

Through The Door To Danger



SHANNON TEPER

Royal Fireworks Press
Unionville, New York



For my husband Dave, who can open any door,
and for my son Zach, who lent me his hand

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Teper, Shannon.

Through the door to danger / Shannon Teper.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-88092-534-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Title.

PZ7.T2655Thr 2010

[Fic]--dc22

2010026129

Copyright © 2012, Royal Fireworks Publishing Co., Inc.
All Rights Reserved.

Royal Fireworks Press
First Avenue, PO Box 399
Unionville, NY 10988-0399
(845) 726-4444
fax: (845) 726-3824
email: mail@rfwp.com
website: rfwp.com



ISBN: 978-0-88092-534-1

Printed and bound in the United States of America using vegetable-based inks on acid-free, recycled paper and environmentally-friendly cover coatings by the Royal Fireworks Printing Co. of Unionville, New York.



CHAPTER 1 • A SKELETON AND A CLOSET

The first time I met Mr. Voepel, I knew he was trouble. It was bad enough when he tried to make a skeleton talk, and it only got worse when that skeleton started trying to pick up my mom.

We had just stepped out of the bright August sunshine into the hallway of Shady River Middle School. Mom had put me to work as a muscle man helping her lug heavy cardboard boxes of books from her car to her new classroom. I was working up a sweat and felt glad to get out of the summer sun. Inside it was cool and dim. The wood floors made our footsteps echo, and the high shadowy ceilings had secret dark corners.

“It feels like we’ve been sucked up in a time warp,” I said, thinking how different this place seemed from the wide, brightly-lit, modern hallways of the school I went to last year in Jacksonville.

Mom nodded. “It’s an old school, Craig, and it hasn’t changed much. I feel like I’m in seventh grade again. I went to middle school here when I was your age. Your granddad taught at Shady River back when so few people lived in town that all the kids, first grade through twelfth, went to school here together.”

I imagined little kids and older kids walking down the hall to class dressed in funny, old-fashioned clothes. Right then, the skeleton made its entrance, clattering through the glass double doors at the opposite end of the hallway and



rolling our way. A tall, skinny man pushed its wheeled stand from behind.

“Looks like some of the very first students still go here,” I said jokingly, nodding at the skeleton. Later, I wished I hadn’t, because it made Mom laugh her deep throaty laugh. Dad always called it her “dainty bullfrog” laugh. The laugh echoed down the hallway, and the man’s pointy face, glasses askew and slipping down his nose, popped out from behind the skull. The skeleton seemed to have two heads, one flesh and one bone. Both dropped their bottom jaws, and both stared wide-eyed at my mom. The rolling skeleton picked up speed until it put on brakes in front of us.

The man stood behind the skeleton and used one hand to make its bony fingers wave hello while he moved the skull’s bottom jaw up and down with the other hand.

“Hi there, pretty lady!” he made the skeleton say.

I rolled my eyes at Mom in disgust and was surprised to see that she was turning pink and giggling. What was wrong with her? The guy was obviously a complete freak.

“Hello.” Mom shifted the box she was carrying to her hip and reached out to shake the skeleton’s bony plastic hand. “I’m Rebecca Stanton, the new Language Arts teacher, and this is my son, Craig.”

“Yeah, hi,” I muttered. “Let’s go, Mom. This box is getting heavy.”

“Set it down a minute.” Mom put hers down by her feet.

The weirdo came out from behind his fleshless friend.

“I’m John Voepel,” he said. “As you can probably guess, I teach Science.”

Great, my favorite subject ruined, I thought, while Mom shook his flesh and blood hand. He nodded at the skeleton.



“I got this guy from a friend at the university. I think my students will love him.”

“He’s certainly friendly,” Mom said.

“Only to beautiful English teachers.”

Mom smiled so big she made dimples in her cheeks. She hadn’t smiled that way for a while, not since Dad used to tease her. Who was this guy to deserve one of Dad’s smiles?

