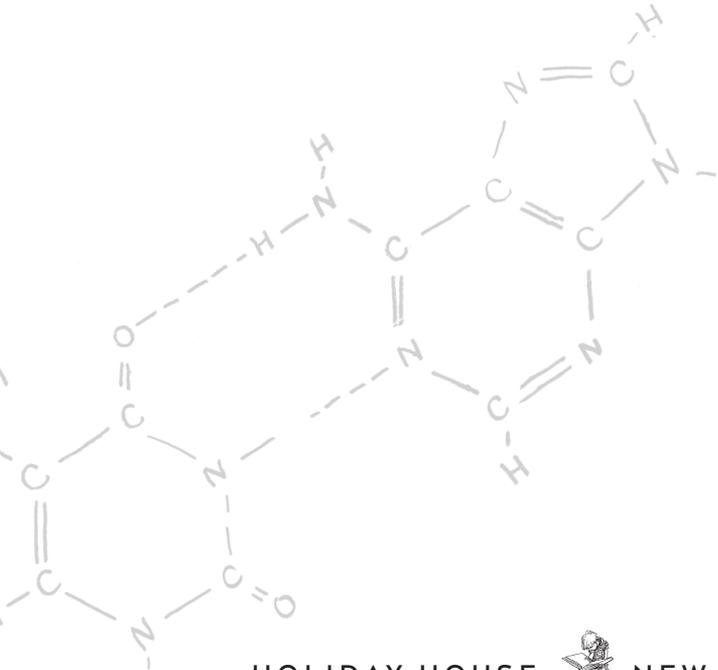


SPLICED

JON MCGORAN



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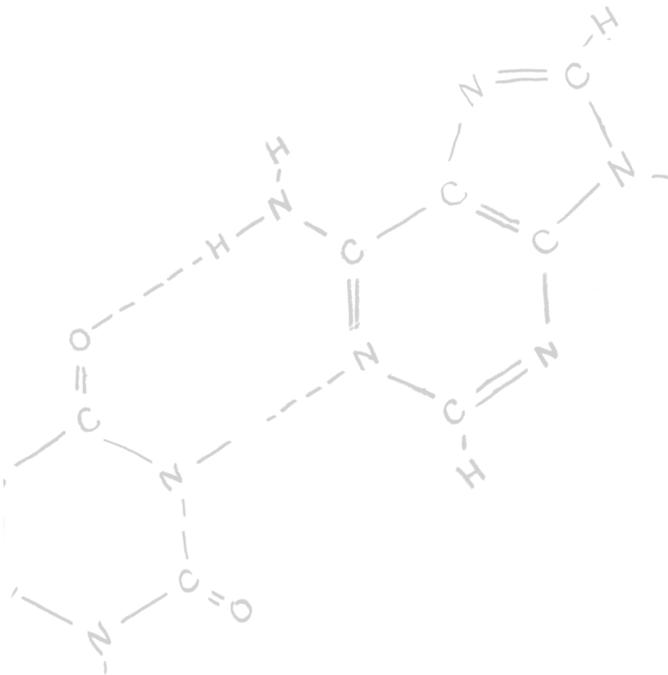
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To people deciding who they want to be,
and to Earth for everyone



PART ONE



ONE

I awoke with a start to the sound of yelling and the sight of spaceships doing battle above my bed.

It wasn't the first time this had happened. If I left the Hologrid set to automatic, it turned off when I fell asleep but started playing again as soon as I woke up. I waved it off and looked at the clock.

Six fifty-six.

The yelling was coming from next door. Nothing new there, either. But in the two weeks my mom and Kevin had been gone, I'd gotten used to our house being extra quiet. When there was noise, I really heard it.

My alarm was set for seven, and I closed my eyes, determined to enjoy those last few minutes in spite of the ruckus. Then I heard a crash.

I jumped out of bed, yanked on a bathrobe over my thin tank top, and looked out my window as Del came half running, half falling down his back steps. His momentum took him across the stretch of grass that separated our houses. I was almost down the stairs when he started banging on the back door.

