

The room is silent as Madge makes her way to the Sharing Stool. Fourteen pairs of eyes follow her as she takes a seat and stares at the floor, toying with her hair. There is the sound of shuffling feet. Someone gently clears their throat, but she doesn't feel rushed. The vibe in the room is one of patience and understanding and benevolence.

"It's okay," Will says. He is sitting in the third chair from the left, just another member, no one special. "You're amongst friends."

She looks up at him, finding strength in his clear hazel eyes. This is her first time, and she's understandably nervous, but Will has assured her that no one will laugh or ridicule her. He gives her a slight nod, and she takes a deep breath.

"Hi, I'm Madge."

There is a chorus of "Hello" and "Hi Madge" and "Nice to meet you." She had been expecting them to all answer in unison, but it's not like this is a twelve-step program.

"I know that's kind of an old lady name," she continues. "I was named after my grandmother. I'm twenty-eight."

"When I hear that name, I imagine a middle-aged chain-smoking waitress at some greasy spoon, with her hair dyed bright red and in a beehive so full of Aqua Net that a hurricane wouldn't knock it down." This from the young woman immediately to Will's left.

"You'll have to excuse Heidi," Will says. "She's our resident smartass." Everyone laughs at this, and Heidi looks pleased to have that distinction. "Go on."

"I had my experience when I was eight years old," Madge says, and there is a collective gasp from the other club members. Most of them, she has been told, had been adults when they became believers, Will included. "I grew up on a farm in Indiana. We grew corn, soybeans,

wheat, that kind of stuff. Or rather, my father and brothers did. He was determined – my dad, I mean – to keep us girls out of farming. So my sister and I got off kind of easy."

"I grew up on a dairy farm," a fortyish man offers from the right side of the semicircle. "It was hard work."

Madge offers him a shy smile. It's perfectly acceptable to interrupt here, and for that, she is grateful. It puts her at ease, makes her feel that people are actually listening, that they can relate. And it also delays the inevitable – voicing this incredible story. But already, she feels accepted, that she is part of the group, and this feeling enables her to go on.

"We had three barns. We used two of them, but the third was kind of abandoned, you know, run down. We kids would play out there even though my mom would always tell us not to. She thought it was too dangerous and that it would cave in on us one day or maybe the floor of the loft would collapse and one of us would break our neck, I guess."

"So that made you want to play in there even more, right?" a voice asks.

Madge chuckles. "Yeah." She picks at a dried drop of mustard on the leg of her jeans. She's coming to the meat of the story, the one she has only told once in the past fifteen years or so, and her heart is pounding in her throat. She looks to Will again and he smiles gently. He's so sweet, so supportive.

"One day, my brother Syd and I were playing out at the old barn," she says. "It was a beautiful summer day. It had been raining on and off for a week, but that day was sunny and bright and perfect. Syd and I were playing tag outside and he was 'it' and I ran into the barn to get away but he didn't follow me inside, which was weird because he had been right on my heels. So I waited for a while, then I went outside to look for him and when I went around to the back of the barn, I saw—" She stops abruptly, suddenly afraid to go on. Will had been wonderful when

she told him the story the month before, but prior to that, she had kept it to herself because of the reactions she'd gotten in the past.

"What did you see?" Heidi asks in a stage whisper.

"I saw..." She feels the prickle of tears at the backs of her eyes, and looks up at the ceiling to keep them at bay. After a moment, she can return her gaze to her audience. This is important, she tells herself, so they know you are being sincere. "I saw...the ship."

"Overhead?" asks the fortyish man who grew up on a dairy farm.

"No, on the ground. In our field."

Everyone's eyes are huge. Madge doesn't know what she's said that's so shocking – everyone here has had an encounter of some sort. After all, that's the one requirement for admission into this very exclusive club. Finally, Heidi clears up the mystery for her. "It landed *in the daytime?*"

"Yes." Madge feels the old defensiveness building within her. "It was right there, on the ground, on a summer afternoon."

An excited murmur ripples through the small gathering. Madge hears the words "extraordinary" and "breakthrough" and "exceptional." Will is beaming like a proud papa.

Suddenly, all of the questions come at once.

"What did it look like?"

"How big was it?"

"What color was it?"

"Were there lights? Were they on?"

"Did it make any noise?"

"Did you see exhaust?"

"Was it radiating heat?"

"How long did it stay?"

Finally, Will rises to his feet. "Okay everyone, quiet down. Madge will be more than happy to answer all of your questions, won't you, Madge?"