I nudged her in the side with the sharp corner of my box. Mom stepped away, surprised, and rubbed the sore spot.

“You said we had a lot to do,” I said. “We’re wasting time.” I glared at Mr. Voepel, but he was only gazing goofy-faced at Mom.

He edged closer to her. “In that case, I’d better hurry up and ask you out to dinner, Rebecca.”

I opened my mouth to tell him no way. My mom still loved my dad, and she didn’t go on dates.

“I can’t,” Mom said. I let my breath out.

“My father, Craig’s granddad, has Alzheimer’s,” she said. “I stay with him in the evenings. That’s why we moved back here. Up until now, all of the burden of caring for him has been on my sister, so I came home to help out.”

It wasn’t the answer I would have given. I wished she would tell Mr. Voepel the truth about Dad instead of letting him down easy with excuses.

“Mrs. Stanton!” Midway down the hall, a door flew open. Black letters on the frosted glass spelled “Brad Armstrong—Principal.” A man in a suit and tie strode in our direction. Tall and stocky with broad shoulders, he looked like he could’ve been a football player when he was a whole



lot younger. Now he had a football-sized belly straining to pop the buttons off his suit jacket.

“We’re pleased to have you with us this year.” He grabbed Mom’s hand and pumped it up and down. “And you too, Craig.” He clapped me on the back so hard I almost spat up my breakfast cereal. “If you would come this way, Mrs. Stanton, I’d like to go over your class schedule with you and have you sign some additional paperwork.”

Mom tossed me her classroom key as she followed Mr. Armstrong. “You go on upstairs, Craig. Room 207.” She threw Mr. Voepel another huge dimple-cheeked smile over her shoulder. “It was nice meeting you, John, and your skeleton too.”

Her box still sat in the middle of the floor. Mr. Voepel moved toward it, but I stepped in the way. “I can take care of my mom’s things myself.”

Stacking the boxes one on top of the other, I started toward Mom’s classroom. I staggered up the shadowy stairs at the far end of the hall, carrying the double load of boxes, each wooden tread creaking and groaning under my feet. In the upstairs hall, I found a door with the number 207 stencilled on it, and stopped, frowning, to check the number on Mom’s key. The classroom door was ajar and I heard a man’s deep voice singing a church hymn inside.

“Hello?” I poked my head through the doorway.

A burly black man stood with his back to me, tightening a screw into a brass hinge on an open cabinet frame. Loose cabinet doors were propped against the wall at his feet. He turned as I stepped inside and gave me a broad grin.

“You look a mite young to be the new teacher.”

I laughed. “I’m her son, Craig.”



“Pleased to meet you.” He held out his hand, and I crossed the room to shake it. “I’m Ron,” he said. “I clean up and fix things ’round here. Lawd, but they do keep breaking.” He smiled and shook his head.

“Did you make these?” I set Mom’s boxes down and knelt to look at one of the cabinet doors. It had a fancy carved wooden frame. When I ran my fingers along the curved edges, they felt smooth, and the corners lined up exactly. “What kind of saw did you use?”

“First a band saw, then I smoothed the edges with a spokeshave.” Ron looked me up and down. “You know what all that is?”

I nodded. “I used to do a lot of woodworking projects with my dad.”

“Then maybe you can lend me a hand.” He held a cabinet door against the frame and passed me a screw and screwdriver. I attached the outer plate of the hinges to the door.

“You’re a right good worker,” Ron said, as we moved on to the next set of hinges. “Wish I had you along every day. Yep, if I had me a good partner, I’d go into business for myself. Been wanting to do that, but I got no head for figures. My brother, Joe, he was real good with numbers, and when we was kids, we planned to have us a business when we grew up—call it Johnson Brothers.”

“Why didn’t you?”

Ron looked so sad I was sorry I asked. “Joe died,” he said.

