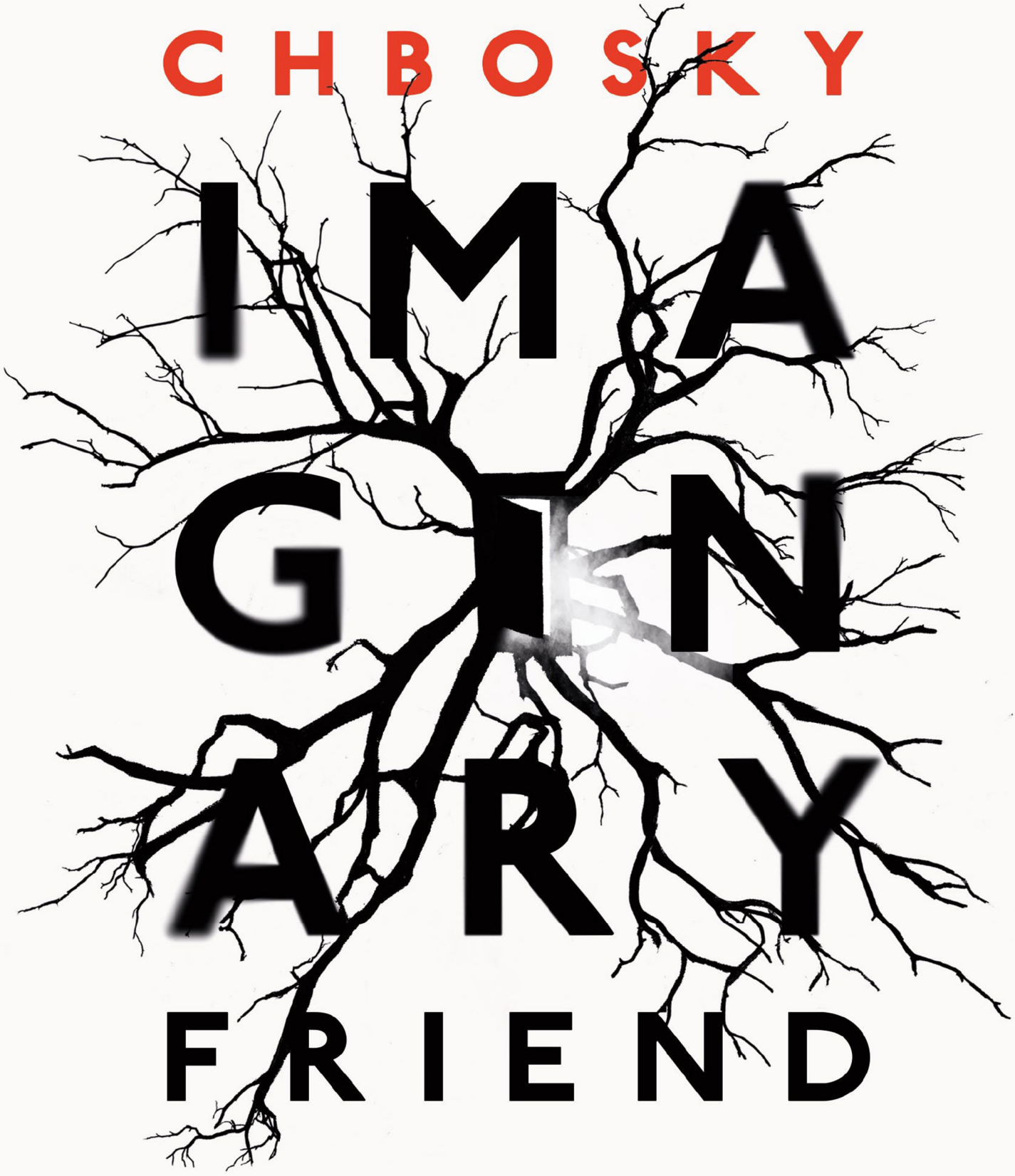
FROM THE AUTHOR OF
THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER

STEPHEN CHBOSKY



'ASTONISHING . . . GENIUS . . . A MASTERPIECE'
EMMA WATSON

Christopher could have helped
with the sheriff's investigation.

He knew how he found the skeleton.
He knew that the bones had been there for a long time.
He even thought he knew the name of the kid who died.
But he couldn't tell the grown ups that.

Because eventually, they would ask him
how he knew everything.
And he only had one truthful answer.

"Because my **imaginary friend** told me."

Kate Reese and her son are starting over in the small town of Mill Grove, Pennsylvania. Like every other time they've moved, she promises Christopher they are safe now.

But when Christopher follows a face he sees in the clouds into the heart of the Mission Street Woods, he disappears without a trace.

Fifty years ago, little David Olson went into those same woods, never to be seen again.

This time, Christopher is found. However, he is quite different from the boy who wandered into the woods.

And it's not just him. The whole town is changing – and no-one can explain exactly how or why.

All Christopher knows is that he has a calling: to go back to those woods, and make the treehouse he can see in his mind a reality. If he does that, a voice tells him, all will be revealed…

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"Sure, this unputdownable book is the scariest thing I've read in a long time. But it's also, like everything Chbosky does, imbued with heart and soul. You'll fall in love with these characters. That's why they stay with you, like a haunting."

R. J. PALACIO
Author of the #1 *New York Times* sensation *Wonder*

"*Imaginary Friend* is a simply extraordinary reading experience. Utterly unique. A tremendous read, every bit worth the wait."

BLAKE CROUCH
New York Times* bestselling author of *A Dark Matter

"An unputdownable, extraordinary book. The pages practically turn themselves."

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"*Imaginary Friend* has been a long time coming. And like a fine Bordeaux, it rewards that wait in countless ways. This is a fearsome, remarkably ambitious novel that breaks through the boundaries of the genre to become epic—in all the best senses of the word."

LINCOLN CHILD
#1 *New York Times* bestselling coauthor of *Verses for the Dead*

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IMAGINARY FRIEND

STEPHEN CHBOSKY



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For Liz
and mothers everywhere

50 years before . . .

Don't leave the street. tHey can't get you if you don't leave the street.

Little David Olson knew he was in trouble. The minute his mother got back with Dad, he was going to get it. His only hope was the pillow stuffed under his blanket, which made it look like he was still in bed. They did that on TV shows. But none of that mattered now. He had snuck out of his bedroom and climbed down the ivy and slipped and hurt his foot. But it wasn't too bad. Not like his older brother playing football. This wasn't too bad.

Little David Olson hobbled down Hays Road. The mist in his face. The fog settling in down the hill. He looked up at the moon. It was full. The second night it had been full in a row. A blue moon. That's what his big brother told him. Like the song that Mom and Dad danced to sometimes. Back when they were happy. Back before David made them afraid.

Blue Moon.

I saw you standing alone.

Little David Olson heard something in the bushes. For a second, he thought it might be another one of those dreams. But it wasn't. He knew it wasn't. He forced himself to stay awake. Even with his headaches. He had to get there tonight.