"Yes, of course," she answers dutifully. She hadn't expected to be put on the spot like this. However, it feels good to share the story with people who not only are not scoffing in disbelief, but who actually want all the details.

When she finishes, the silence in the room is profound. Several people have tears running down their faces. The look on Heidi's is of complete and total awe. And Will looks almost smug.

Madge can hear her heart thumping in her ears, feel it slamming in her chest. All eyes are on her, but she doesn't know if it's because they all believe her story or because they don't. She feels moisture land on her hands, which are clasped in front of her, and realizes she's been crying, too. She wipes at her face with her sleeve, and one of the ladies steps forward to offer her a box of tissues. "Did they ever find your brother?" the lady asks softly.

"No," Madge answers shakily. She tells the group the rest of the story, about how her parents just thought it was a big joke until Syd hadn't returned by sundown. She tells them about the search parties and news reporters and tracker dogs and suspects being pulled in for questioning. And later, long after the case had gone cold, her nightmares and therapists and medications and institutions. "So I stopped telling the story," Madge concludes. "Everyone kept saying I'd fallen asleep in the barn and had a bad dream. But I know what I saw!" This last bit has a contentious edge to it.

"WE believe you," says a man about her age. Soon everyone is relaying their stories, and though most of them have heard them all before, no one looks bored or annoyed.

When everyone has finished talking, Will perches himself on the Sharing Stool. "I met Madge about six weeks ago, in the paranormal section of the library," he says. "And from the moment I laid eyes on her, I knew she was something special. She is our link to the world beyond the stars, people. She witnessed an abduction in broad daylight. She has firsthand knowledge that there is something out there, and that it means us harm. The question is not whether there's life on other planets; the question is how will we defend ourselves when, not if, but *when* they decide to attack? And the answer is—" He rises from the stool to pace the room. "—that there *is* no defense. That one creature was able to eradicate the free will of a headstrong eleven-year-old boy. What's to say what hundreds or thousands or *millions* of them will do once they descend upon us? We'll be just as helpless as that little boy. Our planet will be taken over like that." He snaps his fingers.

"The people who are attempting to communicate with extraterrestrials," Will continues, "are not only wasting time and energy and money, but they are playing with fire. We know that there are alien beings out there. We know that they are not only aware of us but that they can and do visit whenever they want. We know that their not being here right now is only because they're choosing not to be, and that they're toying with us." He pauses for a moment to survey his small but totally captive audience. Smiling beatifically at the newest member of the group, he says, "It was a very brave thing that Madge did today, wouldn't you agree?"

The group, of course, agrees.

"And now we owe it to her – but even more than that, we owe it to that terrified little boy – to keep events like that to a minimum."

Will's voice, which had risen to a crescendo, is quieter now. "We can't stop them," he says. "We know this. But maybe we can protect ourselves. Madge's experience is further proof of how imperative it is that we fortify our bunker."

There are fervent nods and words of agreement from the group members.

"It's coming along nicely," Will informs them. "We now have enough supplies to support all of us for three months. But it may not be enough. The awful truth is that we may need to live there for years. And then, if no one else has had our foresight, *we* may be the only thing that keeps civilization alive. That's why," he concludes, "it's so very important, now more than ever, that you give whatever you can. Our very lives – and possibly the fate of the human race – depend on it."

A coffee can is passed around. Wallets are pulled out of pockets and purses are opened. Madge gasps when she sees a middle-aged black woman put two hundred dollars in the can. "All my life," the woman tells her, "my mama made me tithe ten percent of my money to the church. But when I had my experience, the pastor claimed I was being deceived by Satan. *This* is my church now." Madge adds all of her cash, eighteen dollars, to the pot.

Will walks her to her car once the meeting is over. "Thank you for telling your story tonight," he says solemnly.

She nods, so overcome with emotion that for the moment, she cannot speak. She finally feels that she belongs somewhere, has gotten the validation she needs. A great weight has been lifted from her shoulders.

Unthinkingly, she leans in for a kiss. Will immediately steps back out of reach. "Remember what I told you," he says softly, out of earshot of the other people who linger in the

community center parking lot. "It's best if the group doesn't know about us. I'm their leader, and I can't have anyone believing that I'm showing one person special treatment."

"Of course," Madge says, disappointed. "I understand." She opens the door and gets behind the wheel of her twelve-year-old Chevy. "Will I see you tonight?"