“Yeah, my dad too.” Now it was my turn to feel that huge wave of sadness wash over me, like a tidal wave drowning



me. I fought up to the surface and swallowed hard. “I miss him.”

Ron nodded, and we both worked quietly, not knowing what to say, until the door swung open and Mom bounced into the room. She greeted Ron cheerily and made him smile again. Mom always made people smile. She was so friendly and pretty, with her sea-green eyes and her short honey-colored hair. Sometimes I wished she wouldn’t be so friendly. I hoped Ron wasn’t going to ask her out too.

Mom put her hands on her hips as her gaze swept over her new classroom. “Wow, have I got my work cut out for me!”

The polished wood floor was bare in the middle because all the chairs were stacked in four tall towers in a corner. The tables were piled one atop the other against a wall of windows, their black metal legs sticking up in the air.

Mom set to work, ripping open box flaps. “Craig, when you finish up helping Ron, could you please run out to the car and bring in the rest of those boxes?”

“Sure, Mom.”

After we hung the last of the cabinet doors, I snatched up the car keys and dashed down the stairs two steps at a time. I didn’t want to leave Mom alone for long in case that creepy science teacher tracked her down.

I’d almost reached the bottom when I tripped over a girl. She sat three steps up in a dark corner of the stairs. She looked like part of the shadow until I stepped right on top of her. Then it was too late. My foot caught her shoulder, and I went flying onto the floor below, landing on my back with a groan. As I hit the floor, something jabbed me hard in the hip.



The girl's face hovered above mine. Up close, I saw salty tracks running down her cheeks where she had been crying. They were old dried up tears, not new ones, so they couldn't have been my fault.

"Are you hurt bad?" she asked.

I shook my head and struggled up to a sitting position. I felt a little bruised and stiff, but mostly just stupid. Reaching into the back pocket of my shorts, I pulled out Ron's screwdriver. I must have tucked it there by mistake instead of handing it back to him. Now I rubbed my hip where it had left a screwdriver-sized bruise.

"You need to look where you're going." The girl straightened up and put her hands on her hips, giving me a stern teacher look. It looked funny because she was only about twelve, my age. She was black with large brown eyes and glossy black hair, brushed straight and flipped under in some kind of old-fashioned hairdo. I wondered what she was doing at the school, especially all dressed up. She had on a dress with a sweater buttoned over it and shiny buckle-up Sunday school shoes over lacy socks. It was a weird outfit to wear in the summertime when most kids dressed in shorts and flip-flops.

"I'm Luceille," she said.

"Craig."

"It's a pleasure to meet you. Why were you coming down the stairs so fast?" Luceille looked up the stairs. "Was somebody chasing you?"

"No, I was just in a hurry. I'm helping my mom out," I said. "Hey! I know who you must be. I'll bet you're Ron's daughter."



“Mmm.” She looked away from me down the hall, then she turned and tip-tapped up the stairs. “I’ll show you a better way to get down next time you’re in a hurry.” She perched on the banister and, pushing off with one foot, slid gracefully down.

I ran up to try it and jumped off at the bottom, laughing.

“Let’s play a game,” she said. “You hide.”

I opened my mouth to tell her I had to get back to work, and that we were a little too old for hide-and-go-seek, but she had already covered her eyes and started counting. I shrugged and looked around for someplace to hide. I took off down the hallway, passing closed glass office doors with names stencilled on the outside. At the end of the hallway, near the entrance Mom and I had come through, a wooden door labeled “Custodian’s Closet” stood ajar.

“Ready or not, here I come,” Luceille’s voice called softly from the stairway.

I whipped open the door and slipped inside. It was pitch black dark with the door closed, and my elbows brushed against things—something soft and tickly that I decided must be a feather duster, what felt like the bristly head of a straw broom, and the soft vinyl bag of a vacuum cleaner. The sour scent of dirty mop water mixed with the lemony scent of furniture polish. I held my breath and waited.