He didn't stop until he saw me through the small panes of glass. His face always got red when he was angry, but this morning it was redder than usual. Especially the hand-shaped mark that took up the whole left side.

I opened the door, and he flew past me, stomping around the kitchen table twice before he uttered a word.

"I *hate* Stan," he finally said, his face twisting with emotion.

This was not news.

Lots of kids say they hate their parents, but Stan—Del's dad—was truly bad, mean in a crazy-strict kind of way. He'd always been a jerk,

but he'd gotten more vicious over the last few years. Sometimes when he'd bring his patrol car home, I'd look at the TO SERVE AND PROTECT written on the side and wonder if it was supposed to be ironic or just plain sarcastic.

I poured us two glasses of orange juice. It was kind of a ritual between us, something my mom started doing when we were younger and Del would come over upset about something.

I put the glasses on the table and sat in front of one of them. Del circled the kitchen a few more times, eyes burning with rage, before settling in front of the other.

I took stock of him while he seethed, and it struck me how different he looked compared to just a few months ago, maybe even a few weeks ago. Lately my mom wouldn't shut up about how much we were both changing, how quickly we were growing up. It was annoying, the way she went on about it, but looking at Del that morning, I could sort of see what she meant.

He wasn't anywhere close to physically intimidating Stan. But he was tall—almost six feet now—and getting more solid, more muscular. He still had that Del vulnerability, but skinny had turned to slender. Below his prominent cheekbones, his jawline looked stronger, too, but that could have been because it was clenched so hard. This morning, his unruly dark hair could pass for tousled.

It occurred to me that objectively speaking, Del was sort of hot. But he'd be the last person on earth to own it, which was one of the many reasons I liked him.

I waited until he sipped some juice before I asked, "You okay?"

His eyes were still burning, but then they rolled, annoyed. He started laughing. I did, too. I had meant it seriously, but we both knew it was a ridiculous question.

"Yeah, Jimi," he said. "I'm just great."

We'd come a long way since the first few times Del's dad had gone off on him. Back when we were little, Stan scared the living crap out of

us. These days, the whole situation was more depressing than scary. It wasn't the end of the world; it's just how the world *was*. Or at least Del's corner of it.

It would have been nice if he had more people in that corner with him. But besides me, Del didn't have any real friends, and Stan was his only family. His mom had committed suicide a few years ago, after the last big flu outbreak, a year after the one that killed my dad. Del didn't like to talk about it. Stan had been a mess ever since.

"You got any bagels?" Del asked.

"Yeah." I reached behind me and grabbed the bag out of the fridge. As I tossed it onto the table, Del gave me a funny look.

"What?" I said.

He cocked an eyebrow. "Moons and stars?"

He was smirking but blushing, too, and at first I had no idea what he was talking about. Then I realized my robe had come open.

"Don't be an idiot."

"What? It's a pretty shirt. What there is of it."

"I didn't have time to get dressed because some wacko was banging on my door. Besides, you've seen me in tank tops a million times."

"Well, the moons-and-stars one is especially cute."

I rolled my eyes at him, but the way he had been looking at me was messing with my head. The morning had already gotten off to a sucky start. I didn't need things getting awkward, too. "I have to get ready," I said, standing up and tying my robe tight.

Del cleared his throat and pulled a bagel out of the bag. "Do you want one?" he asked as he started hacking at it with a knife, sprinkling poppy seeds everywhere.

"Sure," I called back as I ran up the stairs.



I tend to shower pretty quickly, but for some reason, knowing Del was downstairs, and after the way he'd been looking at me, I finished

up even faster than usual. We'd been friends forever—we'd probably even been in the tub together at some point—but things were different now.

It occurred to me as I rinsed off that maybe my mom's daily comments about us growing up weren't so much about the physical changes. Those were pretty obvious, and every kid who'd taken fifth-grade health class knew they were coming. Maybe it was more about who we were becoming as people.

