

Chapter One:

Aaron and Evan Reed never made it to the zoo the bright sunny morning they left the house with their mother.

Walking beside her along Broadway Avenue, the steady stream of traffic on their right a noisy counterpoint to the gently flowing waters of the Maumee River on their left, they meandered along the sidewalk with the pace typical of a couple of nine year old boys. They stopped often, pausing to examine the most inconsequential of objects along the way; a shiny stone that caught their fancy, a seagull feather, even a discarded plastic pop bottle. And though the zoo was their destination, and the twins were anxious to pet the rays and maybe even hold a crab at the newly-renovated aquarium, they never reached their objective.

Circumstances conspired against them, interrupting what should have been a pleasant family outing and transforming it into an ordeal that would have deep ramifications for the entire family.

They wound up instead at the Emergency Room at Toledo Hospital.

Laura Reed was feeling the need to get outside. She felt as though she had been stuck indoors all winter, shivering under her layers of clothing as she attempted to stay warm. The only time she got outdoors anymore was to go to work, trudging through the snow and the cold to get to Kroger, where she'd be on her

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feet for hours at a time running the cash register. Sometimes Ted would pick her up at the end of her shift, depending on his schedule and whether it coincided with hers, but it seemed most days she never even saw her boyfriend other than a few minutes in the morning or at night before they crawled into bed together.

It had been a long winter for all of them, and she was glad it was finally over. She wanted to be warm again, and open the windows and enjoy the smell of fresh air in the house. She wanted to wear her light capris, and her sandals, and the loose fitting sleeveless tops with the airy feel to them that she enjoyed so much.

Spring had failed to alleviate the condition. If anything it prolonged her misery, teasing her with signs of good weather but never quite fulfilling the promise. Below average temperatures and above average amounts of precipitation hadn't rectified the situation, forcing her to prolong her time indoors.

It wasn't so bad when the kids were at school. At least she didn't have to put up with a couple of complaining fourth graders. But here it was, barely into summer vacation, and they were growing increasingly restless already.

Evan, the most vocal of the twins, summed it up that morning. "I'm so bored." He dragged the word out, to emphasize his feelings on the matter. "There's never anything to do around here."

Sitting in the corner, his attention captivated with the hand-held video game he manipulated, Aaron looked up but failed to comment. Less talkative than his brother, and more moody at times, he was content to ignore

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what was going on around him. Solitude seemed to suit him.

Laura shook her head in disbelief. "How can you be bored already?" she asked. "You've only been out of school for two weeks. Is this what the summer's going to be like?"

"Can't we do something?" Evan persisted. "Or go somewhere?"

"How are we supposed to go somewhere when we don't have a car?"

"We could take the bus."

"That cost money. You know I don't get my check 'til the end of the week. And I work too hard for my money to waste it on public transportation to take us places we don't need to get to."

Aaron - eyes still focused on the electronic game he played - spoke up, his voice barely above a whisper. "We could walk to the zoo." He displayed no emotion with the remark, stating it as a simple declaration of fact and nothing more. He then returned to his game, ignoring the conversation around him, fearful lest he miss out on some of the video action in his hands.

Laura considered. It was Monday, which meant the zoo was free to Lucas County residents, so it wouldn't cost them anything to get in. It was a seven block walk, and though it was a bit of a hike she had done it in the past with the twins so she knew they were up to the task. And at least it would get them out of the house for a while.

Maybe the zoo wasn't such a bad idea after all.

"Okay, we'll go to the zoo," she informed them.

"Yeah!" Evan ran for the door, his exuberance obvious.

"But!" Laura raised her voice to accent

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the word, the tone bringing her son to an abrupt halt. "I don't want to hear any whining about how tired you are. Or it's too long of a walk. Understand?"

The twins answered a simultaneous "Yes, Mom," as though they were programmed to say the same thing.

"And we can't spend any money when we get there."

"Not even for popcorn?" Aaron suggested, the prospect of food breaking him free from his involvement with the video game.

"They charge too much at those places," Laura continued. "I could make you a whole barrel of popcorn for what it costs for one little bag at that place."

