

## PROLOGUE

Time rolled to a stop on the Massachusetts Turnpike. Construction and wet weather clogged the westbound lanes at Chicopee, turning a breezy Sunday flow into a snake of angry brake lights.

Robert Given puffed a surly breath as his Voyager merged with the congestion. Two long hours had passed since he hugged the last of his grieving siblings and herded his family into the minivan. The rain had followed them the whole way from Boston, coming down in buckets and thimbles by turns. Now the sky dribbled just enough to make the windshield wipers squeal at the slowest setting.

After five squeals and ten feet of progress, he pushed up his glasses and studied the speedy trucks on the overpass. He had no idea which highway he was looking at, aside from a better one.

“Don’t,” said Melanie, from the passenger seat.

“Don’t what?”

“I see you putting on your explorer’s hat. I’m saying don’t. I’d rather be stuck than lost.”

His wife had spoken the words gently, and with a small twinge of irony. Melanie was typically the flighty one of the duo, the titsy-ditzzy actress who rarely reached noon without making some heedless blunder. Today’s reigning gaffe was her choice of funeral dress, a clingy black number that was a little too little for the comfort of some. Worse than the sneers and leers of her stodgy in-laws was the scorn of her ten-year-old daughter, who chided her for disrespecting Grandpa with her “showy boobs.” That hurt like hell. It wasn’t so long ago that Amanda needed help buttoning her blouses. Now the girl had become the family’s stern voice of propriety, the arbiter of right and wrong.

Melanie straightened her hem, then turned around to check on her other brown-haired progeny, the sweeter fruit of her womb.

“You all right, angel?”

Hannah warily chewed her hair, unsure if it was safe to be honest. At five years old, she was too young to understand the grim rituals she’d witnessed today. All she knew was that she had to be on her

best behavior. No whining. No showboating. No wriggling out of her itchy black dress. She'd spent the morning on cold metal folding chairs, staring glumly at her feet while all the grown-ups sniffled. It was a strange and ugly day and she couldn't wait for it to be over.

"I want to go home."

"We'll be there soon," Melanie said, prompting a cynical snort from her husband. "You want to sing something?"

Hannah's chubby face lit up. "Can I?"

"Sure."

"No," said Amanda, her stringy arms crossed in austerity. "We said no songs today."

Her mother forced a clenched smile. "Sweetie, that was just for the funeral and wake."

"Daddy said it was for the day. Out of respect for Grandpa. Isn't that what you said, Daddy?"

Melanie winced at the buckling to come. She knew Robert would eat his own salted fingers before disappointing Amanda.

Right on cue, he bounced a sorry brow at Hannah in the rearview mirror. "Honey, when we get home, you can sing all you want. Just not now, okay?"

Friends often joked that Robert and Melanie Given didn't have two children, they each had one clone. Nearly all of Amanda's genetic coin flips had landed on her father's side. She bore his finely chiseled features, his willowy build, his keen green eyes and ferocious intelligence. The two of them doted on each other like an old married couple. Rarely an evening passed when they weren't found curled up on the sofa, devouring one heady book after another.

Hannah was Melanie's daughter through and through. While Robert and Amanda were made of sharp angles, the actress and her youngest were drawn in soft curves. They shared the same round face, the same brown doe eyes, the same scattered airs and theatrical temperament. Hannah had also been born with a gilded throat, a gift that came from neither parent. The child crooned like an angel and never missed a note. She could perform any song flawlessly just by hearing it twice. Her mother worked with her day and night, honing her talent like a fine iron blade. Hannah Given would carve her name in the world one day. Of this, Melanie had no doubt.

Sadly, the skews in parental attention—the balanced imbalance—was starting to bear bitter fruit. With each passing day, Amanda treated her mother more and more like a rival while Hannah increasingly saw her father as a stranger.

And the girls themselves weren't the tightest of sisters.

Magnanimous in victory, Amanda rummaged through her neatly packed bag of backseat boredom busters. "Look, why don't we do a puzzle out of my book?"

"Why don't you shut up?"

Both parents turned around. "Hannah . . ."

