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**December 24th**

**Christmas Eve**

# 1

**TEMPORARY OFFICE OF PROJECT EDEN'S PRINCIPAL DIRECTOR  
NB219, LAS CRUCES, NEW MEXICO  
8:53 PM MOUNTAIN STANDARD TIME (MST)**

PEREZ HIT PLAY.

It was the fourth time he'd watched the video. He wasn't one hundred percent happy with the piece, but changing it at this point would mean an unnecessary delay of at least a week.

"Fine," he said to Claudia, his assistant. "Approved."

"And the proposed date?"

It was three days away.

"Also approved."

"I'll let the communications team know," she said. "Do you want this on automatic or would you like to activate?"

He gave it only a second's thought. "When the time comes, we'll do it from here."

"Very good, sir."

## 2

**PCN BROADCAST  
11:13 PM EASTERN STANDARD TIME (EST)**

“FIREFIGHTERS BELIEVE THE blaze started in a grocery store on 22<sup>nd</sup> Avenue before it quickly overtook the surrounding buildings,” Candice Mandel said.

She was reporting from St. Petersburg, Florida. The camera revealed flames rising from nearly every building along the avenue. Firefighters ran up and down the street, pulling equipment from trucks and spraying water on the flames, but it was clear their efforts would not be enough.

“One official we were able to speak with said that the rapid spread of the fire indicated it had been set intentionally.” The camera panned to the left until Mandel was in the picture. With her free hand, she adjusted the surgical mask covering her mouth and nose before adding, “A mandatory evacuation of the residential area directly behind the fire has already begun. Unfortunately, the effort is hampered by residents’ fear of leaving their homes.”

The image of Mandel cut to prerecorded shots of the evacuation.

Police wearing gas masks normally used in riot situations were knocking on doors and moving people to buses parked along the street. Before they boarded, the evacuees were handed masks similar to the one Mandel was wearing. While most people seemed to be cooperating, a few could be seen struggling with the officers.

The picture cut to a shot of a front door as police knocked on it. It opened an inch, but no more.

“Sir, how many people are in the house with you?” one of the officers asked.

“Just me and my wife. Why?”

“You both need to come with us.”

“Are you kidding me? We’re not going anywhere,” the man said. “Not with that bug out there.”

“Sir, there’s a fire on 22<sup>nd</sup> Avenue that’s threatening to spread this way. We need to

evacuate the entire neighborhood.”

“Sorry, buddy. We ain’t leaving!” The man started to close the door, but the officer jammed a foot across the threshold.

The image cut back to Mandel standing in front of the fire. “That couple was eventually escorted to one of the buses, but the man wasn’t the only one to express that kind of sentiment.” She paused. “Choosing between running from a fire or exposing themselves to the Sage Flu virus now spreading around the world is not what these people thought they’d be doing on Christmas Eve. Back to you in New York, Henry.”

Mandel was replaced on screen by PCN anchor Henry Nash. “There have been reports of looting and acts of destruction throughout the country, but so far these have been isolated events that authorities have been able to stop.” Nash fell silent for a second, his eyes becoming momentarily unfocused. When he looked back into the camera, he said, “We’re going to take you to the White House briefing room and correspondent Shelley Barnes. Shelley?”

The new image was a wide shot of an empty podium with the White House seal hanging on the wall behind it. In front of the podium were several rows of chairs, each filled with a member of the press. Most were wearing surgical-type masks, while a few went as far as donning full gas masks.

After a second’s delay, the unseen Shelley Barnes said, “Henry, we’ve been told that a White House spokesman will be delivering an important update on the situation at any moment. So far, we’ve only been hearing—” She paused as a door at the front of the room opened. “It looks like the brief is about to start.”

There was a rustle in the crowd as four men entered and spread out on either side of the podium. As soon as they were in position, the president himself walked out. He was followed by the majority and minority leaders of both the House and Senate, and the chief justice of the Supreme Court.

