

EXIT 13

THE SPACES IN BETWEEN

BY JAMES PRELLER

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IN THE BRIGHT, early morning, Willow, Ash, and Mrs. McGinn gathered outside their rooms at Exit 13 Motel. Mr. McGinn methodically packed the car for today's trip. Daisy, the family dog, was especially excited—she was always up for a ride in the car, windows down, preferably.

“Sorry, Daisy,” Mr. McGinn said. “It’s just me this time.”

Willow, thirteen, watched with her arms crossed. She would normally crack a joke at a moment like this. A snarky aside or something. But nothing the least bit funny came to mind. She glanced sideways at her

brother, Ash. He looked like a coiled spring, jittery and nervous, lips knit together in a frown. Was it possible that Ash was the most intense eleven-year-old on the planet? Willow gave it a maybe.

For the past four days, Mr. McGinn had taken off on similar trips. And though each journey ended in bitter disappointment, Mrs. McGinn stood beside her husband. She glowed with positive vibes.

Mr. McGinn checked his list twice, just like Santa before harnessing the reindeer: “Okay, hmmm. Flashlight, extra batteries, emergency mylar thermal blanket, backpack, first aid kit, maps, compass, utility knife, lighter, waterproof matches, axe, tire repair kit, food supplies, jumper cables, hiking boots, whistle, two dozen bottles of water, spare clothes, cash, cell phone, duct tape . . .”

He looked to his wife. “Duct tape, honey?”

“It’s in the trunk,” Mrs. McGinn answered.

Willow finally spoke up. “Dad, do you have to go through with this? You know how it’s going to end.”

“Yes, I do know,” Mr. McGinn told his daughter. “I am going to succeed. I am going to find a way out of

here, once and for all. Because I am your father—and that’s what fathers do.”

Willow shut her mouth. Her heart clenched like a fist. She didn’t tell her father that this trip was surely going to be like all the others. He would return again, in less than a minute, a failure. And with each return, her father looked a little more broken, a little more defeated.

There was no escape from Exit 13.

“Come on, bring it in,” Mr. McGinn said, holding his arms out. The family huddled in a group hug. Even Daisy pressed against their legs. “You don’t have to do this,” Mrs. McGinn reminded her husband. “Maybe it’s best to rest a few days.”

“Isn’t this the definition of insanity?” Ash added. “To do the same thing over and over again, and expect a different result?”

“But I’m not doing the same thing, son,” Mr. McGinn replied. “I’ve learned from each failure. I’m more prepared this time.”

You had to give him credit. Deckland Seaver McGinn had an almost inexhaustible supply of hope. So Mr. McGinn got in the car, gently tapped the horn, and pulled out of the parking lot.

A crow cawed and landed on the roof of the motel.

A cloud passed in front of the sun.

Daisy scratched behind her ear.

Full of dread and expectation, Willow counted silently to herself: *seven, eight, nine . . .*

Mr. McGinn pulled back into the same parking space.

He was back in no time at all.

And he looked terrible. Exhausted with dark circles under his eyes. His face thick with stubble. There was a bruise over his right eye. He climbed out of the car, shoulders stooped, pants muddied and torn. “Dad, are you okay?”

Mr. McGinn could not bring himself to look anyone in the eye. He wearily checked his watch. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m so sorry.”

His wife went to his side. She brushed a hand through his hair. “You are back with us, that’s the important thing. Our family is together. That’s all that matters.”

“I’ve been gone one hundred and fifty-three hours,” he said in a hoarse voice. He coughed. “Six and a half days. When the fog rolled in, I pulled over and tried bushwhacking through the forest. It rained and rained.

And every time I came back to the same place. Over and over again. No matter how hard I tried . . .”

“Oh, sweetie. Come inside. You need to lie down.”

He wheezed, eyes downcast.

“Maybe Kristoff is right,” Willow volunteered, trying to be helpful. “We’re trapped in some weird rift in time and space. Like the fabric of the universe is torn. Kristoff says—”

“I’m tired of hearing about Kristoff,” Mr. McGinn snapped. “As far as I’m concerned, he’s part of this. I don’t trust him, Willow, and I don’t want you spending time with that boy.”

“Honey,” Mrs. McGinn said in a soothing voice. “This is hard on everyone. Come inside for a hot shower. It sounds like you’ve caught a cold.”

The door to room 16 opened and closed.

Willow and Ash and Daisy stood outside.

“He couldn’t even look at us,” Ash said.

The crow flew away, black wings beating ceaselessly against the sky.