Amanda fell back into her seat, matching her sister's pouty scowl. "I was trying to be nice."

"You're not nice. You're bossy. And you don't want me singing, 'cause I'm better than you."

"That's enough," Melanie snapped. She rubbed her brow and blew a dismal sigh at the windshield. "This is our fault."

"No kidding." Robert rolled the Voyager another ten inches, tapping the wheel in busy thought. "Maybe next weekend, Hannah and I—"

The piercing screech of tires filled the air, far too close for anyone's comfort. The Givens spun their gazes all around but no one could see movement. Every vehicle was stuck on the flytrap of I-90.

The noise gave way to a thundering crunch. A long and twisted piece of metal rained down on the Camry in front of them, shattering the rear window.

Melanie covered her mouth. "Oh my God!"

Robert raised his wide stare at the overpass, where all the trouble was happening. A speeding tanker truck had flipped onto its side and skidded through the guardrail. Now the curved metal trailer teetered precariously over the edge. Robert barely had a chance to formulate his hot new worry before the Shell Oil logo bloomed into view like a mushroom cloud.

*No . . .*

The truck toppled over, plummeting toward the turnpike in a messy twirl. The parents froze, breathless, as their minds fell into an accelerated state of alarm. While Melanie forced a hundred regrets,

Robert hissed a thousand curses at the invisible forces that brought them here, all the cruel odds and gods behind their senseless demise.

After an eternity of wincing dread, they heard the dry squawk of the wiper blades, the rustling scrapes of Amanda's black taffeta.

"Daddy?"

Robert and Melanie opened a leery eye, then gawked at the fresh new madness in front of them.

The fuel truck hung immobile in the air, a scant nine feet from impact. Floating bits of debris twinkled all around it like stars in the night. In every other vehicle, silhouetted figures remained flash-frozen in terrified poses. Only the thin wisps of smoke from the cab's engine seemed to move in any fashion. They rippled in place with the lazy torpor of sea plants.

Amanda leaned forward, her face slack with bewilderment. At ten years old, her universe had settled into a firm and tidy construct. Everything fit together with mechanical precision, even the squeaky gears of her little sister. But now something had gone horribly wrong with the clockwork. Amanda was old enough to know that things like this simply didn't happen. Not to the living. Not to the sane.

"Daddy, what . . . what is this?"

Robert turned around as best he could, struggling to rediscover his voice. "I don't know. I don't know. Just stay where you are. Don't do anything."

Melanie unclasped her seat belt and reached a trembling hand for Hannah. "Sweetie, you okay?"

The child shook her head in misery. "I'm cold."

Now that Hannah mentioned it, the others noticed the sharp drop in temperature, enough to turn their breath visible. They glanced outside and saw a strange blue tint to the world, as if someone had wrapped their van in cellophane.

Amanda flinched at the new life outside the window.

"M-Mom. Dad . . ."

The others followed her gaze to the center of the freeway, where three tall and reedy strangers watched them with calm interest. The man on the left wore a thin gray windbreaker over jeans, his handsome face half-obscured by a low-slung Yankees cap. The woman on the right sported a stylish

white longcoat and kinky brown hair that flowed in improbable directions, like Botticelli's Venus. Her deep black eyes locked on Amanda, holding the girl like tar.

Hannah and her parents kept their saucer stares on the man in the middle.

He was the tallest of the group, at least six and a half feet, with a trim Caesar haircut that lay as white as a snowcap. He wore a sharp charcoal business suit, eschewing a tie for a more casual open collar. Melanie found him beautiful to the point of unease. His skin was flawless, ageless, and preternaturally pale. His only color seemed to come from his irises, a fierce diamond-blue that cut through glass and Givens alike.

The trio stood with the formal poise of butlers, though Robert found nothing helpful or kind in their stony expressions. Melanie gripped his shoulder when he reached for the door.

"Don't. Don't go out there."

The white-haired man blew a curt puff of mist, then spoke in a cool honey bass that might have been soothing if it wasn't so testy.

"Calm yourselves. We just saved your lives. If you wish to keep living, then do as I say. Come out of the vehicle. All of you. Quickly."

