Savvy

Savvy by Ingrid Law tells the story of Mibs Beaumont, a young girl who discovers her magical "savvy" on her 13th birthday. As her family faces a crisis, Mibs embarks on an adventure to unlock her powers, learning about herself, family, and the true meaning of strength along the way.

Chapter I

Chapter I introduces the protagonist, who reflects on the family’s recent decision to relocate to a remote area following a traumatic event involving her brother, Fish. Their previous home, nestled by the coast, had been a place where the protagonist had always felt a deep connection to the ocean—its waves and rhythm provided comfort and solace. However, Fish’s relationship with water was far from serene; his connection to the sea seemed to summon storms rather than peace. This dangerous pattern led the family to make the difficult decision to move far inland, away from the coast, seeking safety in a place untouched by the chaos caused by Fish’s unsettling connection to the water. The fateful hurricane that triggered the move occurred on Fish’s thirteenth birthday, which abruptly changed the course of what should have been a joyful celebration. As the storm violently tore through their home, causing trees to crash and windows to shatter, the family’s attempts to keep Fish calm became the focus, while the storm itself symbolized the deeper turmoil they all felt.

After the hurricane had passed, the family settled in a remote area located between Nebraska and Kansas, a place they humorously dubbed Kansaska-Nebransas. This stretch of land, distant from any major bodies of water, offered a sense of safety, with the family hoping to prevent future storms. The isolation brought with it both

advantages and drawbacks. While the family found solace in the peace of their new home, the absence of neighbors and the nearest town’s lack of basic amenities left them feeling disconnected from the world they once knew. Though the location promised calm and stability, it also fostered a sense of longing for their old life by the coast, where the protagonist had felt a part of the natural beauty surrounding them. Despite the peace, there was a yearning for the vibrancy they had left behind.

In the midst of this new chapter in their lives, Grandpa Bomba introduces an element of humor and whimsy into the family’s dynamic. He is a figure of lightheartedness, often sharing outlandish stories and tales that entertain his family. One of his favorite stories revolves around his own thirteenth birthday, during which he claims Idaho came into existence, adding a playful, fantastical tone to the otherwise serious atmosphere. These stories, while seemingly trivial, offer a contrast to the protagonist’s own anticipation of her thirteenth birthday. Unlike Grandpa’s whimsical tales, the protagonist is anxious about the milestone birthday, as she hopes to unlock a special ability, or "savvy," that runs in her family. This ability has been passed down through generations, with each member displaying a unique talent. However, the protagonist's excitement is tempered by the knowledge that her brother Rocket, at seventeen, has already showcased his special power—electricity. Rocket’s teasing comments about girls not having remarkable savvies only add to the rivalry among the siblings, illustrating the tension and playful teasing that often occurs between family members, especially when one sibling seems to outshine the others.

As the protagonist’s birthday approaches, the excitement and anticipation are clouded by the weight of family expectations and personal anxieties. At a family dinner, the mood shifts unexpectedly when a phone call disrupts the evening, delivering tragic news. The protagonist’s father, Poppa, has been involved in a serious car accident and is now unresponsive in the hospital. This shocking revelation casts a long shadow over the family, turning what should have been a celebratory moment into one of worry and sorrow. The protagonist, particularly, feels the emotional weight of this news, her disappointment and anger growing as she realizes that her thirteenth birthday will no

longer hold the joyful significance she had imagined. Instead of feeling special, she feels the burden of the family’s crisis weighing heavily on her, overshadowing her own hopes and dreams for the future.

This chapter serves as a poignant introduction to the emotional landscape of the protagonist’s life, as she navigates family tensions, personal aspirations, and the looming challenges of growing up. The contrast between her excitement for her birthday and the devastating news about her father creates a powerful narrative that reflects the unpredictability of life. While the family’s love for each other is clear, their circumstances and the weight of life-altering events show how fragile their world is. The protagonist’s journey is set up as one that will be shaped by these familial challenges, as she must reconcile her personal dreams and desires with the realities of the world around her. The chapter skillfully combines elements of humor, sadness, and tension, weaving a story that promises both growth and emotional depth for the protagonist as she faces the complexities of family life and self-discovery.

Chapter II

Chapter II begins with Mibs Beaumont, the narrator, reflecting on her life at home following a traumatic incident involving her father. That night, she shares a dimly lit bedroom with her younger sister, Gypsy. Mibs listens to the sounds around her—Gypsy's steady breathing, the muffled activity of her mother and brother Rocket downstairs, and even the low rumbling of the earth itself. The atmosphere is thick with the noise of a family navigating its own sense of instability. Meanwhile, Mibs' mother and Rocket are making plans for an early trip to Salina, where their father is receiving medical care. Mibs longs to accompany them, hoping for a brief escape and the simple distraction of motel soaps, but she remains at home with Grandpa, who seems troubled and restless, unable to find peace.

The next morning brings a sense of unease and anticipation. It is the day before Mibs' thirteenth birthday, and she feels burdened by the responsibilities that seem to pile up around her. She is tasked with looking after her younger brother, Samson, who is moody and withdrawn, adding to the weight she already feels. As they make their long bus ride to school in Hebron, Mibs wrestles with the teasing from her peers. Her unusual name, Mississippi, has made her a target for cruel nicknames and hurtful rumors about her family's troubles. Mibs is eager to leave Hebron Middle School behind after her birthday, anticipating a change that will bring relief from the mockery, as she hopes to transition to homeschooling. She sees this as a way to escape classmates like Ashley Bing and Emma Flint, whose teasing she finds unbearable.

Throughout the last day of school, Mibs struggles to keep her focus, her thoughts consumed by the worries about her father. The emotions she has been carrying all day finally reach a breaking point when the teacher announces her departure from school. The other students respond with indifference, further deepening Mibs' feelings of isolation and loneliness. Throughout the day, Mibs quietly wishes for a skill or talent, a

"savvy," that could help her deal with the bullies. She fantasizes about a power that could silence her tormentors or even transform them into friends, seeking a way to escape the pain of being misunderstood.

When Mibs returns home, she finds a shiny gold minivan parked outside, its presence a sign of the arrival of Miss Rosemary, the preacher’s wife. Known for her meticulous nature and overzealous desire to maintain order, Miss Rosemary has come to help the family in the wake of the accident. Mibs and Samson, feeling the oppressive weight of Miss Rosemary’s judgments, attempt to sneak inside unnoticed, but her presence feels unavoidable. Miss Rosemary immediately begins cleaning the house, her actions underscoring the absence of the maternal care that Mibs desperately longs for. Her comments about the need for a mother only deepen Mibs’s anxiety, as she tries to navigate the emotional turmoil caused by her father’s condition and the impending changes in her life. Miss Rosemary’s insistence on cleaning feels like a reminder of everything Mibs’s family lacks—stability, warmth, and the love that should come naturally in a home.

This chapter explores the complexities of Mibs’s emotional landscape as she grapples with the challenges of her family’s situation and the cruelty of her peers. The burden of responsibility, particularly in caring for her younger brother Samson, weighs heavily on her, further isolating her from her childhood innocence. Her longing for a different life, one where she can escape her classmates’ cruelty and her family’s struggles, is palpable. The arrival of Miss Rosemary adds a layer of tension, as she represents both the well-meaning but oppressive forces trying to impose order and the absence of the maternal care Mibs needs. As the chapter progresses, it becomes clear that Mibs is at a turning point, on the cusp of major changes, both in her personal life and in her understanding of her role within her family. This turning point hints at the challenges and growth she will experience as she begins to navigate the complexities of adolescence, responsibility, and self-identity.

Chapter III

Chapter III delves into the narrator’s struggle with the absence of their mother and the arrival of Miss Rosemary, who, despite her well-meaning efforts, cannot replace the emotional gap left by their mother’s absence. Miss Rosemary brings along her two younger children, Roberta and Will Junior, hoping to offer some companionship to the narrator and their brother, Samson. However, the siblings are less than thrilled by this arrangement, as the absence of a television and their own reluctance to connect with the guests leaves them feeling distant and uncomfortable. The atmosphere in the house becomes more strained as the family adjusts to this forced interaction, each member processing their grief and unease in their own way.

When Miss Rosemary’s daughter, Bobbi, enters the room, her presence only adds to the tension. At sixteen, Bobbi is openly disdainful of being at the house, showing little respect for the family’s situation. She carelessly sifts through their mother’s unfinished artwork, her actions signaling a lack of sensitivity toward the family’s pain, especially since their father is hospitalized. Meanwhile, Will Junior, Bobbi’s younger brother, tries to smooth over the awkwardness by encouraging Bobbi to show respect, especially given the gravity of their father’s illness. Despite his attempt to mediate, the difference in maturity between him and Bobbi becomes apparent, with Will Junior acting as a quieter, more solemn figure, seeking to connect with the narrator and Samson in a more considerate manner.

Bobbi’s teenage defiance takes center stage as she complains about the situation and dramatically lounges on the sofa, with eye shadow and a pierced eyebrow that reflect her rebellion. This behavior leaves the narrator intrigued and slightly puzzled, wondering how Miss Rosemary manages to parent her daughter. Will Junior, in contrast, is neat and composed, trying his best to engage with the narrator and Samson about their father’s health and expressing his hope for his recovery. While Will

Junior’s intentions are undeniably kind, the narrator feels awkward and uncomfortable, caught between a sense of gratitude for his kindness and a growing sense of guilt for not having prayed for their father’s recovery sooner.

As the day progresses, Samson, struggling with his own emotional turmoil, retreats with his deceased pet turtle, symbolizing his vulnerability and the deep sense of loss he feels. Meanwhile, Will Junior attempts to offer comfort by mentioning the food they’ve brought, specifically meatloaf made by their mother, thinking it might ease their pain. However, the mention of food falls flat, as the narrator quickly realizes that no meal, no matter how thoughtfully prepared, can heal the deeper emotional wounds they are experiencing. This realization underscores the theme of the chapter: the visit is not about food or superficial comfort, but about the complexities of coping with grief and loss. The dynamics between the characters illustrate the discomfort of forced social interactions, the varying levels of empathy from the visitors, and the challenges the family faces as they attempt to navigate their feelings in the wake of their father’s hospitalization.

This chapter reveals the nuances of coping with family crises, especially the emotional weight of missing a key figure in the family while trying to engage with others who don’t fully understand the depth of the situation. The complex interactions between the narrator, Samson, and their visitors emphasize how grief can create walls between individuals, even those who share a common bond of family. The discomfort felt during this visit highlights the emotional distance that often arises in times of crisis, as everyone deals with their emotions in different ways. Through these interactions, readers are shown the difficulty of finding solace, especially when well-meaning gestures fall short of addressing the real emotional needs that the family is grappling with.

Chapter IV

Chapter IV opens with Miss Rosemary bringing up the idea of celebrating Mibs’ thirteenth birthday, an innocent comment that quickly escalates into an uncomfortable conversation. The atmosphere at the table becomes tense as the family’s usual excitement for birthday celebrations clashes with an unspoken tradition within the Beaumont family: thirteenth birthdays are typically private, low-key affairs. Mibs' brother, Fish, visibly tenses at the thought of a party, his discomfort suggesting deeper feelings about family expectations and his own anxieties. While Fish's unease is clear, their youngest sister, Gypsy, obliviously reacts with innocent excitement, eagerly anticipating balloons and cake, embodying the pure joy that children bring to celebrations. The contrast between Fish’s discomfort and Gypsy’s enthusiasm highlights the varying emotional responses within the family to the upcoming event.

Mibs, who doesn’t share Gypsy’s carefree attitude, openly expresses her reluctance about the party. She confesses to Miss Rosemary that she doesn’t have any friends to invite, feeling isolated and out of place. However, Miss Rosemary is undeterred by Mibs' hesitations and continues to push for a celebration with the cheerfulness of someone determined to bring joy to others. While Mibs’ thoughts grow darker, the conversation becomes more heated, with Mibs' older sister, Bobbi, mocking the plans. Bobbi’s scornful attitude exposes the rift within the family, a tension that is rarely discussed but always felt. Her disregard for the planned celebration adds to Mibs’ growing anxiety, as Bobbi’s words remind her of how little she feels she belongs. Miss Rosemary, ever the optimist, suggests that Mibs invite her classmates to the party, but Mibs, inwardly rejecting the idea, feels a strong desire to remain unnoticed and avoid drawing attention to herself.

As the conversation drifts into the background, Mibs’s thoughts take her back to Rocket’s thirteenth birthday, a day filled with both celebration and an underlying sense

of fear. Rocket, like Mibs, had once felt the weight of family expectations on his shoulders. Mibs recalls how their Grandma Dollop had made the day special by introducing the quirky tradition of “canning radio waves”—a ritual where the family would capture the sounds of songs and stories transmitted through the air. Although the activity was whimsical and filled with the charm of family eccentricity, it highlighted the deeper anxiety Rocket felt about his place in the family. Unlike his siblings, who had displayed some form of special ability, Rocket feared being just another ordinary person, blending into the background. That fear culminated in a dramatic moment during a power outage when Rocket, seemingly unintentionally, discovered his unique talent, causing chaos and spectacular radio noises to fill the air, confirming his extraordinary nature and marking his place within the family.

As Mibs thinks about her own upcoming thirteenth birthday, she realizes that she doesn’t crave the same sense of spectacle or grand revelation that Rocket experienced. While Rocket had yearned for something extraordinary, Mibs simply wishes for peace and solitude. The idea of a birthday party, with its inevitable attention, makes her feel more anxious than excited. She prays fervently that the party will be quiet, that no one will show up, and that she can avoid the spotlight altogether. This desire for solitude contrasts sharply with the expectations of her family, creating an emotional tension between the private Mibs and the external pressures placed on her. She longs for a birthday without the pressures of performing or meeting others’ expectations, a simple moment of calm and reflection. This longing for peace highlights the growing emotional distance between Mibs and the others, as she yearns for something that feels more authentic to her own needs.

The chapter deeply explores Mibs' internal struggle with family traditions and the weight of growing up, especially in the face of societal expectations. Mibs’ desire to have a quiet, personal birthday reflects the universal challenge of balancing individual desires with the roles and responsibilities placed on us by family and tradition. The pressure to conform to expectations, particularly around significant milestones like a thirteenth birthday, can make it difficult for young people to express their authentic selves. This tension between Mibs’ desire for privacy and the family’s anticipation for a

celebration serves as a poignant reflection of the emotional complexities that come with growing up and stepping into a new chapter of life. In many ways, this chapter portrays the bittersweet nature of adolescence, where the longing for self-discovery often collides with the external pressures to conform, creating a powerful narrative that many readers can relate to.

Chapter V

Chapter V begins with the narrator waking up early on her thirteenth birthday, brimming with excitement but finding that the day feels strangely ordinary. She had hoped for some extraordinary event or newfound ability, but nothing happens to suggest that this will be a day unlike any other. Feeling a bit disappointed that she hasn’t suddenly developed magical powers, she quietly gets out of bed, careful not to wake her younger sister, Gypsy, who is deeply immersed in the comfort of her stuffed animals. As she steps into the kitchen, the narrator makes herself a bowl of cereal and sits down on the sofa, where a strange thumping sound suddenly catches her attention. Curious, she follows the noise and discovers something remarkable—Samson’s turtle, which she had thought was dead, is stirring from hibernation. This unexpected turn of events leaves her with an unsettling feeling, reminding her of the urgency she feels about this significant day in her life.