I was out of the shower before the mirror had fogged, and I paused in front of it. My mom told me—constantly—that I was pretty. But she said it in this wistful way that made me wonder if she was really talking about how much I looked like my dad: the small curve at the end of my nose, the faint freckles, the light hair, the brown eyes. People said all the time that I looked like him. I never used to see it, but lately even I had been struck by the resemblance.

I put on jeans and a light sweater, tied back my damp hair, rubbed some moisturizer on my face, and ran back downstairs.

Del had a bagel waiting for me—hacked, toasted, and buttered—on a plate.

"Thanks." I took a giant bite, then looked up at the clock. "Yikes. We need to go."

Del looked over my shoulder and out the window. "Crap."

"What?"

"Stan's car's still there. He hasn't left for the station yet."

"So?"

"So, I need my bag."

My stomach sank. I looked at the clock again. "Okay," I said, steering him toward the door with my hand on his back. "Just get in and get out. Fast and quiet. He won't even know you're there."

TWO

The shouting started up again as soon as Del slipped back inside his house. As I wolfed down the rest of my breakfast and headed out the door, I could make out Stan's voice now and again saying "disgrace" or "heathen."

I tried not to roll my eyes. Stan loved the word *heathen*. He used to be a normal guy who went to church once a week like lots of people did. But then Del's mom died, and it was like, once a week just wasn't enough. So he found another church—a different kind of church, called the Church of the Eternal Truth. It was pretty intense—like, I think they spent a lot of time talking about who was going to hell—and Stan got into it big-time. He volunteered for all sorts of things there. Sometimes I wondered if he spent so much time there because he was afraid to be home with Del. If so, the feeling was mutual.

Standing outside in the almost-chill of early autumn, I could hear them going back and forth—not the words anymore, just their voices, taking turns trying to hurt each other.

The mail drone flew past our houses, and I looked at my watch. It was almost 7:30. I hated running late, and we were really pushing it. The drone stopped down the street and left a package on the Merricks' porch, then it shot off into the sky and disappeared.

I was starting to get seriously antsy when I heard two noises—the screech of Del's screen door as he finally came out and the hum of the school bus cruising past our stop, right on schedule.

We ran to the end of the block and got there just in time to watch the bus disappear around the next corner.

I scowled at Del.

"Sorry," he said with a shrug. "What can I say? My dad's a jerk."

I stifled a growl and started speed walking. I could hear him coming up behind me. “Let’s just ditch,” he called.

I turned to look at him, trying to read his face. He had a mischievous twinkle in his eye and a half smile. He had one earbud in his ear, the other clipped to his shirt. If we’d made the bus, we’d probably be sharing a song by now, something he’d found on some weird playlist I’d never heard of.

I’d never ditched school in my life. But for a moment, the expression on Del’s face had me thinking about it—wondering what the day would look like, what we would do. What it would feel like to let loose a little.

Del seemed to sense my resistance wavering. “Come on,” he said. “We deserve a mental health day.”

I laughed. “You need a mental health *month*, at least. Maybe a year. But I can’t ditch.” I turned away and kept walking. “Besides, we have a test.”

“Oh, come on. That class is a joke.” Honors calculus was the one class Del was better in than I was. I got mostly As, but for me, calc was work.

Del came up beside me. “We can just take a makeup.”

I turned and looked at him again, trying not to let him know how seriously I was considering it. He bobbed an eyebrow at me, and we walked that way for a few seconds, neither of us looking where we were going.

I turned away first. “I can’t ditch,” I said again. “And neither can you. It’s not like we’re a shoe-in for Temple U, or anywhere else. We can’t afford to be screwing around. Not junior year. And you know what my mom would do if she found out.”

He stayed quiet, sulking. Okay by me, I thought. *I* should be the one sulking, since he was the one who’d made me miss the bus. Luckily, since our bus route was so long and convoluted, walking wouldn’t get us to school much later than usual. If I’d *really* been worried, I could have just run and gotten there in no time. I probably would have

enjoyed it. But Del was no athlete. And annoyed as I was, I didn't want to leave him behind.