A car drove past, bathing the fog in headlight. Little David Olson hid behind a mailbox as rock 'n' roll poured from the old Ford Mustang. A couple of the teenagers laughed. A lot of kids were being drafted into the army, and drunk driving was on the rise. That's what his dad said anyway.

"David?" a voice whispered. Hisspered. Hisss.

Did someone say it? Or did he just hear it?

"Who's there?" David said.

Silence.

It must have been in his head. That was okay. At least it wasn't the hissing lady. At least he wasn't dreaming.

Or was he?

David looked down the hill at the street corner with the big streetlight on Monterey Drive. The teenagers passed it, taking all the sound with them. That's when David saw the shadow of a person. A figure stood in the middle of the pool of streetlight. Waiting and whistling. Whistling and waiting. A song that sounded a little like

Blue Moon.

The hairs on the back of David's neck stood up.

Don't go near that corner.

Stay away from that person.

Little David Olson cut through the yards instead.

He tiptoed over an old fence. *Don't let them hear you. Or see you. You're off the street. It's dangerous.* He looked up in a window where a babysitter was making out with her boyfriend while the baby cried. But it sounded like a cat. He was still sure he wasn't dreaming, but it was getting harder and harder to tell anymore. He climbed under the fence and got wet grass stains on his pajama bottoms. He knew he couldn't hide it from his mom. He would have to wash them himself. Like how he was starting to wet the bed again. He washed the sheets every morning. He couldn't let his mother know. She would ask questions. Questions he could not answer.

Not out loud.

He moved through the little woods behind the Maruca house. Past the swing set that Mr. Maruca had put up with his boys. After a hard day's work, there were always two Oreos and a glass of milk waiting. Little David Olson helped them once or twice. He loved those Oreos. Especially when they got a little soft and old.

"David?"

The whisper was louder now. He looked back. There was no one around. He peeked back past the houses to the streetlight. The shadow person was gone. The figure could be anywhere. It could be right behind him. *Oh, please don't let it be the hissing lady. Please don't let me be asleep.*

Crack.

The twig snapped behind him. Little David Olson forgot about his hurt

foot and ran. He cut through the Pruzans' lawn down onto Carmell Drive and turned left. He could hear dogs panting. Getting closer. But there were no dogs. It was just sounds. Like the dreams. Like the cat baby crying. They were running after him. So, he ran faster. His little booties hitting the wet pavement. Smack smack smack like a grandma's kiss.

When he finally got to the corner of Monterey Drive, he turned right. He ran in the middle of the street. Like a raft on a river. *Don't leave the street. They can't get you if you're on the street.* He could hear the noises on either side. Little hisses. And dogs panting. And licking. And baby cats. And those whispers.

"David? Get out of the street. You'll get hurt. Come to the lawn where it's safe."

The voice was the hissing lady. He knew it. She always had a nice voice at first. Like a substitute teacher trying too hard. But when you looked at her, she wasn't nice anymore. She turned to teeth and a hissing mouth. Worse than the wicked witch. Worse than anything. Four legs like a dog. Or a long neck like a giraffe. Hssss.

"David? Your mother hurt her feet. They're all cut up. Come and help me."

The hissing lady was using his mom's voice now. No fair. But she did that. She could even look like her. The first time, it had worked. He went over to her on the lawn. And she grabbed him. He didn't sleep for two days after that. When she took him to the house with the basement. And that oven.

"Help your mother, you little shit."

His grandma's voice now. But not his grandma. David could feel the hissing lady's white teeth. *Don't look at them. Just keep looking ahead. Keep running. Get to the cul-de-sac. You can make her go away forever. Get to the last streetlight.*

"Hsssssss."

David Olson looked ahead to the last streetlight in the cul-de-sac. And then, he stopped.

The shadow person was back.

The figure stood in the middle of the pool of streetlight. Waiting and whistling. Whistling and waiting. Dream or no dream, this was bad. But David could not stop now. It was all up to him. He was going to have to walk past the streetlight person to get to the meeting place.

"Hiiiiiissssssssss."

The hissing lady was closer. Behind him. David Olson suddenly felt cold. His pajamas damp. Even with the overcoat. Just keep walking. That's all he could

do. Be brave like his big brother. Be brave like the teenagers being drafted. Be brave and keep walking. One little step. Two little steps.

"Hello?" said Little David Olson.

The figure said nothing. The figure did not move. Just breathed in and out, its breath making

Clouds.

"Hello? Who are you?" David asked.

Silence. The world holding its breath. Little David Olson put a little toe into the pool of light. The figure stirred.

"I'm sorry, but I need to pass. Is that okay?"

Again there was silence. David inched his toe into the light. The figure began to turn. David thought about going back home, but he had to finish. It was the only way to stop her. He put his whole foot into the light. The figure turned again. A statue waking up. His whole leg. Another turn. Finally, David couldn't take it, and he entered the light. The figure ran at him. Moaning. Its arm reaching out. David ran through the circle. The figure behind him. Licking. Screaming. David felt its long nails reaching, and just as it was going to grab his hair, David slid on the hard pavement like in baseball. He tore up his knee, but it didn't matter. He was out of the light. The figure stopped moving. David was at the end of the street. The cul-de-sac with the log cabin and the newlywed couple.

Little David Olson looked off the road. The night was silent. Some crickets. A little bit of fog that lit the path to the trees. David was terrified, but he couldn't stop. It was all up to him. He had to finish or the hissing lady would get out. And his big brother would be the first to die.

Little David Olson left the street and walked.

Past the fence.

Through the field.

And into the Mission Street Woods.

Part I

Today

CHAPTER 1

Am I dreaming?

That's what the little boy thought when the old Ford station wagon hit a speed bump and knocked him awake. He had that feeling of being cozy in bed, but suddenly needing to go to the bathroom. His eyes squinted in the sun, and he looked out over the Ohio Turnpike. The steam from the August heat came off it like waves at the pool that Mom took him to after saving up by skipping lunches for a while. "I lost three pounds," she said and winked. That was one of the good days.

He rubbed his tired eyes and sat up in the passenger seat. He loved riding in the front seat when his mom drove. He felt like he belonged to a club. A special club with him and this cool skinny lady. He looked over at her, framed by the morning sun. Her skin was sticking to the hot vinyl seat. Her shoulders red around her halter top. Her skin pale just under the cutoffs. She had her cigarette in one hand, and she looked glamorous. Like the old movie stars in their Friday Night Movies together. He loved how the ends of her cigarettes had red lipstick. The teachers back in Denver said cigarettes were bad for you. When he told his mom that, she joked that teachers were bad for you and kept on smoking.

"Actually, teachers are important, so forget I ever said that," she said.

"Okay," he said.

He watched her stub out her cigarette and light another instantly. She only did that when she was worried. She was always worried when they moved. Maybe it would be different this time. That's what she always said since Dad died. This time it will be different. Even though it never was.