Evan, feeling the need to reinforce his brother's suggestion, drew closer to his mother. "But, Mom..."

His whine halted abruptly following the stern look he received in reply.

"Yes, Mom."

"I think there's some cookies in the cupboard. If you want to bring some along, and maybe a couple juice boxes, you can have them on the way."

The kids scampered through the house to the kitchen, Laura following at a more sedate pace. She passed Grandpa Mike on the way, asleep in his recliner as usual. The noise coming from the television fell on deaf ears, the old man missing the latest round of trading taking place on the game show in front of him as he slumbered his morning away.

Laura considered turning the television off as she walked past then decided against it. The silence would probably wake him up. No reason to disturb his rest. He'd been fighting a cold the last couple of days, on top of everything else he had to deal with; he could

use some extra sleep.

Continuing through the clutter that comprised the living area of the house and into the tiny kitchen at the back of the house she approached Grandma Ruth, who sat at the chipped Formica table, back ramrod straight in one of the wooden chairs as though it was the most comfortable seat in the house. As usual her attention was riveted on the Bible in front of her, though she occasionally pulled her eyes from the printed page to glance at the boiling pot of potatoes on the stove. She acknowledged Laura's presence with a slight arching of her eyebrows, as though wondering what her granddaughter was up to.

Laura walked idly up to the large pan, picking up a wooden spoon from the counter as she moved forward. She stirred the contents, the steam from the boiling water forcing her to step back slightly. "What are you making?"

"German potato salad."

Laura smiled at the old woman. "I should have known."

"It is my favorite," Grandma Ruth replied.

Finished with the stirring, Laura replaced the spoon on the counter and approached her grandmother. "The boys and I are heading to the zoo for a while."

A smile, a gently lop-sided expression that took its shape from the missing teeth on the left side of the old woman's mouth, answered. "That's nice." She glanced at the two boys, who were busily stuffing cookies from the cupboard into a brown paper bag that seemed on the verge of exploding. "Aaron and Evan will like that."

"It's more for me than for them. If I'm gonna keep my sanity I got to find something for them to do. Anyways, we shouldn't be too late."

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"Take your time." The Bible laid half-closed on the tabletop, her right hand marking the page, while her left lovingly caressed the cover. "I got my book to keep me company."

"You gonna be okay? If Grandpa wakes up...."

"Don't concern yourself with that. After fifty-two years of marriage I think I know how to handle your Grandpap."

"I'm sure you do." Laura smiled, bent over to plant a kiss on the other woman's cheek, then straightened up. "Okay. See you in a few hours."

It was a glorious afternoon, the type of day when the sun shone in the sky and the birds chirped in the trees and even the noise of the passing cars and trucks on the busy avenue they walked along failed to dampen the spirits. Laura walked at a leisurely pace, enjoying the mild temperature, watching her two sons as they scampered ahead. They had already consumed their cookies and the juice boxes were empty, which left them time to enjoy the walk in their own fashion.

Occasionally they would stop, and wait for her to catch up, then resume their play. Though markedly different in temperament from one another they were the best of friends, reacting to situations as only twins could, anticipating each others' moods and responding as one to the things around them. It was as though they shared a sixth sense with one another, having developed a capacity for closeness that Laura still marveled at.

As they drew closer to the zoo they approached Broadway Park, an urban playground of green nestled along the river. By peering through the trees along the bank you could just catch sight of the assorted craft plying the

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waters; tall-masted sailboats, majestically capturing the wind as they sliced through the waves; sleek motorboats, the roar from their engines echoing from the rows of trees lining the banks; the occasional kayak or canoe, their lone occupants enjoying the serenity of the day. In its way the Maumee River was as busy of a thoroughfare as the street they walked along.

The twins paused, eyeing the playground equipment that beckoned from the city park. Laura caught up to them where they stood together on the sidewalk.

They peered up at her, Evan voicing the question on both their minds. "Can we play on the jungle gym for a while, Mom?"

"I thought you wanted to do the zoo?"

"We can still do the zoo," Aaron suggested, in the quiet, logical way he used to approach things. "We'll just do the playground first."