We hopped fences and snuck through backyards, cutting diagonally through our neighborhood. Oakton was a decent neighborhood on the northwest edge of Philadelphia, not far from Broad Street, which bisected the city going north and south. My mom thought we were a little too close to the zurbs, but there were lots of trees and grass, and it was better than a lot of other neighborhoods in the city. My dad used to say it reminded him of how the zurbs used to be, but with electricity and stuff that you could only get in the city now.

We'd walked about a block without saying anything when Del got over himself and broke his silence. "Okay, I was going to save this for after school, but check this out," he said, stepping closer.

He rolled up his sleeve to show a massive chameleon freshly tattooed onto the inside of his right forearm. Its tail was coiled in a tight spiral that perfectly hid the scar at its center, where Stan had held a lit cigarette several months earlier. Del had made me promise not to tell anyone about it, and I still wondered if I should have.

"A tattoo?" I said. "Seriously? When did you get that?"

He laughed. I didn't. He knew I didn't like tattoos. I couldn't believe he had gotten it without telling me. Then again, he probably knew I would have tried to talk him out of it.

"Last night, while Stan was at his Bible study meeting. There's a parlor by the Avenue that does them cheap. Pretty cool, right? It looks just like Sydney."

Sydney was Del's nine-inch pet tiger salamander. He'd wanted to get a chameleon, but Stan wouldn't let him. Technically, he didn't let him get a salamander, either—Del just went and got it.

"You do know that's a chameleon, and that Sydney's a salamander, right?"

Del shrugged. "Artistic license. Besides, I think it captures Sydney's spirit."

Sydney was cute, as amphibians go, and Del loved him more than a salamander should really be loved. It was like an obsession.

I shook my head. “What is it with you and that salamander?”

He looked at me with mock indignation. “Are you serious? You mean apart from the fact that salamanders are the only animals that can regenerate limbs? Salamanders are *awesome*. And Sydney is the best one there is.”

I couldn’t help but smile. “Okay, I’ll admit, Sydney *is* pretty cool, for a lizard.”

“Sydney’s an amphibian,” Del said, correcting me.

“Yeah, yeah, I know. So is that why your dad’s so angry?” I asked, pointing at the tattoo.

He rolled down his sleeve as we turned onto Devon Street. “Are you kidding? Stan hasn’t seen this. He’d go nuts.”

I was going to ask Del if *he* was the one who’d gone nuts, doing something he knew was going to set his father off.

Instead, I stopped in my tracks and said, “Oh no.”

Our chances of getting to school on time suddenly looked an awful lot slimmer.

THREE

The red plastic fence spanned the entire road, sidewalk to sidewalk. A sign attached to it said DEVON STREET BRIDGE CLOSED. I ran up and peered over it.

The bridge wasn't just closed; it was gone. Empty space yawned where it used to be. I looked right and left, up and down the rails that stretched each way into the distance.

"When did this happen?"

The mail drone flew over our heads, effortlessly crossing the void where the bridge once stood. It seemed to be rubbing it in.

Del stepped up next to me and said, "Huh."

The tracks were sandwiched between two tall fences. Together, they stretched into the distance. To the right I could see the Forrest Avenue Bridge, a mile away. To the left was the old McAllister Street Bridge, a quarter that distance. But outside the city. In the zurbs.

Del spat into the ravine, watching the little white dot as it arced up into the air and landed on the dusty rocks between the two sets of tracks.

I punched him in the arm.

"Ouch," he said, kind of laughing, but not completely.

"What are we going to do now?" I demanded.

He hooked his fingers into the construction fence and gave it a little shake. Before I could tell him we were *not* going to climb the fences, a soft whispering sound grabbed our attention, and we both looked down at the tracks. The sound grew for a second, then exploded into a roar as a long, silver Lev train flashed below us. It was moving so fast you couldn't see the gaps between the train cars—just

an uninterrupted silver blur. Trash and freshly fallen leaves whipped around violently as the train tore through the air.

A shorter train going the other way appeared on the other track, startling us both.

Then they were gone, replaced by the drizzly sound of the debris settling back to the ground.

“We could ditch,” Del said.

I punched him again.