And this time, they were running.

She took a drag, and the smoke curled up past the beads of August sweat on her upper lip. She peered out over the steering wheel, deep in thought. It took her a full minute to realize he was awake. And then, she smiled.

"Isn't this a great morning?" she whispered.

The boy didn't care about mornings at all. But his mom did. So he did.

"Yeah, Mom. It sure is."

He always called her Mom now. She told him to stop calling him Mommy three years earlier. She said it made him small, and she never wanted her son to be small. Sometimes, she told him to show her his muscles. And he would take his skinny little arms and strain to make his biceps be anything other than flat. Strong like his dad in that Christmas picture. The one picture he had.

"You hungry, buddy?" she asked.

The boy nodded.

"There's a rest stop right up the turnpike over the state line. I'm sure there's a diner there."

"Will they have chocolate chip pancakes?"

The boy remembered the chocolate chip pancakes back in Portland. That was two years ago. There was a diner under their apartment in the city. And the cook always gave them chocolate chip pancakes. There had been Denver and Michigan since. But he never forgot those pancakes or the nice man who made them. He didn't know men other than his dad could be nice until him.

"If they don't, we'll get some M&M's and throw them in the middle of the stack. Okay?"

The little boy was worried now. He had never heard her say that. Not even when they moved. She always felt guilty when they moved. But even on her guiltiest day, she told him that chocolate was not a breakfast food. Even when she had her chocolate SlimFast shakes for breakfast, she told him that. And no, those shakes do not count as chocolate. He had asked her that already.

"Okay," he said and smiled, hoping this wasn't a one-time thing.

He looked back at the turnpike. The traffic slowed as they saw an ambulance and a station wagon. The emergency men wrapped a man's bloody head with gauze. He looked like he cut his forehead and might be missing some teeth. When they drove a little farther, they could see the deer on the station wagon's hood. The antler was still stuck in the windshield. The eyes of the deer were open. And it struggled and twitched like it didn't know it was dying.

"Don't look at it," his mom said.

"Sorry," he replied and looked away.

She didn't like him to see bad things. He had seen them too much in his life. Especially since his dad died. So, he looked away and studied her hair under her scarf. The one she called a bandanna, but the little boy liked to think of it as a scarf like the ones in the old movies they watched on Movie Fridays. He looked at her hair and his own brown hair like his dad's in the one picture he had from Christmas. He didn't remember much about his father. Not even his voice. Just the smell of tobacco on his shirt and the smell of Noxzema shaving cream. That was it. He didn't know anything about his father other than he must have been a great man because that's what all fathers were. Great men.

"Mom?" the little boy asked. "Are you okay?"

She put on her best smile. But her face was afraid. Like it was eight hours ago when she woke him up in the middle of the night and told him to pack his things.

"Hurry," she whispered.

The little boy did as he was told. He threw everything he had into his sleeping bag. When he tiptoed into the living room, he saw Jerry passed out on the sofa. Jerry was rubbing his eyes with his fingers. The ones with the tattoos. For a moment, Jerry almost woke up. But he didn't. And while Jerry was passed out, they got in the car. With the money in the glove compartment that Jerry didn't know about. Jerry had taken everything else. In the quiet of night, they drove away. For the first hour, she looked at the rearview mirror more than she did the road.

"Mom? Will he find us?" the little boy asked.

"No," she said and lit another cigarette.

The little boy looked up at his mom. And in the morning light, he finally saw that her red cheek was not from makeup. And this feeling came over him. He said it to himself.

You cannot fail.

It was his promise. He looked at his mother and thought, *I will protect you*. Not like when he was really little and couldn't do anything. He was bigger now. And his arms wouldn't always be flat and skinny. He would do push-ups. He would be bigger for her. He would protect her. For his dad.

You cannot fail.

You must protect your mother.

You are the man of the house.

He looked out the window and saw an old billboard shaped like a keystone. The weathered sign said YOU'VE GOT A FRIEND IN PENNSYLVANIA. And maybe his mother was right. Maybe it would be different this time. It was their third state in two years. Maybe this time, it would work out. Either way, he knew he could never let her down.

Christopher was seven and a half years old.

CHAPTER 2

They had been in Pennsylvania for a week when it happened.

Christopher's mother said she chose the little town of Mill Grove because it was small and safe and had a great elementary school. But deep down, Christopher thought maybe she picked it because it seemed tucked away from the rest of the world. One highway in. One highway out. Surrounded by trees. They didn't know anyone there. And if no one knew them, Jerry couldn't find them.

Mill Grove was a great hiding place.

All she needed was a job. Every morning, Christopher watched his mom put on lipstick and comb her hair all nice. He watched her put on her smart-looking glasses and fret about the hole under the right armpit in her only interview blazer. The rip was in the fabric, not the seam. So, there was nothing to do except throw on a safety pin and pray.

After he ate his Froot Loops, she would take him over to the public library to pick out his book for the day while she looked over the want ads in the paper. The book of the day was his "fee" for eating Froot Loops. If he read a book to practice his words, he got them. If he didn't, he got Cream of Wheat (or worse). So, he made sure to read that book, boy.

Once Mom had written down a few promising leads, they would climb back in the car and drive around to different interviews. She told Christopher that she wanted him to come along so they could have an adventure. Just the two of them. She said the old Ford was a land shark, and they were looking for prey. The truth was that there was no money for a babysitter, but he didn't care because he was with his mom.

So, they went "land sharking," and as she drove, she would grill him on the state capitals. And math problems. And vocabulary.

"Mill Grove Elementary School is really nice. They have a computer lab and everything. You're going to love second grade."

No matter where they lived, Christopher's mother hunted for great public schools the way other moms hunted for bargains on soda (they called it "pop" here in Mill Grove for some reason). And this time, she said, he would have the best. The motel was near a great school district. She promised to drive him every day so he wouldn't be called a "motel kid" until she saved enough to get them an apartment. She said she wanted him to have the education she never got. And it was okay that he struggled. This was going to be the grade when he'd be better at math. This was the year that all of his hard work would pay off, and he would stop switching letters when he read. And he smiled and believed her because she believed in him.

Then, when she got to each interview, she would take her own private moment and say some words she read in her self-improvement books because she was trying to believe in herself, too.

"They want to love you."

"You decide this is your job. Not them."

When she was finally confident, they'd go into the building. Christopher would sit in the waiting rooms and read his book like she wanted, but the letters kept switching, and his mind would wander, and he would think about his old friends. He missed Michigan. If it weren't for Jerry, he would have loved to stay in Michigan forever. The kids were nice there. And everyone was poor, so nobody knew it. And his best friend Lenny "the Loon" Cordisco was funny and pulled down his pants all the time in front of the nuns in CCD. Christopher wondered what Lenny Cordisco was doing now. Probably getting yelled at by Sister Jacqueline again.

