

yes, i know the
Monkey Man

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Chapter One

The little red light on our answering machine was blinking on and off when I wandered into the kitchen. I groaned. I could guess who that was.

“Hey, Sherlock!” I whistled for my dog. “Do you need to go outside?” It was eight o’clock in the morning, so of course he needed to go outside. He came running, tail wagging and nails clicking against our cracked kitchen floor.

“Here you go,” I said, holding the back door open for him.

I wondered if we had anything for breakfast. I pressed PLAY on the answering machine and wandered over to the fridge to see what was inside. Not much. A little bit of milk. Bologna. Leftover pizza.

The machine beeped and I heard, “Hello? T.J.?” My fingers tightened around the fridge handle. “This is Sam. Again.” I could tell she was trying to sound friendly and unconcerned, but she also sounded nervous. What did *she* have to be nervous about? She wasn’t the one who’d had her whole life turned upside down.

“My mom and I just wanted to make sure you’re still coming on Wednesday,” Sam went on. “Are you? Did you get the money for the bus ticket? We need to know what bus you’re coming on and what time it gets in so we can come pick you up. Could you maybe call us back and let us know?”

I grabbed the pizza box, then slammed the fridge closed.

“Oh!” I jumped when I saw Joe standing on the other side of the fridge door. He had on an old T-shirt and ratty jeans. Work clothes.

“Hey,” he said as though it was just another normal day, and we were just another normal father and daughter about to sit down to a nice, delicious breakfast together. Right. I’d have gone back to my room if Sherlock hadn’t still been outside. Believe it or not, Joe was the one who’d gotten me the dog. He chose a Westie because that’s what he had when he was a kid. He told me Westies were smart, loyal, and independent. Which was true. Too bad everything else he’d ever told me was a lie.

“Are you planning to eat that pizza or are you just going to carry it around for a while?” Joe asked.

Very funny.

“Is there enough pizza left for both of us?” Joe tried again.

I shoved a bunch of dirty dishes aside so I could set the box on the counter. “Open it and see,” I told Joe. It was the most I’d said to him in about three days.

He pulled up the lid and grabbed a slice from the pepperoni side of the pizza. Once he moved out of the way, I

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helped myself to a slice of the bacon and pineapple and stuffed the pointy end into my mouth. It was like biting into cold cardboard. Fortunately, I happened to like cold, cardboardy pizza.

“I take it you still haven’t called Sam back,” Joe said as he leaned against the stove.

“Obviously not,” I said, wishing my dog would hurry up. I went over to the door to wait for him.

“How many times has she called in the last couple of weeks? Three? Four?”

“More like five or six.”

Joe sighed. “T.J., you have to call her back.”

“Why?” Even more important, why did he care whether I called her back?

“Because when someone calls and leaves a message, you call them back. That’s the way it works.”

Maybe in normal families.

“I don’t have enough money for the bus ticket anymore, remember?” I said. I’d given him some of the money Suzanne sent me so he could pay our electric bill. Not that I minded. If I didn’t have money for the bus ticket, I wouldn’t be able to go to Iowa. Oh, well.

“I’ve got your money right here,” Joe said, reaching into his front pocket. He pulled out a wad of bills and brought them over to me.

I eyed the cash, but didn’t take any. “Where’d you get all that?” I asked.

“Hey, I’ve got a job now, remember?” Joe said, a little too cheerfully. He grabbed my free hand, the one that didn’t

have the half-eaten slice of pizza in it, pressed the bills against my palm, then closed my fingers around them.

I popped the last of my pizza into my mouth and counted the money while I chewed. Twenty, forty, sixty, eighty, one hundred dollars. I'd actually given him a hundred and twenty dollars, but whatever. It wasn't my money. It was Suzanne's.

"What's the matter, T.J.?" Joe asked. "Don't you want to go to your mom's?"