“Stop it,” he said, rubbing his arm.

“Damn it, Del, for the last time, I can’t ditch! And I can’t be late, either. I barely managed to talk my mom into letting me stay on my own. You know she said if I screw up I’ll have to stay with Aunt Trudy.”

Trudy was my eccentric aunt—my dad’s sister. She ran an art gallery in the city, but lived out in the zurbs, in an area called Perkins Park. She seemed nice enough, but I hardly knew her. She’d moved out to the West Coast when I was little, and I’d met her exactly twice since then: once for a few hours at my dad’s funeral, and once a year ago after she moved back east and my mom invited her over for what may have been the most awkward dinner of my life.

Aunt Trudy was the only family we had. When Mom agreed to let me stay in the house alone while she was doing college visits with Kevin, she made it clear that if she later decided it wasn’t working out, I’d end up staying with Aunt Trudy. My mom wasn’t known for bluffing.

I glared at Del and kicked the fence.

“It’s not my fault we’re late,” Del said defensively. “You know how my dad is.”

“Yeah, and I know how you are, too.”

“What do you mean by that?” he said, his voice rising.

“I *mean*, just because he’s an abusive jerk who’s always looking for a fight, doesn’t mean you always have to give him one.”

He glared back at me.

“I’m serious, Del,” I said, softening my voice. “You’re not going to change him. Sometimes you have to just walk away and let him be his miserable self.”

He turned and started walking away from me instead.

“Del!” I called after him. I felt bad, even though what I’d said was true. I started to follow him, but when he got to the corner, he turned right instead of left. Toward the McAllister Street Bridge. The one outside the city.

“Uh, Del?” I called after him, running to catch up. “Where are you going?”

“You said it yourself. You can’t be late. This way is fastest.”

“Well, yeah,” I said, hurrying to keep up with him. “But it’s outside the city.”

“It’s not the edge of the world,” he said with a sharp laugh. “You’re not going to sail off the edge, for God’s sake.”

I didn’t like the way he was taunting me, and I really didn’t like the fact that it was working. I’d been outside the city, plenty of times. We used to go all the time when I was little. But the zurbs had gotten weirder since then. I wasn’t scared. I just didn’t like it.

On the last block before North Avenue, the northern edge of the city, the houses turned ratty. Some had beat-up cars out front, old gasoline models retrofitted with electric motors. Half a block from the Avenue, the Super-E utility lines came out of the ground in huge gray pipes that rose onto metal structures taller than the nearby houses. The Super-E lines didn’t cross the Avenue. That’s where the city ended, and so did the reach of the city’s electricity. The lines made a faint, high-pitched hum, but it was mostly drowned out by the whine of the cars whooshing past us on the Avenue.

The blur of cars looked a lot like the Levline, except instead of silver it was all different colors blending together. The Avenue wasn’t

technically a Smart-route, since it had traffic lights and pedestrian crossings. But your car had to be in autodrive to be on it, or else you could get major fines.

The sound of the traffic grew louder as we approached, then it fell away altogether as the crossing light turned green.

I stopped walking, but Del didn't. The numbers on the pedestrian light were counting down. Soon it would turn red, and it would be at least five minutes before it turned green again.

Where I was standing, on the city side of the Avenue, the sidewalk was trashy and unkempt, but the other side was a hundred times worse—there was twice as much litter, and the concrete was cracked and split and overgrown with weeds. The houses lining the far side of the Avenue were vacant and covered with vines.

“You're going to be late,” Del called over his shoulder, taunting me again. He was halfway to the other side. The light clicked to yellow.

I ran after him, across six lanes. We both stepped onto the curb just as the light clicked to red.

Del grinned down at me.

“Now what?” I said, shouting over the sudden rush of cars accelerating behind us.

He shrugged and started walking down the road. “We cross the McAllister Street Bridge, and we go to school.”

A block off the Avenue, the traffic sounds faded away to an unsettling quiet. The houses were more and more run-down the farther we walked. Dark, vacant windows stared down at us.