"Um..." He glances over his shoulder, where Heidi is leaning against the passenger door of his van. "I have business to attend to tonight. It may run late."

"With Heidi?" Madge asks.

"It's just business. And I'm her ride home. There's no reason to be jealous."

But it's hard for Madge to not be jealous. She has been told that she is a pretty girl, with her enviable long strawberry blonde hair, clear skin, and guileless gray eyes. But once people get to know her, they sense something is a little off, and as a result, she has never really dated or had an actual boyfriend. Will is her first and only lover, and to know that he is spending the evening with vivacious, voluptuous, blonde, blue-eyed Heidi is almost too much to bear. Still, she stifles the urge to protest. Don't mess up a good thing, she cautions herself.

"Alright," she says. "Call me tomorrow?"

"Definitely."

The next night, Will comes to see her after her shift ends at the library. "How was your business last night?" she asks, working hard to keep her voice casual and light as they lie together in her bed.

"It went well. Everything's coming along as it should. I just wish I could devote more time to the preparation, but unfortunately, preparation doesn't pay the bills." He is a high school math teacher, so he can only work on his true passion in the evenings.

"I can help," Madge says. It is an offer she's made before.

"You *are* helping, sweetheart. Grading papers for me frees up time that I can use to secure our future."

"I mean I can help with the bunker."

Will sighs. "I've told you before why I don't think that's a good idea. I really wish you wouldn't press the issue." Will had his experience at nineteen years old, and since then has developed some low-grade psychic abilities. It is because of his gift that he was drawn to Madge, and the idea and necessity for the bunker was delivered to him via a dream. In subsequent dreams, however, he has been cautioned to work on the bunker alone. To accept assistance with its construction or to even divulge its location to anyone else before it is needed will prove to be catastrophic. Exactly what will happen, he doesn't know, because his visions do not always lay everything before him in black and white. However, they've never steered him wrong, and so he adheres to their directives invariably. All that Madge and the other group members know is that there is a safe haven waiting for them, and that it is underground and well-hidden. They have all received disposable cell phones from Will, with explicit instructions to keep them fully charged. As soon as he is enlightened as to the date of the impending invasion, he will text them all with the location of their meeting place, and together, they will journey to their new, hopefully temporary, home.

At the next meeting, Madge adds two weeks' pay to the pot. She wants to help in whatever way she can, but she also wants Will to know how serious she is about their cause. Maybe, she believes, once he realizes just how dedicated she is, the visions will show him that

with her by his side every step of the way, their future will be even better than anyone can imagine.

After her third meeting, Heidi approaches her in the parking lot. "Would you like to get a drink?" she asks.

Madge is speechless. She has never really had friends before. Her family has written her off, thanks to her fantastical story, and it's been years since she's seen her remaining siblings, her sister and two brothers.

"It's not a marriage proposal," Heidi says when Madge doesn't respond.

"Okay."

They go out for drinks, and then to lunch a few days after that, and before Madge knows it, she has an actual friend. Heidi comes from a large family, too, though she is still close with her relatives. "I never told anyone about my experience until I joined the group," she explains. "My family still doesn't know. They think I'm actually doing pottery on Thursday nights." The pottery class is the cover for their weekly meetings, and whenever someone expresses an interest in actually learning how to create pottery, they are put on a waiting list that never ends. Will has gone as far as to bring in amateur creations from the high school, to make it appear more authentic. "That was *my* idea," Heidi says proudly.

Madge really likes hanging out with Heidi. With the bubbly blonde around, there's never a lull in conversation and Madge doesn't even have to talk much, since Heidi is more than willing to perform her endless supply of monologues for someone who has such an enthusiasm for listening. It's a partnership that works well for the both of them.

The two girls are leaving a movie together when Heidi suddenly gasps. "Oh my god!"

"What? What is it?" Madge asks, glancing wildly around.

Heidi peers at her friend's neck. "You have a hickey!"

"I do not," Madge says, but she feels her face growing warm. Will had been especially amorous the night before, and her turtleneck doesn't quite cover the evidence.

"You do so! Who's the guy?"

Embarrassed, but also secretly pleased, Madge refuses to spill the beans. After pestering her over dinner, Heidi finally gives up. "Fine," she says with a sigh. "Don't tell me about your supposedly nonexistent boyfriend. But just to show you how good of a friend that *I* am, I'll tell you about mine."