He spoke with a slight foreign accent, a quasi-European twang that didn't register anywhere in Robert and Melanie's database. Despite all floating evidence in support of the man's good intentions, the elder Givens had a difficult time working their door handles.

The stranger shot an impatient glower through the driver's window. "I took you for a man of reasonable intelligence, Robert. Must I explain the danger of staying here?"

Robert once again eyed the fuel truck at the base of the bridge, now six feet from collision. Suddenly he understood why the smoke rippled slightly, why the hovering bits of metal sporadically twinkled. The clock hadn't stopped, just slowed. Their fate was still coming at the speed of a sunset.

Robert pushed his door open. "What's happening? How—"

"We're not here to educate," snarled the female of the trio, through the same odd inflections as her companion. "We came to save your pretty rose and songbird. Would you rather see them perish?"

"Of course not! But—"

“Then gather your daughters and come. Bring the cow if you must.”

While Melanie and Robert scrambled outside, the white-haired man kept his sharp blue gaze on Hannah. She’d never seen anyone more beautiful or frightening in her life. He was a Siberian tiger on hind legs, a snowstorm in a suit.

Robert opened the side hatch and pulled her into his quivering arms. “Come on, hon.”

“I don’t like it here.”

“I know.”

“It’s cold in the bubble and I want to go home.”

Robert didn’t know what she meant by “bubble.” He didn’t care. He clutched her against his chest, just as Amanda climbed out the door and wrapped herself around Melanie.

“Mom . . .”

Thick tears warmed Melanie’s cheeks. “Stay with me, sweetie. Don’t let go.”

Soon the family stood gathered outside the minivan. Robert held his wary gaze on the strangers.

“Can you please tell me what—”

They ignored him and split up. The man in the baseball cap turned around and moved a few yards ahead. The woman took a shepherding flank behind the Givens. The white-haired man stayed in place, bouncing his harsh blue stare between Robert and Melanie.

“We walk now,” he said. “Tread carefully and stay within the field. If even a finger escapes, you won’t enjoy the consequences.”

They began traveling. Robert noticed that everything within thirty feet of them existed at normal speed and color, a pocket of sanity in the sluggish blue yonder. The field seemed to move at the whim of the man in the Yankees cap. He walked with strain, fingers extended, as if pushing an invisible boulder.

Battling his panic, Robert retreated into his head and imagined the analytical discussion he and Amanda might have in a calmer state of mind.

*“Daddy, what did he mean about the finger and the field?”*

*“Not sure, hon. I’m guessing it’s not healthy for a body to move at two different speeds.”*

*“Did they slow down the world or did they speed us up?”*

*“Good question. I don’t know. In either case, I figure we’re just a blur to the people in the other cars.”*

*“How is this happening?”*

*“I don’t know, sweetie. It’s entirely possible that I’ve lost my mind.”*

He looked up and saw exactly where the drizzling rain stopped, a perfect dome that extended all around them. A bubble.

Suddenly his inner Amanda posed a dark new stumper.

*“Daddy, how did Hannah know the shape of the field?”*

Robert’s heart pounded with new dread, enough for Hannah to feel it through his blazer. She wrapped her shivering arms around his neck and buried her face in his shoulder. The air outside the dome carried a thick and smoky taste in her thoughts, like a million trees burning. She just wanted it to go away, along with the freezing cold and the scary white tiger-man.

Her mother and sister trailed five feet behind them, their arms locked together. Melanie’s stomach lurched every time Amanda threw a backward glance at the fuel truck. For all she knew, one more peek would turn the girl into a pillar of salt.

“Honey, don’t look. Just keep moving.”

“But there are still people back there.”

“Amanda . . .”

“We can’t just leave them!”

Melanie bit her lip and winced new tears. Though her daughter often wielded her morality like a cudgel, there was no denying the depth of her virtue. The girl was good to the core.

Five feet behind them, the female stranger shined a soft smile at Amanda. “You’re a noble one to worry, child, but little can be done. Even those who survive have short years ahead. I see the strings. I know the death that comes.”

