she says, the words dripping out of her in a hoarse whisper.

 “It means: Time to make a deal.” He claps his hands together, so loud that it makes Cassidy Jo wince. “So,” he says. “You’re in quite a bit of trouble. Safe to say?” He doesn’t wait for an answer. “You’re in the kind of trouble that could lead to you getting kicked out of school. Your mother’s going to be very disappointed. It’s very possible she’ll stop loving you. You wouldn’t like that, would you?”

 Cassidy Jo is staring down at the floor, trying to fight away the tears. She shakes her head from side to side.

 “OK, then,” Mr. Hagman says, sitting atop his desk and folding his arms. “So. What, then, can we do to make this go away?” He waits for an answer. Cassidy Jo is looking at him now, but she doesn’t know what to say to him. “Well,” Mr. Hagman says, holding a finger against his chin as if he’s got an idea. “Let’s think. Maybe there’s something …” His voice trails off and he stands and starts pacing. “Hmmm,” he says. She knows where he’s going. She’s 8 years old; she’s not stupid. As if the idea has suddenly struck him, Mr. Hagman turns toward her and snaps his fingers. “The dog,” he says. “The little stuffed dog.” He takes a few steps toward her and leans forward. His mouth is closed, his lips pursed. He forces a small smile, although he doesn’t look happy.

 “Bring me the dog,” he says. “Bring me the stuffed dog, and all this trouble will go away.”

 Cassidy Jo’s head drops again. A tear falls to the floor.

 “I don’t have him,” she whispers.

 “Excuse me?” He groans. “Young lady,” he says. “Please, look at me.”

 She raises her head, and through her tears, she shouts: “Pup-Pup’s gone!”

 ###

 Gladys takes the taxi back to the trailer park, the stuffed dog tucked under her shirt. It smells like banana peels and stale fish, and its fur is matted, but she knows how to bring it back to life.

 She steals a glance toward Cassidy Jo’s trailer as she scurries past. There’s no movement in there. She knows she doesn’t have much time.

 Gladys scurries into her trailer, runs a bath and logs on to the internet. She opens windows for all the re-sale websites: Craigslist, e-bay, sellanything.com. She fills the bath with dish soap and holds out the matted dog. She can’t see the attraction. It’s an ugly little creature, with beady eyes and nappy fur. She can’t imagine why anyone would pay five cents for such a thing, much less hundreds of thousands of dollars.

 She drops the dog into the bathtub and watches its eyes expand as it falls back into the water. She leaves it to soak and gets back on the computer. She types in “stuffed dog,” but the only thing that appears is a bean-bag toy that sells for $11.99. She grunts and keeps trying. “Rare stuffed animal.” “Pup-Pup.” “Ugly dog.” None of it pops up.

 Then she remembers the news story. She types in KROW-TV.com and finds the report. She gets the information she needs, does a Google search, and, sure enough, the reporter was right. There’s a website where investors are putting up bids. “I’d pay half a mill,” one investor writes. “Worth more than that,” writes another. Gladys squeals with joy and claps her hands together rapidly. She feels overcome with emotion.

 She sets the computer back on the table and hurries to the bathroom. The dog is now floating on the water, soaked and clean. She starts the drain and picks him up.

 That’s when there’s a knock at the door.

 “Uh-oh,” she says. She holds the dog against her chest. She looks around the room.

 “Open up!” a voice shouts. “Police! We’ve got a search warrant!”

 *Search warrant?!?!*

 She looks toward the closed window, then back at the dog, and the knocking continues. A breath of air escapes. She can hear them trying to jar the door open. She goes to the window, opens it, but realizes it’s not wide enough for her to escape. The sound of the front door breaking open startles her into action, and she tosses Pup-Pup out the window. She’ll come back for him later.

 She turns to the bathroom door and calls out: “I’m almost done in here. Just running a bath!”

 But the police don’t wait. They kick in the door, start searching the trailer, and put her in handcuffs.

 ###

 Mr. Hagman sends her home. Cassidy Jo is on something called *indefinite suspension.* He called her mother, but he didn’t let Cassidy Jo talk to her.

 Cassidy Jo’s mother shows up at school to pick her up and is fuming. Cassidy Jo gets in the car and tries to explain, but her mother cuts her off.