The family soon prepares to leave for the church in Hebron, where a party is planned to celebrate her birthday. The narrator is dressed in a special dress that her father had picked out for her, a gesture that brings back sweet memories of a time when her father’s presence was a comfort. However, the joy of wearing the dress is tinged with sadness, as her father is now in the hospital, unresponsive after her grandmother’s passing. As they drive to the church, the narrator can’t shake her worries about her father, wondering if he will ever wake up. While she doesn’t possess the supernatural abilities that her brothers seem to have, she believes that her unique gift lies in her ability to awaken things, much like the turtle emerging from hibernation. This belief in her special talent fuels her hope that she might be able to help her father, despite her uncertainty.

When the family arrives at the church, the birthday party is already in full swing, and the narrator is taken aback by the vibrant atmosphere, which far exceeds her

expectations of a simple gathering. The excitement of the celebration is overshadowed by her growing anxiety, especially when her brother Fish warns her about the potential dangers of using her ability in such a crowded place. Despite Fish's concerns, the narrator remains confident in her ability, feeling certain that she can use her unique gift to help her father. Just as she begins to gather the courage to explain her thoughts, she is distracted by Will Junior, who pulls her into the chaotic celebration, shifting her focus away from her contemplations about her father's condition and her growing sense of purpose.

This chapter illustrates the narrator’s internal struggle as she grapples with the weight of her emotions and the uncertainty surrounding her abilities. Her hope to use her gift to help her father reflects a universal desire to have control over difficult circumstances, especially when faced with the helplessness of not being able to change what’s happening around her. The presence of the turtle, awakening unexpectedly, serves as a metaphor for the narrator’s own potential, suggesting that like the turtle, she too may have a latent power waiting to be realized. The tension between her desire to act and the distractions that pull her away highlights the internal and external conflicts she faces, which adds emotional depth to her journey. As the day unfolds with the chaos of the party and the growing realization that her powers might be real, the narrator is left at a crossroads, unsure of how to move forward but determined to find her way. The narrative not only explores themes of family, loss, and hope but also the awakening of potential, both literally and figuratively, that will shape the course of the narrator's future.

Chapter VI

Chapter VI begins with the protagonist stepping into the church, where she is immediately confronted by the presence of Ashley Bing and Emma Flint, two girls from her past at Hebron Middle School. Dressed for a party, they serve as a painful reminder of old memories she hoped to leave behind. As she enters the room, she feels like an outsider, especially when Ashley's gaze lingers on Will Junior, the boy she admires from afar. Summoning all of her courage, the protagonist decides to confront Ashley, hoping to stand her ground, but Ashley dismisses her in a cruel and condescending manner. The remark stings, and the embarrassment is amplified with Will standing nearby, witnessing the exchange. Just as the awkwardness begins to overwhelm her, Fish, a close friend, scowls at the girls, clearly showing his disapproval of their behavior and offering her some silent support.

Will Junior, noticing the tension and the discomfort in the air, gives the protagonist a sympathetic smile and reassures her with kind words. He suggests that she’s better off without people like Ashley and Emma in her life, and he leads her away from the uncomfortable situation toward the party room. The atmosphere in the room is far from festive; it’s underwhelming and feels more like a half-hearted attempt at a celebration. Sagging streamers hang from the walls, and the only food offered is a chocolate cake, signaling that the people hosting the party are still uncertain about the event and its significance.

As Will hands her a birthday gift—a simple pen set—she feels unsure about the appropriate etiquette for such a gift. She wonders whether she should open it right away or save it for later. Moving on, they head to the kitchen, where Bobbi and her stylish friends are busy preparing refreshments. Bobbi, with her usual dismissive attitude, comments on the protagonist’s birthday dress, making her feel younger and insecure. The remark makes the protagonist realize that at thirteen, she no longer felt

the same sense of specialness she once had, adding to her feelings of being out of place at this gathering.

Amidst the preparations, a strange sound catches her attention, which causes her to pause and experience a moment of unexpected clarity about her upcoming journey to Salina. The sensation feels almost like a premonition, an odd feeling of certainty in the midst of chaos. As she contemplates her next steps, her thoughts are interrupted when she accidentally bumps into Will Junior, causing a tray of sandwiches to fall and adding to the disarray of the moment. During the commotion, the protagonist's gaze lands on Bobbi’s tattoo, an angel with a mischievous grin, which immediately piques her curiosity. She can't help but wonder how Bobbi came to have such a tattoo, especially in a town that seems to hold so many secrets.

What happens next takes the situation to an entirely surreal level. The tattoo, which seemed like just a piece of body art, begins to come alive, its image shifting and whispering words that reveal the loneliness of the character depicted. The protagonist is overwhelmed by this unexpected development, unsure of what to make of the moment. The tattoo’s ability to communicate adds a layer of mystery and intrigue, leaving her unsettled as she grapples with this bizarre experience. The surreal nature of the event becomes too much for her, and she faints, signaling a dramatic turning point in her emotional journey. This fainting spell marks a significant moment in the story, as it reflects both the physical and emotional weight of everything the protagonist is experiencing during what should have been a celebratory day.

This chapter emphasizes the theme of self-discovery, as the protagonist navigates the awkwardness and discomfort of growing up, while also dealing with unexpected encounters and revelations. The tension between her desire for normalcy and the strange occurrences around her underscores her internal conflict. The interaction with Bobbi’s tattoo also introduces an element of the supernatural, suggesting that there is more to the protagonist's world than she has realized. These events, though unsettling, serve as a catalyst for the protagonist’s growth, forcing her to confront not just her feelings about her birthday and the people around her, but also the path that

lies ahead, particularly her journey to Salina. The fainting spell, in a way, symbolizes her need to pause, reflect, and prepare for the challenges and discoveries that are about to unfold in her life.

Chapter VII

Chapter VII begins with the protagonist waking up in Pastor Meeks’s office, disoriented and confused, to the sound of heated arguments. She finds herself lying on a blue plaid sofa, surrounded by chaos. Pastor Meeks is in the midst of an angry confrontation with a thin deliveryman, who is holding a large pink Bible. The pastor, visibly irritated, criticizes the color of the Bibles, questioning their appropriateness for his congregation. He seems more focused on the color than the actual purpose of the Bible. Meanwhile, the deliveryman, who appears sad and meek, tries to explain that he's simply following orders, but his voice is quickly drowned out by the pastor's anger.

At the same time, the protagonist’s brother Fish is involved in a heated argument with Miss Rosemary. Fish insists that Mibs doesn’t need a doctor, thinking that she should just go home instead, while Miss Rosemary is frantically trying to maintain control over the situation. She desperately clings to the telephone, trying to reach someone who can help, but it seems the situation is spiraling out of her control. Fish, in a display of frustration, climbs over the pastor’s desk to rally their grandpa, but unfortunately, he’s asleep and unaware of the chaos unfolding around him. The disorder continues to intensify as each person in the room becomes more involved in the conflicts that are taking place.

In the midst of all the external commotion, the protagonist experiences her own internal struggle. She begins to hear two distinct voices in her head, which mirror the arguments occurring in the room. The voices argue back and forth, further confusing her and adding to her already overwhelming sense of disorientation. As she tries to make sense of her thoughts, she recalls a previous encounter involving Bobbi’s tattoo that had inexplicably spoken to her. This memory only adds to her confusion, as she tries to understand the strange connection between her and the world around her. She

feels overwhelmed by the noise in her head and yearns for peace and quiet, wanting a moment to focus on her own aspirations and not be consumed by the chaos of the external world.

The ongoing arguments in the office, combined with the overwhelming noise, make her feel unnoticed and trapped. She longs for an escape, wanting nothing more than to leave and head to Salina Hope Hospital to be with her father. At the same time, she feels an urgent desire to activate her latent abilities, hoping that they will help her find a way out of her current predicament. The tension builds as the chaotic arguments about pink Bibles and emotional pleas to adults continue to spiral out of control, pushing her further into a state of frustration and anxiety. Noticing a moment when the focus shifts elsewhere, she quietly slips away, eager to escape the noise and confusion that have been tormenting her thoughts.

Once outside the pastor’s office, she encounters Will Junior, who expresses concern for her well-being. He holds the birthday pen set she lost, and in her desperation, she implores him for a way to escape the madness. Her request reflects her urgent need for a reprieve from the overwhelming chaos around her, a desire to find some semblance of peace and freedom. Will Junior’s presence offers a brief moment of relief, though the chaos still looms large in her mind.

This chapter highlights the protagonist’s sense of being caught in the middle of an emotional storm, both externally and internally. The disarray in the room mirrors the turmoil she feels within herself, caught between her yearning for quiet and the urgent need to connect with her father. Her internal conflict, brought on by the voices in her head, deepens as the situation around her escalates. This sets the stage for her eventual need to find a way to escape, both physically and mentally, from the cacophony that surrounds her. As she moves through the space, the reader is reminded of how external chaos often reflects inner turmoil, and how the search for peace can sometimes feel impossible when surrounded by noise and confusion.

Chapter VIII

Chapter VIII opens with Mibs's unwavering determination to reach Salina, feeling an overwhelming urgency as she makes up her mind to leave the church where she had fainted. Despite Will Junior’s deep concern for her well-being, Mibs refuses to let anything stand in her way, resolute in her decision to go alone. Her desire to get to Salina, no matter the cost, drives her to step outside the church and prepare to run the ninety miles if necessary. As she looks around, the sight of the Heartland Bible Supply bus ignites a spark of hope in her. She believes that if the bus had come from Salina, it might be heading back there, offering her a chance to close the distance to her father. Ignoring her mother's previous warnings about riding with strangers, Mibs feels an undeniable pull to board the bus, convinced that this could be the opportunity she has been waiting for.

As Mibs begins to approach the bus, she runs into Bobbi, who immediately mocks her for her decision, ridiculing her determination. However, Will Junior steps in, defending Mibs and making it clear that he believes in her choice. Their exchange hints at a deeper tension between Bobbi and Will Junior, suggesting a complicated family dynamic filled with rivalry and perhaps unspoken resentments. Despite Bobbi’s dismissive attitude toward Mibs’s plan, Will Junior stands firm, insisting that they should continue the journey together, no matter the obstacles in their way. Just as Mibs begins to believe their plans may be set in motion, Fish suddenly appears, his anger flaring as he confronts them. His disapproval of their intentions further complicates their already tense situation, leaving Mibs uncertain about how things will play out.

Once on board the bus, Mibs is struck by the cluttered interior, filled with crates and boxes that create an almost chaotic atmosphere. Not feeling comfortable in the crowded space, Mibs instinctively decides to hide in the back of the bus, hoping to

remain out of sight. Bobbi, despite her earlier objections, reluctantly follows them, taking on the role of the caretaker, determined to prevent any trouble from arising. Tension mounts as the deliveryman approaches, and Mibs, Will Junior, and Bobbi scramble to find a suitable hiding place, worried that Miss Rosemary, who is outside and looking around the parking lot, might spot them. Their cramped hiding place, wedged between crates, leads to a surprising discovery: Samson, who had been quietly reading in the corner of the bus. His unexpected presence adds a layer of complexity to the already fragile situation, as it becomes clear that this journey is about more than just reaching Salina.

As the bus begins to roll away, Mibs and her companions cling to their seats, the air thick with nervous anticipation. The direction the bus takes becomes a point of concern as it veers away from Kansas, the place where Mibs had hoped to reach. The realization that they are heading in the wrong direction leaves Mibs in a state of uncertainty, unsure of what to expect next. Her entire plan now hangs in the balance, and the tension of the moment underscores the themes of youthful rebellion, familial bonds, and self-discovery that have been building throughout the chapter. Mibs’s dream of reuniting with her father is suddenly overshadowed by the uncertainty of their journey, making it clear that the road ahead will not be easy, and the twists and turns of fate are far from predictable.

The chapter emphasizes Mibs’s internal growth and the strength of her resolve as she pushes against the boundaries set by others, striving to control her own fate. The interactions between the siblings and their friends bring to light the challenges that come with asserting one’s own path, especially when it disrupts the plans of those around you. Mibs’s determination reflects the universal struggle to break free from the expectations of others and follow one’s own desires, no matter how daunting. The constant push and pull between the conflicting forces of familial duty, personal aspirations, and external influences create a rich and dynamic narrative that propels the story forward. As the chapter ends, Mibs faces an uncertain future, her journey to Salina taking an unexpected turn. The cliffhanger leaves readers eagerly anticipating the next chapter, wondering how the unfolding adventure will shape the characters’

destinies and what challenges they will face as they move forward into the unknown.

Chapter IX

Chapter IX opens with the group aboard a bus heading deeper into Nebraska, an environment thick with tension and the emotional weight of the journey ahead. Fish and the narrator exchange subtle but telling glances, communicating their shared anxiety without words. The unease between them is tangible, as both are clearly struggling to process the overwhelming stress of their situation. In contrast, Bobbi sits undisturbed by the rising tension, lounging casually on a cot, comfortably chewing on Bubble Tape while flipping through a National Geographic magazine. The cover of the magazine features a dramatic image of a human heart, which catches the narrator’s eye and stirs a deep reflection on the fragility of life itself. In that moment, the narrator recognizes a parallel between Bobbi’s outwardly strong yet delicate demeanor and the inherent vulnerability of life, highlighting the complex layers that define Bobbi’s personality.

As the bus rolls on, Fish continues to keep his distance from Bobbi, clearly embracing his role as the protective older brother. His attempt to maintain control over the situation, however, is hindered by an inner turmoil that he is struggling to reconcile. Haunted by memories of past traumatic experiences, particularly a hurricane that left lasting emotional scars, Fish seems consumed by a sense of responsibility and guilt. His inner conflict is evident, and he grapples with the immense pressure of looking after his family, especially in such an uncertain and volatile environment. Meanwhile, the narrator, sitting on the floor next to Will Junior, attempts to cling to optimism. They are convinced that soon enough, they will return to Salina, Kansas, where their father is being treated in the hospital. Despite the lively atmosphere in the bus, an angelic voice continues to whisper anxiously in the narrator's mind, echoing their internal worries and heightening the overall tension. This voice brings back memories of a previous encounter with a troubled man, reminding the narrator that the stress of the

situation may be impacting their mental state, making it more difficult to discern reality from their heightened emotions.

Outside, the vast, empty Nebraska landscape stretches endlessly by the windows. The countryside appears lifeless, marked only by the occasional sight of silos and water towers that dot the horizon. This barren landscape reflects the mood within the bus, a feeling of emotional desolation that mirrors the group's growing isolation. The monotony of the scenery, punctuated only by the occasional building, seems to emphasize the stagnation they feel as they travel toward an uncertain future. The group's mood shifts dramatically when Bobbi, bored and seeking to provoke, kicks Fish off the cot where he had been sitting. This playful act of mischief sparks a rapid escalation, with Fish retaliating in frustration by sending magazines flying in all directions. The outburst creates a chaotic atmosphere, and the tension within the group threatens to boil over completely. At that moment, the narrator steps in, attempting to mediate the situation and calm Fish before things spiral further. Just as the emotional storm reaches its peak, Samson, with his quiet and reassuring presence, gently intervenes, bringing a sense of calm to the group and defusing the escalating conflict.