After each interview was over, Christopher's mother would come out with a shaken look on her face that acknowledged that it really was their decision to hire her. Not hers. But there was nothing to do but climb back in the car and try again. She said that the world can try to take anything from you.

But you have to give it your pride.

On the sixth day, his mother pulled into the middle of town in front of a parking meter and took out her trusty paper bag. The one that said OUT OF ORDER on it. She threw it on the meter and told Christopher that stealing was bad, but parking tickets were worse. She'd make it up to the world when she got back on her feet.

Normally, Christopher had to go into the waiting room to read his book. But on the sixth day, there was a sheriff and his deputy eating across the street in a diner. She called out to them and asked if they were going to be there for a while. They gave her a salute and said they'd keep an eye on her boy. So, as a reward for his reading, she let Christopher in the little park while she went into the old folks home to interview for a job. To Christopher's eyes, the name of the old folks home read like . . .

Sahdy Pnies

"Shady Pines," she corrected. "If you need anything, call out to the sheriff."

Christopher went to the swings. There was a little caterpillar on the seat. He knew Lenny Cordisco would have smushed it. But Christopher felt bad when people killed small things. So, he got a leaf and put the caterpillar under a tree where it would be cool and safe. Then, he got back on the swings and started to pull. He may not have been able to make a muscle. But boy could he jump.

As he began to swing, he looked up at the clouds. There were dozens of them. They all had different shapes. There was one that looked like a bear. And one that looked like a dog. He saw shapes of birds. And trees. But there was one cloud that was more beautiful than all the rest.

The one that looked like a face.

Not a man. Not a woman. Just a handsome pretty face made of clouds.

And it was smiling at him.

He let go of the swing and jumped.

Christopher pretended that he landed on the warning track. Top of the ninth. Two outs. A circus catch. Tigers win! But Christopher was near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, now. And it was time to switch teams so the kids would like him. Go Pirates!

After ten minutes of swinging, his mother came out. But this time, there was no shaken look. There was only a big smile.

"Did you get the job?" Christopher asked.

"We're having Chinese tonight."

After she thanked the sheriff for his help, and was warned about her OUT OF ORDER bag, she got her son back in the land shark and took him out for Movie Night. Friday was their night. She wouldn't miss it. Not for anything. And this was going to be the best one in a long time. No Jerry. Just their special club with only two members. Junk food. And old movies from the library.

So, they drove to the 7-Eleven to play her numbers like they did every Friday. After picking up some beer, they went back to the library to get Christopher his two practice books for the weekend and a couple of videos for their night. Why do people pay for things that are free? They went to China Gate like the sheriff said since cops know food better than anyone, and she gasped when she saw the prices, but tried her best to hide her expression from him. Then, she smiled. She said she had a little left on the Visa that Jerry didn't know about, and in a week, she'd have a paycheck. And as they drove back to the motel, with the smell of Egg Rolls and Orange Chicken and Christopher's favorite Lo Mein (Chinese Spaghetti you like! said the menu), they planned what they would do with the lottery money like they did every Friday before they lost.

Christopher said he would buy her a house. He even made blueprint plans with graph paper. Christopher had video games and a candy room. A basketball court and a petting zoo off the kitchen. All painstakingly planned. But the best room was his mom's. It was the biggest one in the house. It had a balcony with a diving board that went to her own private pool. And it had the biggest closet with the nicest clothes that weren't ripped under the arm.

"What would you do with the money, Mom?" he asked.

"I'd get you a tutor and all the books in the world."

"Mine is better," he said.

When they got home, the mini fridge in the motel room wasn't working too well, so her beer was not getting cold in time for their feast. So, as she watched the lottery on the little television, Christopher went to the ice maker down the hall. And Christopher did the thing he learned in the old movies they watched. He got some ice and poured her beer over it to make it cold for her.

"Here, Mom. On the rocks."

He didn't know why she laughed so hard, but he was glad to see her so happy.

*

Christopher's mother sipped her beer on the rocks, and made yum yum sounds until her son beamed with pride for his clever—if somewhat misguided—solution to her warm beer problem. After her lottery numbers came up short . . . AGAIN . . . she tore up the lottery ticket and put a DVD in the old player she got at a garage sale back in Michigan. The first movie started. It was

an old musical she loved as a kid. One of her few good memories. Now one of his. When their feast was done, and the Von Trapps were safely in Switzerland, they opened their fortune cookies.

"What's yours say, Mom?" he asked.

"You will be fortunate in everything you put your hands on."

. . . *in bed*, she thought and did not say.

"What about yours, buddy?" she asked.

"Mine is blank."

She looked. His fortune was indeed blank except a series of numbers. He looked so disappointed. The cookies were bad enough. But no fortune?

"This is actually good luck," she said.

"Really?"

"No fortune is the best fortune. Now you get to make up your own. Wanna trade?"

He thought about it long and hard and said, "No."

With negotiations over, it was time for the second movie. Before the film had finished, and the good guys had won the war, Christopher had fallen asleep on her lap. She sat there for a long time, looking down at him sleeping. She thought back to the Friday Night Movies when they watched Dracula, and he pretended he wasn't scared even though he would only wear turtleneck sweaters for a month.

There is a moment childhood ends, she thought. And she wanted his moment to happen a long time from now. She wanted her son to be smart enough to get out of this nightmare, but not smart enough to know that he was actually inside one.

She picked up her sleeping boy and took him to his sleeping bag. She kissed his forehead and instinctively checked to make sure he didn't have a fever. Then, she went back to the kitchen. And when she finished her beer on the rocks, she made another just like it. Because she realized she was going to remember this night.

The night she stopped running.

It had been four years.

Four years since she found her husband dead in a bathtub with a lot of blood and no note. Four years of grief and rage and behavior that felt out of body. But enough was enough. Stop running. Your kid deserves better. So do you. No

more debt. No more bad men. Just the peace of a life well fought and won. A parent with a job is a hero to someone. Even if it was cleaning up after old people in a retirement home.

She took her beer on the rocks out on the fire escape. She felt the cool breeze. And she wished it weren't so late or she'd play her favorite Springsteen and pretend she was a hero.

As she finished her drink, she was content, looking up at the August night and the beautiful stars behind that big cloud.

That cloud that looked like a smiling face.

CHAPTER 3

The week after his mom got the job was the best Christopher had in a long time. Every morning, he looked out the window and saw the Laundromat across the street. And the telephone pole. And the streetlight with the little tree.

And the clouds.

They were always there. There was something comforting about them. Like the way that leather baseball gloves smell. Or the time Christopher's mom made Lipton soup instead of Campbell's because Christopher liked the little noodles better. The clouds made him feel safe. Whether they were buying school supplies or clothes, erasers or stationery. The clouds were there. And his mom was happy. And there was no school.

Until Monday.

The minute he woke up Monday, Christopher saw the cloud face was gone. He didn't know where it went, but he was sad. Because today was the day. The one day he really needed the clouds to comfort him.