And waited. And waited. Where was she? I strained my ears, but I couldn’t hear her footsteps, or her breathing, or the sound of her calling. I decided to take a chance and crack the door open.

Peeking out through the slit in the doorway, I expected to see the dim, empty hall with Luceille tiptoeing through it. Instead, I saw bright lights and heard loud voices. People filled the hall, talking, laughing, jostling into one another.



Most of them carried books. It was as if, in a split second, school had started and everyone was here. Something was weird about the way the kids looked. They wore dress-up clothes like Luceille's. As I gaped at a tough-looking, older boy in dress pants and loafers, he caught my eye, stuck out his chin, and started toward me, balling his huge hands up into fists. I quickly slammed the door shut.

My heart beat like a drummer in a rock band. What was going on? How could the hall be empty one minute and full of kids the next? What kid with any kind of life would show up at school now, with a whole week of summer vacation left?

Again, I carefully cracked open the door, hoping the big, mean guy wasn't waiting for me right outside. The hallway was empty, shadowy, and quiet. No angry guy, no kids, no noise.

Abruptly, someone pulled the closet door back with a jerk.





CHAPTER 2 • WHERE THERE'S SMOKE, THERE'S FIRE

Ron stepped from behind the door, his mountain of muscles filling the doorway. I jumped, then put my hand over my heart to slow down its heavy hammering.

“You scared me.” I laughed nervously and stepped out into the hall.

“You sure weren’t the mops and brooms I was expecting to find,” said Ron, looking at me curiously. He grinned. “So what you doing lurking in the closet like this?”

I bit my lip. Explaining was going to be difficult and embarrassing since we both knew I should’ve been carrying boxes for my mom instead of playing hide-and-go-seek. The hide-and-go-seek by itself was embarrassing enough. How did I let Luceille talk me into this? I looked down the hall for her, but she had done a vanishing act.

If I could find her, she could help explain. Maybe Ron would be happy with me for being nice to his daughter and playing with her. For all I knew, Luceille made him play hide-and-go-seek sometimes too.

“Have you seen Luceille?” I asked him.

Ron’s face changed in a split second. The warmth in his eyes disappeared, and the big, cheerful grin slid from his face. Instead, dark brows drew down over eyes that glittered with sudden anger. His mouth became a hard-set line.

“Stay out of the closet,” he said. Glaring at me, he firmly shut the closet door, crossed his arms, and stood in front of it.



“Sorry.” I felt the blood rise up to my face and tint the tips of my ears pink. Turning quickly away, I made for the glass double doors that led outside. What had I done that was so wrong? Ron laughed about finding me in the closet at first. So what turned his laughter into anger? Was I not supposed to play with Luceille? Was I not supposed to talk to her? Was Ron some kind of crazy, overprotective father?

Luceille could probably tell me what was wrong with Ron, but where was she? I was the one who was supposed to be hiding. Somehow I’d managed to make and lose two new friends in one morning.

I decided to go get Mom’s boxes before she got mad at me too.

Outside, the midday sun baked the parking lot and made dark pools of shadow under the cars. Down the bumpy brick street leading away from the school I glimpsed the blue water of the St. Johns River dancing with sunlight sparkles. The houses along the street were two-story and old-fashioned with white pillars along the porches and big oaks dripping moss in their front yards. My grandfather’s house, where we lived now, stood six blocks in the other direction, farther from the river. It wasn’t anything fancy, just a one-story frame house. Instead of massive oak trees, medium-sized crepe myrtles grew in the yard. It was okay, but I missed the house I grew up in.

I lifted as many boxes from Mom’s car as I could carry, which wasn’t many since Mom stuffed them with heavy books, and staggered back up the steps into the school. As I turned away to pull the door closed behind me, I thought I glimpsed a flutter of movement and heard the soft click of a door closing. When I turned around, the hall was quiet and



still—creepy quiet, like an empty church or a funeral home. I shivered.

Next week will be different, I told myself, when kids are running all over the halls.

