



PROLOGUE

Everyone called us the ideal family. Two parents, two kids, always spending time together. Family games of Scrabble after dinner. Dad going for Saturday boat rides with my little brother Sam in the skiff that Sam rowed himself. Dad playing cards with me by the fire before bedtime.

But our family was also a little unusual. For one thing, Mom was blond and fair-skinned, and Dad was from India and had dark skin and hair. Like every family in today's world, both Mom and Dad worked. Mom had a pretty typical job as a guidance counselor at the high school in Bayview, the small town where we live on the north shore of Massachusetts. But Dad worked at MIT, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the brainiest place in the world. People called him a genius, and his work was super top-secret.

It was fun and easy being a part of our family. I guess I took it mostly for granted.

The truth is, you never know what you have until you lose it.

It all started with the phone calls late at night. I was used to Dad coming and going at strange hours—he had labs to check on, experiments to oversee, graduate students to direct—but there was something different about these calls. I could hear



the tension in his voice. I could feel the worry in his too-quiet footsteps when he took his phone into his bedroom to continue the call. Sometimes I heard a strange car idling outside our house; once I saw a white van sitting there for a couple hours. And one night I came upon Mom in the kitchen, and she was just staring off into space.

Dad had always been busy in his work—in fact, it was amazing he was able to spend so much time with Sam and me, because he put in so many hours at MIT—but he always seemed relaxed and confident. He told me once no man could be happier than he was: he loved his work, and he loved his family.

There came a morning when he was neither relaxed nor confident.

He buzzed into the kitchen looking to grab something to eat for the commute to Cambridge. His favorite breakfast was masala dosa—a type of pancake stuffed with potato and spices.

He sniffed the air disappointedly. “No fresh dosa?”

“Don’t you remember? We finished the dosa batter last night, and you didn’t get any more from the Indian store,” our mom replied. Actually, she sort of snapped at him—which was unusual—but at the same time she flashed a worried look in his direction.

He kept the smile on his face. “Oh yes, I do remember now,” he said. Though Dad has lived in the USA for many years, he still has his Indian accent—sort of like a British accent, but more musical.

“Here, darling,” Mom said, turning to him and handing him a tall cup. “Take this smoothie.” It was the one she made for herself every morning for her breakfast.

“Why, you don’t have to do that . . .” Dad began.

“Yes, I do,” she replied, giving him a quick kiss.

Dad stopped and looked toward her. An expression came into his dark brown eyes that I’d never seen before, full of pain and sorrow.



And fear.

He opened his mouth to say something, but his eyes filled with tears, and he bent over, gave Sam and me a kiss on the cheek, and fled out the door.

It was the last time we ever saw him.



There are a few different versions of what happened next. I'll give you the official version first.

Early the next evening, I was lying on the couch reading for school. The door shuddered open and Mom staggered in, red-faced and shaking. She was talking on her cell phone and her blond hair was all out of place. She never let that happen to her hair. Her jacket was buttoned wrong. That never happened either.

"You can't know that for sure," she snapped.

"Mom?"

She saw me then. "All right, I'll call again once I get there." She slid her phone into her purse.

"Mom, what's going on?"

"Nothing. A little problem at work," she replied. She yanked out her phone again and glanced at it. "Let's see . . . what's the quickest way to get to Memorial Drive . . ."

"Mom," I retorted, "Memorial Drive is in Cambridge. You don't work there. Dad does." My stomach was churning like a cement mixer.

"Paul, do I have to explain everything I do to you?" Now she was snapping at me—a very unMom-like thing to do. Her blue-gray eyes were gazing past me. "One of the high school kids is there, and she needs help."

I lifted my hands and shook them. "I'm not a little kid. You don't have to hide things from me."

"I'll be back soon," she said. She wouldn't meet my eye.

"Mom, what's going on?" I asked.



She gave me a quick glance. “I love you,” she told me. Her eyes glistened, and she was gone.

“Whazzup with Mom?” Sam asked.

Some people say Sam and I look a lot alike, but I think we’re as different as can be. I’m tall for my age and skinny, while Sam is as plump as a muffin. What people see is that we both have Dad’s coloring, but even there Sam’s skin is a little darker than mine. I try hard in school and usually get straight A’s; Sam doesn’t care about his grades, and he only does his homework when he thinks it’s interesting. Which isn’t often. And that doesn’t play so well with the parental units (as he calls them).

“I don’t know,” I answered. “She’s freaking out about something.”

“Why is this family so crazy and uptight recently?” he asked. He took a major bite of his Portuguese toast (the sour-dough bread that our town is famous for). He had slathered it with butter and strawberry jam, and he was carrying it around on a ratty old paper towel.

“Something’s happened to Dad,” I told him.

“How do you know that?” he challenged me.

“I just have this feeling. He’s in trouble. Big trouble.”

“You’re imagining it,” he said. “You’re always worrying about something.” Nothing seems to bother Sam unless he runs out of Portuguese toast and butter. He did a spin move and danced out of the room, followed by Brinda, our beagle, who was drooling big time at the thought of scoring some of his toast and jam.

About an hour later the front door opened and closed, way too quietly. Mom called us into the living room.

“Boys, I have some terrible news,” she began, as soon as we were seated on the sofa.

The cement mixer was working overtime in my stomach again.



“What’s wrong?” Sam asked.

“Your father has disappeared,” Mom said.

“No way,” Sam replied.

“What do you mean, *disappeared*?” I asked. “People don’t just disappear.”

“Well, your father did. He just vanished,” she said. Her blue-gray eyes were looking past us. In her early years Mom was an actress in New York and Boston, and for some reason it felt to me now like she was playing a scene.

Sam put his head in his hands. “He’s dead,” he pronounced slowly. “He’s dead and you just don’t want to say it.” Sam either ignored things completely or else he jumped to the farthest conclusions—there was no middle ground with him.

Mom tried to answer, but the words wouldn’t come. She sat down trembling. And then my mom—who never, ever cried—began to sob, with great sighs that shook her whole body.

I turned away my head. A trap door was opening somewhere inside me, and I felt myself tumbling into darkness and horror.

The next thing I knew, I was lying on the sofa, crying—those big wrenching sobs you have when your body feels like you can’t even take a breath. Sam was wailing next to me. We had no idea what was happening. All we knew was that our father had disappeared. Whatever that meant. And we were heartbroken.



That was the official story. But there were also the rumors. Sam found out about them first because there’s a kid in his fifth grade class, Jeremy Flinks, who’s always spreading dirt about people. Half the time it turns out to be nothing, just stuff he made up.

But the other half of the time, it turns out to be true.

Jeremy told Sam that one of his uncles is a policeman in Cambridge. And the uncle was working that night . . .



When there was a car crash. On Memorial Drive.

According to Jeremy, the uncle said it was the strangest thing he'd ever seen. He thought at first it was nothing much, a minor automobile accident. A car had slid off to the side and come to a stop against a guardrail.

This guy, the uncle, was the first policeman to arrive at the scene. He stopped behind the car and approached, flashlight in hand.

He gave a low whistle. For such a minor accident, the damage was extraordinary.

The windows were all broken. The windshield was shattered. The driver was slumped against the steering wheel.

The policeman got a quick look at the man. He had dark skin and seemed to be of Indian descent. He checked the man's pulse. Nothing. There was blood everywhere.

The policeman radioed for help.

Within minutes, the FBI arrived, sent the policeman away, and sealed off the area. The incident disappeared from all official records.

But the policeman had seen something about the man in the car that he would never forget.

The man's upper body and most of his face were punctured in about 100 places by deep, gashing wounds that looked like someone had stabbed him, over and over again, with a super-sharp knife.