Laura nearly said no, then thought better of it. At least they were outside. And getting some exercise. And she was out of the house for a change as well.

"Go ahead."

They ran off, screaming in their excitement, and she called out to them.

"But only for a few minutes."

She doubted they even heard her remark.

Laura found a place to sit close to the playground. A young mother occupied the end of a bench, gently rocking the stroller in front of her with her left foot while she leafed through a magazine in her lap. She offered a weak smile as Laura sat down. "Hi."

"Hi." Laura sneaked a quick peak into the stroller, observing the infant within snuggled beneath a blanket of pink. "How old is she?"

"Three months."

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"She's a cutie."

"Thanks." She gestured toward the play area, where half a dozen kids were raucously enjoying the equipment at the park. "Which one is yours?"

"The two on the jungle gym."

"They look pretty close in age."

"Eleven minutes."

Understanding showed on the other woman's face. "You mean...?"

Laura nodded. "Twins."

"Wow. I can't imagine. They must be a handful."

"They can be," Laura admitted.

"I suppose they're pretty similar?"

"Not really. Oh, they have a lot in common and all. But sometimes they're different as night and day. Evan never stops talking, and is always getting into everything. Aaron's more serious. Doesn't say much, but when he does it's like he's been thinking things over and won't say anything until he's sure what he wants to say."

"Still..." The young mother shook her head in wonder. "It must be a lot of work."

"Sometimes it is. But other times...."

Whatever Laura meant to say next was interrupted by a piercing scream from the vicinity of the playground. Laura was on her feet in moments, along with several other mothers in the area, all of them casting concerned glances toward where the children played.

A still form lay on the ground beneath the metal bars of the playground equipment. Even from a distance Laura recognized Aaron.

She also detected the odd way his left leg extended from beneath him.

A moment later his cries of agony resumed as Laura raced

to his side.

Chapter Two:

Dr. Lois Tyrone felt weary, worn-out after nearly five hours on her feet. It had been a busy day at Toledo Hospital. No busier than usual, she admitted to herself. But following on the heels of a full weekend of contusions and abrasions and sprains made it only that much more difficult. At least there hadn't been any tragic car wrecks to contend with, or anything as horrendous as the industrial accident she had dealt with back in December when she was working at Riverside Hospital.

Those were the days that tried her skills as a physician.

Though, at the same time, the tough days were in many ways the most rewarding. They were the days where she truly felt she was making a difference in someone's life; when she could apply her knowledge and experience to successfully see a patient through a difficult time. They depended on her to be there. It was a satisfying feeling that she never grew weary of, rising up to the challenges set before her.

Passing a darkened office she caught a reflection of herself, observing a middle-aged woman with drooping hair and sagging shoulders, the signs of weariness obvious. She made a conscious effort to stand straighter while brushing an errant strand of blonde away from her eyes. She wasn't vain; she was content in the knowledge that she would never grace the

cover of a fashion magazine. But she was pleased nonetheless with the change in her appearance as she continued her rounds.

Approaching the tiny cubicle at the end of the hallway she forced a smile, hoping it would disguise her exhaustion. The chamber she entered, one of fifteen just like it in the Emergency Room, looked much the same as the last cubicle she had left; the same standard hospital cot draped in white, the same rolling tray of medical implements, the same nondescript curtain encircling the patient and evoking a sense of privacy.

Her previous patient, an eighty-seven year old woman who had slipped in her bathroom and apparently broken her hip, was being wheeled down to X-Ray to verify the extent of the damages. She had been difficult to communicate with, owing to hearing loss that substantially hampered her ability to answer questions in a coherent manner. Her son had done his best to interpret for the woman, but as a consequence of his seeming lack of interest in his mother's predicament he hadn't been very helpful. It had been a time-consuming ordeal, ascertaining the extent of the woman's injuries, and had taken her away from other patients. She was anxious to make amends by getting back to work.