I sniffed. A sharp new smell mixed with the scent of wood polish and musty books. As I breathed in, the acrid smell of smoke stung my nostrils. In a way, it was a good smell and reminded me of camping trips with my dad. But smelling smoke around a campfire and smelling smoke in a school meant two different things. If something was burning inside the building, I'd better do something about it.

The principal's office and the other front offices opened off the main hall, but just before the custodian's closet, another hallway jutted off to the left. I dumped my heavy load of boxes against a wall and followed the smoky smell down this hallway. Rows of grey metal lockers lined the hall with classroom doors wedged in between. I stopped where the smoke smelled the strongest—outside the door labeled Science Lab.

Putting the palm of my hand to the door, I felt heat through the wood. I'd taken fire safety at school, so I know you're not supposed to open a warm door because huge flames are usually licking at the other side. I turned to find a fire alarm or dash back to the office for help. Then I heard a sound that made me ignore all the firefighters' good advice. Mom's voice came from behind the door. Spinning back around, I jerked the door open, ready to throw her over my shoulder and save her from the leaping flames.

Inside the science lab, there was no fire and no smoke, but I would rather walk into the middle of a fiery inferno than what I did walk into. My mom and Mr. Voepel stood so close together they were breathing into each other's faces.



She smiled up at him, and he smiled down at her, while the rolling skeleton behind them grinned from ear to ear. I wanted to knock its teeth out.

“I’d love to,” said Mr. Voepel.

“Love to what?” I asked, standing in the doorway with my arms folded.

“Oh, there you are, Craig!” Mom took one giant step back from Mr. Voepel and smoothed her clothes. “I went looking for you when you didn’t come back, and I ran into John. He’s agreed to come to dinner at our house tonight. Isn’t that great?”

What is going on here? I wanted to scream. *What about Dad?* But, “Yeah, that’s just great,” was all I said.



That night, everyone bustled around getting ready for Mr. Voepel’s arrival. Mom dressed up and even put on fresh make-up and sprayed her hair. She made Granddad change, too, out of his favorite blue-striped pajamas into real clothes. She forgot his feet, though, and, as he kicked back in his recliner working on one of his jigsaw puzzles, his wrinkled socks and ratty brown bedroom slippers stuck straight up in the air. *Take that, Mr. Voepel,* I thought, giving Granddad a pat on the back as I walked by.

Granddad tugged on his collar and stared down at the rows of diamonds on his tie.

“Where are we going, Hank?” he asked me. Hank was his brother who died fifty years ago, but I’ve learned to answer to his name. Granddad gets people mixed up a lot, just like he mixes up what’s happening now with what happened a long time ago.



“Nowhere, Granddad. We’re having company, remember?”

“That’s right.” Granddad nodded and smoothed down his tie, but I knew he’d forget again and ask the same question in a couple of minutes.

I didn’t see why we were dressing up for Mr. Voepel. It worried me that Mom took so long picking out clothes and smearing goop on her face. He wasn’t anybody important. I wasn’t even planning on changing out of my shorts, but Mom noticed me as she clicked between the kitchen and the dining room in her fancy high-heeled sandals. She cocked her head at me and frowned.

“Go get changed, Craig. No, go take a bath. You’ve got a streak of dirt running right down the middle of your face.”

I spat on my finger and rubbed my nose. “There, all better.”

She shook her head. “A bath, Craig. And put on something nice.”

I trudged down the hall to the bathroom. When I undressed, I found Ron’s screwdriver still in my shorts pocket. In all the excitement, I forgot to give it back to him. I put it next to the sink and climbed into the tub, splashing around resentfully long enough for most of the dirt to wash off. Afterward, I went looking for clothes. Some of my things hung in the closet of my new bedroom, but a lot of stuff was still heaped in boxes against one wall. Since we’d sold our house and moved in with Granddad, we hadn’t had a lot of time to unpack. Half of our things were still in storage.