The first day of school.

Christopher could never tell his mom the truth. She worked so hard to get him into these great schools that he felt guilty for even thinking it. But the truth was he hated school. He didn't mind not knowing anyone. He was used to that. But there was this other part that made him nervous about going to a new school. Simply put,

He was dumb.

He might have been a great kid, but he was a terrible student. He would have preferred it if she had yelled at him for being dumb like Lenny Cordisco's mom. But she didn't. Even when he brought home his failed math tests, she always said the same thing.

"Don't worry. Keep trying. You'll get it."

But he did worry. Because he didn't get it. And he knew he never would. Especially at a hard school like Mill Grove Elementary.

"Hey. We're going to be late for your first day. Finish your breakfast."

As Christopher finished his Froot Loops, he tried to practice reading the back of the box. Bad Cat was the cartoon on it. Bad Cat was the most funniest cartoon on Saturday mornings. Even in this cereal box version, he was hilarious. Bad Cat went up to a construction site and stole some hard hat man's sandwich. He ate it all up. And when they caught him, he said his famous line.

"Sorry. Were you going to finish that?"

But this morning, Christopher was too nervous to laugh at the cartoon. So, he immediately looked for other things to distract himself. His eyes found the carton of milk. There was a picture of a missing girl. She was smiling without her two front teeth. Her name was Emily Bertovich. That's what Christopher's mom told him. To him, the name looked like . . .

Eimyl Bretvocih.

"We're late. Let's go, buddy," Mom said.

Christopher drank the little bit of sugar milk left in the bowl for courage, then zipped up his red hoodie. As they drove to school, Christopher listened to his mother explain how "technically" they didn't exactly "live" in the school district, so she kind of "lied" that her work address was their residence.

"So, don't tell anyone we live in the motel, okay?"

"Okay," he said.

As the car rolled over the hills, Christopher looked at the different sections of town. The cars in the front lawn on blocks. Houses with chipped paint and missing shingles. The pickup truck with the sleepaway camper in the driveway for hunting trips. Kind of like Michigan. Then, they moved to the nicer section. Big stone houses. Manicured lawns. Shiny cars in the driveways. He would have to add that to the graph paper sketch of his mom's house.

As they drove, Christopher searched the sky for clouds. They were gone, but he did see something he liked. No matter the neighborhood, it was always close by. Big and beautiful with tons of trees. All green and pretty. For a moment, he thought he saw something run into it. Fast as lightning. He wasn't sure what. Maybe a deer.

"Mom, what is that?" he asked.

"The Mission Street Woods," she said.

When they arrived at school, Christopher's mother wanted to give him a sloppy kiss in front of all the new kids. But he needed his dignity, so she gave him a brown bag and fifty cents for his milk instead.

"Wait for me after school. No strangers. If you need me, call Shady Pines. The number is sewed into your clothes. I love you, honey."

"Mom?" He was scared.

"You can do this. You've done it before. Right?"

"Mommy—"

"You call me Mom. You're not small."

"But they're going to be smarter than me—"

"Grades and smarts are not the same thing. Keep trying. You'll get it."

He nodded and kissed her.

Christopher got out of the car and approached the school. Dozens of kids were already milling about, saying hello after their summer vacations. These twin brothers were pushing and shoving and laughing. The smaller one had a lazy-eye patch. A couple of girls itched at their new school clothes. One of them had pigtails. When the kids saw him, they stopped and looked at him like they always did in new places. He was the shiny new thing in the store window.

"Hey," he said. And they nodded the way the kids always did. Quiet and mistrustful at first. Like any animal pack.

Christopher quickly walked into his homeroom and took a seat near the back. He knew not to sit up front because it's a sign of weakness. His mother said, "Never mistake being nice for being weak." Christopher thought maybe that worked in the grown-up world.

It didn't in the kid world.

"That's my seat, Squid."

Christopher looked up and saw a second grader with a rich boy's sweater and haircut. He would soon know Brady Collins by name. But right now, he was just this kid who was mad that Christopher didn't know the rules.

"What?"

"You're in my seat, Squid."

"Oh. Okay. Sorry."

Christopher knew the drill. So, he just got up. Brady Collins said,

"Didn't even fight back. What a Squid."

"And look at his pants. They're so short you can see his socks," a girl said.

When the teacher took roll call later, Christopher would hear her name, Jenny Hertzog. But right now, she was just a skinny girl with an overbite and a Band-Aid on one knee, saying,

"Floods! Floods!"

Christopher's ears turned red. He quickly moved to the only open seat left. Right in front of the teacher's desk. He looked down at his pants, and he realized that he must have grown because they looked like Alfalfa in the Little Rascals. He tried to pull them down a little, but the denim wouldn't budge.

"Sorry I'm late, boys and girls," their homeroom teacher said as she quickly entered the room.

Ms. Lasko was older like a mom, but she dressed like she was still a teenager. She had a short skirt, Sound of Music blond hair, and the thickest eye makeup Christopher had ever seen outside of a circus. She quickly put her thermos down on the desk with a thump and wrote her name on the blackboard with perfect penmanship.

Ms. Lasko

"Hey," a voice whispered.

Christopher turned around and saw a fat kid. For some reason Christopher couldn't figure out, the kid was eating bacon.

"Yeah?" Christopher whispered back.

"Don't listen to Brady and Jenny. They're jerks. Okay?"

"Thanks," Christopher said.

"Want some bacon?"

"Maybe not during class."

"Suit yourself," the kid said and kept chomping.

As it was in the kid world, that is how Christopher replaced Lenny Cordisco with a new best friend. Edward Charles Anderson ended up being in Christopher's remedial reading class, lunch period, and gym. He ultimately proved to be as bad at reading as he was at kickball. Christopher called him Eddie. But everyone else in the school already knew him by his nickname.

"Special" Ed.

CHAPTER 4

For the next two weeks, Christopher and Special Ed were inseparable. They had lunch every day in the cafeteria (trade you my baloney). They learned remedial reading from the sweet old librarian, Mrs. Henderson, and her hand puppet, Dewey the Dolphin. They failed math tests together. They even went to the same CCD two nights a week.

Special Ed said that Catholic kids have to go to CCD for one reason . . . to get them ready for what Hell is really going to be like. Marc Pierce was Jewish and asked him what CCD stood for.

"Central City Dump" was Special Ed's hilarious reply.

Christopher didn't actually know what CCD stood for, but he had learned a long time ago never to complain about it. There was one time back in Michigan that Christopher hid in the bushes so he didn't have to go. His mother called his name over and over, but he didn't say anything. Then, finally, she got really mad and said,

"Christopher Michael Reese, you get out here . . . NOW."

She used his three names. And when she did that, there was no choice. You went. That's it. Game over. With a stone face, she told Christopher that his father was Catholic. And she promised herself that his son would be raised Catholic, too, so he would have some connection to his father besides one picture at Christmas.

Christopher wanted to die.