A murmur of surprise arose as all the reporters stood until the leader of the United States was behind the podium. The president’s normally vigorous and youthful face looked drawn and tired. He stared at the gathered press for a moment before he began.

“Ladies and gentleman,” he said. His face turned even grimmer. “In the last hour, I have received confirmation that deaths in the US directly attributable to the Sage Flu are

in the thousands and climbing rapidly. I wish I could tell you these were confined to a particular location, but I cannot. The cases are spread throughout the country. In addition to the dead, tens of thousands more have already reported suffering from flu-like symptoms.

“I have been in touch with leaders in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and throughout Europe, and, without exception, all are experiencing similar outbreaks.

“I have told the director of the CDC that there is no higher priority than the creation of a vaccine to defeat this deadly virus. All resources of this government are at their disposal, and I have been assured scientists in labs throughout the world are working around the clock until that goal is met. Something that I am confident they will achieve.

“It will take time, however. Months. Perhaps up to a year. My mission is to see that you, the citizens of the United States, are still here to receive the inoculation.” He glanced over his shoulder at the congressional leaders who had joined him, then said, “As a first step to make sure that happens, and in consultation with both parties in Congress, just moments ago, I signed an executive order suspending the Constitution of the United States, extending the twenty-four-hour curfew indefinitely. The only people exempt are those needed for essential services—military; emergency personnel such as police, firefighters, doctors, and nurses; those needed to maintain utilities such as power and water; and others in positions critical to maintaining the health and safety of our nation. Anyone outside of these individuals found breaking curfew or otherwise risking the safety of others will be arrested and forced to spend the duration of our state of emergency in a holding facility as a guest of the United States military. Food and other needed items will be dispersed in an organized, scheduled manner, with strict instructions on how these items are to be retrieved. We ask that everyone please be patient and understanding.

“We are all in this together, and together we will see this through.”

**SITUATION ROOM, WHITE HOUSE**  
**11:16 PM EST**

EVERY CHAIR SAVE the one usually occupied by the president was filled, all eyes on the

monitor at the front of the room displaying the press briefing.

All, that was, but Dr. Michael Esposito's. He was glancing at his boss, Dr. Marston, head of the CDC. The man looked thoughtful and supportive as he watched the president speak, an expression Esposito couldn't bring himself to match.

Dr. Marston had been in Washington advising the president since not long after the shipping containers found around the world began spewing their deadly cargo. He had then flown Esposito up that afternoon on a government plane. Esposito had protested, saying he needed to stay at the labs while his team continued trying to find some way to combat the Sage Flu virus. The new strain, which they were calling Sage Flu B (SF-B), was subtly different from the SF-A virus that had broken out in California the previous spring, and Esposito's team was just beginning to make some progress on what those differences might mean.

"The work won't stop if you're not there," Marston had told him. "Get on that plane and get up here now."

Upon arriving in DC, Esposito was rushed to the White House by a police escort, an unnecessary step given that the streets were all but empty. There, he'd been led to an office his boss was using.

Marston immediately stood. "Finally. Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"To brief the president."

"I could have done that over the phone," Esposito said, unable to hide his annoyance.

Marston pressed his lips tightly together, then said, "No, this is *not* something you could have done over the phone."

Esposito held up a hand in defense. "All right, all right." He dropped his jacket on the guest chair and followed his boss to the door. "So what are we supposed to be talking about?"

Marston's hand was on the doorknob, but he paused without turning it and looked back at Esposito. "A vaccine."

"What vaccine?"

"For the Sage Flu. What do you think?"

"There *is* no vaccine."

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“I know that, and so does the president. What he wants to know is, when will it be ready?”

Esposito gaped at him, hoping this was some kind of joke. “You know I can’t put a date on it. Maybe it’ll take a couple of months, maybe it’ll take twenty years! Look at HIV, for God’s sake. How long have we been working on a cure for that?”