 “Cassidy Josephine, don’t start,” her mother says. “Just don’t start.”

 Cassidy Jo sits in the back seat and doesn’t know what to do with her hands. She doesn’t just want Pup-Pup; she *needs* him.

 “Well, here we are again,” her mother says, looking into the rearview mirror with steely eyes. “Let’s get this out of the way. This behavior, it has to stop. It *has* to, Cass.”

 “But I-“

 “Don’t *but* me, Cass. You’ve done enough talking this week. I feel bad you lost your stuffed animal, but, c’mon. That’s no reason for you to keep acting up at school.” She slows to a red light and turns around, facing Cassidy Jo. “He’s gone, Cass,” she says. “I’m sorry, but that’s the truth. Your dog is gone.” The light turns green. While watching traffic as she lets off the brake, Cassidy Jo’s mother says: “I know you’re sad. You’ve got reason to be sad. You loved that dog. But he’s gone. You need to accept that.”

 Cassidy Jo silently weeps into her hands.

 Her mother glances at her in the rearview mirror, sighs and continues in a softer voice. “It’s hard,” she says. “I know that. I felt the same way. When your father left.”

 Cassidy Jo looks up from her hands. She watches her mother’s eyes through the rearview mirror.

 “Every day for a year, maybe two,” Mrs. Decker says, “I stared at the front door, waiting for him to come back. I sat by the phone, waiting for him to call. I woke up every morning, thinking he’d be there, but he wasn’t. I’d lost a piece of me, and all I wanted was to get it back. To be whole again. Without him, I didn’t feel whole. I felt like I couldn’t breathe. All I wanted was for him to walk through that door so I could breathe again.” Cassidy Jo can see a tear crawling down her cheek. “I just wanted to breathe,” she says.

 Cassidy Jo looks down at her hands. She sniffs.

 “You never talked about him,” she says softly.

 “I know,” her mother says. “That doesn’t mean I ever stopped loving him. I didn’t. It just means I had to figure out a way to move on without him. And, for me, that meant coming to terms with the fact that he wasn’t coming back.” She pulls the car into a parking lot, stops the engine, and turns to look at Cassidy Jo in the backseat. “You have to figure out a way to move on without Pup-Pup,” she says.

 Cassidy Jo nods once, as if to tell her mother that she can. But the truth is, there’s no way she’ll ever be able to move on.

 ###

 When they get back to the trailer park, Cassidy Jo runs to the bedroom and slams the door behind her. She falls onto the bed in tears. She lies like that, face-down in the pillow, for what seems like hours. She hears her mother moving around in the kitchen but doesn’t want to go out and talk to her.

 She rolls onto her back and prays that her mother will go back to work. She wants to be alone. She wants to cry and throw things and yell words that would get her grounded. She waits, then goes to the door, creaking it open. Her mother is wiping down the kitchen counter. She looks up at Cassidy Jo.

 “When are you going back to work?” Cassidy Jo asks softly.

 Her mother sets down the rag. She looks at the floor. She takes in a deep breath. She looks at Cassidy Jo. “I’m not,” she says. “I got fired again.” She sighs again. “For having to leave to pick you up.”

 Cassidy Jo closes the door quietly and goes back to the bed. Her hurt and anger build into rage. She wants to scream. She puts a pillow over her face. She feels her whole body tense up. She has no more tears to cry, so she just whimpers.

 She’s like that for about another hour before the bedroom door opens a crack, her mother’s face appears, and Mrs. Decker says: “I’m going out, hon. Just for a little. Will you be okay?”

 Holding the pillow in her hand, her face red from anger, Cassidy Jo nods.

 And then her mother shuts the door.

 ###

 There’s another knock on the door what seems like five seconds later. It’s her mother again, and Cassidy Jo realizes that she’s fallen asleep. Her mother opens the door just wide enough to slip into the bedroom, and she turns on the light. Cassidy Jo sits up and wipes her eyes. Mrs. Decker is holding something behind her back, and Cassidy Jo feels her heart beating faster with anticipation. *Pup-Pup? Is he back? Did she FIND HIM?!?!*

 Mrs. Decker smiles and says: “I’ve got a surprise for you.” Cassidy Jo feels like her heart is going to burst out of her chest. She sees her arms moving, and then she sees brown fur. Her mother’s grin widens. She pulls a stuffed dog from behind her back.