Pulling the curtain closed behind her Dr. Tyrone made a quick visual examination of the boy on the cot while at the same time glancing over his chart. He wore shorts, stained with dirt, and a striped shirt with a torn sleeve. The left side of his shirt was torn as well, darkened with what she was pretty certain must have been dried blood. His sneakers were untied; she wondered if that was an accident or just a fad the nine-year-old sported. His face was dirty with brown streaks that ran down his cheeks. She suspected the marks were a

combination of dirt and tears, though he was not crying at the moment. For now the boy sat quietly, a look of fear and bewilderment on his face, clearly uncomfortable in his present surroundings.

According to the report the child had fallen from some playground equipment. From the bruising and swelling already apparent on his leg she suspected a broken bone.

The doctor finished reviewing the information on the chart before addressing her patient.

"Hello, Aaron. I'm Dr. Tyrone."

He attempted a smile, but the movement seemed to bother him. He grimaced instead and nodded his head. His face was pale, his breathing shallow.

She approached the cot to examine the injury. She reached slowly for the spot but, before she even touched the skin, Aaron flinched, attempting to pull away.

"I'm not going to hurt you," she assured him. "I just need to look things over."

"It hurts," the child admitted.

"I'm sure it does. But you're being brave to sit there so quietly."

She flashed him a smile, which he halfheartedly returned.

Something seemed peculiar to the physician. Something that just hadn't seemed right from the moment she entered, and it finally came to her. She turned toward the nurse on the other side of the cot.

"Where's his mother?"

"I asked her to leave."

Dr Tyrone made no reply, waiting for the young girl to continue.

"I made a quick examination, to determine where he was hurt. I was concerned with the blood on his side." As she spoke she moved

forward to lift the bottom edge of the boy's shirt. Aaron flinched, pulling back as though afraid, at the same time averting his eyes from the physician.

"Nobody's going to hurt you," Dr. Tyrone repeated, keeping a soothing lilt to her tone.

The nurse pulled gently on the material, exposing Aaron's left side along with a portion of his back. The skin had been scraped raw - just above his waistline - from the fall, though it seemed to be only a surface abrasion. There wasn't much blood, as though it had seeped slightly through the skin rather than bleeding profusely. The blood was nearly dried by now. It was no doubt sore, but nothing some bacterial ointment and time wouldn't take care of.

Dr. Tyrone gave a passing glance to the wound, her eyes attracted instead to some marks several inches higher on the boy's abdomen. A series of jagged lines, perhaps half a dozen or more, crisscrossed the skin, the raised welts glaring against the pale white of the flesh. A patch of discolored skin, light purple from bruising, showed under the armpit. There seemed to be little swelling, as though the healing had progressed beyond that stage and the damage was beginning to heal.

The nurse replaced the shirt material, flashing a weak smile toward Aaron Reed, and faced the physician. "The mother was hysterical when she first came in, which was understandable. But when she saw this she became confused. Almost disoriented. Like she couldn't understand what was going on."

For several seconds no one spoke, until Dr. Tyrone voiced her concern. "Those marks weren't caused from falling off some playground equipment. And they didn't happen today. They're at least a few weeks old."

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The nurse merely nodded.

"Take him down to X-Ray," the physician advised. "Let's get a look at what's up with that leg."

She turned, a look of determination on her face.

"I have a phone call to make."

Evan Reed was bored.

An hour earlier he had been scared, following the unexpected events at the park. He hadn't seen his brother fall from the jungle gym. At the time he had been digging in the dirt with a stick, looking for the colored stones he sometimes discovered at the park. Ted - his mother's boyfriend - claimed they were only bits of colored glass. But he chose not to believe that. Instead he imagined them as priceless gems. Pirate booty, perhaps. Like a modern day Tom Sawyer he fantasized all sorts of imaginative reasons to explain why pirate treasure would be at the park, along the banks of the river. In Toledo Ohio, of all places.

Rational thinking seldom entered his daydreams.

It was while he had been excavating in the soil that he heard the startled cry, in a voice he instantly recognized as Aaron's. By the time he had turned around his brother was laying on the ground, screaming in pain, his mother running to assist him while assorted onlookers approached the scene.