I wondered what Mom meant by “nice.” Then I remembered a box I had rescued when we were packing. I reached under the bed where I had shoved it to keep it safe, and tugged it out. The box had three words written on



the side that I had scribbled out in heavy marker—“Give To Charity.” Even though I couldn’t read them any longer, those words still made me mad. I still couldn’t believe Mom had written them.

I tugged open the box flaps. Inside the box, Dad’s clothes lay neatly stacked and folded. I hung a few of his shirts on empty hangers in my closet. I chose one I liked, a striped maroon button-down with a white collar, and put it on. It was a tad too big for me still, but I rolled up the sleeves and tucked the shirttails into a pair of my pants. I found Dad’s favorite navy tie rolled up in a corner of the box and his brown loafers resting in the bottom. I slipped them on, and felt pleased that my feet were big enough to fill up Dad’s shoes.

I stood back from the dresser mirror so I could see my whole self. I looked a lot like Dad. I had my mom’s sandy blond hair and green eyes, instead of his blue eyes and brown hair, but I was tall and lanky like my dad, and when I smiled at myself in the mirror, his smile grinned back at me.

If Dad couldn’t be around to keep an eye on Mr. Voepel, I decided, I would step in and do it for him. I took a last look at myself, straightened Dad’s tie, then started down the hall to the living room.

Family pictures hung along the hall. Some were old faded photos from when Granddad and Grandma first got married and when Mom and Aunt Stacey were little girls. One photo showed Granddad standing at the front of a classroom at the school, all dressed up and looking important, next to the American flag. Kids sat in desks in rows behind him.

Something seemed weird about the class, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. Maybe it was the funny clothes the kids wore. The kids dressed like grown-ups, like I was dressed



now. It reminded me of the kids I had seen in the hall today, when I opened the closet door. In fact, the burly guy in the front row looked a lot like that angry guy.

I must have been imagining the kids I saw and the smoke I smelled at the school. Still, what happened today was so clear in my mind that it felt real. It just didn't make any sense.

I didn't want to think about the closet because that made me remember Ron and how angry he got. I moved away from that picture and found what I was looking for hanging a little farther down the hall. Mom and Dad smiled and hugged each other, standing in front of our house in Jacksonville on Christmas Day. A wreath hung on our door, and Christmas lights shone through the picture window. Dad wore a funny Santa Claus hat, and I was a little kid sitting up on his shoulders, tugging on the pompom and laughing.

Lifting the picture down from its hook, I took it to the dining room. I propped it on the sideboard where Mr. Voepel could get an up-close view of our happy family while he ate.

The doorbell rang.

"Get that please, Craig," Mom called from the kitchen.

"Are we expecting company?" Granddad asked as I walked through the living room.

"Nobody special," I told him, flicking on the porch light. It was getting dark outside. Mr. Voepel stood on the top step, and I unlatched the screen door and let him up onto the porch. He held a bunch of flowers, but not the kind you get at the florist. In fact, they were really odd flowers to bring someone. He clutched a clump of elephant ears mixed with some gladioli and a huge bird of paradise with some yellow dandelions sprinkled in for effect.



He smiled, trying to be my buddy. “Hi, Craig. Thanks for having me over. Do you think your mom will like these?” He shoved the flowers toward me so I could inspect them, but I’d seen enough. I glanced down at his shoes. Sure enough, they were caked with mud.

“You stole those from old Mrs. Odom’s garden down the street, didn’t you?”

Mr. Voepel put a finger to his lips. “Don’t tell on me!”

“I think Mom might notice.” I shook my head. He was crazier than I thought. I wondered how he made it out of Mrs. Odom’s garden alive. “You don’t know about Gretchen, do you?”

“Who?”

“Mrs. Odom’s Great Dane. She lets her loose in the backyard to keep the house safe at night.”

“Oh, that was her name?” He showed me a rip in his trouser cuff, and we laughed. Both of us. I’m ashamed to say I laughed right along with him. For that one moment, I forgot he was the enemy.