“We both know it will probably take less than a year.”

“No, we don’t.”

“Yes, we do. And that’s what you’re going to tell him.”

“You brought me up here to *lie* to the president?”

Marston stared at him for a moment. “What do you think is happening here?”

“I’m not sure what you—”

“Here. In the world. Right now. What do you think is happening?”

“Um, you mean with the flu?”

“Yes, with the goddamn flu!”

Esposito had never seen his boss so angry. He resisted the urge to moisten his suddenly dry lips. “Someone is trying to kill a lot of people.”

“Someone is trying to kill more than just a lot of people. You know what the death rate was for the initial victims of the SF-A outbreak!”

Everyone at the CDC was well aware of that number. Nearly a hundred percent. The only reason there were survivors was because the virus had been tailored with a built-in cutoff so only those in the first few generations received the killer variety. That was a bit of info they hadn’t shared with the public.

“And can I assume you’ve read the report on the deaths we’ve already seen this time?”

“Of course,” Esposito said. So far, the death rate had been the same. “But it’s still possible that SF-B will have the same generational cutoff as SF-A. We’re still working on finding that out.”

“Really? Because the reports I’ve read from your team indicate that the cutoff trigger identified in SF-A is missing in SF-B.”

“That’s true,” Esposito said. It was one of the first things he and his colleagues had looked for. “But we’re hopeful it’s just being expressed in a different way.”

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“Hopeful? Think, Michael, think! This is a terrorist attack. Both strains were purposely released. The limited boundary of the spring release was because they knew it was going to burn out. It was a test. Don’t you see that? This time, they’re pumping it into the air *everywhere*, not just in a small geographical area. This is the big attack. What they planned for. Do you really think they’ve included some kind of biological timer? Do you?”

As soon as Sage Flu had been identified as the virus in the containers, Esposito had thought about all the different possibilities, including that given the scale, there would be no cutoff this time. But because of what that would mean—the near annihilation of the human race—he hadn’t been able to bring himself to believe anyone could be that ruthless.

He hesitated, then nodded, forced to admit the truth.

“We have one job right now,” Marston said. “One. And that’s to keep as many people alive as possible.” He paused, the look of anger that had taken him dissipating. When he spoke again, his voice was softer, conciliatory. “If people think there is a vaccine coming, they’ll cling to hope, and cut down on exposure to one another. There’s an excellent chance, then, that some *will* stay alive long enough to receive the vaccine I’m sure your team will develop. But if we tell them we don’t know when or even if the vaccine will be ready, we’re all but admitting we’re condemning everyone to death. That’s why we need to give the president a definitive timetable. If *he* believes, he can make everyone else believe. Do you get it now?”

When they entered the Oval Office a few minutes later, and the president asked Esposito how long until a vaccine would be ready, the doctor said, “A year at the outside. Hopefully sooner.”

And now, there he sat in the conference room, his eyes avoiding the television screen as he listened to the president spread the fictional timeline.

His throat dry, he stood and walked to the back of the room where several bottles of water sat on a counter. As he took one and opened it, a man in an army uniform walked up and grabbed another bottle.

The officer started to drink, but suddenly pulled the bottle away and coughed.

Already on edge, everyone in the room whipped around and stared at him.

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He held up a hand and said in a hoarse voice, “Went down the wrong tube.”

That seemed to mollify the crowd. As the others returned their attention to the monitor, Esposito said, “You all right?”

“Fine,” the officer replied. He put his hand in front of his mouth as he cleared his throat. “Hate when that happens, you know?”

“Yeah,” Esposito said.

On the screen, the president was finishing up, which meant he would be joining them soon. Walking back to his seat, Esposito noticed a few droplets of water on his hand that must have popped off his bottle when he’d opened the top. He wiped them off, and took another drink.

Unfortunately for him, and for everyone else in the room, the drops didn’t come from his bottle. They were from the army officer’s cough, one that hadn’t been caused by water going down the wrong pipe.