Two blocks from the Avenue, the street was pocked with sinkholes. Some of the houses were completely hidden by foliage. Some had been torn down, with the debris piled into what used to be the basements and half-covered with dirt. The rest had been left to fall down on their own, and many were well on their way. One had a tree growing through the second-floor window. The window wasn't

even broken; someone had left it open, and now a tree was growing through it.

I would never have let on to Del that I was the slightest bit nervous, but as we walked, I could feel imaginary eyes watching my every step.

It wasn't until the next block that I discovered they were real.

FOUR

Chimeras.

Three of them. Two were on the front steps and one was in the driveway of a big old stone mansion that looked like it had been converted into apartments before being abandoned altogether.

None of them moved a muscle as they watched us. It creeped me out that we might have just as easily walked right past and never noticed them.

The two on the steps had bird splices. Beige feathers covered their heads instead of hair. Their huge black eyes stared at us, unblinking, above noses that were large but somehow graceful, with a pronounced curve. They looked exotic—maybe even beautiful. But they were also unsettling.

They wore jeans and T-shirts. The one on the left had a green stone set in her pierced nose. Apart from that they could have been twins. If they'd gotten their splices from the same batch, I guess in a way they were.

The one in the driveway, wearing khakis and a maroon jacket, had some kind of cat splice. His ears were pointy, his nose flat, and he had a thin sheen of striped fur on his face, more tabby than tiger. His upper lip was slightly puffed out. His eyes were different, too; they were still human in shape, but the pupils seemed elongated.

I realized I'd seen him before, in the city, getting kicked out of Genaro's Deli. Genaro was a cranky old guy, and a big-time chimera-hater. He had signs all over his deli saying HUMANS ONLY and ANIMALS MUST WAIT OUTSIDE. I'd heard that chimeras sometimes went there just to provoke him.

The cat was staring at me, but I couldn't tell if he recognized me.

"Jesus," I whispered involuntarily as we passed.

“Chimeras,” Del said softly.

“Don’t stare,” I said, quickening my step.

“They’re so cool,” he said, stopping to look back at them.

“They’re not cool,” I said. “They’re creepy. What are they thinking, doing that to themselves?” I stopped and looked back, too, and the cat chimera in the driveway narrowed his eyes. Maybe he sensed my disapproval, or maybe he did recognize me from the neighborhood.

There was a movement at the doorway, and I noticed a fourth chimera, looking out from the shadows inside the house. He stooped as he came through the doorway and out onto the porch.

I couldn’t tell what he was spliced with—maybe a dog or a wolf—but his face was striking. His skin looked smooth and fair, but tanned from the sun. His ears were slightly pointed and his nose was wide, ending in a flat triangle. He had a prominent mouth, full lips, and a strong jawline. His hair was kind of awesome, chestnut brown, peaking down into his forehead and spiked up as it swept backward. But his most arresting feature was his eyes—large and wide set, they were a deep, soulful brown; calm but wary, and radiating intelligence.

He was also massive—probably close to seven feet tall, and solidly muscled, like he was part mastiff and part landmass. Come to think of it, he may actually have *been* part mastiff.

The whole effect was not entirely unattractive, if you were into that sort of thing.

I’d never seen him before, but I got the sense that maybe he recognized us.

The two bird chimeras on the steps looked up at him with a quick, jerky, simultaneous movement. Then their heads snapped back in unison to stare at us.

“What’s up, Del?” said a voice, sudden and surprisingly close.

I turned to discover yet another chimera, leaning against a tree right near us. He had pale brown eyes in a face that narrowed to a point, with a faint coat of fur, reddish brown on the top half and

white along his jaw, chin, and neck. He might have been part fox. I was still trying to figure it out when I heard Del responding, “What’s up, Sly?”

I looked at Del as it sank in that he knew this chimera. Then the big guy in the doorway said something to his friends. His words were too soft for me to hear—just a low rumble that I felt in my chest—but the bird chimeras rose together in response and hurried inside. I turned to see that the cat in the driveway was gone, and so was Sly. The big dog chimera stared at me another moment, then stepped back through the doorway and disappeared into the shadows.