When they were driving home that night, Christopher thought of his dad reading the Bible. Christopher's dad probably didn't scramble his letters like Christopher did. He was probably much smarter because that's what dads were. Much smarter. So, Christopher promised that he would learn to read and know

what the Bible words meant, so he could have another way to be close to his dad besides the memory of the tobacco smell on his shirt.

*

As for picking the church, Christopher's mother always followed the Cold War strategy of her grandmother's favorite president, Ronald Reagan. Trust but verify. That was how she found St. Joseph's in Mill Grove. The priest, Father Tom, was fresh from seminary. No scandals. No former parishes. Father Tom checked out. He was a good man. And Christopher needed good men in his life.

But for her own faith, it didn't matter who the priest was. Or how beautiful the mass. Or the music. Her faith died in the bathtub next to her husband. Of course, when she looked at her son, she understood why people believed in God. But when she sat in church, she didn't hear His word. All she heard were whispers and gossip from all the good Catholic women who regarded her as that working-class mother (aka "trash").

Especially Mrs. Collins.

Everything about Kathleen Collins was perfect. From her tight brown hair to her elegant suit to her polite contempt for "those people" Jesus would have actually loved. The Collins family always sat up front. The Collins family was always first in line for Holy Communion. And if her husband's hair slipped out of place, her finger would be there instantly to put it right back like a raven's claw with a tasteful manicure.

As for their son Brady, the apple didn't fall too far from the tree.

If Christopher's mother only had to deal with Mrs. Collins on Sundays, it would have been tolerable. But her husband was a real estate developer who owned half of Mill Grove including Shady Pines, the retirement home where she worked. He put his wife in charge of the place. Mrs. Collins claimed that she took the position to "give back to the community." What it really meant was that it allowed Mrs. Collins to yell at the staff and the volunteers to make damn sure that her own elderly mother, who was suffering from Alzheimer's, got the finest care possible. The best room. The best food. The best of everything. Christopher's mother had traveled enough to know that Mill Grove was a very small pond. But to the Collins family, it may as well have been the Pacific Ocean.

"Mom, what are you thinking about?" Christopher whispered.

"Nothing, honey. Pay attention," she said.

Right before Father Tom turned the wine into blood with a few well-chosen words, he told the flock that Jesus loved everyone beginning with Adam and Eve. This prompted Special Ed to begin singing the jingle for Chili's restaurant.

"I want my baby back baby back baby back! Adam's baby back ribs!"

This was met with thunderous laughter, especially by Special Ed's parents.

"Good one, Eddie. My baby is so clever!" his mother said, her fleshy arms jiggling.

Father Tom and the CCD teacher Mrs. Radcliffe sighed, as if realizing that Special Ed's discipline was now entirely their job.

"First Holy Communion is going to be awesome," Special Ed said in the parking lot after church. "We get money. And we even get to drink wine."

"Really?" Christopher asked. "Is that true, Mom?"

"It's part of Communion. But it'll be grape juice," she said.

"That's okay. I can get wine at home. Bye Mrs. Reese," Special Ed said before leaving to hit up the bake sale table with his parents.

*

On the drive home, Christopher thought about mass. How Jesus loved everyone. Even mean people. Like Jenny Hertzog and Brady Collins. And Jerry. Christopher thought that was amazing because he could never love someone like Jerry. But he would try because that's what you were supposed to do.

When they got back to the motel, Christopher held the door open for his mother, and she smiled and called him a gentleman. And when he looked up before going inside, he saw it. Drifting. A shooting star looked like a twinkle in its eye.

The cloud face.

Normally, Christopher wouldn't have thought much about it. Clouds were normal. But every day when his mother drove him to school. Every time they drove past the Mission Street Woods. Every sunset when they drove to CCD. The cloud face was there.

And it was always the same face.

Sometimes, big. Sometimes, small. Once it was even hidden behind the other shapes in the clouds. A hammer or a dog or an inkblot like the ones the

man showed him after his father accidentally drowned in the bathtub. It was always there. Not a man. Not a woman. Just a handsome pretty face made of clouds.

And Christopher could have sworn it was watching him.

He would have told his mother that, but she had enough worries about him already. He could stand her thinking he was dumb. But he didn't dare risk her thinking that he was crazy.

Not like his dad.

CHAPTER 5

The rains began on Friday.

The thunderclap woke Christopher up from a nightmare. The dream was so scary that he instantly forgot it. But he didn't forget the feeling. Like someone was right behind his ear. Tickling it. He looked around the motel room. The neon from the Laundromat outside turned the front curtains into a blink.

But there was no one there.

He looked at the clock next to his mother sleeping in the other twin bed. It flashed 2:17 a.m. He tried to go back to sleep. But he couldn't for some reason. So, he just lay there with his eyes closed and his mind going.

And listened to the pouring rain.

There was so much rain, he couldn't figure out where it was coming from. He thought it would dry the oceans.

"Floods! Look at his pants! Floods! Floods!"

The words came to him, and Christopher's stomach tied itself into knots. He would be going to school in a few hours. School meant homeroom. And homeroom meant . . .

Jenny Hertzog and Brady Collins.

Every morning, they waited for him. Jenny to call him names. Brady to fight him. Christopher knew his mother didn't want him to fight anyone. She always said he wasn't going to become some violent roughneck like the men in her family. She wouldn't even let him have toy guns.

"Why not?" asked Special Ed during lunch.

"Because my mom is a packfist," Christopher said.

"Do you mean a pacifist?" Special Ed replied.

"Yeah. That's it. Pacifist. How did you know that word?"

"My dad hates them."

So, Christopher turned the other cheek, and Jenny Hertzog was right there waiting to make fun of him and the other kids in the dumb class. Don't say dumb, his mom would say. Don't you ever say dumb. But in the end, it didn't matter. He was in the dumb class, and Jenny was especially mean to the dumb students. She called Eddie "Special Ed." Matt got the name "Pirate Parrot" on account of his lazy-eye patch. His twin brother, Mike, was the best athlete in the school, but Jenny liked to call him "Two Moms Mike" or "Mike the Dyke" depending upon her mood since he and his brother Matt had two mothers and no dad. But Christopher was the new kid, so he got it the worst. Every home room started with Jenny Hertzog pointing at his short pants, and chanting,

"Floods! Floods!"

It got so bad that Christopher asked his mom for new pants, but when he saw in her face that she couldn't afford them, he pretended that he was kidding. Then, during lunch, he told the cafeteria lady that he didn't want milk, so he could save his fifty cents every day and buy pants on his own. Christopher had already saved up $3.50.

He just wasn't sure how much pants cost.

He went to ask Ms. Lasko, but her eyes were a little bloodshot and her breath smelled like Jerry's after a night at the bar. So, he waited until the end of the day, and went up to sweet old Mrs. Henderson.

Mrs. Henderson was mouse-quiet. Even for a librarian. She was married to the science teacher, Mr. Henderson. His first name was Henry. Christopher thought it was so weird for teachers to have first names, but he went with it. Henry Henderson.