The bus unexpectedly comes to a halt, breaking the fragile calm that had descended. The deliveryman, who had previously seemed lost in thought and distracted by his own concerns, now shifts into a more serious role, confronting the children with a stern and unfriendly demeanor. His change in attitude is unsettling, and both the children and the deliveryman sense that something is amiss. There is an air of anticipation, as if trouble is about to emerge, though the cause remains unclear. The chapter ends on this unsettling note, leaving the reader in suspense about what will happen next. The subtle shift in atmosphere suggests that the group may be heading toward a new set of challenges, and the reader is left anxiously awaiting the next development in the story.

This chapter delves deeply into the emotional dynamics of the group, highlighting the delicate balance between tension, responsibility, and the subtle connections that bind

them. The way that Fish and the narrator interact, exchanging anxious glances without speaking, serves as a poignant reminder of the weight of their situation. These unspoken moments of communication are just as significant as the louder, more obvious interactions, revealing the emotional turmoil that simmers beneath the surface. Bobbi’s calm demeanor in the face of mounting tension stands in sharp contrast to the others, providing an intriguing layer to her character. Her ability to remain composed amidst the chaos offers a quiet strength, but also hints at her own complexities that remain hidden from the others.

At the same time, the chapter also touches on the weight of family responsibility, particularly through Fish’s struggles to protect those he loves while dealing with his own unresolved trauma. His internal conflict underscores the theme of generational responsibility and the emotional toll it takes on individuals, especially in times of crisis. As the group navigates the challenges ahead, their interactions continue to evolve, showing the ways in which shared adversity shapes their relationships. This chapter captures the essence of childhood innocence clashing with the harsh realities of adulthood, as the characters are forced to confront not only their external challenges but also their internal struggles. The emergence of Samson’s calming presence is a crucial moment, symbolizing the power of compassion and understanding in the midst of conflict. This, along with the mysterious shift in the deliveryman’s behavior, sets the stage for the challenges to come, ensuring that the reader remains engaged and eager to see what happens next.

Chapter X

Chapter X opens with the deliveryman pausing in the intense silence, seemingly contemplating what to do with the baby mice he had discovered nesting among his Bibles. His expression, tense and uncertain, suggests he is considering extreme options, such as poison, drowning, or perhaps even offering us as a meal to a cat. As he slowly removes his wilted carnation and loosens his pink necktie, his rolled-up sleeves reveal a gaunt chest beneath his worn-out overalls. Crossing his arms, two names appear on his forearms: Carlene, etched above a black rose, and Rhonda, inscribed below a heart adorned with the word “Mom.”

As I observed, something peculiar happened—the letters on his arms seemed to animate, shifting into the likenesses of the two women, Carlene and Rhonda. Their voices echoed the tension in the air as they bickered about Lester’s perceived weaknesses. Carlene accused Rhonda of causing Lester’s soft nature, claiming he lacked the necessary fight to stand up for himself. Rhonda, not to be outdone, blamed Lester’s weak father and argued that Carlene demanded every penny he earned from delivering Bibles, thereby limiting his chances of success. This surreal transformation gave the scene an almost comic-book-like quality, further contributing to my unease as I recalled the urgent mission I had before me—to wake up Poppa.

The atmosphere was thick with discomfort, yet I felt a reassuring touch from Samson, grounding me amidst the chaos. The deliveryman, still jittery, broke the silence with a melodic yet nervous voice, asking what we were doing. Carlene, from within his mind, urged Lester to show some backbone and mocked his apparent lack of gumption, further exacerbating the tension. The growing sense of unease was palpable, and I felt the weight of the moment as I cautiously approached the deliveryman.

I stepped forward carefully, asking if he was headed to Kansas, explaining that we needed to reach Salina for a family emergency. Lester, clearly overwhelmed, stumbled over his words and seemed slow to catch on. It became apparent that he was struggling with the situation, unsure of how to handle our request. Despite his hesitation, he finally muttered that we could not ride on his bus, although his shaky finger pointing toward us revealed his uncertainty about the decision.

Undeterred, I continued to explain that my parents were in Salina and that he would be helping us by allowing us to ride with him. Carlene, still present in Lester's mind, taunted him, predicting he would cave in to our plea. Rhonda, on the other hand, lamented Lester's timidity, underscoring the tension between the competing forces in his mind. As I continued to plead with him, I could feel the pressure mounting on Lester, torn between his compassion for us and the fear of facing consequences from his boss.

After a long moment of hesitation, Lester slumped into a seat, clearly battling his reluctance and weighing his options. He finally broke the silence with a hesitant question about where we were from, signaling a shift in his resolve. His question marked a significant moment—Lester was surrendering to the inevitable, preparing to help us despite his inner conflict. This moment of surrender encapsulated the human struggle between fear of authority and the drive to do what feels morally right. It was clear that, in that moment, Lester's compassion had finally overcome his fear, and he would help us on our journey to Salina.

This chapter not only delves into the dynamics of personal struggle but also highlights the complexities of human interaction. The bickering voices in the deliveryman's mind, represented by Carlene and Rhonda, symbolize the internal conflict many people experience when faced with difficult decisions. Whether it's the fear of authority or the pull of personal values, the chapter explores how the human psyche can be torn between different forces, leading to moments of profound hesitation and ultimate decision-making. The protagonist's persistence, paired with the deliveryman's eventual surrender, underscores the power of human connection and compassion in

overcoming even the most challenging circumstances. This interaction also reflects the larger theme of the chapter—how individuals are often caught between competing desires and how, in moments of crisis, their true character is revealed.

Chapter XI

Chapter XI begins with Lester Swan, the bus driver, enjoying a lively conversation with his passengers. He eagerly encourages everyone to sit near the front of the bus, creating a sense of camaraderie among the group, though Bobbi and Will Junior hesitate as they sit beside him, clearly unsure and uncomfortable. Meanwhile, Mibs and Fish, both on edge due to their father's worsening health, sit quietly across from them, their anxiety palpable. The tension in the air is thick, as their journey to Salina grows more urgent with each passing minute. While Lester drives, he casually talks about the quirks of the bus, including a past incident when the vehicle unexpectedly broke down. His nonchalant storytelling provides a stark contrast to the anxious atmosphere inside the bus. Fish, his patience running thin, interrupts and urgently asks how long it will take to reach Salina. This question cuts through the light-heartedness, making everyone in the bus realize just how important and time-sensitive their mission is.

Lester glances at his watch, his expression shifting to one of mild concern as he recognizes that he's running behind schedule. He still has to make a stop in Bee before continuing on to Wymore and Manhattan to deliver money to a friend. Despite the group's growing frustration and their urgent need to reach Salina, Lester stands firm, unwilling to prioritize their request over his own professional commitments. He insists that he cannot afford to risk his job, a reality that weighs heavily on Mibs, who begins to feel guilty for asking Lester for a favor that might jeopardize his livelihood. Her internal conflict highlights the complexities of the situation: their personal emergencies clash with the larger, often inconvenient demands of everyday life. This moment serves as a reminder that sometimes, the things we need most aren't easily within reach, and the responsibility of others can't always align with our own desperation.

As the bus rolls into the small town of Bee, Lester’s frustration grows when he finds that the church, which is the only building of interest in town, is locked and dark. The town offers no immediate solace, only a reminder of the passage of time and the many unanswered questions that linger in their lives. Mibs, noticing Lester’s agitation, begins to reflect on her own life and the memories she holds of her mother. Her mother had always taught her that perfection is an illusion and that the true beauty of life lies in its imperfections. These lessons were passed down during quiet moments spent together in the kitchen, where they’d share warmth and wisdom while cooking. For Mibs, these memories of her mother provide comfort amidst the chaos of the present, reinforcing the idea that, like everyone else, the Beaumont family experiences both joy and sorrow. These reflections offer her a brief respite from the pressure of the journey and help her realize that, despite the difficulties they face, they are not alone in their struggles.

As Mibs steps outside to escape the complaints and growing tension inside the bus, she seeks solitude. The fresh air offers a moment of clarity, and she finds herself drawn to an old, abandoned house with a porch that seems to invite her to sit and reflect. Alone, she begins to remember the dream her father once had of building a porch swing for their family home—a symbol of comfort, togetherness, and the simpler moments in life. As she sits on the porch, her mind drifts back to these peaceful, hopeful times before the complexities of their current situation took hold. Will Junior, ever curious and persistent, eventually finds her and strikes up a conversation. Mibs, ever secretive, tries to deflect his questions but, in the end, opens up just enough to share a fleeting, light-hearted moment with him. This brief exchange provides her with a small amount of emotional relief, reminding her that, despite the whirlwind of events, there are still pockets of connection to be found.

The conversation takes an unexpected turn when Will Junior presents Mibs with a birthday gift—a pen set she hadn’t yet opened. As she examines the gift, she begins to draw a sun on his hand, a simple, innocent gesture. To her astonishment, the sun sketch comes to life, glowing and shifting in ways she could not have anticipated. This

moment marks the beginning of Mibs’s journey into the discovery of her abilities, a revelation that surprises and deeply intrigues her. The chapter ends with the realization that Mibs’s powers are not just a figment of her imagination but a tangible force that is starting to take shape. This discovery symbolizes a turning point for Mibs, as she begins to see that her life is changing in ways she cannot fully understand yet.

The chapter is a rich blend of childhood innocence, family bonds, and the slow unveiling of Mibs’s unique powers. Through the challenges and the chaos of their journey, Mibs begins to confront the reality of her abilities and the weight they might carry in the future. At the same time, the urgency of the journey to Salina remains ever-present, reminding Mibs that time is slipping away. This constant push-pull between personal growth and urgent external demands mirrors the tension of adolescence, when the desire to grow and understand oneself is often in conflict with the pressures and responsibilities of the world around them. The chapter encapsulates the complex nature of family life, where joy and sorrow intertwine, and the realization that no one is immune to both the light and dark sides of existence. As Mibs embarks on this emotional and physical journey, she begins to understand that her family’s struggles are part of the larger human experience, one filled with both profound challenges and unexpected moments of wonder.

Chapter XII

In Chapter XII, the narrator finds herself completely overwhelmed by the chaos that is unfolding around her, as well as the internal struggle created by the clashing voices in her head. Desperate to escape the overwhelming situation, she flees from Will Junior’s presence and the dilapidated house that has become a symbol of her confusion. She rushes past her friend, Lester Swan, and Bobbi, barely acknowledging their existence as she tries to distance herself from the storm of emotions that cloud her mind. The pressure is suffocating, and she doesn’t know how to make sense of it all. She finally seeks refuge by hiding beneath a cot at the back of the bus, accompanied by her friend Samson, attempting to shut out the overwhelming world around her. She blocks her ears, humming softly in an effort to find some semblance of peace. However, the noise never truly stops, and soon a new voice joins the chorus—Will Junior's, pulling her further into the unsettling web of secrets he holds.

In a moment of desperation, the narrator yells at Will Junior, demanding that he wash his hand—a strange request fueled by an even stranger tension building inside her. The plea is more than just a cry for cleanliness; it is an unspoken desire for Will Junior to rid himself of the mysterious and unsettling energy he carries with him. At this point, her brother, Fish, notices her distress. Without understanding the full scope of the situation, Fish perceives Will Junior as a potential threat to his sister and immediately engages with him. The tension between them escalates into a physical confrontation, with punches thrown and emotions running high. Throughout the chaos, the narrator continues to shout at Will Junior, urgently telling him to wash his hand. Each word heightens the already overwhelming atmosphere. Meanwhile, Fish’s own emotional response intensifies, and the environment around them begins to react. The bus windows begin to crack and shatter as Fish’s powers surge, echoing the emotional turmoil rippling through the air.

As the storm outside rages, the narrator watches the conflict unfold between her brother and Will Junior. She feels an overwhelming mix of emotions as storm clouds gather in the sky, paralleling the chaos within the group. Fish, in an attempt to calm the situation and protect his sister, spits into Will Junior's ink-covered hand, effectively smearing away the drawings that have caused so much tension. This unexpected act, though messy and seemingly impulsive, is a profound gesture of solidarity and protection. The ink that once symbolized deep, hidden secrets now fades away, and the atmosphere shifts, leaving only the narrator's conflicting thoughts swirling in her mind. Will Junior's secrets, like the ink, seem to evaporate, but the weight of the narrator's own hidden emotions remains. As the situation settles, Will Junior, visibly bruised from Fish's punch and the spitting incident, wipes off the remnants of the ink, his blackened eye a sign of the intense emotions that have played out. The narrator reflects on the harsh realities of adolescence—the struggle with identity, the pressure of secrets, and the overwhelming desire to understand oneself in a world full of turmoil. With her brother's support, she finally finds a brief moment of respite. She allows herself to relax, feeling the weight of the moment lift slightly. However, the voices of Carlene and Rhonda in her mind continue to linger, offering their usual commentary on the chaos that seems to follow them all, a reminder that adolescence, for all its challenges, is rarely calm.

The emotional complexity of this chapter illustrates the intense inner conflict the narrator faces. She's trapped between wanting to escape the chaos and needing to confront it. As the chapter progresses, she starts to realize that her struggles are not just her own, but are shared with the people around her—especially her brother, Fish. This chapter serves as a reflection on the tumultuous nature of adolescence, where emotions run high, and every action, no matter how small, can have far-reaching consequences. The sense of confusion, mixed with an attempt to find solace, is something that many readers can relate to, especially when it comes to navigating relationships and identity during such a transformative time. Despite the heavy emotions, there is a sense of hope embedded in the actions of the narrator's brother, Fish. His protective gesture towards Will Junior not only acts as a form of redemption

for the group but also serves as a reminder of the power of family in the face of life’s most challenging moments. The storm may have passed, but the emotional aftermath lingers, leaving the narrator to grapple with the reality of growing up and the complexities that come with it.

Chapter XIII

Chapter XIII delves further into Mibs’ emotional turmoil, as she struggles with the aftermath of her father’s accident while aboard Lester Swan’s bus. Overcome with guilt and despair, Mibs wrestles with feelings of inadequacy, crying out in her turmoil while reflecting on how she believes she must change herself in order to find any reassurance about her father’s health. The atmosphere inside the bus becomes increasingly tense as passengers—particularly Rhonda and Carlene—express their dissatisfaction with Lester, who has taken charge of their journey. Mibs, feeling both overwhelmed and helpless, is caught in the grip of their criticism and is deeply affected by the increasing sense of danger that pervades the situation. Despite the rising tension in the bus, Mibs finds solace in her brother, Samson, who quietly offers her a moment of calm. His silent support brings Mibs some relief, helping her stay grounded amid the chaos around her.

As the bus moves along, the situation grows more intense when Mibs notices Lester struggling to secure the broken windows. The sight of Lester grappling with the damage brings Mibs into the role of caretaker, even though she feels entirely unprepared. She is forced to step into the responsibility of tending to the injuries of the other passengers, something she does reluctantly but without question. Bobbi’s sharp remarks and the discomfort of the other passengers only add weight to Mibs' shoulders, making the tension palpable. Despite her doubts, Mibs pushes forward, determined to help not just out of duty but also in an attempt to redeem herself in her own eyes. She is driven by a need to prove that she can be of value in this time of crisis. However, the more Mibs tries to help, the more her internal struggle grows. The growing discomfort and judgment from the people around her make her feel like a misfit, but she stays focused, pushing through her fear and doubts for the sake of the others.