The succeeding events were a whirlwind of activities. Evan stood idly by and watched the action progress, forgotten for the moment with all the attention centered on his brother. It seemed to take minutes only for the ambulance to arrive, the shrill blare of the siren announcing its arrival long before reaching the

park. The crowd had separated then, stepping back to allow the paramedics to move forward to assess the situation. Rapid motion followed, the ambulance attendants performing their tasks in a manner that seemed unhurried yet, at the same time, wasted not a single instant. Sooner than Evan would have believed possible his brother was in the emergency vehicle, securely strapped in place and ready to be transported to the hospital.

And then they were on their way, Evan and his mother sitting nervously on the low-benched seat that lined the back of the medical vehicle, while Aaron whimpered and moaned on the gurney - a word Evan had never encountered before until hearing the two men in the ambulance use it.

Their motion over the city streets should have been exhilarating, racing down the roads as traffic pulled to the side to clear the way, but the occupants were too involved with other considerations to pay attention to the mad dash. While Aaron fought back the tears, his pain obvious from the paleness of his skin and the tight clenching of his jaw, Evan sat impatiently observing the scene, squirming in nervousness, sympathetically imagining the agony his brother was experiencing. He could almost feel a soreness in his own leg, a throbbing sensation that jolted him each time the ambulance hit a bump in the road.

Eventual the hectic journey was over. The vehicle screeched to a halt and the rear doors flew open, followed by a hustle of activities. Apparently the emergency room staff had anticipated their arrival; Aaron was instantly wheeled away, their mother at his side, while Evan had been instructed to stay in the waiting room. He sat down in a hard-backed chair and watched as Laura Reed disappeared in back with

Aaron and the nurses.

That's when things had slowed down. The excitement had passed, replaced by a dull humdrum of leafing through magazines that didn't interest him, glancing occasionally at the television program playing on the set in the corner, and basically just sitting and waiting and wishing he was anywhere else but stuck in a boring hospital.

What had seemed like an adventure had become a dull routine, his fantasies replaced with the reality of the situation.

Eventually his mother had rejoined him.

"How's Aaron?" The words left his lips before his mother even sat down.

She took a minute to compose herself. "I don't know," she finally admitted. "They think he has a broken leg. They're sending him down to X-Ray."

"Cool!" Evan could only sit there and envy his brother's experience. He wondered what it was like inside the hospital. What secret passageways would Aaron be exploring? Would it hurt to get an X-Ray? He didn't think so. He had never heard of X-Rays hurting. But he couldn't be sure.

He and his mother talked for a while - mostly about what had happened at the park - but it was obvious her thoughts were somewhere else. She stared into the distance, biting her lower lip, her replies vague. Eventually Evan tired of trying to talk to her and slumped back into his seat, staring into space, wishing they had never decided to go to the zoo that morning.

Dr. Tyrone entered the waiting room escorted by a nurse from the front desk, who pointed to Laura and her son and then disappeared around the corner. The physician

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walked slowly over, a look of concern on her face. There was something else there as well, though Aaron couldn't quite place it. It was a sad sort of expression, as though she'd been called upon to do a particularly unpleasant task.

"Laura Reed?"

She had been feeling drowsy, her mind in an almost trance-like state following the excitement of the morning. But the sound of her name brought Laura to instant awareness. She stood immediately. "Yes?"

"I'm Dr. Tyrone."

"My son....?"

"Will be fine, Miss Reed. He has a fractured fibula. That's the smaller of the two lower leg bones. Luckily it was a clean break. He's getting the cast put on right now. I'm afraid he'll be on crutches for the next few weeks."

Evan's face lit in excitement, imagining the fun of walking around in crutches. "Cool!"

The doctor smiled at the boy, a light-hearted inflection gracing her voice. "He'll be laid up for most of the summer, I'm afraid. Which means no swimming. Or bicycling. He won't be able to get around much at all. Now that doesn't sound like fun, does it?"

"I guess not," Evan meekly acknowledged.

Laura reached tentatively toward Dr. Tyrone, brushing against the woman's sleeve. "Can I see him now? I'd like to see my son."

"In a few minutes. But there's something we need to discuss with you first. Please come this way."

Without waiting for an answer the doctor turned and started to walk away. Laura and Evan followed; through the double doors behind the nurses' station, down one hall, then another, and again a third, before finally

reaching what looked to be a row of offices. Dr. Tyrone opened a door, then stood aside to usher Laura and her son into the room.