Amanda had been nervously avoiding eye contact with the woman, but now drew a second look. She was a shade over six feet tall, with an immaculate face that put her anywhere between a weathered

thirty and a blessed sixty. Whatever her age, she was jarringly beautiful, at least on the outside. Her dark eyes twinkled with instability, like matches over oil.

“W-what do you mean?” Amanda asked.

Melanie tugged her forward. “Don’t talk to her.”

“It’s no matter,” the woman replied. “Just take comfort that you have a future, my pretty rose. I’ve seen you, tall and red.”

“Leave her alone,” Melanie hissed.

The stranger’s smile vanished. Her stare turned cold and brutal.

“Be careful how you speak to me, cow. We spare you and your husband as a courtesy. Perhaps we should slay you both and rear the little ones ourselves.”

“NO!” Amanda screamed.

The white-haired man sighed patiently at his companion. “*Sehmeer . . .*”

“*Nu’a purtua shi’i kien Esis,*” said the other man, without turning around.

The madwoman pursed her lips in a childish pout, then narrowed her eyes at Melanie.

“My wealth and heart oppose the idea. Pity. Your flawed little gems would thrive in our care.” She tossed Amanda another crooked smile. “We’d make them shine.”

The Givens moved in tight-knuckled silence for the rest of their journey—past the turnpike, over the guardrail, and up a steep embankment.

The tall ones stopped at the peak and surveyed the falling truck in the distance. The fuel tank had just touched the concrete and was starting to come apart.

“Brace yourself,” said the white-haired man, for all the good it did.

In the span of a gasp, the bubble of time vanished and a thunderous explosion rattled the Givens. Robert covered Hannah as a fireball rose sixty feet above the overpass. A searing blast of heat drove Melanie and Amanda screaming to the ground.

The strangers studied the swirling pillar of smoke with casual intrigue, as if it were art. Soon the madwoman swept her slender arm in a loop, summoning an eight-foot disc of fluorescent white light.



The family glanced up from the grass, eyeing the anomaly through cracked red stares. The circle hovered above the ground, as thin as a blanket and as round as a coin. Despite its perfect verticality, the surface shimmered like pond water.

Before any Given could form a thought, the quiet man in the windbreaker pulled down the lip of his baseball cap and brushed past the family with self-conscious haste. He plunged into the portal, the radiant white liquid rippling all around him. Robert watched his exit with mad rejection. It was the stuff of cartoons, a Roger Rabbit hole in the middle of nothing.

The dark-eyed woman gave Amanda a sly wink, then followed her companion into the breach. The surface swallowed her like thick white paint.

Alone among his rescues, the white-haired man took a final glance at the Givens. Melanie saw his sharp blue eyes linger on Hannah.

“Just go,” the mother implored him. “Please. We won’t tell anyone.”

The stranger squinted in cool umbrage, clearly displeased to be treated like a common mugger.

“Tell whoever you want.”

Robert stammered chaotically, his throat clogged with a hundred burning questions. He thought of his minivan, which no doubt stood a charred and empty husk on the road. Suddenly the father who’d cursed the gods for his horrible fortune knew exactly what to ask.

“Why us?”

The stranger stopped at the portal. Robert threw a quick, nervous look at Amanda and Hannah.

“Why them?”

The white-haired man turned around now, his face an inscrutable wall of ice.

“Your daughters may one day learn. You will not. Accept that and embrace the rest of your time.”

He stepped through the gateway, vanishing in liquid. Soon the circle shrank to a dime-size dot and then blinked out of existence.

One by one, the survivors on the freeway emerged from their vehicles—the injured and the lucky, the screaming and the stunned. In the smoky bedlam, no one noticed the family of mourners on the distant embankment.

The Givens huddled together on the grass, their brown and green gazes held firmly away from the turnpike. Only Hannah had the strength to stand. She was five years old and still new to the universe. She had no idea how many of its laws had been broken in front of her. All she knew was that today was a strange and ugly day and her sister was wrong.

Hannah moved behind her weeping mother and threw her arms around her shoulders. She took a deep breath. And she sang.