As Mibs attempts to tend to Will Junior’s injuries, she finds herself facing deeper questions about her identity. The constant questioning by Will about her family’s unusual abilities causes Mibs to confront the deeper complexities of being a Beaumont. Her powers, which once seemed like a source of pride, now feel like an overwhelming burden. As she grapples with the reality that these abilities make her different from others, Mibs begins to wonder whether she will ever find a way to live a normal life. Will’s probing questions make her feel exposed, forcing her to reflect on how others perceive her and whether she will ever be able to fit in. Mibs’ powers, which are inherently a part of her, now feel like they hold her back from connecting with others, and this only intensifies her internal struggle. She is torn between the desire to embrace her gifts and the wish to live like a regular person, free from the pressures of her extraordinary abilities.

Mibs is overwhelmed with feelings of confusion, guilt, and self-doubt, unsure of how to reconcile her identity with the expectations placed on her. The constant push and pull between what she feels she should be and who she really is creates a powerful emotional conflict. Will’s persistent questioning brings her to the point of emotional exhaustion, forcing her to confront the complexity of being a Beaumont child. Her internal battle intensifies as she tries to understand whether her powers are a blessing or a curse, and whether they will always make her different. The chapter captures Mibs’ journey of self-discovery, as she seeks not only to understand her own abilities but also to navigate the shifting relationships she has with those around her. The pressure to live up to the Beaumont legacy weighs heavily on her, leaving her to grapple with the complexities of family, identity, and self-acceptance. Mibs’ struggle to find her place among her family and the world around her is an ongoing theme in this chapter, highlighting the challenges of growing up when you are burdened with extraordinary gifts. The internal conflict of wanting to be seen for who she truly is, while also wanting to escape the expectations tied to her powers, makes this chapter one of profound emotional growth and exploration.

Chapter XIV

Chapter XIV begins with the narrator reflecting deeply on the Beaumont family’s unique traits, which have become an essential part of their identity. These special gifts, known as "savvies," are passed down through generations and shape their lives in ways that set them apart from others. The narrator recalls a conversation with Grandpa, who shared the family’s history of extraordinary abilities, especially after Grandma Dollop's passing. In the comforting presence of Grandpa, the narrator learns that these savvies, much like physical traits, are inherited, and each generation’s abilities are influenced by the ones before. Grandpa regales stories about various relatives, some of whom used their talents for good, while others, like Grandma Dollop's sister Jubilee, misused her abilities for selfish purposes, like stealing.

Grandpa emphasized that a savvy is not a supernatural power but rather a natural, innate gift that becomes a part of the family dynamic. According to the narrator’s recollection, their mother, Momma, firmly believed that everyone possessed their own unique savvy, even though many people failed to recognize it. She often pointed out how people might not realize that their talents, such as making excellent homemade jam or being able to avoid mosquito bites, were part of their innate savvy. Over time, the Beaumonts began to see these abilities for what they truly were: a distinct type of knowledge or ability that added depth to their experiences, making them different from others but also providing a way to navigate the world. Momma’s belief in the potential for everyone to have their own gift helped the children embrace their own abilities, as it allowed them to see their talents not as burdens but as special advantages.

As the narrator continues to grapple with the weight of being part of a family so uniquely gifted, they share a moment with Will Junior, explaining how the Beaumonts’ savvies make their lives different but not necessarily better than other families. While

the children’s experiences may be shaped by their abilities, they are still just like everyone else, navigating similar challenges. However, when the narrator is pressed to share their own savvy, they hesitate, reminding themselves of the family’s rules about discretion. These unspoken rules dictate that abilities should only be shared with those who have earned the trust of the family, maintaining a sense of privacy and safety around their extraordinary gifts. This rule creates an internal conflict for the narrator, as they both want to be open about their powers but also understand the importance of safeguarding the family’s secrets. The chapter shifts as the narrator recalls the story of how Momma and Poppa first met during a carnival. Momma, with her natural talent for tossing rings onto hooks, caught Poppa’s attention, leading to a humorous exchange that highlighted the Beaumont family's quirky and charming use of their savvies. This playful moment between Momma and Poppa further illustrates the fun and ease with which the Beaumonts integrate their abilities into their everyday lives, making the family’s unique gifts feel like a natural part of their existence.

The story of how Momma and Poppa met at the carnival adds depth to the idea that these talents, while extraordinary, are part of the family’s normal interactions. It was a moment where their unique skills led to a meaningful connection, and it was a reminder that these abilities were never meant to isolate or cause trouble, but to enhance their lives. As the narrator reflects on this, they begin to appreciate the balance between their family’s gifts and the need to navigate the world like everyone else. The chapter then transitions to the present as the bus ride continues, with tensions beginning to rise among the boys. The narrator observes the boys' growing frustration, hinting that the journey ahead may not be as smooth as expected. Despite the fun and lighthearted moments that define the Beaumont family’s interactions, there are still underlying struggles that need to be addressed. This sense of uncertainty about what lies ahead is amplified as the bus moves forward, and the narrator begins to feel the weight of their family legacy and the complexities that come with it. The chapter ends with a sense of anticipation, as the Beaumont family continues their journey, grappling with the dynamics of their extraordinary gifts and the challenges that lie ahead.

Chapter XV

Chapter XV begins with a shift in the children’s journey as they make their way toward their destination on the bus. Fish, Bobbi, Will, and the narrator are quietly observing their bus driver, Lester, as he pulls over to assist a woman whose car appears to be broken down. The woman, Miss Lill Kiteley, stands in stark contrast to Lester with her oversized coat worn over her waitress uniform. The children notice the differences between the two, particularly the way she seems larger than life compared to Lester’s smaller, more compact frame. This new arrival instantly catches the attention of the children, sparking a wave of curiosity and concern. They can’t help but speculate on the reasons behind Lester’s sudden stop and the possibility that this unplanned interaction might throw their journey off course. The group, already focused on their mission to reach their father in the hospital, is apprehensive about having an unexpected adult join them, especially when their plan has been so carefully thought out.

Lester, as always, maintains his usual cheerful disposition, which only serves to highlight the children’s growing discomfort. He talks to Lill, unaware of the unease his actions are causing the children. Lill, being perceptive, notices their expressions and engages with them in a kind, non-threatening way, attempting to ease the tension. Despite her warm approach, the children can’t shake their unease, especially with the realization that their journey has just become a little more complicated. In an attempt to regain control of the situation, they quickly fabricate a story about their journey, hoping to convince Lill that everything is legitimate and to ensure that Lester remains on their side. This quick-thinking lie reflects the children’s desire to maintain control over their narrative, which is crucial as they face the uncertainty of their lives and the task at hand. They worry that sharing too much with Lill could lead to unnecessary complications, so they rely on their ability to spin a convincing tale.

As the chapter unfolds, Lill takes a seat beside Lester, still trying to engage the children in conversation. She soon notices the bruises on their faces, remarking humorously that they must be “bad kids,” a comment meant to ease the atmosphere rather than criticize. Bobbi, quick on the uptake, responds by calling them “misfits,” further lightening the mood with her playful tone. Lill smiles in return, showing no judgment and indicating that she’s not there to make them feel uncomfortable or judged. Instead, her response is warm and accepting, signaling to the children that she’s different from the adults they’ve encountered in the past. This moment serves as a shift in the children’s perception of Lill, who, rather than being an obstacle or a threat, starts to seem like someone they can trust. Lill’s openness and nonjudgmental approach help to dissolve the walls the children had put up in response to the unexpected interruption, allowing them to start considering her as part of their group.

As the chapter draws to a close, the children begin to warm to Lill’s presence, understanding that she may be able to offer them something they hadn’t anticipated—acceptance. Though their initial resistance to having a stranger join them was strong, Lill’s kindness and her lack of judgment make them reconsider their stance. By the end of the chapter, they find themselves more open to the idea of Lill traveling with them, realizing that her company might not be a burden after all. The acceptance of Lill represents an important turning point in their journey, symbolizing how the children are learning to navigate the complexities of relationships with others, even when faced with the unexpected. They recognize that while their journey is fraught with difficulties and challenges, it also provides opportunities for growth and the forging of new connections. As they prepare to move forward, the children gain a deeper understanding of the importance of flexibility and trust, not just in themselves but in those they meet along the way. This evolution in their attitude sets the stage for future developments in their journey and underscores the theme of change that runs throughout their adventure.

Chapter XVI

In Chapter XVI, the narrative introduces Lill Kiteley, a charismatic waitress whose cheerful disposition immediately endears her to the children on the bus, even managing to lighten Bobbi's mood. Lill, with her lighthearted nature and absence of tattoos, contrasts sharply with the somber situation surrounding them. She finds herself stranded on the roadside after her dilapidated car breaks down en route to her job at a truck-stop diner. Fortunately, Lester Swan rescues her by stopping the bus, enabling her to continue her journey alongside the children.

As the journey unfolds, Lill assumes a maternal role, tending to the children’s needs while making sure to clean and bandage Fish's injuries. This nurturing instinct provides a comforting atmosphere as she fusses over them, echoing the care a mother would bestow. One poignant moment occurs when Lill helps adjust the protagonist’s dress, which had become rumpled. As Lill compliments the dress—picked out by the protagonist's father—the protagonist reflects on the meaningful connection to her father and the special memories associated with it, despite feeling a pang of embarrassment due to the teasing from others.

As they converse, the protagonist shares her feelings about her father’s health and her desire to help him, comparing her role to that of “Sleeping Beauty,” emphasizing her belief in her ability to awaken him. While Lill expresses concern about these lofty hopes, the protagonist dismisses her worry. This exchange reveals the deeper emotional undercurrents as the protagonist grapples with fear and hope, linking her father and their shared memories with her current struggles.

Lill’s understanding contrasts with the judgment the protagonist feels from peers, particularly regarding her dress and growing feelings for a boy, Will. Lill reassures her that self-worth is not tied to others’ perceptions. By the chapter's conclusion, Lill has transformed from a stranger into a comforting figure, almost an angel, embodying

support and understanding in a tumultuous time. The chapter captures the intricacies of childhood emotions, familial bonds, and the significance of hope in the face of adversity.

Chapter XVII

Chapter XVII takes the group toward the town of Emerald, where the protagonist, along with their companions, has a surprising encounter with Samson, the narrator's seven-year-old brother. He quietly stands next to Fish, holding an empty bag of potato chips, his silent presence adding to the mystery of his character. Lill, who is with the group, is taken aback by Samson's unexpected appearance and learns that he is a quiet and reserved child, not one to engage in many words. This piques the curiosity of the group, adding an air of suspense as they begin to realize how unusual their situation truly is. As the children begin to feel the pangs of hunger, Fish makes a casual comment about how it's well past the time for supper, highlighting their growing need for nourishment. Lill, a waitress at the Emerald Truck Stop Diner, responds to their discomfort by acknowledging her tardiness in getting food, yet sympathizing with the group's struggles. She generously offers to treat them to a meal, including a banana cream pie, much to everyone's surprise, particularly Samson, who is typically shy and doesn't speak often. However, when Samson does speak, it is with a deep and husky voice, expressing his craving for the banana cream pie, which brings a lighthearted moment to an otherwise tense atmosphere. His simple request offers a sense of relief and creates a shared moment of levity among the group.

Upon arriving at the diner, the group is greeted by the neon lights that shine brightly in the evening, indicating a busy and bustling establishment. The parking lot is filled with numerous vehicles, signifying the popularity of the diner, and the atmosphere is lively with patrons. Lester, the bus driver, parks the bus in an alleyway behind the diner, apologizing to the group for not being able to park closer to the entrance. Lill, however, remains unfazed by the less-than-ideal parking, confidently leading the group through the alley toward the diner. As they make their way through the alley, Samson walks between Lill and Lester, though his anxiety is apparent, his steps still

steady. The unease within the group grows as the narrator spots a hand protruding from a pile of discarded clothes behind a dumpster, sparking immediate concern. Despite Will's suggestion that the man might just be drunk, the narrator refuses to ignore the situation, sensing the need to check on him. The narrator's thoughts turn to Poppa, and the vulnerability he always seemed to carry, motivating the narrator to take action despite the uncertainty surrounding the man's condition. Kneeling beside the homeless individual, the narrator reaches out to feel for a pulse, hoping to revive him, even as Will looks on with hesitation.

Rather than finding hope or reassurance, the narrator is overwhelmed with a voice inside their head, one of deep despair and regret. The man's thoughts are filled with sorrow, and instead of the expected relief of knowing someone is alive, the realization of his emotional turmoil causes the narrator to falter. This moment is jarring, as the narrator realizes that their ability, which they had once seen as a potential means of helping others, only brings them deeper into the pain of others. The weight of this realization is heavy, leaving the narrator questioning not only their ability to help but also the purpose of their savviness. They had always thought of their power as something that could be used for good, to aid those in need, but now it seems like a curse, a burden too heavy to bear. The encounter leaves the narrator grappling with feelings of helplessness and an overwhelming sense of isolation, as they yearn for a life without the emotional weight of others' pain. In this moment, the narrator longs to be like their father, Poppa, someone who doesn't carry the weight of the world's emotions. The scene is a powerful turning point for the protagonist, as it forces them to come to terms with the emotional cost of their abilities and the loneliness that often accompanies them. The realization that not all pain can be fixed with their powers leaves the narrator questioning the very essence of their role in the world.

Chapter XIX

Chapter XIX begins with a surge of tension as Bobbi confronts a disturbing realization, leading her to leave in haste, leaving Mibs and Fish momentarily shocked and uncertain. As they process what’s happening, their photographs flash across a small television screen, boldly marked with the words "ALERT! MISSING!" The weight of the moment presses heavily on the group, the true scale of their predicament settling in with a mix of fear and confusion. Fish, sensing the gravity of the situation, quickly tries to shut off the TV, but before the tension can ease, Ozzie, the intimidating manager of the Emerald Truck Stop Diner and Lounge, storms into the room. He immediately starts reprimanding Mibs and Fish for being in a restricted area, disregarding their explanation that Lill had granted them permission. His harsh words only add to the mounting stress, and when they try to reason with him, Ozzie makes it clear he has no tolerance for their presence, threatening Lill’s job if they aren’t immediately removed.

The atmosphere in the diner turns colder as Ozzie’s anger focuses entirely on Lill, his harsh words and actions cutting through the already tense air. The entire diner seems to hold its breath as Ozzie belittles her in front of everyone, escalating the discomfort for all involved. Lill, who had always carried herself with grace and professionalism, now stands on the verge of tears, humiliated as Ozzie tosses her last paycheck at her, using it as a weapon in his verbal assault. His behavior not only displays his complete lack of respect for her but also publicly undermines her authority, causing the rest of the group to feel her pain and embarrassment. The power dynamics in the room are suddenly thrown into disarray, and the group finds themselves further alienated by the harshness of Ozzie’s actions.

Just as it seems like Ozzie’s control over the situation is absolute, the unexpected happens, and everything shifts in an instant. Lester steps in, attempting to intervene and support Lill, but chaos erupts in the form of an unexpected surprise: Samson,

Mibs’ pet, bites Ozzie, causing him to lose control of the banana cream pie he was holding. The moment unfolds in rapid succession, with Mibs and Fish acting on instinct, shoving Ozzie and sending him tumbling backward, splattering the pie across the room. The eruption of laughter and surprise marks a dramatic shift in the room’s power dynamics, with Ozzie suddenly rendered powerless and humiliated, his authority shattered in an instant.

