



FAIR  
COIN





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Inquiries should be addressed to  
Pyr  
59 John Glenn Drive  
Amherst, New York 14228–2119  
VOICE: 716–691–0133  
FAX: 716–691–0137  
WWW.PYRSE.COM

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*For Mom, the best of all possible mothers*



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# CHAPTER 1

Ephraim found his mother slumped over the kitchen table, her right hand curled around a half-empty bottle of vodka. A cigarette smoldered in the ashtray beside her; it had burned into a gray cylinder up to its lipstick-smearred filter. He ground the butt in the tray forcefully and waved wisps of smoke away from his face.

“I suppose this is *my* fault,” he said to her still form. She’d drunk herself into a stupor, but she’d probably blame him for not rushing home from school to wake her for her late shift at the supermarket. He picked up the vodka bottle. Even if he woke her now, she wouldn’t be in any condition for work. Besides, she was already an hour late.

“Mr. Slovisky’s gonna dock your pay again,” he muttered. Ephraim slipped the vodka out of her hand and took it to the sink. He filled a quarter of the bottle with tap water and swirled it around, diluting the alcohol. It stretched out the liquor supply; they already couldn’t afford her two-bottle-a-week habit. Of course, it would be better for both of them if she didn’t drink their money away at all. He screwed the cap on tight and thumped it onto the table where he’d found it. She didn’t even stir.

“Mom?” Normally she’d be coming to by now, slurring incoherent curses while reaching for another drink. But there was no motion at all. Everything seemed to still around him, the sound of the humming refrigerator and the ceiling fan dropping away. Something was very wrong.

He touched her on the shoulder and leaned over her face to check her breathing.

“Mom.”

There was something clutched in his mother’s left hand. An

amber pill bottle. A few purple capsules littered the scratched formica around it. Ephraim's chest tightened as he realized that he'd never seen her take any kind of prescription medication.

"Mom!"

Ephraim shook her shoulders gently, then more roughly when she didn't respond. More of the candy-colored pills flew from the bottle and skittered across the table to the floor. The soft capsules popped under his sneakers as he stepped around her and took the bottle from her limp hand. The long chemical name on the pharmacy label meant nothing to him.

Ephraim eased his mother to a sitting position. Her head lolled forward. "Mom." He patted her cheek gently. "Wake up. Wake up!" He felt her breath against the back of his hand—that was something, at least. "Please, wake up."

"Mmmm . . ." she murmured. Her head twitched.

"Mom!"

Her eyes fluttered open, and she stared at him glassily. "Ephraim, where are you?"

"Right here, Mom. Look at me."

She blinked a couple of times, trying to focus on his face. "Honey?"

"Yes, it's me."

She was really out of it.

"What happened to you?"

She shook her head and tried to push him away. He held her shoulders tighter, worried that she would hurt herself. "No!" she said. "No!"

"What's wrong?"

She scrambled out of her chair and struggled when he tried to grab her arms. The chair fell between them and he bumped his hip painfully against the side of the kitchen table. She was stronger than she looked.

"You're dead!" She jerked away, more awake now. "Ephraim's gone!"

“Calm down, Mom. I’m right here.”

“Ephraim’s dead.” She sobbed.

“You just imagined it. Mom, look at me. Look at me! I’m fine.”

She stumbled toward the stove and grabbed onto the side, then leaned over and retched. Clear liquid splashed onto the faded linoleum, along with some of the pills she had taken.

“Jeez!” he said.

She wobbled, and he rushed over to catch her if she fell.

She collapsed to her knees, head bowed. She coughed a couple of times and stared down at her own mess. Finally she looked up, and this time he knew she recognized him. She was crying; eyeliner was smeared under her eyes like bruises. “Ephraim? But . . . I saw your body.” A thin trail of saliva dangled from her chin.

“Do I look dead to you?” he snapped.

“A bus, it hit you, and—” She rubbed her face. “But you’re here. You’re alive? Are you really my Ephraim?”

“Why’d you do this, Mom?”

“You were so young.” She closed her eyes. “My poor baby . . .”

“Mom, stay with me. You have to stay awake,” Ephraim said.

“Stay . . .” she echoed.

“Mom!”

Her lips moved, murmuring something too low for him to hear. As he leaned closer to listen, she slumped back against the oven door and stopped moving.

Ephraim snatched the phone and dialed 911. While the line rang he lowered his mother gently down on the floor, using her purse as a pillow. His hands shook and hot tears blurred his vision.

A calm voice spoke from the phone. “911, what is your emergency?”

“My mother took some pills,” he said.