### 3

**MONTANA**  
**9:37 PM MST**

THE STORM HAD grown steadily worse. The snow, at first a light dusting on the road, had begun to accumulate into a growing blanket of white, making it more and more difficult for Chloe as she drove south on the motorcycle.

As if that weren't enough to heighten her anxiety, each mile she traveled took her farther from the Ranch, adding to the time she would take to return with the help Daniel Ash needed.

An explosion at a house where he had been searching for his son had left Ash unconscious and seriously injured. Billy, the Ranch's doctor, had been killed several days earlier, leaving the Resistance with a nurse who could tend to Ash's visible wounds but was untrained to diagnose and treat anything more severe. Knowing timing was critical, Chloe and two others had raced away on motorcycles in different directions in hopes of finding a doctor who could help. Not just any type of doctor; they needed a surgeon. Chloe had blown through two towns already, but each was too small to support that skill level. The nearest place she might find what she was looking for was Great Falls.

On a sunlit, summer day with no one else on the road, she could have made it there in little more than an hour. But it wasn't daytime or even close to summer, and the darkness and snow were more than doubling the normal travel time.

She checked her watch. Almost a quarter to ten.

*Dammit! I should be on my way back by now.*

She resisted the urge to increase her speed, knowing she was already pushing her luck, but she couldn't help feeling that every lost second might be crucial to Ash's survival.

The road took a wide turn up ahead. If she remembered correctly, once she was around it the highway would straighten out for the final run into Great Falls. *Maybe a few more miles an hour then.*

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Her hand tightened on the grip, ready to sprint the final distance to the city as soon as she finished the turn, but instead of accelerating, she immediately reduced her speed. Fifty yards beyond the turn, a pair of wooden barricades was set across the road. Parked behind it was a military truck. Dual, portable floodlights were set up on the asphalt, lighting up the area.

A roadblock.

The front wheel of the motorcycle wobbled as the bike slowed. Chloe fought to maintain her balance as she brought her ride to a stop ten feet shy of the barricade.

Two men in military uniforms popped out of the truck. They were wearing full biohazard hoods, and armed—one with an M4 rifle, and the other with a handgun, probably a Beretta. By what she could see of their faces through their faceplates, they seemed as surprised to see her as she was by them.

“Hold it right there,” the shorter one ordered.

“Does it look like I’m going anywhere?” she asked.

“Ma’am, are you aware there is a curfew in effect?”

“I’m trying to get home, that’s all. Why are you guys out here?”

“The president has ordered anyone violating the curfew to be detained.”

“When did that happen?” she asked.

“The order came through thirty minutes ago.”

“Well, I was on my bike thirty minutes ago. How was I supposed to know? Look, I’m just trying to get home to my kids, all right?”

The other airman gave her a skeptical look. “You *live* here in Great Falls?”

“What does it matter if I do?” She thought there probably weren’t that many African-Americans living in town, but there would be a few. “Come on, let me through. My kids are scared to death with all this stuff going on. They need me. I’m sure you can understand that.”

The short one hesitated. “Can we see your ID, ma’am?”

She made a show of reaching into her jacket, and then, in a fake panic, padding her other pockets. “*Dammit!*”

“Ma’am?”

“I don’t have it.”

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“You don’t have it?”

“No,” she said.

The tall one with the rifle raised it a few inches.

“Jesus,” she said. “Just because I don’t have it with me doesn’t mean you have to shoot me! I left it at my friend’s place in Concord. I forgot it, that’s all.”

Neither man said anything.

“Look, you want to drive me to my house so I can prove to you who I am?” she asked. “There’s nothing I’d like more than a warm ride at this point. I’m freezing my ass off.”

A few more tense seconds passed, then the two men huddled together for a moment. Finally, the first one said, “I’m sorry. We can’t do that, ma’am.”