Surprised, Madge looks up from her salad. "You have a boyfriend?" As free as Heidi has been with information about every other aspect of her life, it's shocking to discover that there are things she keeps to herself.

"Yes. We've been seeing each other for over a year."

"Who is it?" Madge asks, though she already knows the answer.

"You absolutely cannot tell anyone, okay? I'm not even supposed to say anything. So promise you won't tell."

Madge promises. And then her heart is irrevocably broken.

"I'm sorry," Heidi says the next time she sees Madge. It is in the parking lot of the community center, before their meeting. Three weeks have passed since that fateful night, when it was revealed that they were being two-timed by the same man. "The way I acted was..."

"It's okay. You were upset." Heidi had caused a scene, calling Madge a bitch and a liar and storming out of the restaurant. Distraught, Madge sat out the next two meetings, not sure if

she could ever face Will or Heidi again. But regardless of Will's betrayal or Heidi's denial, the group is important to her, and she doesn't want to lose that.

"I know you broke up with him, but I haven't said anything about this," Heidi confides.

"It's only so I can lull him into a false sense of security."

"What do you mean?" Madge asks warily.

"Revenge. Meet me at our usual place after the meeting."

Later that night, over apple pie a la mode, Heidi tells Madge about her idea. "I say that after the next meeting, we go to his place and confront him there, make him admit what he's been doing."

"I don't know..." Madge is uneasy. "I don't want to cause trouble."

"Are you kidding me? This guy has been *lying* to us! Do you want him doing this to other girls?"

"No, I guess not..."

"So then it's settled."

The next week, after an especially emotional meeting, Heidi rides with Madge to Will's modest apartment, pulling up in time to see him going inside. "What now?" Madge whispers, though her car windows are closed.

"Let's give it a minute," Heidi says. "Let him get settled, let his guard down." But a few minutes later, he is leaving back out, having changed clothes. Instead of getting into his van, though, he slides behind the wheel of a white Corvette parked across the street. The girls slouch down in their seats so that he doesn't spot them as he drives by. "Follow him," Heidi growls, and

Madge dutifully starts the engine and complies. She's hoping that he's going out to the bunker, that she will finally learn its location. Those hopes are dashed, however, when she realizes he's heading into the city. He has told her that the bunker is located *away* from the city, somewhere in the woods, so this cannot be the way. She swallows her disappointment.

The Corvette pulls into the driveway of a large house in an affluent part of town. At Heidi's direction, Madge cuts off her headlights and coasts to a stop a few houses down. "What is this, his rich girlfriend's house?" Heidi mutters.

"I don't think so," Madge says. "The lights are all out. No one's home."

"Do you think it's *his*?"

"That's impossible. He can't afford this on a teacher's salary."

"He can't afford a Corvette, either, but he's got one."

"That might belong to a friend," Madge says, though it sounds lame even to her. They watch as he uses a key to open the front door. Realization strikes the girls simultaneously, and they stare at each other, eyes wide.

"Son of a bitch," Heidi hisses.

"You don't think – I mean, the money..."

"While we're struggling to pitch in and fund the bunker, he's living on Easy Street."

"So you think he's lying about the supplies?" Madge asks naively.

Heidi rolls her eyes. "He's lying about the bunker, period."

The thought makes Madge feel sick. "That can't be. Every week, he tells us about the progress. He's shown us pictures." But those pictures could've come from anywhere. And it's awfully convenient that no one is allowed to come along on supply runs or help build it or even know where it is.

Awfully convenient.

"Let's get out of here," Heidi says, apparently having lost her taste for a confrontation.

Madge doesn't sleep at all that night.

On Sunday morning, Heidi shows up unannounced at Madge's door, eyes sparkling with an excitement that Madge finds alarming. "Come for a ride with me," Heidi says.

"A ride?" Heidi doesn't have a car, so Madge is confused until she steps outside and sees a familiar van parked at the curb. "Is Will with you?"

"He's at home. Well, his fake home."

"What's going on?" Madge is truly scared now.

"Come on, and I'll tell you on the way."

"Will's a fraud," Heidi begins, and then tells Madge all that she's learned: There is no bunker, no survival supplies, nothing to secure the future of the group members in the event of a hostile alien takeover. Will has never had an extraterrestrial experience, and he does not have visions. All of the group's money has been used to fund his secretly extravagant lifestyle. "And," Heidi finishes as she parks in front of Will's apartment, "this isn't the first time he's done it. He had similar things going on in San Francisco *and* Chicago, until folks caught on and ran him off."