 It’s not Pup-Pup.

 “Isn’t he cute?” she says. She wiggles the dog back and forth. It’s smaller than Pup-Pup. It has sparkly eyes and a longer tail. It looks nothing like Pup-Pup. The fur is brown, and it’s a dog. Otherwise, it might as well be a dishtowel.

 It’s not Pup-Pup.

 Cassidy Jo’s mother goes to her. She holds out the stuffed dog. Cassidy Jo frowns and rolls away from her. Mrs. Decker groans and moves closer, still holding out the dog.

 “I know it’s not Pup-Pup,” she says. “But it’s the closest I could find.”

 “It’s not Pup-Pup,” Cassidy Jo says. Her mother sits on the bed and places a hand on Cassidy Jo’s shoulder. Cassidy Jo pushes it away and turns to her mother. “It’s *not* Pup-Pup!” she shouts. Then she pushes off the bed, moves past her mother, and runs out of the room. She’s in her bare feet, but she keeps on running, out the door of trailer and out onto the pavement. She turns and heads for the woods, the tears coming again. She wishes she could find someone who would understand. Her mother certainly doesn’t. *You have to figure out a way to move on without Pup-Pup*. That’s the most stupid thing Cassidy Jo has ever heard. Almost as stupid as trying to replace Pup-Pup with some toy she found on a shelf. Pup-Pup is the only one who *understands* Cassidy Jo. He’s the only one who can comfort her.

 She runs into the woods with her hand over her mouth. She wants to shout. She wants to throw up. She wants to release something inside of her that can’t get out. She imagines that anyone who’s ever lost something would understand.

 She runs and runs, jumping over fallen trees and small puddles. She feels the pain of rocks and sharp shards of wood on her feet but doesn’t stop. She keeps running, heaving in breaths of air, until finally her bare foot snags on a stick and she falls, face-first, into the dirt with a thud.

 She lies there, breathing heavily, with snot and tears falling out of her in clumps. She forces herself to get onto all fours and continues on, crawling, until she can hardly breathe. She falls to the dirt, rolls over and looks up at the trees. Shards of sunlight spill through the branches. It’s what she thinks heaven might be like. If there is a heaven. If there’s no God, there’s probably no heaven. And if God never answers her prayers, that must mean there’s no God.

 She closes her eyes. She wishes she could keep on running. She wishes she could run to another city, another country, another planet. She opens her eyes, looking up at the rays of sunlight. Her chest is heaving. The breaths come more easily. She’s not crying anymore, but she can feel streaks of dirt on her face where the tears were.

 She lies like that for a few minutes, feeling the forest around her, seeing nothing but branches and rays of light, when she hears something. A twig breaks. She feels movement around her. Her breathing speeds up again. She thinks about sitting up but realizes that, down here between all these twigs and leaves, she might be better off staying still. She tries to pretend she doesn’t hear anything, but another twig breaks. Closer this time.

 Before she can close her eyes, something steps into her line of view and blocks out the light.

*Silhouette (n.): a dark image outlined against a lighter background.*

 Something touches her nose gently. Something soft and familiar. She blinks but can’t tell what it is. It smells like dish soap and the outdoors. She sits up and sees that a doe, the one with the shiny black eyes, is holding something in its mouth. She reaches out and pets the doe along his snout, then runs her hand down to the thing in its mouth.

 Pup-Pup.

 She can’t believe it. *Pup-Pup*! He’s mangled and smells funny, but it’s him. It’s *him*!

 She wraps both hands around Pup-Pup, and the doe releases its grip. Pup-Pup falls into Cassidy Jo’s arms. She’s never felt so whole.

 “Pup-Pup,” she whispers, rubbing her cheek against his matted fur. “Pup-Pup.” She looks into his small, black eyes. She rubs her fingers over his floppy ears. He looks like he’s aged 10 years, and he smells funny, but he’s still her Pup-Pup.

 “Pup-Pup,” she says.

 This time, the tears are tears of joy.

 ###

 Her mother is out in front of the trailer, looking around for Cassidy Jo, when she comes running around the corner screaming and shouting.