“So, what? I stand here and we stare at each other? I gotta see my kids! Come on. Please!”

He studied her for a moment. “What’s your name?”

“Megan Adams,” she said, using the name of someone back at the Ranch.

“All right, Ms. Adams, we’re going to let you go home. But head straight there and stay inside. You get caught out again, you’ll be arrested. No questions asked.”

“Thank you,” she said.

The two men moved one of the barricades out of the way so that she could walk her bike through. The look on the taller one’s face made it clear he didn’t trust her, and that if he’d been in charge she wouldn’t have gotten off so easily.

“Thank you,” she said again as she hopped on her bike.

Within minutes, the town of Great Falls started appearing through the falling snow, streetlights at first, then strings of colored Christmas lights outlining a few of the homes.

She stopped under the awning of a gas station and pulled out her cell phone. To find a surgeon, she needed to find a hospital. A quick search told her the major medical center in town was Benefis Hospital. She navigated to their website, and tapped on the “Find a Doctor” tab. She was given the choice of looking for a physician by name, specialty, or keyword. Chloe found “General Surgery” under specialties and selected it. Nine names appeared, some with pictures, some not. All the doctors with photos appeared to be between thirty-five and fifty. If this had been a big-city hospital, she would have expected

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stern, serious poses, but the surgeons of Benefis looked friendly and approachable.

She flexed her fingers, fighting off the cold, and considered her options.

Approaching someone at the hospital would be difficult at best. The facility would undoubtedly be one of the few places in town where people were still working, and, given her experience with the roadblock, there was a good chance that more airmen had been assigned to guard it. Better if she could find a doctor at home.

She looked down the street, half expecting a police car or military vehicle to drive by and catch her standing there, but the only movement came from the snowflakes falling to the ground. Still, to be safe, she walked the bike around the side of the gas station, out of view, then called the general number for the hospital.

“Benefis Hospital,” a female voice said.

“Can I speak to someone in the surgical unit, please?”

“Is this an emergency?”

“Ma’am, I’m calling from Malmstrom,” Chloe said, invoking the name of the local air force base.

“Of course. One moment.”

Instrumental music filled the void, a violin-and-piano version of some old pop song Chloe recognized but couldn’t name.

“Nurse Reynolds. Can I help you?” The voice was male and sounded rushed.

“Is this the surgical unit?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Mr. Reynolds, I’m Captain Lauren Scott. I’m part of the emergency operations team over here at Malmstrom.”

“Yes?” the nurse said, sounding unimpressed.

“I need the names of your surgeons currently on shift, on call, and those who will be coming in next.”

“I’m not sure I’m allowed to give that out.”

Chloe hardened her tone. “We are in a state of emergency. That means when my office calls needing something, you give it. Understood?”

The nurse fell silent.

“Mr. Reynolds, did you hear me? We are all trying to save lives here. I’m sure you

don't want me coming down there in person. That would take time, and I would not be very pleasant when I arrive. Now, please, can I get your cooperation?"

A moment, then, "I'm sorry. Hold for a second. I'll check."

There was no music this time, only the sound of someone using a computer keyboard.

"Okay, here you go," Reynolds said. He read off the name of two doctors who were at the hospital and one who was on call, then gave her the name of the three surgeons who were scheduled to report in the morning.

"Thank you," Chloe said. "Appreciate the help."

As soon as the call disconnected, she brought up the list of doctors again. Eliminating the six names she'd been given left her with the three surgeons who weren't expected in anytime soon. She called Information.

The first name had only a home phone number. The second and third, though, produced addresses as well. She looked at the map. The closest of the two, a Dr. Bradley Gardiner, lived less than half a mile from her current position.

She memorized the route, and put her phone away.

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"RUN! RUN!"

Brandon Ash's lungs burned as he pushed himself faster through the trees. He could hear the *boom-boom-boom* of his pulse as blood rushed by his ears.

"Run!"

He glanced back over his shoulder, toward the voice—Mr. Hayes's voice.