Amid the chaos, the group’s focus sharpens as they rally together, quickly gathering money and supplies in a bid to escape the diner. Lill, though clearly shaken and humiliated, shows remarkable resilience, urging everyone to grab the burgers and leave quickly, her determination standing in stark contrast to Ozzie’s earlier bullying. In an act of rebellious defiance, Lester re-enters the scene triumphantly, carrying yet another pie, further fueling the ongoing chaos. As the group makes their escape, they leave Ozzie floundering behind them, his sense of control broken and his pride wounded, marking a significant shift in the power structure of the diner and a small, hard-earned victory for the group.

This chapter profoundly illustrates themes of resilience, unity, and the importance of standing up against oppressive forces. The group’s collective ability to navigate this intense moment of crisis demonstrates the strength of their bond, showing that together they can face seemingly insurmountable challenges. Their collective action against Ozzie is a powerful testament to the strength of loyalty and solidarity, as they stand firm against an unjust authority and protect one another from harm. As the chapter unfolds, it becomes clear that the Beaumont children, along with their friends, are learning the value of standing up for each other and for what’s right, no matter how intimidating the situation may seem. Through these challenges, they continue to grow stronger, more united, and more determined to face whatever comes next, armed with their shared sense of purpose and unshakable support for one another.

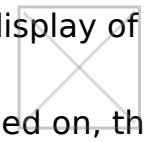
Chapter XX

Chapter XX begins with the group feeling a deep sense of relief after successfully escaping the chaos that unfolded inside the diner. The fresh spring air greets them as they step outside, and the sound of passing cars seems to calm their frayed nerves, offering a sharp contrast to the loud clamor of the restaurant. As they walked carefully, avoiding the potholes that marked the path to an alley, their steps were cautious, and their minds stayed vigilant, particularly watching for any signs of pursuit from Ozzie. Despite their concerns, Ozzie remained behind, likely too embarrassed by his earlier mishap with the pie, or perhaps still trying to recover from the chaos of the moment.

As they made their way through the darkened streets, a moment of reflection suddenly struck the protagonist. They noticed a homeless man sitting by a dumpster, his worn clothes blending into the nighttime shadows. Compassion overwhelmed them, prompting them to place the half-eaten burger basket and a cherished purple ribbon flower next to him—a small yet significant gesture that acknowledged his existence. This quiet act stood in stark contrast to the preoccupation of their group, highlighting the protagonist’s deepening sense of empathy, a quality that seemed to be growing more pronounced with every passing moment.

Upon returning to the bus, the lingering tension from the diner continued to buzz in the air among the group. Bobbi, with her calm demeanor yet probing eyes, remained an ever-present figure, observing the protagonist and adding to their growing discomfort. The protagonist, unable to shake off the unease, felt their thoughts interrupted by Fish, who sought clarity amid Bobbi’s relentless probing. As Bobbi's teasing escalated, frustration began to simmer within the group, particularly for the protagonist, whose patience was now wearing thin due to the unresolved tension between the two.

Meanwhile, Lester, struggling with the bus door and juggling a stolen pie, added to the building intensity of the moment. Bobbi, unable to resist, once again teased Fish, igniting a sharp, defensive response from him. The tension in the air escalated dramatically as a sudden windstorm swept over the group, seemingly out of nowhere. Fish, caught up in the overwhelming emotions of the moment, unleashed his powers, stirring the storm with a force that sent Bobbi stumbling backward, both startled and amazed by the display of his abilities.



As the storm raged on, the protagonist stood motionless, untouched by the furious winds that surrounded them. The protective barrier created by Fish’s powers shielded them, a striking visual representation of the bond they shared as a family. Bobbi and Will Junior, standing a few feet away, watched in awe, the realization dawning on them that the Beaumont children were not like anyone they had ever known. They weren’t just ordinary kids, but extraordinary in ways that defied the normalcy they had once taken for granted. This revelation was a turning point, marking a shift in their understanding of the Beaumont family’s true nature and the powerful abilities they possessed, regardless of the chaos that continuously swirled around them.

In the aftermath of this realization, the atmosphere became thick with unspoken thoughts, as Bobbi and Will struggled to process the truth they had just witnessed. It was clear that the Beaumont children’s powers were far from ordinary, and as the dust settled, the profound implications of their abilities hung in the air. This moment signified more than just a physical display of power—it marked a pivotal shift in the relationships among the group, challenging their perceptions of normal and creating a new understanding of what it meant to be different. With Fish’s powers now openly acknowledged, the group was left to navigate the complex emotions that arose from this newfound reality, all while continuing their journey toward an uncertain future.

Chapter XXI

Chapter XXI focuses on the narrator’s reflection on a crucial life lesson taught by their mother, Momma, about the concept of "scumbling." In an insightful conversation, Momma explains this artistic technique, which involves using just the right amount of paint to bring out one's unique traits or "savvy" without overwhelming everything else. The lesson resonates deeply with the narrator, especially in relation to their brother, Fish, who has struggled with his overpowering savvy. This power, compared to a wild storm, has been difficult for Fish to manage, but the lesson teaches that control is necessary for his abilities to be both impactful and manageable, a message that hits home for the narrator.

As the journey continues through the chaotic landscape of Emerald, the scene shifts dramatically as Fish’s powers intensify, creating a whirlwind of emotions and uncertainty. The group feels the rising tension, with the narrator experiencing growing anxiety, feeling the absence of comfort and security as they move further away from home. The situation reaches a climax when a "No Parking Any Time" sign is lifted by the wind created by Fish's storm, soaring through the air, creating a moment of real danger. However, in a remarkable show of control, Fish channels his powers to redirect the sign, which not only diffuses the immediate threat but also marks a moment of personal growth for him. The success of this action instills a sense of confidence in Fish, showing that he has begun to understand the delicate balance required to harness his abilities.

Once Fish regains his composure, the group finds solace in each other’s presence. Despite the ongoing chaos outside, there’s a growing sense of unity among the children and Lill, who support one another through the trials they face. Will and Bobbi, ever supportive, bond with Fish, helping him cope with the realization of his growing control over his powers. Lester, the adult of the group, remains mostly unaware of the

severity of the storm, consumed by his duties and responsibilities. Lill, however, suggests that they continue on their journey toward Salina, where the possibility of reuniting with their father looms large. Her reassurance provides comfort to the children, offering them a glimmer of hope amid the uncertainty.

Throughout the chapter, we see the character of Lester being weighed down by his growing anxieties regarding his job and responsibilities. His internal conflict creates tension between his obligations and the children’s immediate needs. Lill, ever practical, recognizes that the children’s request to go to Salina is of paramount importance and pushes Lester to focus on their needs rather than his own concerns about deliveries. She calls for clear and open communication, sensing that transparency is vital to maintaining unity within the group. As they continue on their journey, Lill’s determination to face their shared circumstances head-on sets the tone for the group’s resilience in the face of adversity.

The chapter wraps up by emphasizing the internal and external conflicts that the characters are navigating. Each character must confront their responsibilities, desires, and fears while also trying to maintain a sense of hope for the future. From Fish's newfound control over his powers to the complex relationship dynamics between the characters, the chapter showcases the evolution of their personal journeys. The unpredictable nature of their journey serves as a constant backdrop, providing both challenges and opportunities for emotional growth. As the characters continue to forge ahead in uncertain times, they are learning to balance their individual struggles with the collective need to support one another. The chapter highlights the importance of growth, both emotional and physical, as they move forward into the unknown.

Chapter XXII

Chapter XXII takes a deep dive into the anxiety and uncertainty surrounding the characters as they unknowingly embark on a journey, trapped in a web of deception and difficult decisions. After sneaking aboard Lester's bus, they thought they would be heading directly to Salina, but the group soon realizes that they are heading into the unknown, unsure of what awaits them. Lill, one of their companions, reacts with an uncomfortable silence, which only adds to the tension as they all try to understand the magnitude of their situation. While the children try to process the events unfolding, Bobbi’s tattoo ominously repeating, “We’re dead,” reflects the doom they feel, reminding them of the gravity of what’s at stake. As the moment drags on, they express their fears aloud, unsure of what will happen next and the impact of their decisions.

Lill, unable to keep the resignation from her voice, starts reflecting on the toll this journey has taken on her, mentioning how she has already lost so much, including her job and car. As the group grapples with the uncertainty, Lill steps into a leadership role, deciding that the best course of action is to head east toward Lincoln and find a motel to spend the night. She knows the importance of keeping the children safe, so she also plans to call their parents to reassure them. However, the narrator feels a deep weight of responsibility, unsure if reaching Poppa will need to be put on hold until the morning. Though they all know it’s necessary, the children are left to consider the impact of waiting, caught between a need for safety and the desire to take action right away.

As the group settles into their new plan, Lill and the children solidify their alliance, making a promise to each other to make a call home once they find a safe haven. While Lill counts her cash, the children quickly come to realize that there will be enough money to secure motel rooms, which Lester agrees to arrange. Despite his

reluctance to share a room with them, Lester takes Lill’s cash and arranges accommodations at the “Lincoln Sleepy 10,” a small, somewhat secluded motel that will provide them with some much-needed privacy. For the children, it’s a relief to have a roof over their heads for the night, though there’s still a lingering unease due to the recent developments and the looming fear of being discovered. The group tries to settle into a sense of normalcy, but with each step forward, the tension in the air grows.

Arriving at the motel, the group finds comfort in the fact that it’s nearly empty, offering them the peace and quiet they desperately need. Yet, the narrator can’t shake the fear that their secret may be exposed. The knowledge that their faces were shown on TV as missing children heightens their anxiety, and the uncertainty of what will happen if they are found out looms large. They briefly discuss the possibility that Lester may abandon them, but his reassurance that he won’t leave them eases some of their concerns. Still, the weight of their choices is felt by all, and the question of what comes next remains unanswered.

As the group heads up to the second floor, Fish notices the closed swimming pool, which for a moment symbolizes childhood freedom and all the things they’ve been missing out on. Yet, the feeling is bittersweet, as the complexities of their current situation cloud any thoughts of carefree enjoyment. Lill, focused on keeping the group moving forward, commands them to stay on task, yet the narrator takes a moment to confide in Bobbi and Fish. She shares their plan to avoid calling home, a decision meant to protect their secrecy and avoid unnecessary complications. This quiet exchange between the three adds a layer of intimacy and suspense to the narrative, showing how they are working together to protect each other and manage the consequences of their actions. The chapter ends with a quiet but palpable sense of tension, as the group walks a fine line between their desires and the reality of the consequences they’re trying to avoid.

Chapter XXIII

Chapter XXIII delves deeply into the intricacies of deception and the complex dynamics of family relationships. The central challenge of this chapter revolves around a plan to convince Lill that the group has made a successful call home, when in fact, they have not. The narrator reflects on past events when Bobbi had mimicked Lill's voice to cover for herself at school, using her mother’s stern tone to create plausible stories that could smooth over tricky situations. As they find themselves in a motel, the group sets up two rooms, and the narrator feels a sense of cautious optimism. The deception, though uncomfortable, is believed to be necessary for Lill’s peace of mind and to avoid complications from calling home too early. The situation feels fragile, and the narrator understands that maintaining this illusion could help keep the journey moving forward without any unwanted disruptions or stress for Lill.

The tension builds further when Lill inspects the motel rooms and assigns the girls and boys to separate accommodations, a small task that takes on added significance in this moment. With everything still uncertain, the narrator shifts into a leadership role, giving Fish specific instructions on how to handle any incoming calls without giving away the truth. Lill, aware of how concerned the children’s parents must be, encourages Bobbi to call home and reassure her family about their well-being. With Lill momentarily distracted by a trip to the bathroom, the narrator seizes the opportunity to carefully guide Bobbi on how to approach the conversation, ensuring she remains calm and that their story stays consistent. This planning gives Bobbi the tools she needs to act convincingly, while the narrator’s awareness of the potential consequences keeps the pressure high.

Bobbi, despite her initial hesitance, picks up the phone, pretending to speak with her mother, while Fish listens on the other end of the line. Bobbi skillfully takes on the role, providing fabricated details about their safety and the direction they plan to take

toward Salina, all the while maintaining an air of calmness. Eventually, Bobbi passes the phone to the narrator, who must now play her part in the deception. The narrator speaks in a controlled manner, keeping her voice steady despite the nervous tension that pulses within her. She must sound convincing, even as the weight of the situation presses down on her, and the guilt of maintaining the lie builds inside her chest.

When Lill returns and is eager to take the phone, she finds herself in the midst of a conversation where Bobbi adopts a stern, authoritative tone—one that mimics her mother's. Lill, relieved to finally have the chance to speak with Bobbi's family, reassures them with a comforting tone, providing all the details about the motel and how they are fully prepared to care for the children. Her reassurances offer a sense of relief, not only to Bobbi's mother but also to Lill, who is now convinced that everything is under control. However, the narrator is left with a lingering sense of guilt, fully aware that the truth has been carefully manipulated and concealed. The emotional weight of the deception weighs heavily on her, knowing that although Lill may feel reassured, she remains burdened by the lie.

As the conversation winds down and the group resumes their normal routine, Bobbi and the boys return with a sense of triumph, clearly unaware of Lill's lingering doubts. The light-hearted energy that the boys bring contrasts sharply with the underlying tension of the situation. This chapter intricately explores the layers of family dynamics, emphasizing how far individuals will go to protect the ones they love—even when it means crossing ethical lines. The deception, though born out of a desire to shield Lill from worry, raises important questions about the morality of protecting someone through lies. The chapter delves into the complexities of trust, revealing how it can be tested, strained, and sometimes manipulated when love is at stake. The act of deceiving Lill, though seemingly innocent, underscores the larger theme of how deeply family members are willing to go to protect each other, even if it involves the painful cost of honesty.

Through this chapter, the narrator grapples with the weight of her actions, as the moral implications of their choices begin to unfold. The impact of these decisions on

the larger family dynamic remains unclear, but it’s evident that the group is experiencing a delicate balance of trust and secrecy. This chapter not only explores themes of deception but also touches on the vulnerability that comes with navigating the complexities of love and family. The uncertainty of the journey ahead looms large, and the characters must decide whether their methods of protection will lead to long-term peace or deeper struggles as they continue to move forward.

Chapter XXIV

Chapter XXIV begins with Lill expressing her newfound enthusiasm and a sense of optimism about shopping for supplies, offering to take care of the kids until the next day. She suggests walking over to the Mega Mega Mart across the road to gather what they need, while asking if anyone would like to join her. However, the children, wary of their current situation and the potential consequences of drawing attention to themselves, prefer to stay behind in the safety of their temporary shelter. As she prepares to leave, Fish, in an attempt to lift their spirits, grabs the remote control, sparking a moment of lightheartedness amidst the tension. Lill reassures the children, promising to return quickly and that they are safe in the meantime, trying her best to ease their worries before stepping out.