"He just *told* you all this?" Madge asks incredulously. Her hand creeps toward the door handle as she considers making a run for it. Heidi may have actually lost her mind.

"Not at first," Heidi says, "but once I made him answer my questions, the floodgates opened up."

"What do you mean, you *made* him?"

"You'll see," Heidi responds cryptically, shutting off the engine. "But that was just Phase One. I thought you'd want to join in for Phase Two."

"Phase...?"

But Heidi is already exiting the van.

At the door, Heidi turns to Madge before entering Will's apartment. "Before we go in," she says, "let me just say that I believe you one hundred percent. I know that what you told us really happened. I know you're not crazy."

The sentiment brings tears to Madge's eyes. "Thank you."

The scene that greets her when they walk into Will's studio apartment is horrific. A man is in a chair, bound and gagged. Both eyes have been blackened and his nose broken. His green t-shirt is dark with blood. "Oh my god!" Madge exclaims.

At the sound of her voice, the man lifts his head. It's difficult to tell whether or not his eyes are open. He mumbles something against the gag, and Heidi steps forward to rip off the duct tape and pluck the sock from his mouth.

"Madge?" he says weakly.

"Will?" She kneels next to him, her eyes once again filling with tears. Even after what she has been told on the way over, even though they are in his apartment and got there in his van, she doesn't want to believe that it's him.

"Madge...help...me."

Madge rises to her feet to face Heidi. "What have you done?"

"Just what I needed to do to get the truth," Heidi replies defensively.

"Don't believe...her," Will rasps. "Cut...me loose."

"Oh, we're cutting you loose, all right," Heidi says. "We're going to make sure you don't do this to anyone ever again." From behind the sofa, she drags out a five-gallon gasoline can.

"What are you doing?!" Madge shrieks.

"What does it look like I'm doing? I'm giving this bastard what he deserves."

Madge's heart is racing. "Heidi, wait. Let's talk about this."

"There's nothing to talk about. If you're not with me, you're against me. And trust me, you do NOT want to be against me."

That is certainly an understatement, if this is how Heidi treats anyone who crosses her.

"Maybe there's an explanation for...everything."

Heidi heaves the gasoline can onto the coffee table with a grunt before replying. "Come on, Madge. You *saw* the Corvette. You *saw* the fancy house. You *know* he's been sleeping with the both of us. What else needs to be explained?"

"But what about the plan?" Madge says desperately. "The bunker, the visions? Those can't all be lies, can they?"

Behind her, Will begins to chuckle, and she whirls around to face him. "Poor, naïve, stupid Madge," he says. "Even after all this, you still want to believe, don't you?"

"What are you saying?" Madge whispers.

"I'm saying it was almost *too* easy to get you to trust me. All I had to do was pretend to believe that ridiculous story of yours and you were practically begging for me to take your money and your virginity." He grins at her then, a ghastly smile that shows that his remaining teeth are bloodied. "Ironic how virgins are the easiest to get into bed."

More hurtful than the fact that she has surrendered her purity to this jerk is the way he discredits the defining moment in her life. Madge has never been the same since her brother's

abduction. It has altered every single aspect of her existence. "I know the truth," she says vehemently. "My brother—"

"Your brother was snatched up by some sicko with a taste for little boys. And then he was strangled and left somewhere for the animals to clean his bones."

Through her tears, Madge sees Heidi hard at work, splashing gasoline on the furniture. The smell immediately pervades the room, making it difficult to breathe normally. Will begins to wheeze through his broken nose.

"You're a monster," Madge tells their captive. "Everything about you is a lie."

He does his best to shrug against his bonds. "It's not very hard," he says between wheezes, "when you're lying to a bunch of loons. And that's what you all are: crazy as shithouse rats. But you, dear, sweet Madge, are the craziest of them all."

Heidi finishes up by pouring the remaining gasoline over Will's head. He spits and sputters and begins to breathe in great big, heaving gulps that quickly become violent fits of coughing. "Well, friend Will," she says, "this has been fun. But we girls have got to go. I would say, 'burn in hell,' but it's much better this way, knowing you'll burn right here on earth." She digs a lighter from the pocket of her jeans.

"Heidi, no!" Madge holds up her hand in a staying gesture.

"What now?" Heidi puts her hands on her hips. "Don't tell me you still want to spare this asshole."

For the first time in what feels like years, Madge smiles. "Hand me that lighter."