"Keep moving!" the man yelled.

Brandon couldn't see him, but knew Mr. Hayes couldn't be far behind. As he looked back in the direction he was headed, his foot slipped on a rock and his leg flew out from under him. He tumbled, slamming against the ground over and over as the slope of the hill prevented him from stopping.

*Whoop-whoop-whoop.*

The rhythmic sound was slow and distant at first, but as it gained speed, it also increased in volume. The louder it got the more he felt each *whoop* in his chest, as if the

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sound itself had replaced the beating of his heart.

With a final skid through the dirt, he came to rest on his back. Above him was blue sky peeking through the tops of the trees. Then the blue turned black as the source of the sound moved into view.

“Run!” Mr. Hayes shouted.

Brandon wanted to do that more than anything, but the sight of the machine in the sky paralyzed him.

“Run!”

A helicopter, giant and black, hovered directly overhead.

Brandon felt something drip down the side of his face. He touched it, thinking it must be blood. But it was cold, not warm.

*He* was cold.

His eyelids fluttered, then opened. He sucked in a deep, frightened breath, and pushed himself partway up before he realized there was no helicopter above him, no blue sky. The only thing over his head was the makeshift lean-to he'd built to shelter himself as he slept.

Mr. Hayes, he thought. Mr. Hayes was dead.

Brandon pulled inside his sleeping bag, and used his flashlight to check his watch.

10:12 p.m.

So it was still Christmas Eve. He turned so he could look out the opening of his lean-to. The snow had yet to stop, and was piling up around the lower part of his shelter. He wondered if enough would fall to cover the entire thing by morning. The former kid in him would have thought that was cool, but not this Brandon. Not the Brandon who was just trying to survive.

He had spent most of that day following the road south. Not once did a vehicle pass by. In the afternoon, the snow had begun to fall, making him not only tired and cold, but wet. What bothered him most, though, was the eerie silence that enveloped him as more snow stuck to the ground. It made him feel like the last person on Earth, destined to walk forever alone. Finally, when he'd been unable to find a structure where he could spend the night, he had made the lean-to and set up camp.

A snippet of the dream came back to him—the *whoop-whoop-whoop* of the

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helicopter—and he suddenly wondered if the noise had been more than a part of his dream. The cold, after all, had definitely been real.

He pushed his head out of the sleeping bag, and moved over to the opening of the lean-to where he could listen better. Earlier that evening he'd heard a motorcycle drive by, but had rushed over to the road too late to get the driver's attention. Maybe it was coming back. If so, he wanted to be on the highway in plenty of time to flag it down. He held his breath, straining to pick up the slightest of sounds, but if there was an engine roaring out there somewhere, he couldn't hear it.

Just the dream, then.

Disappointed, he settled back down.

*Tomorrow I'll find a phone and call Dad. Tomorrow everything will be okay.*

It took a while, but he finally fell back asleep, and when he did, the dream returned.

*“Run!”*

**SIERRA NEVADA MOUNTAINS, CALIFORNIA**  
**9:15 PM PACIFIC STANDARD TIME (PST)**

MARTINA GABLE STARED up at the sky. Unlike the night before, there were no clouds, so the stars shined brightly over the cabin. Running in a thick band across the field of black was the Milky Way, the light from most of its stars generated long before mankind had taken its first step. She wondered if light that old would still be reaching Earth when man took his last.

She heard the door open behind her, but she didn't turn to see who it was.

“What are you looking at?” Riley Weber asked.

Martina watched the sky for a moment longer, then shook her head. “Nothing.”

Riley hesitated before saying, “Sorry. I didn't mean to bother you.”

Martina looked back. “You didn't. I was just...trying to think about nothing.”

“I've been trying to think about nothing all evening.”

Riley's chin shook as she bit her lip and started to cry. Martina put her arms around her friend. She wanted to say something like “We're going to be okay,” but she couldn't bring herself to lie, so she kept silent as she stroked Riley's hair and let the girl sob.