Once Lill is gone, the children breathe a sigh of relief, feeling like they've successfully managed to keep their whereabouts a secret for the time being. However, this sense of relief is short-lived when Fish, hoping to distract himself, switches on the TV and is immediately confronted by a news alert showing their faces as missing children. This shocking turn of events hits Bobbi and Will hard, as they hadn't seen the update and were unaware of their growing notoriety. The truth of their situation sets in quickly, and the group becomes more anxious as they begin discussing the ramifications of calling home. Bobbi, thinking logically, expresses concern that such a call would complicate matters for their guardians, Lester and Lill, especially given the involvement of state troopers, which makes their situation more complicated than they had anticipated.

The atmosphere becomes heavier as they continue watching the news, and the weight of their circumstances becomes even more real when they learn that their father was one of the victims of a recent accident. This revelation shakes them to the core, causing one of the children to seek comfort in the company of the others. Bobbi, trying

to hold it together, turns off the TV, urging everyone to stay calm and not let panic take hold of them. Despite her best efforts to maintain composure, the truth of their situation is now undeniable, and the children are left grappling with the emotional weight of the news, unsure of how to move forward.

About an hour later, Lill returns, carrying an assortment of supplies from the Mega Mega Mart. She walks into the motel room filled with a burst of energy and excitement, her arms loaded with bags filled with both practical necessities and fun indulgences. The children are stunned by the large variety of items Lill has brought back, including toiletries, candy, clothing, and even a first aid kit. Lill’s cheerful demeanor and her enthusiasm about the trip stand in stark contrast to the heavy atmosphere in the room, providing a small beacon of light in a difficult time. She encourages the kids to enjoy their time, suggesting that they all change into their swimsuits and make use of the pool she discovered, offering them a temporary escape from the worry and uncertainty they’ve been dealing with.

Lill’s ability to maintain such a positive outlook, even in the face of mounting stress, surprises the children. They’re amazed by her energy and the way she can bring a sense of normalcy into their lives, even when everything around them feels so chaotic. Her hopefulness, coupled with her caring actions, provides a rare moment of joy amidst the challenges they’re all facing. She urges the children to focus on the present, even if just for a moment, reminding them that every child deserves to have fun, even when their world feels upside down. Lill’s encouragement becomes a symbol of resilience, offering the children a brief but much-needed reprieve from their fears. Her belief in the possibility of happiness amidst hardship is a reminder that, even in the darkest times, there are sparks of joy to be found. The chapter concludes with a subtle shift in mood as the children, though still apprehensive, find comfort in Lill's optimism and the temporary distraction she offers, knowing they are not facing this moment alone.

Chapter XXV

Chapter XXV opens with Mibs and Bobbi preparing to change into their swimsuits by the pool, marking the beginning of a pivotal moment in the story. Mibs, usually a confident individual, is taken aback by the poor fit of her swimsuit, which makes her feel self-conscious and vulnerable. This is a sharp contrast to the more self-assured character she has been before. Bobbi, on the other hand, steps in as a comforting presence, exuding a grown-up confidence in her cherry red bikini. She helps Mibs adjust the straps of her purple one-piece swimsuit, offering both practical assistance and emotional support, which has a noticeable effect on Mibs, boosting her confidence and helping her feel a bit better about her appearance. Bobbi’s encouragement is exactly what Mibs needs to regain some sense of control and comfort in a moment where she felt exposed.

Once they manage to get dressed, the girls make their way outside to join the boys, Will and Fish, near the pool. The scene that unfolds is vibrant, with the pool area described as a mix of charm and chaotic energy. Will is already in the water, swimming effortlessly, while Fish stands off to the side, preparing himself for what might be a more cautious dive into the pool. The mood lightens as the boys start a playful water fight, exchanging playful insults and laughter. In the midst of this playful chaos, Will unexpectedly kisses Mibs, causing her to feel flustered and confused. This kiss, unexpected and spontaneous, adds a layer of complexity to Mibs’s growing emotions. Fish, seeing this interaction, steps in with a warning to Will about how he should behave around Mibs, causing the group to shift into a slightly more serious dynamic, even though the fun continues. The complexity of emotions that begins to surface in Mibs further enriches the moment, leaving her unsure about how to process the sudden affection she has just experienced.

As the boys continue their water games, Mibs finds herself caught in a whirlwind of emotions, which prompts her to reflect on her feelings for Will. She becomes more introspective, trying to understand what she truly feels as she watches Will interact with the others. Bobbi, ever perceptive, notices Mibs's growing discomfort and teases her about Will's clear affection toward her. This playful teasing forces Mibs to acknowledge her own feelings, although her responses are uncertain, fluctuating between shyness and curiosity. She finds herself questioning whether she is ready to explore these feelings more deeply, unsure of what it all means. Her internal conflict highlights the emotional complexities of adolescence, where every interaction feels heightened and significant, especially in the context of relationships that are just beginning to evolve.

During this quiet moment of reflection, Bobbi opens up about her own struggles. As the preacher's daughter, she confides in Mibs about the pressure she feels to conform to a certain image and the weight of societal expectations that she constantly battles against. This admission of vulnerability helps the two girls bond on a deeper level. They share a candid conversation, discussing their respective challenges, their desires for freedom, and their evolving sense of self. For Mibs, it's a revelation that she is not alone in feeling the pressure of growing up and trying to reconcile who she is with the expectations placed upon her. This shared understanding provides a sense of connection, helping Mibs realize that she's not the only one struggling with the complexities of identity and the transition from childhood into young adulthood.

As the chapter draws to a close, Mibs and Bobbi float together in the pool, reflecting on the idea that life sometimes feels surreal. They both share the sentiment that it feels as though they're navigating a strange dreamscape, where the rules of childhood seem to blur as they step closer to maturity. This introspective moment encapsulates the bittersweet nature of their growth, as they begin to move past the innocence of childhood and enter a more complex, uncertain future. Their conversation marks a key turning point, not just in their friendship but in their personal development, as they start to navigate the emotional intricacies of adolescence. The chapter leaves the reader with a sense of quiet contemplation, as Mibs and Bobbi's shared experiences

illustrate the transformative journey of self-discovery, growth, and the complexities of navigating new emotions, relationships, and expectations. Their evolving bond and the realization of the challenges ahead remind them of the importance of personal growth and the strength that comes from understanding one’s identity in the face of a rapidly changing world.

Chapter XXVII

Chapter XXVII begins with the group’s arrival in Wymore just as the morning church service is finishing, presenting the perfect opportunity for them to make their delivery. Lester parks the large pink Bible bus in front of the church, preparing to deliver a batch of pink Bibles, something Lill is confident will be well received, particularly by the minister’s wife. Lill, always supportive, offers words of encouragement, accompanied by a quick kiss for good luck, which leaves Lester blushing, his chest puffed with pride. She has spent time coaching him, helping him build his confidence, and it’s clear that her influence has made a noticeable impact on how he carries himself. Lester, once hesitant and unsure, now stands taller and ready to take on the task with a newfound sense of purpose.

As Lester steps away to make the delivery, Lill watches him intently from the bus, her eyes filled with affection and concern. Her love for him is evident, but there’s also a sense of anxiety about the success of this moment. Meanwhile, Fish and Will begin to joke around, disrupting the tense atmosphere with playful banter. Their laughter is a brief reprieve from the tension, but it’s quickly overshadowed when Lester returns with a triumphant air. He announces that not only did the minister accept the Bibles, but the Wymore Women’s Guild also placed an order for three more cases. This news is a huge relief for Lester, who had been anxious about the possibility of unsold inventory, and the success of the delivery fills him with a sense of accomplishment.

Buoyed by this success, Lester, feeling more confident, recruits Fish and Will to help carry the boxes into the church. While they attempt to keep a low profile, worried about being recognized from the news reports about the missing children, they can’t avoid attracting some attention. Despite their concerns, they return from the delivery with cash in hand and a box of donuts as a reward. The sugary treats offer a momentary distraction and a sense of joy, but Fish, who had been uneasy from the

start, feels his worries deepen as Lester announces a change in plans. They will be making a detour before heading to Salina, and Fish’s unease grows as he contemplates what this might mean for their journey. The uncertainty of what lies ahead begins to weigh heavily on everyone, especially Mibs and the others, who are anxious about the next step in their journey and their father’s eventual return.

As Mibs struggles with her feelings and the growing sense of uncertainty, her gaze is drawn to a crumpled magazine cover that depicts a heart. The image triggers a moment of introspection, and she becomes lost in thought, contemplating the fragility of emotions and life itself. This reflection leads to a personal revelation as she opens up to Will, confessing that while she likes him, she’s not ready for a romantic relationship. It’s a vulnerable moment for Mibs, one that marks a significant step in her emotional growth, as she begins to understand the complexity of her feelings. In a quiet, symbolic gesture, Mibs hands Will her cherished birthday pen, a small but meaningful act that signifies her willingness to let go of something important while growing emotionally. Will, understanding the depth of her words, promises to wait for her, and Mibs, though still processing the weight of their conversation, looks out the window of the bus. The world outside is moving, yet inside, she is in a transitional phase of self-discovery and emotional maturation. This moment marks a significant point in her journey, as she navigates the uncertainty of her own feelings and begins to understand the deeper layers of relationships and personal growth.

Chapter XXVIII

Chapter XXVIII continues the group’s journey south, with the distance from Salina still weighing heavily on their minds. Despite the Beaumont family’s strong encouragement to head straight to Salina Hope Hospital, Lester remains firm in his decision to take one last detour. As the miles pass, the group distracts themselves by munching on snacks from the Mega Mega Mart, each person doing their best to keep their thoughts away from Poppa, who remains in the hospital. This small diversion serves as a brief respite, but the tension surrounding Poppa’s condition lingers in the back of their minds, shaping the atmosphere as they move forward.

The journey takes a tense turn as they approach Manhattan, where the sound of a police siren causes the children to stiffen in anxiety. For a brief moment, they fear it might be related to them, but their apprehension fades when they realize it’s not. Instead, they focus on Lill and Lester, whose quiet interaction with each other seems to have absorbed their attention. However, Fish, with his heightened senses, declares that he smells water, which immediately raises concern among the kids. Lester, trying to alleviate the unease, confirms their proximity to Tuttle Creek Lake, offering a measure of comfort to Fish and calming the group's nerves for the time being.

As the group continues their journey, the narrator seeks to provide reassurance to Fish, who is still haunted by his traumatic experience during the hurricane. The narrator reminds him that he is in control, emphasizing his strength and resilience. Just as the conversation settles, the mention of Carlene’s name causes Lester to react with visible tension. This mention stirs up past emotions, especially regarding his tattoos, which are tied to a difficult and complex history with Carlene. The group, feeling the weight of Lester’s discomfort, shifts their focus to Carlene’s reputation, particularly her questionable actions with animals, which casts a shadow over the conversation and creates unease among the children.

Lester initially appears to be lost in thought, the harsh words of Rhonda and Carlene echoing in his mind. Their negative influence clearly weighs on him, and Mibs, frustrated by this, admonishes him for allowing their voices to hold such power. Lester, despite his discomfort, begins to reflect on the truth of his relationship with Carlene, recognizing the deception she had caused in his life. He comes to terms with the fact that it was Carlene who had secured both his job and the bus, a realization that hits him with a mixture of guilt and clarity. The tension surrounding Carlene's influence is palpable, but it is through this self-reflection that Lester begins to understand the full scope of his connection to her.

In a rare moment of vulnerability, Lester opens up about his desire to settle his debts with Carlene before he can move forward in his relationship with Lill. This moment of honesty offers insight into Lester's internal struggle, as he acknowledges the lingering ties to his past that he must confront before he can embrace a future with Lill. Lill, ever supportive, responds with compassion, reassuring him that he is not alone in his journey and that together, they can overcome the shadows of his past. This gentle exchange brings a sense of hope and clarity to Lester, and he feels as though he has finally found a guiding light in Lill, whose unwavering support helps him navigate the complexities of his past. The chapter ends on a note of optimism, highlighting Lester's growth as he begins to reclaim his sense of self amidst the challenges and self-doubt that have long held him back. It captures the themes of personal conflict, redemption, and the importance of support from those who care, setting the stage for Lester to begin healing and moving forward.

Chapter XXXI

Chapter XXXI unfolds in a whirlwind of tension and emotion as the narrator searches desperately for a silver happy birthday pen amidst the overwhelming chaos surrounding them. The pen, a seemingly small object, is nowhere to be found, amplifying the sense of urgency and dread. In the back bedroom, Will Junior is locked in a heated argument with Carlene, who yells at him for disturbing her blankets. The narrator's anxiety heightens as they catch sight of two police officers approaching the trailer through the rain, a sight that instantly sends a ripple of fear through the room. With the threat of the officers drawing nearer, the family reacts quickly, locking the front door and pushing a chair against it, hoping to buy enough time to figure out an escape route.

As the narrator rushes through the trailer, their mind races, and they find Fish in the bathroom, clearly struggling emotionally with the unfolding events. Bobbi is frantically searching through the washer and dryer, perhaps looking for something to distract herself from the mounting tension. Eventually, Fish joins the narrator and Bobbi in Carlene's bedroom, but their attempt to regroup is disrupted by Carlene, whose behavior grows increasingly erratic as she screams for help. To silence her, Bobbi tries using Bubble Tape gum, but Carlene's response is violent, flailing her limbs and kicking in resistance. The narrator, trying to regain some sense of control over the situation, grabs the missing pen from Will, using it to draw a face on Carlene's foot as a way to distract her while also trying to find out where their missing brother, Samson, has gone.

Despite Carlene's defiance and the chaos around them, the narrator remains focused on uncovering Samson's whereabouts. The urgency of the moment becomes even more apparent when a voice, presumably Samson's, rings out in the narrator's mind, saying he is "in the wall." The police continue banging on the door, adding to the

pressure and urgency, but the narrator spots something that might provide an escape. They notice uneven panels in the wall and, after some effort, manage to pry one open, revealing a hidden space behind it. The discovery of this secret space brings both relief and frustration, as the tension reaches its peak.

Inside the hidden space, the narrator finds Samson, completely unaware of the chaos unfolding around him. He is sitting among clutter, happily drawing on himself with a pen, lost in his own world. The chaotic scribbles he’s created with the pen are a colorful and noisy reflection of his thoughts, bringing a sense of randomness and joy to the otherwise tense moment. The narrator, overwhelmed by the sight of Samson and relieved to have found him, embraces him tightly, feeling a deep sense of comfort. However, this brief moment of peace is shattered when Carlene reappears in the doorway, holding a broom and looking ready to lash out. The sudden shift in energy, from relief to tension, underscores the unpredictable nature of Carlene’s behavior and the precariousness of their situation.

The chapter captures the emotional rollercoaster of the family’s ordeal, filled with fear, confusion, and the desperate need to protect each other. Carlene’s unpredictable actions add a layer of complexity, making it even harder for the family to find any sense of peace or unity. The narrator’s determination to reunite with Samson, despite the chaos and obstacles in their path, speaks to the deep bond that holds the family together. The presence of the police officers outside and Carlene’s erratic behavior only serve to heighten the stakes, creating a constant sense of urgency. As the chapter draws to a close, the family’s resilience in the face of such overwhelming circumstances stands out, emphasizing the importance of staying united and protecting one another, no matter what challenges they face.