 “Pup-Pup!” she’s yelling, holding him out in her hands. “It’s him! It’s him! It’s him!”

 Cassidy Jo’s mother sees her and holds out her arms. She wraps Cassidy Jo in her arms and squeezes her, so tightly that she squeezes even more tears out of her. Cassidy Jo is holding Pup-Pup tightly, and Mrs. Decker is holding Cassidy Jo tightly, and together the three of them swing around in circles. The sun shines above them, unobstructed by trees.

 “Pup-Pup!” Cassidy Jo shouts.

 “Pup-Pup!” her mother shouts.

 “He came back!”

 Cassidy Jo’s mother stops turning and looks into her eyes. Cassidy Jo can’t remember seeing her mother’s eyes with this much sparkle. “He came back,” Mrs. Decker says softly. Then she kisses her on the forehead.

 AFTERWARD

 When you’re a parent, everything’s a lesson. It’s like they’ve got a big book somewhere, heavier than the dictionary, and it’s got all these lessons listed from A to Z.

 The one Mrs. Decker has tried to squeeze out of this situation can be filed under the letter S. As in: STICK IT OUT.

 While Cassidy Jo sees her mother getting fired as an opportunity to get out of this horrible town, Mrs. Decker says life doesn’t work that way.

 “You can keep running,” she tells Cassidy Jo on their way to school Monday morning, “but wherever you go, there you are.”

 Cassidy Jo squeezes Pup-Pup in the backseat and frowns. She feels like her mother stole that from the Big Book of Parenting too.

 “I’m nervous,” she says, sniffing Pup-Pup. He’s clean now. Mrs. Decker ran him through the laundry. He doesn’t quite smell the same, but he smells different. Cassidy Jo knows the only way he’ll ever smell the same is to spend time in her arms.

 “I know, hon,” her mother says. “But you’ve got to go back. You can’t run from school. And we can’t run from this town. We need to stick it out.”

 When they pull up to the school, Cassidy Jo tucks Pup-Pup into her backpack, rustles around, and takes out a paper bag with something inside. She gets out of the car, and her mother asks: “What’s in the bag?”

 Cassidy Jo shrugs. “Apology notes,” she says.

 Cassidy Jo’s mother musses her hair and kisses her cheek. “Good luck, hon,” she says. “Make sure to check in at the office first, just to make sure you’re not in trouble anymore.”

 Cassidy Jo smiles and looks down at the paper bag.

 “I don’t think I will be,” she says, stifling a smile.

 She watches her mother drive away, then Cassidy Jo goes into the school. She walks into the office and asks if Mr. Hagman is available. The receptionist looks up at her, frowns, then turns to find him. She comes back a few seconds later. “He’ll see you now,” she says.

 When Cassidy Jo enters the office, she’s holding out the paper bag.

 “Deal,” she says.

 Mr. Hagman looks at her, then at the bag. “Excuse me?” he says.

 “You wanted the dog, you get the dog.”

 Mr. Hagman smiles and picks up the bag. He looks inside. He reaches in and pulls out a brown, stuffed dog. He pulls it out of the bag, and his smile widens.

 “You’re a good girl, Cassidy Jo,” he says. He drops the bag and inspects the dog. “It’s in good shape,” he says.

 “I cleaned it,” she says. “Worth more money that way.”

 Mr. Hagman stares at the stuffed dog like it’s a winning lottery ticket.

 “Are we square?” Cassidy Jo says.

 “Square?”

 “Even,” she says.

 He chuckles and continues to gawk over the stuffed dog.

 “You’re off probation,” he says. “Well done.”

 She nods and leaves the office, leaving Mr. Hagman with the new stuffed dog that her mother bought her. Like he’d know the difference. All he knew was that she had a stuffed dog that was worth a lot of money. He didn’t know what the dog looked like.

 As she scurries away from his office, off toward Mrs. Pollidor’s classroom, she smiles and reaches into her backpack. She feels Pup-Pup in there, all soft and cuddly, and a warm feeling streams through her body.

 It’s the feeling of being *whole*.

 She zips up her backpack and hurries to class, with an extra little bounce in her step.

 When she returns to the classroom, Ms. Pollidor asks: “Welcome back, Cassidy Jo. Is everything okay?”