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Both Martina's family and Riley's family had escaped to the mountains in hopes of avoiding the Sage Flu. And while it had not touched them so far, they'd had their own near tragedy when Riley's twin sister Laurie wandered off the previous night and nearly died of exposure. That afternoon, Mr. Weber had decided to take her back down the mountain to get medical attention. Without any cell phone coverage or land line at the cabin, Mr. Weber and Laurie hadn't been heard from since.

Riley took a deep breath as her tears finally lost strength. She pulled out of Martina's arms, and said, "Thanks. I guess I just needed to let that out, huh?"

"We're all going to need to let it out at one point or another, I think."

Riley looked up at the stars. After a moment, she said, "Tell me about college."

"What do you want to know?" Martina asked. Riley was still a senior at Burroughs High School, while Martina was in her freshman year at Cal State University, Northridge.

"What's it like living on your own?"

Martina shrugged. "It's fun sometimes."

"Only sometimes?"

"Well, I still have to study. And Mom's not there to clean up for me or do the laundry."

"Still better than living at home, I bet," Riley said.

"They both have their ups and downs, but, yeah, it's pretty cool." Martina gave her friend a smile. "Come on. I'm getting cold."

Back in the house, they found Martina's parents in the kitchen making hot chocolate for Martina's brother Donny and Riley's younger sister Pamela, who were lying on the floor in front of the fireplace, playing games on their iPods.

"You two want any?" Martina's dad asked as he poured the brown liquid into mugs.

"Definitely," Martina said.

"Me, too," Riley chimed in.

"You want to see if your mom wants some?" he asked.

Riley looked around. "She still in her room?"

Martina's mom nodded, picked up one of mugs, and held it out. "Why don't you take one back? She's had a rough day. No reason to make her come out and deal with all of us."

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“Thanks, Mrs. Gable,” Riley said.

She took the mug and headed toward the back bedrooms.

“Here you go, honey.” Mr. Gable handed Martina a mug. “It’s hot, so be careful.

Pamela, Donny, yours is ready.”

Neither of the other two kids moved.

“Hey!” Mr. Gable yelled.

Martina walked over and kicked her brother’s foot.

Donny pulled one of the earphones out of his ear. “What?”

She pointed at their dad.

“Hot chocolate,” Mr. Gable said.

“Cool.” Donny jumped up and motioned for Pamela to join him.

The girl looked over, saw the steaming mugs, and hopped up, too.

“Martina?”

Riley was standing in the hallway, motioning for Martina to join her.

“What’s up?” Martina asked as she walked over.

“Mom...she...” Riley couldn’t seem to finish, so instead she hurried over to the door of the bedroom her parents had been using.

As soon as Martina joined her, Riley pushed it open several inches.

The light was on inside so Martina didn’t have any problem seeing Mrs. Weber lying on the bed. At first she thought the woman was asleep, but then she noticed the sweat along Mrs. Weber’s hairline, and the look of pain on her face. Suddenly, Riley’s mom twisted back and forth, and let out a low groan that turned into a cough.

Without even meaning to, Martina took a step backward. “Did you go inside?” she asked Riley, though she already knew the answer. She could see the mug of hot chocolate sitting on the nightstand.

“She’s my mom,” Riley said. “What am I going to do?”

“Stay here. I’ll be right back.” Martina dashed back to the living room. After catching her mother’s eye, she said, “Can I see you for a minute?”

“Sure.”

Once her mother had entered the hallway, Martina whispered, “It’s Mrs. Weber. I think she’s sick.”

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Her mother's eyes grew wide. "What?"

Martina led her over to the bedroom door so she could peek through. She watched as the blood drained from her mother's face.

Before either of them could say anything, Donny called out from the living room. "Hey, Mom. Can you bring me a tissue when you come back? I need to blow my nose."