So many e's.

When Christopher asked Mrs. Henderson how much pants cost, she said they could use the computer to look it up. Christopher's mom didn't have her own computer, so this was a real treat. They went online and searched the word "pants." They looked at all these stores. And he saw that things were a lot of money. $18.15 for pants at JCPenney.

"So, how many fifty cents is that?" he asked Mrs. Henderson.

"I don't know. How many?" she asked.

Christopher was almost as bad at math as he was at reading. But like a good teacher, instead of giving him the answer, Mrs. Henderson gave him a pencil and a piece of paper and told him to figure it out. She'd be back in a bit to check

on him. So, he sat there, adding up 50 cents at a time. Two days is 100 cents. That's a dollar. Three days is 150 cents. That's a dollar and fifty cents. With the seven dollars in his piggy bank, that meant he could . . .

hi

Christopher looked at the computer. It made a little sound. And there was a little box in the left-hand corner. It said INTSATN MSESGAGE. But Christopher knew that meant instant message. Someone was writing to him.

hi

Christopher turned to look for Mrs. Henderson, but she was gone. He was all alone. He looked back at the screen. The cursor blinked and blinked. He knew he wasn't supposed to talk to strangers. But this wasn't talking exactly. So, he pecked with the pointer on his right hand. Peck peck.

"Hi," Christopher typed back.

who is this?

"Christopher."

hi, christopher. it's so nice to meet you. where are you right now?

"I ma in teh library."

you have trouble with letters, huh? which library?

"At scohol."

which school do you go to? don't tell me. mill grove elementary, right?

"How did yuo konw?"

lucky guess. are you liking school?

"It's oaky."

when are you leaving for the day?

Christopher stopped. Something felt wrong to him. He typed.

"Who is this?"

There was silence. The cursor blinked.

"Who are you?" Christopher typed again.

Silence again. Christopher watched the cursor blink and blink. The air was still and quiet. But he could feel something. A tightness in the air. Like staying under the covers too long.

"Hello?" Christopher asked the empty library.

Christopher looked around the stacks. He thought someone might be hiding. He started to get a panicked feeling. Like back in Michigan when Jerry would come home from the bar in a bad mood.

"Hello?" he called out again. "Who's there?"

He felt this prickle on the back of his neck. Like when his mom used to kiss him good night. A whisper without words. He heard the computer beep. He looked over. He saw the person's reply.

a friend

When Mrs. Henderson came back, the screen went blank. She looked at his math work and told him that he should ask Ms. Lasko for help. In the meantime, she gave him three books for the weekend to help with his reading. There was an old book with a lot of words. Then, there were two fun books. Bad Cat Eats the Letter Z and a Snoopy. Snoopy wasn't as good as Bad Cat. But Snoopy was still great. Especially with his cousin Spike from Needles. That word. Needles.

So many e's.

When the bell rang, Mrs. Henderson walked Christopher to the parking lot. Christopher waved goodbye as she and her husband got in their old minivan. Ms. Lasko got in her cherry-red sports car that must have cost a million fifty-cent milks. One by one, the teachers left. And the students. The twin brothers—"Pirate Parrot" and "Two Moms Mike"—threw their little plastic football as they got on the school bus. Special Ed blew a raspberry from the bus, which made Christopher smile. Then, the last buses left. And when everyone was gone, Christopher looked around for the security guard.

But he wasn't there.

And Christopher was alone.

He sat down on a little bench and waited in the parking lot for his mother to come pick him up for Movie Friday. He tried to think about that instead of the bad feeling he was having. The feeling that something could get him. He was nervous waiting outside. And he just wanted his mom to get there early today.

Where was she?

The thunder clapped. Christopher looked at his math test. 4 out of 10. He had to work harder. He picked up the first book. A Child's Garden of Verses. It was old. Kind of dusty. Christopher could feel the spine creak a little. The

leather cover smelled a little like baseball gloves. There was a name in the front cover. Written in pencil.

D. Olson

Christopher turned the pages until he found a picture he liked. Then, he settled in and started reading. The words were scrambled.

Up itno the cehrry tere
Woh shuold cilmb but ltitle me?

Suddenly a shadow cut across the page. Christopher looked up. And saw it drifting overhead, blocking out the light.

It was the cloud face.

As big as the sky.

Christopher closed the book. The birds went silent. And the air got chilly. Even for September. He looked around to see if anyone was watching. But the security guard was still nowhere to be seen. So, Christopher turned back to the cloud face.

"Hello? Can you hear me?" he asked.

There was a low rumble in the distance. A thunderclap.

Christopher knew it could be a coincidence. He may have been a poor student, but he was a smart kid.

"If you can hear me, blink your left eye."

Slowly, the cloud blinked its left eye.

Christopher went quiet. Scared for a moment. He knew it wasn't right. It wasn't normal. But it was amazing. A plane flew overhead, shifting the cloud face and making it smile like the Cheshire Cat.

"Can you make it rain when I ask you to?"

Before he got out the last word, sheets of rain began to pour over the parking lot.

"And make it stop?"

The rain stopped. Christopher smiled. He thought it was funny. The cloud face must have understood he was laughing, because it started to rain. And then stop. And rain. And then stop. Christopher laughed a Bad Cat laugh.

"Stop. You'll ruin my school clothes!"

The rain stopped. But when Christopher looked up, the cloud started to drift away. Leaving him all alone again.

"Wait!" Christopher called out. "Come back!"

The cloud drifted over the hills. Christopher knew he shouldn't, but he couldn't help himself. He started walking after it.

"Wait! Where are you going?"

There was no sound. Just sheets of rain. But somehow, it didn't touch Christopher. He was protected by the eye of the storm. Even if his sneakers got soaked from the wet street. His red hoodie remained dry.

"Please, don't leave!" he yelled out.

But the cloud face kept drifting. Down the road. To the baseball field. The rain trickling on the clay-caked dirt. Dust like tears. Down the highway where cars honked and skidded in the rain. Into another neighborhood with streets and houses he didn't recognize. Hays Road. Casa. Monterey.

The cloud face drifted over a fence and above a grass field. Christopher finally stopped at a large metal sign on the fence near a streetlight. It took him a long time to sound out the words, but he finally figured out they said . . .

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"I can't follow you anymore. I'll get in trouble!" Christopher called out.

The cloud face hovered for a moment, then drifted away. Off the road. Behind the fence.

Christopher didn't know what to do. He looked around. He saw that no one was watching. He knew it was wrong. He knew he wasn't supposed to. But Christopher climbed under the construction site's fence. Snagging his little red hoodie. Once he untangled himself, he stood on the field, covered in wet grass and mud and rain. He looked up in awe.

The cloud was HUGE.

The smile was TEETH.

A happy SMILE.

Christopher smiled as the thunder clapped.

And he followed the cloud face

Off the cul-de-sac.