Chapter XXXII

Chapter XXXII begins with a sense of disarray as the aftermath of the situation involving Carlene’s trailer unfolds. The scene is swarming with police officers, state troopers, and paramedics, each moving swiftly to address the chaos. The rain had finally stopped, leaving behind an audience of curious neighbors who stood outside, eager to witness the drama that had just occurred. Inside the trailer, Lester, Lill, and Carlene were being questioned by the authorities, while the children gathered nearby, watching over each other protectively. Bobbi, Will, and Fish sat on Carlene's sofa, with Bobbi trying to appear uninterested while Will focused intently on the officers, studying their every move. Fish, still affected by the earlier turmoil, seemed to have found some comfort after locating Samson, his distress fading with each passing moment.

On the floor, Samson and I shared a quiet moment of connection. His ink-stained hand grasped mine, the sensation of his touch offering a sense of calm amid the surrounding chaos. The paramedics moved through the room, handing out blankets and checking on the children to ensure their well-being. Despite the presence of so many adults around us, I felt an overwhelming urge to explain everything to the officers and caseworker, especially the reason behind our journey to see Poppa. I feared that the time we had taken to get here was being wasted and that we would soon face consequences for our actions. Even as I insisted that it had been my idea to lead the group, the adults merely nodded politely, their expressions betraying little conviction in my words. It became clear that my attempts to ease the situation were not making the impact I had hoped for.

A sense of dread settled in my stomach as I began to worry about the consequences for Lester and Lill, guilt gnawing at me over the lies that had led us to this point. My anxiety was compounded by my concern for Carlene, though I considered her more of an unfortunate part of our tangled situation rather than a central figure in my worries. As I anxiously inquired about Poppa's condition, I received only rehearsed responses from the caseworker, which did little to alleviate my growing sense of unease about our future. The uncertainty of our circumstances seemed to be closing in on me, making me feel even more helpless in a situation that had spiraled beyond my control.

The arrival of Kansas state troopers added a new layer of tension, and the looming possibility of being taken back to Hebron filled me with dread. Despite the overwhelming odds, a sense of resolve began to build inside me, a quiet determination not to lose the progress we had made in our quest to see Poppa. Just as the situation seemed to reach its peak, a familiar figure emerged from among the troopers—Bill, Will and Bobbi's older brother. His presence was like a breath of fresh air, bringing a wave of relief that swept over me, especially as he embraced his younger siblings. Watching this reunion unfold shed new light on Will's life, revealing a side of his family dynamic that I hadn't fully understood before. This unexpected revelation reshaped my perception of their relationship, adding depth to my understanding of their situation and their motivations.

Seizing the opportunity, I approached Officer Meeks, hoping to convey my perspective on everything that had transpired. With a rush of emotion, I implored him to understand that I was the one responsible for our actions, pouring out my heart and expressing my deep desire to see Poppa. Overcome by the weight of everything that had happened, tears welled up in my eyes as I spoke, my emotions finally breaking free in a moment of vulnerability. This raw outpouring was my attempt to make sense of the chaos, to offer a glimpse into my feelings and the immense pressure I had been carrying. It was a desperate plea for understanding, for a chance to be heard in a

moment when everything seemed to be spiraling out of control.

Chapter XXXV

Chapter XXXV brings the Beaumont family to the heart of Salina Hope Hospital, where tension and emotion fill the air as they step into the critical care unit. The family's arrival is marked by a somber atmosphere as Momma gathers her children—Rocket, Fish, Samson, and the protagonist—into a tight embrace. With visible concern, she expresses her anxiety over Poppa's condition, holding her children close as she processes the fear of what's to come. While she is focused on Poppa, Rocket, in a quieter moment, asks about the protagonist's recent birthday. His question is not truly about the celebration but rather a subtle way of checking in on how the protagonist is coping with their newfound abilities, particularly their savvy.

Momma's worry about the protagonist's adjustment to their savvy is evident as she tries to gauge how they have been handling life since their last meeting. Samson mentions Poppa, and Momma's facial expression shifts, revealing her sorrow despite the faint smile she forces. Her eyes fill with unshed tears, silently acknowledging the gravity of the situation. As the family moves toward the nurses' station, the weight of their emotional burden is visible, with the nurses offering sympathetic looks that show they understand the gravity of the moment. The tension is palpable as they approach the station, and every step taken feels heavy with anticipation, yet there is an unspoken sense of unity within the family, each member holding on to the other for emotional support.

A nurse in cheerful blue scrubs greets Momma with a warm yet measured tone, but Momma, trying to mask the distress, introduces her children humorously as "delinquents—my wandering adventurers." Despite the attempt at humor, the situation remains tense, and the protagonist, desperate to see Poppa, pleads with the nurse to allow them into the room. Momma, though anxious, stresses just how important it is for the family to be together with Poppa at this critical juncture. The

nurse, with a soft nod of understanding, grants them permission to enter, but the uncertainty of what they will face behind those doors lingers in the air.

As the family walks down the corridor toward Poppa’s room, emotions run high. Fish, unable to mask his concern, nervously asks if Poppa has woken up, revealing the deep fear that hangs over them all. Momma’s gentle response, informing them that Poppa has not woken and that the doctors are uncertain if he ever will, hits like a heavy blow. The news leaves the protagonist feeling unsettled, caught between disbelief and sorrow, while Fish—surprisingly calm—remains composed, masking the anxiety that others cannot hide. This moment underscores the emotional impact of the situation, where the uncertainty of Poppa’s recovery looms over the family, creating a shared sense of helplessness.

Rocket, always determined not to be excluded from important moments, insists on entering Poppa’s room, declaring that it would be worse to remain outside in suspense. Momma, torn between wanting to protect her family and her desire to keep them close, reluctantly agrees. She turns to the protagonist, seeking reassurance, but the protagonist feels powerless, knowing that their savvy cannot fix this situation. There is an overwhelming sense of helplessness, especially as the protagonist reflects on their inability to influence the outcome of their father’s condition. This moment highlights the complexity of their emotional struggle—wanting to offer comfort, but being unsure how to do so.

Eventually, Momma pushes open the door to Poppa’s room, and the family steps in, greeted by the quiet reality of his condition. Poppa lies in the bed, seemingly lifeless, lacking the vitality that once defined him, a stark contrast to the fairytale image of Sleeping Beauty. The sight is a devastating reminder of how fragile life can be, and the family’s emotions are a blend of vulnerability, fear, and a fragile sense of hope. The room, silent except for the faint sounds of the machines monitoring Poppa’s condition, encapsulates the uncertainty and the delicate balance between hope and despair that defines this moment. For the family, this visit marks not just a confrontation with Poppa’s uncertain future but also a reflection of the complexities of their love for him

and their fears for what lies ahead. In this moment, the true weight of family bonds and the emotional turmoil of facing a loved one’s mortality are felt deeply by each member of the Beaumont family.

Chapter XXXVI

Chapter XXXVI opens with the Beaumont family gathered in the quiet, sterile environment of Poppa’s hospital room, a space filled with tension and heartache. As they approach his bed, the weight of the situation presses down on them, each family member holding onto someone else, finding comfort in shared strength as they inch closer to Poppa. The sight of Poppa—unrecognizable with his bald head wrapped in bandages and numerous medical devices connected to him—sparks a deep emotional reaction in each of them. The protagonist, struggling to keep it together, feels her heart race, her breath quickening with the sheer weight of what they’re facing. Her emotions bubble up, and she fears that her tears might spill over at any moment, revealing the depth of her fear and helplessness.

The family’s presence in the room reflects their love and concern for Poppa. Grandpa Bomba, though clearly shaken by the circumstances, tries to distract himself by attempting to open a jar, his actions a small attempt to cling to normalcy. Rocket steps in, offering his help with the jar while softly singing the familiar love song that symbolizes the bond between Poppa and Momma. These simple acts, though small, offer a sense of comfort and familiarity amidst the overwhelming sadness. Meanwhile, the protagonist gently touches Poppa’s face, her fingers tracing the lines of his skin, reflecting on the difference between his condition and the homeless man she once encountered—someone who, unlike Poppa, had no one to care for him. She recalls Poppa’s faded tattoo of a mermaid, Miss Mermaid, which once seemed to represent his vitality and life. Now, that image seems distant, a symbol of a time when Poppa was a different person, and the protagonist yearns to re-establish the connection they once shared.

As the silence in the room deepens, the protagonist finds herself yearning for any sign of recognition from Poppa, but there is only stillness. Despite her attempts to listen for

any sign of life, nothing reaches her ears. Fish and Samson, both relying on the protagonist to offer insight into Poppa’s condition, look to her for answers, but she is powerless to provide any. Unable to hear anything encouraging, she watches as Fish quietly walks out of the room, followed by Momma, leaving her to face the stillness alone. The constant beeping of the machines becomes a haunting reminder of the situation, amplifying the sense of hopelessness that fills the air. Yet, despite everything, the protagonist refuses to give up, her heart holding onto a sliver of hope, a belief that perhaps her words can reach Poppa, despite the silence surrounding them.

In a moment of quiet resolve, the protagonist whispers softly to Poppa, offering words of encouragement, telling him that he still has his "savvy," the fighting spirit that has always been a part of him. She pours out her love for him, hoping that these words will bring him back to her, wishing for his recovery with all the strength she can muster. As if responding to her plea, there is a faint sign of life from Poppa—his fingers twitch, his eyelids flutter, and for the first time in what feels like an eternity, a tiny spark of hope fills the room. The family, who had been holding their breath in anxious anticipation, watches in stunned silence as this small, yet profound, response breaks the tension. The alarms suddenly blare, and the machines go haywire, signaling a medical crisis, but the protagonist’s unwavering belief in her father’s strength pushes her to continue speaking to him.

With the room now in chaos, she persists in calling out to Poppa, urging him to wake up, to come back home, and to fulfill the promises they had made, like building the porch swing they had always dreamed of together. Her words cut through the noise, offering a touchstone of hope amidst the frenzy of the hospital’s response team. As Poppa’s fingers twitch once more and his eyes flutter open, the room erupts into commotion and disbelief, but there is an undeniable sense of hope that floods the space. The protagonist’s words, filled with love and the weight of a promise, seem to have reached Poppa, bringing him back from the brink. This powerful moment symbolizes the strength of family bonds, the transformative power of love, and the

magic of belief in moments of profound uncertainty.

In the end, the chapter leaves readers with a sense of hope, capturing the theme of resilience and the depth of familial love. Despite the ongoing challenges and uncertainties they face, the Beaumont family’s unwavering connection to one another proves to be a source of strength. This chapter highlights the power of words, the influence of love, and the ability to hold onto hope, even when faced with the most difficult of circumstances. It serves as a reminder that, in the most challenging moments, love can be the force that propels us forward, pushing us to never give up on those we care for. The hope that fills the room as Poppa stirs again is a powerful symbol of the belief that no matter how dark the times may seem, there is always a chance for light to shine through.

Chapter XXXIII

Chapter XXXIII begins with Mibs feeling completely overwhelmed by the emotions swirling within her as she sits alone on the floor, separated from her family, with her father in the hospital. The absence of her father’s comforting presence has left her feeling unsettled and unsure, and the weight of the moment causes her anxiety to rise. Her brother, Will, notices her distress and, along with a caseworker named Bill, steps forward to offer her comfort. Bill, recognizing how deeply affected Mibs is, speaks to her with a gentle understanding, acknowledging the pain she's experiencing. In an attempt to help ease her turmoil, Bill suggests they go to the hospital to find their father, a proposition that catches everyone off guard, as they had not expected this offer. The suggestion is unexpected but also carries with it the promise of a sense of direction, which leaves everyone in the room both surprised and cautiously hopeful.

The story takes a reflective turn as Mibs and her siblings begin to recount the chaotic events that have brought them to this point, sharing their perspective on everything that’s happened. Bill listens closely, offering empathy as he absorbs their story, not interrupting but instead showing them the care they need in this moment of crisis. After they finish, Bill somberly informs them of their father’s condition, emphasizing that the family’s presence is crucial during such a difficult time. This news further heightens the sense of urgency, and Fish, who has always been aware of the weight of responsibility, acknowledges the gravity of the situation. He suggests that everyone, no matter how challenging it may be, must remain strong in order to help their family through this trial. His words resonate deeply within the group, as they realize that the support of one another is essential to getting through this hardship.

Bill then addresses the actions they’ve taken that led to the current situation, acknowledging that their behaviors have caused concern among their families and the people around them. He reassures the group that there are no legal ramifications for

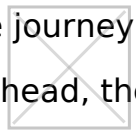
Lester and Lill, who have been the ones looking after the children during the chaos. Bill's words help calm their fears, reminding them that the immediate concern is to safely transport the children to Salina, where their father is being treated. The news that there would be no legal consequences brings a measure of relief, allowing the group to focus on what's important next—getting to their father. Mibs, feeling a deep sense of gratitude toward Bill, silently thanks him for the reassurance and kindness he has shown throughout this difficult time. She wishes, however, that she could express her thanks more openly and with more depth than mere words could convey, yet in her heart, she knows the comfort his presence offers is invaluable.

After a brief discussion, the decision is made that an armed officer will accompany the children for safety on the journey to the hospital. Though the decision is made to ensure the children's security, it also makes the situation feel even more serious, heightening the tension in the room. Mibs can't help but notice the change in atmosphere, feeling the weight of their circumstances more acutely. Meanwhile, Lill comforts Lester, offering him words of encouragement and support, reminding him that they are all in this together. She reassures him, providing the emotional strength he needs to face the journey ahead. As the family prepares to depart, Lill's continued support offers a sense of solidarity, helping to steady everyone's nerves.

As they get ready to leave, Bill offers Will a chance to ride along in the patrol car, an offer that is tempting but also creates internal conflict for Will. The idea of leaving his siblings behind, even in the safety of the patrol car, feels wrong to him. Will, after a moment of hesitation, chooses to stay with his siblings, further solidifying his commitment to his family. His decision highlights the strong familial loyalty that runs through the siblings, emphasizing that, despite the uncertainty and fear they all face, they are committed to sticking together. This decision is not just about proximity but about the emotional ties that bind them, and Will's choice underscores the depth of the connection between them.

As the chapter draws to a close, Mibs reflects on the unpredictable nature of life and how both positive and negative experiences are often intertwined. She considers how

the lessons she has learned from this chaotic journey are shaped by the contrasts between hardship and love, uncertainty and hope. The events that have unfolded so far have taught her valuable lessons about the unpredictability of life and the power of family support. Mibs realizes that despite the challenges they face, the presence of her family offers strength in the face of adversity. She also recognizes how each experience, whether good or bad, plays a crucial role in shaping the person she is becoming. As the journey to Salina continues, Mibs holds onto the hope that, despite the uncertainty ahead, the love and support of her family will guide them through this difficult time.



Chapter XXIX

Chapter XXIX introduces Carlene, a striking and complex figure whose larger-than-life persona creates an immediate sense of tension. Despite her small stature, Carlene's presence is anything but diminutive. She's described vividly with big hair, sharp teeth, and long fingernails, all of which contribute to her eccentric and imposing charm. When Lester drives the large pink Bible bus into the Tuttle Terrace Trailer Park, Carlene stands at the doorway of her trailer, her expression a mixture of surprise and irritation at the unexpected visitors. The sight of the bus and its passengers seems to irritate her further, setting the stage for the uncomfortable and unpredictable exchange that follows.