Laura hesitated. Something just didn't feel right. "What's going on?"

"We just have a few questions for you."
We?

There were two people already in the office. Sitting behind the desk was an elderly man sporting a finely trimmed white beard. He wore a white lab coat, and sported a stethoscope around his neck like it was some kind of adornment. Laura took him to be a doctor. His face held a stern look, like it was chiseled from stone and it was the only expression he knew. His eyes glared her way, examining her with a look she couldn't quite place. Contempt, perhaps?

The other man was much younger, wearing slacks and a light sport coat and holding a clipboard loaded with sheets of paper. His manner seemed friendlier, almost approachable. But, like the white-coated man behind the desk, there was no humor in his expression.

It felt crowded in the room, especially after Dr. Tyrone closed the door behind them.

"What's going on?" Laura asked at last.

The young man stepped forward. "I'm Patrick Zimmerly, Miss Reed. I'm a case worker at Lucas County Children's Services."

"I don't understand." Laura glanced from one face to another, her bewilderment growing. "What's this about?"

"We're concerned about your son's injuries."

"I don't believe this." She stammered a moment, at a loss for words. "My son fell off a jungle gym, for heaven's sake. It was an accident. And it wasn't like he wasn't being watched. I was right there. And now you want

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to make it into some kind of federal offense?"

She shook her head in disbelief. "Don't you people have something better to do with your time?"

She stopped then, at a loss for words, and the man from Children's Services continued.

"Those aren't the injuries we're concerned with, Miss Reed."

"I don't understand."

Patrick Zimmerly indicated the man behind the desk. "This is Dr. Yamal Rahid. He specializes in these sorts of cases, so we called him in to get his opinion."

Laura, speechless, stared and said nothing.

Dr. Rahid stood, presenting an even more imposing figure as he did so. "Has your child had any other injuries in the last few weeks, Miss Reed?"

"No. Of course not. I take good care of my kids. What are you trying to say?"

"There are bruises, and other marks, that we are very concerned with."

"You mean from his fall?" Laura suggested.

"No," Dr Rahid answered. "These are obviously older, judging by the scarring."

Laura, beginning to get an inkling of what they were driving at, searched the faces in the room for a sign of sympathy. None was to be found.

"This is ridiculous. What are you trying to say?"

No one replied to her question.

She continued, her words gushing forth. "I certainly don't abuse my children. I'm a good mother."

"We're certain you are," the case worker replied, in a tone that seemed much too condescending. "But perhaps somebody else in your household? Or someone the children were

visiting...?"

"No." Laura shook her head violently back and forth to indicate her point. "I don't want to hear this. Just let me see my son. We want to go home."

"We cannot allow that at this point," Dr. Rahid said.

"I don't understand." She looked the accusatory trio over one more time, pausing at last to face Dr. Tyrone. She at least seemed more sympathetic than the others. "Can't we just go home?"

Dr. Tyrone slowly shook her head. "I'm sorry, Miss Reed. But I'm mandated to report cases where we suspect abuse. At this point we have to investigate the allegations. The children will have to stay here, Miss Reed, so we can make a thorough physical examination to determine the extent of their injuries. I'm sorry."

"Children?"

Patrick Zimmerly supplied the answer. "We will need to examine both of the children, Miss Reed."

Laura attempted to say more; to point out how ridiculous the entire accusation was. But she wasn't thinking clearly now. Her mind was in too much of a blur from all that had transpired. It was obvious the decision had been reached before she even walked into the room. She really had no say in the matter.

Dr. Tyrone drew a step closer. "It's for their own good, Miss Reed. Please understand that."

"I will need to get some more information from you," Patrick continued. "And then you may leave."

"But my kids...?"

"Will be well taken care of. I assure you. And I promise you I will move this

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through Children's Services as quickly as possible so you won't be separated any longer than necessary."

Laura looked down at Evan, who had remained silent the entire while. Brushing a tear away from his cheek, she bent down to kiss him on the forehead.

"Mommy will see you again real soon. Okay?"

He nodded in reply.