“You must have really wanted those flowers!” I said.

“Mrs. Odom has the best garden around, and I really wanted to impress your mom.”

Yeah, that’s why I didn’t like him. It all came back to me. I stopped laughing and folded the corners of my mouth down again. Turning my back on him, I led the way inside.

“Too bad Mom doesn’t like garden flowers,” I shot back over my shoulder. “Dad used to bring her fancy flowers, a dozen long-stemmed red roses, and he didn’t steal them.”



When we all sat down around the dinner table, I saw Mr. Voepel notice the picture of our family with Dad in it. It didn't stop him from gazing goo-goo-eyed at Mom, though, around the huge vase of Mrs. Odom's shrubbery that Mom put in the middle of the table.

"This lasagna is heavenly, Rebecca," he said, dishing out a third helping of food and piling on more compliments. "You are a wonderful cook." I had to give him credit, he was really knocking himself out trying to make Mom like him. It was my job to put a stop to it.

"Lasagna was Dad's favorite," I said.

Granddad had been quiet so far, casting puzzled looks down the table at Mr. Voepel. Seeming glad of a familiar subject, he latched onto it and chimed in. "It sure was! Your dad loved your mom's cooking even when they first got married and she burned everything black!"

Mom pursed her lips and gave us both a quick little shake of her head. "Now's not the time."

But I was on a roll, and Granddad was playing right along.

"Granddad, did I ever tell you about the Mother's Day that Dad and I got up early to cook breakfast in bed for Mom? Dad accidentally set a dish towel on fire, and all the smoke alarms in the house went off and woke her up."

Mom put a hand up to cover her mouth. Under her hand she was smiling at the memory.

Granddad threw back his head and laughed, slapping his thigh.

"How on earth did you manage that, Kevin?" he asked, turning to Mr. Voepel.



I had been cracking up along with Granddad, but now I sat straight up in my chair. “No, Granddad, he’s not Dad!” I said.

“Course he is.” Granddad winked at Mr. Voepel. “I should think I’d know my favorite son-in-law!” He laughed heartily, but everyone else froze in place around the table, not knowing what to say or do.

Then Mom stood up quickly and began to collect our half-finished dinner plates. “Dessert anyone?”

When she reached to pick up his plate, Mr. Voepel grabbed Mom’s hand. “Rebecca, I think Kevin sounds like a wonderful person. No wonder everyone remembers him so fondly.”

Mom smiled a shaky smile at him, and he released her hand.

My stomach felt queasy, but it had nothing to do with Mom’s cooking. The whole dinner thing had somehow gotten out of hand. I didn’t know what to do next, but what I did know was that Mr. Voepel was going to be a lot harder to get rid of than I thought. I peered uneasily across the table at him. He was staring straight back at me, and he was not smiling.



Later that evening, after Mr. Voepel had gone, I helped Granddad put some pieces of his jigsaw puzzle together while Mom did the dishes.

Granddad asked for a refill of his glass of water, so I headed through the dining room into the kitchen. When I heard a funny, smothered sound, I stopped and peered over the top of the swinging doors. Mom sat at the kitchen table,



sobbing with her head buried in her arms. The picture of our family at Christmas lay on the kitchen table in front of her.

I backed away, feeling sick to my stomach. I hadn't meant to make her cry, only to scare Mr. Voepel away. This morning, she had been happy and laughing, and now, thanks to me, she was in tears. But maybe it was a good thing, I told myself. Now at least she was focused on Dad and had forgotten Mr. Voepel. Why did Mr. Voepel have to make her laugh and Dad have to make her cry? I wished it could be the other way around.

Tiptoeing away, I filled Granddad's glass from the bathroom faucet instead.

"Your dad just wasn't himself tonight," he said, shaking his head as I handed him the glass.

"You've sure got that right, Granddad." I gave him a quick hug before taking myself off to bed.