Lester, unsure of how to handle the situation, tells the group to stay in the bus while he attempts to handle things with Carlene. However, things take an immediate turn when Samson, needing to use the bathroom, forces their hand. In an unexpected move, Bobbi volunteers to assist Samson, leading him to Carlene's trailer despite her initial hesitation. As the children enter, they are struck by the dim, musty interior filled with the overpowering smells of mothballs and candles. Carlene's trailer is a cluttered, chaotic space, decorated in a gaudy and somewhat unsettling style, making the children feel out of place and anxious as they try to navigate the mess. The atmosphere is heavy with the combination of Carlene's bizarre environment and the growing tension over what might unfold next.

The tension escalates further when Carlene confronts Lester about money, accusing him of being dishonest and rejecting his offer of assistance. Her anger bubbles over, turning the situation into a chaotic scene where snacks are thrown and harsh words are exchanged. This outburst reveals the deeper rift between Carlene and Lester, shedding light on their complicated relationship. It's clear that Lester feels cornered by Carlene, who seems to relish in belittling him, further escalating the emotional strain

between them. The confrontation reaches its boiling point when Lester, unable to handle Carlene’s antagonism any longer, explodes in frustration, refusing to comply with her demands or return to her. The silence that follows this moment signals a shift in the power dynamics, with Lester finally standing his ground, though the atmosphere remains charged with unresolved tension.

The situation takes a sharp turn when Carlene suddenly recognizes the children as the missing kids from the news. Her anger shifts to concern, and she immediately calls the police, further intensifying the already volatile atmosphere. The realization that the authorities are on their way sparks a wave of panic among the group, and they quickly scramble to devise a plan of action. In a desperate bid to avoid being caught, the children instinctively rush to protect Lester, pushing him back toward the bus in a frantic attempt to escape. Their flight from Carlene’s trailer is driven by the urgent need to get away before the police arrive, highlighting the high stakes of their situation and the rapidly escalating tension.

As the group flees, their anxiety only deepens as they watch for signs of the approaching authorities. Every minute feels like a countdown as they hope to escape the escalating danger without being caught. Just as the group breathes a momentary sigh of relief, the protagonist’s heart sinks with the realization that Samson is missing. This shocking discovery amplifies the urgency of their escape, as the group now faces not only the threat of the police but the unknown whereabouts of one of their own. The chapter ends on this heart-stopping note, leaving readers with a deep sense of uncertainty and fear for Samson’s safety, wondering how the group will navigate this new challenge. The emotional rollercoaster of their escape, paired with the looming threat of capture and the missing Samson, sets the stage for even more tension to come.

Chapter XVIII

Chapter XVIII begins with Mibs struggling deeply after an emotionally unsettling encounter, her mind heavy with confusion and anxiety. Feeling lost and vulnerable, she leans on her friend Will, who tries to offer her some comfort by suggesting they take a trip to the Emerald Truck Stop Diner and Lounge. The atmosphere inside the diner, however, doesn’t provide the escape she hoped for; as soon as they enter, Mibs is bombarded with the overwhelming noise of countless thoughts from the people around her. The loud, cluttered environment, filled with bikers and truckers, only adds to her sense of discomfort. Her dizziness intensifies as she struggles to control the intrusive voices echoing in her mind, and Fish, noticing her distress, quickly rushes to steady her. Despite his concern, Mibs is still trapped in her own mind, unable to escape the deluge of thoughts that keep coming at her. Meanwhile, Lill, although dealing with her own set of problems, offers assistance but is momentarily distracted by a difficult waitress.

Seeking a moment of solace, Mibs is led to the back of the diner, into a cramped storeroom that smells of ketchup and pickles, evoking a strange mix of nostalgia and discomfort. The scent transports her back to her old life in Mississippi, reminding her of simpler times, but it offers no real peace as her mind continues to race. Lill encourages Mibs to rest on a small sofa in the storeroom while Lill attends to her diner responsibilities, leaving Fish to watch over her. Despite the relative quiet, Mibs remains distracted by the noisy thoughts in her head, struggling with feelings of failure. Her special ability, her "savvy," seems more like a burden than a gift at the moment. Mibs wonders if this newfound power can ever truly help her bring Poppa home or if it will only complicate her already complicated life further. The weight of this uncertainty adds to the emotional strain she’s feeling, clouding her thoughts and further isolating her from those around her.

Fish, concerned for his sister, gently presses her to explain her powers, sensing her growing frustration. Reluctantly, Mibs admits that her ability is connected to ink on skin—she can read minds, a talent that feels both empowering and invasive. This revelation only deepens Mibs' emotional turmoil, as she is no longer sure if she wants such an extraordinary gift. Her longing for normalcy clashes with her growing awareness of her abilities and the way they shape her life. Wanting to demonstrate her abilities, Mibs asks Fish to think of a number and uses the silver pen Will Junior had given her to draw a symbol on his palm. Without needing any verbal cues, she transcribes Fish’s thoughts, confirming that her power is very much real, but also frightening in its reach.

Just as she begins to process this overwhelming truth, Bobbi interrupts, playfully teasing Mibs with the question, "So, you read minds, do you?" The question, though lighthearted, leaves Mibs feeling exposed and vulnerable. This moment of interruption forces Mibs to face not only the reality of her power but also the complexities of how it affects her relationships. Her friends, once unaware of her ability, now have a glimpse into the burden she carries, and Mibs struggles to reconcile her sense of normalcy with her exceptional abilities. As the chapter closes, Mibs is left contemplating the future and how her power will shape her identity moving forward. The revelations are only the beginning, and Mibs’ journey of self-discovery is far from over, with more challenges awaiting her as she grapples with both the gifts and the burdens that come with her abilities. This chapter captures her growing internal conflict and sets the stage for deeper exploration of her emotions, relationships, and the world she must navigate with her unique gift.

Chapter XXX

Chapter XXX begins with the group caught in a frantic search for Samson, who has been unexpectedly left behind at the Tuttle Terrace Trailer Park. The mood is heavy with worry and urgency as the group realizes, despite their thorough search, that Samson is missing and not on the bus. As panic spreads among the group, Lill, Fish, and the others strongly insist that they need to turn back and search for him, no matter the risks. Lester, however, feels cornered by the situation, fearing that their actions could lead to serious legal consequences for him and his role in taking care of the children. Despite the dread that weighs on him, Lester finally acquiesces, and the group begins the tense journey back to the trailer park.

Lill, ever the level-headed figure in moments of crisis, takes on a maternal role, urging everyone to remain calm and focus on their task of retrieving Samson. She confronts Lester, challenging his reluctance to return to the scene, especially after learning that the police had been called in response to the escalating situation. Lill’s calm, determined demeanor convinces Lester, and with pressure mounting from the urgency of the moment, he finally agrees to turn the bus around and head back. The sky outside darkens ominously, and the weather shifts as dark clouds gather, foreshadowing the storm that is not only brewing in the sky but also within the group. The sense of unease is palpable, as the trailer park now seems like a place filled with unknown dangers, and the group is unsure of what they will face when they arrive.

Upon reaching the trailer park, the family quickly disembarks and heads toward Carlene’s trailer. Carlene, standing defiantly in the doorway, greets them with a smug expression, informing them that the police are on their way and that Samson is locked up inside. Her cruel satisfaction at their distress is evident, and she revels in the group’s desperation, which only escalates the tension in the air. Lill, along with the others, demands that Carlene release Samson, but she only intensifies the situation,

taunting them with hints about Samson’s ability to hide well. Carlene’s obstinate demeanor becomes an obstacle, and with each passing moment, the group’s patience wears thinner, as they are left with no choice but to confront her to get to Samson.

In an emotional surge, Fish, driven by his protective instincts and anger, uses his powers to forcefully push Carlene aside, allowing the group to enter the trailer. This moment of raw emotion is a physical manifestation of the urgency and desperation felt by the family, as they move forward to find Samson. Once inside the trailer, the group begins to search every possible hiding place, scouring under beds, behind furniture, inside closets, and even the oven, yet Samson is nowhere to be found. The rising distress among the group is amplified by the ticking clock, knowing that the police could arrive at any moment, and time is running out. Fish’s emotional state only seems to worsen the situation, his fury seeming to stir the wind outside, adding to the feeling of chaos that permeates their frantic search.

As the tension continues to rise, the narrator has a sudden realization—a possible way to extract the necessary information from Carlene. They believe that by using a pen, they can get her to reveal where Samson is hiding, a plan that offers a glimmer of hope in the midst of the uncertainty. The chapter ends on this critical note, with the group facing both the imminent arrival of the authorities and the daunting task of finding Samson. The uncertainty surrounding Samson’s fate and the potential consequences of their actions leaves readers hanging in suspense, eagerly awaiting what will happen next. The anticipation builds, as the group must find a way to outsmart Carlene, navigate the impending confrontation with the police, and ultimately reunite with Samson before it’s too late.

Chapter XXVI

Chapter XXVI opens with the group arriving at a motel, a temporary haven as they seek both physical and emotional comfort amidst the chaos of their lives. The small space of the boys' room is transformed by Samson, who has ingeniously fashioned a makeshift bed under a table using a motel bedspread as a cover, creating a sense of safety in the midst of the uncertainty surrounding them. Meanwhile, the protagonist shares a bed with Lill, who murmurs in her sleep, providing an almost hypnotic rhythm to the night. As Lill's murmurs softly fill the air, the protagonist is left to reflect on the unpredictability of life, with Lill offering an unspoken reminder that even the most difficult situations can bring about some form of good.

The protagonist struggles to find rest, as her mind races with thoughts of past losses. The loss of Grandma Dollop, in particular, weighs heavily on her heart as she recalls the chaotic funeral that followed her passing. Family members, including Aunt Dinah, Uncle Autry, and Grandma’s notoriously mischievous sister, Jubilee, added to the unpredictable nature of the event, with Jubilee causing such trouble that her mother had to hide all valuables during the wake. Despite the disorder, the funeral transformed into a surreal celebration of life, as nature itself seemed to respond to the sorrow, with vibrant colors and scents appearing at odd moments, almost as if the world itself was acknowledging the emotional weight of the event. This reflection stirs the protagonist’s emotions, making her realize how life can feel both fleeting and chaotic, yet still filled with moments that are strangely beautiful.

As memories continue to flood her mind, the protagonist begins to question the true motivations behind her decision to run away. She wonders whether it was purely an act driven by the desire to be with Poppa or whether it was also a way to escape the unavoidable changes of her own life. In the quiet of the night, she contemplates the deeper reasons for her flight, and she realizes that perhaps she was running not only

from her father’s absence but also from the complexities and challenges of growing up. This realization unsettles her as she comes to terms with the fact that her escape might not have been as simple as it seemed, and that the act of running away was as much about escaping the fears of adolescence as it was about seeking comfort in a familiar, lost relationship.

The following morning, as the group prepares to leave the motel, there is a sense of normalcy returning with the arrival of breakfast, which Will Junior and the boys bring with them. Their lighthearted chatter and playful interactions bring a sense of warmth to the otherwise tense morning, offering the first bit of relief after the emotional strain of the previous day. In the midst of the morning chaos, Lill and Lester share a quiet, tender moment, which speaks to the growth of their relationship. The protagonist, observing their interaction, begins to realize how Lill’s support seems to have a positive effect on Lester, bringing out a side of him that was previously hidden beneath layers of uncertainty and self-doubt. As she watches their exchange, the protagonist feels a deep sense of curiosity and admiration, realizing that Lill's presence in Lester’s life may be transformative in ways that are not immediately apparent.

The group boards the Heartland Bible Supply bus, and as the journey continues, the protagonist reflects on the growing relationship between Lill and Lester. Lill’s unwavering support for Lester seems to inspire a new sense of confidence in him, suggesting that her influence may play a pivotal role in his personal growth. The protagonist sees how Lill’s kindness and belief in Lester may help him overcome his struggles, offering him the encouragement he needs to face the challenges ahead. As the bus rolls toward Wymore, the protagonist notices the world outside the window, the landscape slowly shifting with the change in seasons. Spring is blossoming all around them, symbolizing new beginnings and the potential for growth. This sense of renewal mirrors the protagonist's quiet hope for Poppa's recovery and the group's journey toward healing, both physical and emotional. The chapter ends with a hopeful tone, as the protagonist clings to the possibility that the journey ahead might offer more than just a physical destination—it might bring the emotional clarity and peace the group has been desperately seeking. The road ahead is uncertain, but it holds the

potential for reconciliation, personal growth, and a future shaped by hope and resilience.

Acknowledgments

Acknowledgments serve as a personal tribute to the many people who have played a vital role in the author’s creative journey, and in this section, the author offers heartfelt thanks to several key individuals. The author begins by expressing immense gratitude to Rick and Shirley, who were a source of stability and support during difficult times. Their presence was like a safe harbor amidst the storm, providing both emotional comfort and a sense of security when the world felt uncertain. In addition, the author thanks Michelle for her unwavering support, whether it was through sharing books that sparked new ideas, offering a patient ear during moments of self-doubt, or simply sharing moments of joy, such as enjoying scallion pancakes together. These small yet meaningful gestures of friendship helped the author stay focused and connected to their creativity. Sean is also recognized for his constant encouragement in the realms of reading and writing, consistently reminding the author to focus on the finer details of life that often go unnoticed, and which ultimately enriched the author’s work in unexpected ways.

The author extends their gratitude to Lauri Hornik and Regina Castillo, recognizing their invaluable contributions to the project. In addition, the support from the Dial/Puffin design team and the exceptional team at Penguin Young Readers Group are highlighted for their expertise and dedication in making the author’s vision a reality. Special mention is given to Deborah Kovacs and Micheal Flaherty, whose work at Walden Media was pivotal in shaping the direction of the project. The author also takes the time to acknowledge Brandon Dorman for his incredible artistry, noting how his vibrant illustrations brought the story to life, with colorful depictions that added depth and visual richness to the work. These contributions are not just technical; they are emotional as well, as the collaboration between the author and the design team created a truly unified and immersive reading experience.

Further acknowledgment is given to Sarah Hughes at Puffin in the U.K., whose efforts helped broaden the reach of the book internationally, ensuring that the author’s work found an audience beyond borders. The author expresses gratitude to editors from around the world, with specific thanks to Maja Nikolic and Elena Santogade at Writers House for their insightful guidance and editorial expertise. Kassie Evashevski, representing UTA on the West Coast, is also thanked for her role in supporting the author’s career and facilitating important connections in the literary and entertainment industries. The author’s agent, Daniel Lazar at Writers House, is acknowledged for his tireless work and constant dedication, often working late into the night, ensuring that the author’s voice and story were represented to the best of his ability. Finally, the author extends deep appreciation to editor Alisha Niehaus, who struck the perfect balance between motivation and encouragement, always pushing the author forward while providing the necessary emotional support to keep moving through the challenges of the writing process.

This section of acknowledgments is a testament to the strength of collaboration in the creative world. The author’s journey is not one of solitary achievement but rather one shaped by a network of dedicated professionals, friends, and supporters who have all contributed in their own ways. From the smallest gestures of kindness to the largest professional contributions, the acknowledgments serve as a reminder that the creation of a work of art is rarely ever a single-handed endeavor. The gratitude expressed here goes beyond mere words—it highlights the importance of community, the strength of partnerships, and the power of shared passion. Each person mentioned in these acknowledgments played an essential role in helping the author bring their vision to life, ensuring that the story not only made it into the world but also resonated with readers on a deep level.