Down the path.

And into the Mission Street Woods.

CHAPTER 6

Christopher looked up. He couldn't see the cloud face anymore. That's how thick the trees were. He could still hear the rain, but not a drop fell to earth. The ground was still dry. Cracked like old skin. It felt like the trees were a big umbrella. An umbrella keeping something safe.

Christopher

Christopher turned around. The hairs on his neck stood up.

"Who's there?" he said.

There was silence. A quiet, shallow breathing. It might have been the wind. But something was here. Christopher could feel it. Like the way you know when someone is staring at you. The way he knew Jerry was a bad man long before his mother did.

He heard a footstep.

Christopher turned and saw that it was just a pinecone falling from a tree. Thump thump thump. It rolled down the ground and landed on

The trail.

The trail was covered by tree needles. And a few twisted branches. But it was unmistakable. A trail worn into the earth by years of bikes and ramps and races. By kids taking shortcuts to the other side of town. But now it looked abandoned. Like the construction fence outside had kept the kids away for months. Maybe even years. There wasn't a pair of fresh footsteps on it.

Except one.

He could see the imprint of shoes in the dirt. Christopher walked over and put his little sneakers next to it. They were about the same size.

It was a little kid's footprint.

That's when he heard a little kid crying.

Christopher looked down the trail, and he saw that the little-kid tracks went on for a long long time. The sound was coming from that direction. Far away. In the distance.

"Hello. Are you okay?" Christopher yelled out.

The crying got louder.

Christopher's chest tightened, and a voice inside told him to turn around, walk back to school, and wait for his mother. But the little kid was in trouble. So, he ignored his fear and followed the footprints. Slowly at first. Cautiously. He walked toward an old creek with a billy goat bridge. The footprints went through the water and came out on the other side. They were muddy now. The little kid must be close.

Help me.

Was that a voice? Was it the wind? Christopher picked up his pace. The little-kid tracks led him past an old hollow log that was carved out like a big canoe. Christopher looked ahead of him. He saw no one. The voice must be the wind. It didn't make sense to him. But there was no other explanation because he saw nothing.

Except the light.

The light was far down the trail. Bright and blue. The place where the crying was. Christopher began walking after it. To help the little kid. With every step, the light got bigger. And the space under the trees got wider. And pretty soon, there were no trees above his head.

Christopher had reached the clearing.

It stood in the center of the woods. A perfect circle of grassy fields. The trees were gone. And he could see the sky. But something was wrong. He went into the woods a few minutes ago when it was day. But it was nighttime now. The sky was black. And the stars were shooting a lot more than usual. Almost like fireworks. The moon was so big that it lit the clearing. A blue moon.

"Hello?" Christopher called out.

There was silence. No crying. No wind. No voice. Christopher looked around the clearing and saw nothing but the trail of footprints leading to

The tree.

It stood in the middle of the clearing. Crooked like an old man's arthritic hand. Reaching out of the earth like it was trying to pluck a bird

from the sky. Christopher couldn't help himself. He followed the footsteps. He walked up to the tree and touched it. But it didn't feel like bark. Or wood.

It felt like flesh.

Christopher jumped back. It hit him suddenly. This horrible feeling that this was wrong. Everything was wrong. He shouldn't be here. He looked down to find the trail again. He had to get out of there. His mom would be so worried. He found the trail. He saw the little-kid tracks. But there was something different about them now.

There were handprints next to them.

Like the little kid was walking on all fours.

Crack!

Christopher turned around. Something had stepped on a branch. He could hear creatures waking up all around him. Surrounding the clearing. Christopher didn't hesitate. He started to run. He following the trail out. He reached the edge of the clearing. Back into the woods. But the minute he stepped under the trees, he stopped.

The trail was gone.

He looked around for it, but the sky was getting darker. The clouds were covering the stars now. And the moon was shining through the cloud face like a pirate's good eye.

"Help me!" Christopher called out to the cloud face.

But the wind moved, and the cloud covered the moon like a blanket. Christopher couldn't see. *Oh, God. Please God*. Christopher fell to his knees and started digging through the pine needles. Frantic. Looking for the trail underneath. The needles sticking to his palms.

He could hear the little kid now.

But it wasn't crying.

It was giggling.

Christopher found the trail with his hands and began to crawl on all fours. *Get out of here! Faster!* That's all he thought. *Faster!*

The giggling was closer now.

Christopher started running. He moved so fast that he lost the trail. He ran in the darkness. Past the trees. His legs buckled when he stumbled into the creek. Past the billy goat bridge. He fell and ripped up his knee. But he didn't care. He

kept running. A full sprint. He saw the light up ahead. This was it. He knew it. The streetlight. He had somehow found the street again.

The giggling was right behind him.

Christopher ran faster toward the street. Toward the light. He ran under the cover of the last tree. And he stopped when he realized he wasn't in the street.

He was back in the clearing.

The light was not the streetlight.

It was the moon.

Christopher looked around and could feel things staring at him. Creatures and animals. Their eyes glowing. Surrounding the clearing. The giggling was closer. Louder. Christopher was surrounded. He had to get out of here. Find a way out. Find any way out.

He ran to the tree.

He began to climb. The tree felt like flesh under his hands. Like climbing arms instead of branches. But he ignored the feeling. He needed to get higher to see a way out. When he reached halfway up the tree, the clouds parted. The moon made the clearing glow.

And Christopher saw it.

On the other side of the clearing. Hidden behind the leaves and bushes. It looked like a cave mouth. But it wasn't a cave. It was a tunnel. Man-made. Wood-framed. With old train tracks in the ground running through it. Christopher realized what that meant. Train tracks led to stations, which led to towns.

He could get out!

He climbed down the arms of the tree. He reached the ground. He felt a presence in the woods. Eyes on him. Waiting for him to move.

Christopher ran.

All of his might. All of his speed. He felt creatures behind him. But he couldn't see them. He reached the mouth and looked into the tunnel. The train tracks went through it like a rusty spine. He saw moonlight on the other side. An escape!

Christopher ran into the tunnel. The wooden frames held up the walls and ceiling like a whale's rib cage. But the wood was old. Dilapidated and rotting. And the tunnel wasn't wide enough for a train to pass through it. What was this place? A covered bridge? Sewer? Cave?

A mine.

The word hit him like water. A Pennsylvania coal mine. He saw a movie about them in class. Miners using handcarts and rail track to bring out earth to burn. He ran deeper. Racing to the moonlight on the other side. He looked down at the tracks to get better footing. That's when he saw the little-kid footprints were back. And the giggling was back. Right behind him.

The moonlight faded ahead as the clouds played hide-and-seek. The whole world went black. He groped into the darkness. Trying to find the walls to guide his way out. His feet scraped the tracks as he reached out like a blind man. And he finally found something. He finally touched something in the dark.

It was a little kid's hand.

Christopher

was

not

seen

or

heard

from

for

six

days.

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