 It’s such a complicated question. *Everything*? Cassidy Jo thinks to herself that there’s no way *everything* can ever be okay. There’s still criminals and jails and missing fathers and mean principals. There’s still sickness and sadness and hopelessness. There are a lot of things that aren’t okay, and Cassidy Jo can’t help but to think that they’ll never be okay.

 But what she says is: “Yes.”

THE END

OLD:

 There’s a small window in the hallway that looks into Mr. Hagman’s office, and she steals a quick glance as she passes, her heart beating with fear.

 She’s catches a glimpse of him in there, away from his desk, leaning over to put something into a bag in the corner. She can’t be sure, but the thing looks familiar. It looks a lot like …

 Her heart starts beating faster. This time, with hope.

*Anticipation (n.): the act of looking forward.*

 She stops at the window and watches. He’s making sure the door is closed and looking over his shoulder. The kinds of things that robbers do. She realizes Mr. Hagman is a lot like those other jerks: the guys who showed up at her door, Caleb’s mother and boyfriend, the old neighbor lady and that weirdo with the mustache. Add Mr. Hagman to the list.

 But there’s no way she could have seen what she thought she saw. There’s no way he would have Pup-Pup. Is there?

 She puts her head down, turns the corner, and heads into the office. Mr. Hagman’s secretary calls for him, and Cassidy Jo can tell by the way he answers the phone that he’s startled. “Yes, um, send her back,” he says. He’s making noises like he’s moving around.

 By the time she knocks on his door and is told to enter, he’s sitting behind his desk. She can see that the bag is in the corner of the office behind him. She wants to – no, she *needs to* see what’s inside.

 “Well, well, well,” he says. “You again.”

 “I’m sorry,” she says, and before the words are finished coming out of her mouth, he’s writing some kind of note.

 “I understand you’re making more trouble in Ms. Pollidor’s class,” he says, scribbling away. “Well, don’t do it again.” He rips the paper from the pad and holds it out to her.

 “What’s this?” she asks.

 “A pass to get back in class,” he says. He seems distracted. She can tell he just wants her out of his office.

 “That’s it?”

 “Yes,” he says. “Like I said, don’t do it again. Like, stop. Whatever you were doing, whatever got you sent to the office, just stop doing it. Understand?”

 “Sort of.”

 “Okay,” he says, waving the piece of paper at her. “Now, get back to class.”

 She slowly reaches out to take the pass from him. She glances at the bag in the corner again, and a lump rises in her throat. Cassidy Jo places the pass in her pocket, stands, and turns toward the door. She feels this sense that the balloon of opportunity is running out of air. She looks up at the wall and sees another photograph of his family. *I’m willing to give you $100 for it*, he’d said of Pup-Pup. “It,” he had called him. One of many people who XXXXXXXXXXXX

OLD:

 “I’m speaking,” she says. “Please. Hear me out.” She stands and begins to pace in front of them. Cassidy Jo looks away from her and to the floor. “How about we do this?” she says. “Instead of writing notes and passing them in class, which is never a good idea, how about we actually talk to each other?” She stops, her shoes in Cassidy Jo’s line of sight. “Mr. Wollport, would you like to start?”

 “Ummmm.” Caleb pauses. Cassidy Jo can hear a slurping noise, like he’s got a finger in his nose.

 *Habit (n.): a settled or regular tendency or practice, especially one that is hard to give up.*

 “Please,” Ms. Pollidor says. “Continue.”

 “Um, I guess I just wanted to see if … ummmm.” He pauses again. “I kind of forgot her name.”

 Cassidy Jo groans. She’s looking at the ceiling now, rolling her eyes at the situation. What she doesn’t see is Caleb glance toward the back of the room. She doesn’t see his gaze fall on the desk. She doesn’t see his mind coming to realize that Pup-Pup is still in the desk.

 “Um, can I have a minute?” he says.

 “Come again?” says the teacher, another thing that old people say. It basically means: *What?* Adults tend to use more words than necessary most of the time.

 “I need a minute to collect my thoughts,” Caleb says. “Could you, like, give me a minute? Like, alone and stuff?”

 Cassidy Jo turns and looks at him. He’s got his head down now, although he sneaks a sideways peek at her.