

OPERATION DO-OVER

GORDON KORMAN

Cover art by David Miles

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*For Shari, “The Shopper,”
with undying thanks!*



TWELVE YEARS OLD

OCTOBER 28

I'm standing next to the bumper cars when the first bolt of lightning splits the sky and strikes the main transformer. The explosion is like a bomb blast.

I almost jump out of my skin.

Oh man, I didn't even want to come to Harvest Festival, and now I'm going to get fricasseed before my thirteenth birthday!

A blinding shower of sparks rains down on the crowded fairgrounds as the lights blink once and wink

out. The honky-tonk music from a dozen different rides and games suddenly stops as the bumper cars grind to a halt. A new sound rises—screams, howls of protest, crying babies, shouts of alarm from people stranded at the top of the Ferris wheel. It's like somebody flipped a switch, sending the fair from fun mode to full freak-out in the blink of an eye.

The storm comes out of nowhere. Just a few minutes ago, the sky was full of stars. Now it's pitch black, hard to see your hand in front of your face. A howling wind rakes the midway. We get pelted with a barrage of flying dust and litter—ride tickets, napkins, wrappers, paper cups, and straws.

You try to be a good kid—do your homework. Follow the rules. And what do you get for it? Blown away.

Something slams into the back of my head, nearly knocking me over. I wheel, expecting to see a cannonball—surely nothing less than that would pack such a punch. Smiling up at me from the ground is a pink teddy bear that must have sailed away from one of the game stalls. I reach for it, but the next gust of wind sends it tumbling away, where it's stomped to shreds by many fleeing feet.

Where does everybody think they're going? There's nowhere to go!

People are running—most for the exits, but some just because running is what you do in an emergency. I catch glimpses of faces I recognize—kids from my grade—

But where is *she*?

She's the only reason I'm here, even though she's the reason I should be a million miles away.

I want to call out to somebody, but what could I say, and who would hear me in this commotion? Flailing legs trip each other up, and bodies go down. That's when the rain comes in, sweeping across the midway. Pelting rain. The water causes the damaged transformer to burst into flames, casting an orange glow over the pandemonium.

Desperately, I fight through the panicked crowd, escaping behind a hot-dog stand. There I'm almost knee-deep in scattered buns, but at least I can breathe, free of the crush of people. Wires and cables swing dangerously overhead, sparks spurting from every connection.

I wipe the rain from my eyes, noting that not even all that water can soften my bristly stick-up hairline. Story of my life.

“Mason?” comes a plea, faint in the howling wind and pounding rain.

I'd know that voice anywhere. I've been half dreading it, half hoping to hear it since I got to the fairgrounds.

I squint into the gloom. Ava Petrakis stands at the base of the Tilt-A-Whirl, her drenched auburn hair plastered to her scalp, hugging her light jacket around her.

I run to her underneath the big ride. "It's okay! This can't last long!"

She looks like a half-drowned kitten. In spite of the wildness of the storm and the danger all around, my first thought is that the two of us have never been alone together before this moment. Was it really only a month ago that Ms. Alexander introduced the new girl to our seventh-grade class?

With a deafening crunch, a blast of wind tears the sign off the top of the Tilt-A-Whirl. For an instant, the heavy metal square twirls above our heads like a piece of scrap paper.

We watch it with terrified eyes. You don't have to be a science kid to know the law of gravity: What goes up must come down.