Of course I didn't want to go. I didn't know these people. I didn't even know Sam and Suzanne existed until Sam showed up on our doorstep three weeks ago and said she was my sister. My twin sister. I might have been able to get excited about that under other circumstances. Like, if her existence didn't prove that my entire life had been a lie. Now I was supposed to forget everything I'd ever been told about who I was and be like any other divorce kid. Go to Iowa. Go to Suzanne's wedding and act like her daughter. It was too much. Too much, too soon.

"It'll be okay," Joe said as he went to the fridge and took out a can of Coke. "It's only a week. It'll go fast."

Was that supposed to make me feel better?

"Maybe I'll get there and decide I don't want to come back," I said, just to see what he'd say. "Did you ever think of that?"

Joe popped the tab on his Coke can. "I *have* thought of that," he said, not meeting my eyes. "And if that's what you want..." His voice trailed off.

It wasn't what I wanted.

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Sherlock let out a short bark, so I let him in. He went straight to his food bowl, which was still empty. Holding tight to the hundred bucks, I grabbed the bag of dog food from the shelf next to the back door. Three ants crawled out from behind the bag. Gram would have a fit if she knew there were ants in her house. I smashed them with the bag, then poured some food into Sherlock's bowl. He nosed his way in before I even finished pouring.

"I called the bus station last night," Joe said suddenly.

I lifted an eyebrow. "*You* called the bus station?"

"Don't give me your lip. Of course I called the bus station. I knew you hadn't done it. And I thought it was about time we made a plan for Wednesday. There's a bus that leaves here at 7:20 a.m. and gets in to Cedar Rapids around 6:30 p.m. Cedar Rapids is the closest town to Clearwater that has a bus station." He looked pretty proud of himself for finding out all that information. "Why don't you call Sam back and tell her you'll be on that bus?"

"You're the one who called the bus station," I said. "Why don't *you* call her?"

Joe scratched his ear. "I don't think that would be a good idea. Do you?"

No, probably not. After everything that had happened, Joe and Suzanne had been communicating through Mrs. Morris, my social worker. It was better that way. Safer. Personally, I thought it was safer for me to communicate with Suzanne and Sam through Mrs. Morris, too, but Mrs. Morris wanted me to talk to them directly.

And now even Joe wanted me to talk to them directly.

He grabbed the phone and held it out to me. "Call and tell them you're coming, Teej," he said. "Please."

I stared at the phone for a couple of seconds, then went to put the bag of dog food back on the shelf. "I think we should call and tell them I'll come in a few weeks," I said. "After the wedding."

I'd never actually been to a wedding before, but I'd seen enough of them on TV to know that this was a really stupid time for my first visit. It's not like Suzanne and I would have any time to "get to know each other." Not with some big wedding going on. And then the day after the wedding they're going to be busy moving into their new house. Who invites a total stranger to their wedding and then asks the person to help them move?

"Suzanne told Mrs. Morris that she wanted both her daughters there for her wedding," Joe said. "I'm not really in a position to tell her no, am I?"

Probably not. Because if he gets on Suzanne's bad side, he could end up in jail.

Joe held the phone out to me again. "Would you please just tell them you're coming? You don't want that social worker to come over here and start nosing around again, do you?"

Of course I didn't, so I took the phone. I knew Joe would stand there until I made the call, so I went over to the answering machine, rewound the tape, and got Suzanne and Sam's phone number. My finger shook as I punched in the numbers. If I was lucky, no one would answer.

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Two rings...three rings...four rings...*click*. “You have reached the Wright residence.” *Yes! An answering machine.* “We can’t come to the phone right now, but if you’ll leave your name and number, we’ll get back to you as soon as possible.”

“Hi. This is—” I had to stop and think. I was T.J. As far as I was concerned, that was my name.

But *they*—Suzanne and Sam—knew me as Sarah.

Well, tough. “This is T.J.,” I said. “My bus gets in to Cedar Rapids at 6:30 on Wednesday night. See you then.” I hung up and handed the phone back to Joe.

He winced.

“What?” I asked.

“You could’ve been a little friendlier.”

Considering none of this was my idea, or my fault, I could’ve been a lot *unfriendlier*.