



Prologue

Chicago.

A man is about to get on a routine flight.

*Suddenly, he pauses. He doesn't know why—
but he's got to walk away.*

An hour later the plane goes down in flames.

It's dismissed as chance. . . .

—Time-Life Books commercial, circa 1987

When I was a kid, I used to stop cold whenever one of those commercials came on. If I was drowsing to my mother's game shows, I'd jolt awake, sit up straight, and listen. If I was playing with my Spirograph on the floor, I'd stop, stare, and let my colored pen go loose in my hand. If I was getting a snack in the kitchen, I'd run back to the living room to watch. Like the Pied Piper, the spooky synthesizer music drew me in, and the stories told by the priestly sounding narrator gripped me

long after the commercial was over—usually past bedtime. I'd lie awake thinking of the woman with the prophetic dream of schoolchildren dying in an avalanche. The matching drawings of aliens produced by abductees who'd never met. The man who points a clover-shaped wire at Stonehenge, feels an inexplicable surge throughout his body, then faints. And I couldn't dismiss any of it.

There are so many hints of a world more remarkable than we ever imagined, and of abilities that we barely suspect. Send for your first volume on a trial basis and see if you can explain these things away. . . .

It wasn't until we were eleven that Charlotte and I learned that her older brother, Paul, had had several of the books in his bedroom for years. All this time we'd been passing his room, holding our noses against the smell of dirty shirts and rotting dregs of milk shakes—and this treasure had been buried there. It was like finding a sacred scroll in the Dumpster behind Denny's. Turns out he'd bought a subscription with some paper-route money but eventually canceled it when he got tired of the books, which weren't actually that great, he said. And now he was cleaning out his bedroom, making space for a stereo he planned to buy, and was going to chuck the books if Charlotte didn't want them.

Charlotte kept her fifteen treasured volumes at the bottom of a cardboard box in her closet, covered with a stack of *Highlights* magazines. The books were beautiful. The textured black covers with the silver lettering made them feel very official and adult, like a high-school yearbook. And the smell of the thick, glossy pages reminded me of new textbooks at school—which

confirmed the seriousness of their contents. Besides, it seemed that Paul had barely cracked them. The text was difficult, but Charlotte used her top reading-group skills to decipher a few pages nearly every night. She found the most important and interesting bits for me. Plus, there were lots of pictures. Almost every day after school, we pored over the books, boring Charlotte's beautiful teenage baby-sitter—Rose, with the dirty-blond hair and even dirtier mouth—practically to death.

But then Rose disappeared in November of our sixth-grade year, making the books even more vital to us—no longer a mere source of entertainment but an investigative guide. By then we knew better than the neighbors who whispered “runaway” and the police who let her trail go cold. We knew better than to stop at what people aren't willing to talk about. The commercials had explained that there is much that is unknown but promised that the books would tell us at least “what could be known.” And Charlotte and I took them at their word.

Visions and Prophecies:

November 1990

After Rose disappeared, Charlotte's parents never found a replacement baby-sitter. Either they were hoping that Rose would return any day or they'd finally figured out that Charlotte was old enough to take care of herself for a couple of hours each afternoon before Paul arrived home from soccer practice.

“I'm still worried about Rose,” Charlotte told me about a week after the disappearance had hit the news. We were sitting cross-legged on her bed, playing a halfhearted round of Rack-O.

“Everybody is,” I said.

“Her picture was in the paper again this morning.”

“I know,” I replied, a little annoyed. Sometimes Charlotte acted like I lived in a cave.

“I don’t think we should just be sitting here playing games. I think we should be helping them find her.”

I wasn’t surprised when Charlotte went to the corner of the closet where she kept her black books. Sighing, I reshuffled the Rack-O cards. I wasn’t in the mood for the black books just now. And I wasn’t sure I could handle the darkness of their contents without Rose’s sarcasm there to lighten it up.

But the picture Charlotte held out to me was a beautiful one, unlike anything she’d ever shown me in the books before. An African woman was sitting in deep orange sand, her shadow extended behind her. Before her were two long rows of flattened sand, each about three feet wide. Within each row was a symmetrical series of boxes, drawn with raised sand borders. Some of the boxes had sand symbols built in them—small spherical mounds, clusters of craters, finger-drawn horseshoes and crosses. Some boxes were left blank. Little sticks stuck out of a few spots on the grid. It looked like a hopscotch court, except more delicate, more beautiful, and far more important.

“It’s used to predict things. It’s used by a tribe in Africa called the Dogon,” Charlotte explained, pronouncing the tribe name like “doggone.” “They leave it like that at night and wait for a sand fox to come and walk over it. They read the footprints—which boxes he walks in.”

“What if a different animal comes?” I asked, not so much be-

cause I cared but because it seemed like something Rose would have said if she were around.

"I'm not sure," Charlotte admitted. "But the sand fox is sort of magical."

I nodded and looked back at the photo. I wished they'd also included a picture of a sand fox.

"I thought we should do one for Rose," Charlotte said. "We should do one to help find out where Rose is."

"Yeah," I agreed. "That sounds good."

"In the backyard, don't you think? There's the spot under the tree where the grass never grows."

"Sure. Wherever."

"Or in your yard, maybe?" Charlotte suggested. "There's lots of patches that don't have grass."

"Mrs. Crowe would kill me, and then my mother would kill me again. Mrs. Crowe's really weird about her yard. She has dreams about dogs in her yard and then wakes up in the morning and goes out to look for the imaginary poops she thinks they left."

"You're so *weird*, Nora."

"*I'm* not. It's *her*." Charlotte didn't understand the politics of living in a two-family house. She knew nothing of grumpy old landladies. "I'm not making that up."

"We'll do it in my yard, then."

"It doesn't say here what the different symbols mean."

"We'll have to think up our own," Charlotte said. "Ones that say stuff about Rose."

"And since we don't have any sand foxes around, what do we do? Wait for a dog to come by?" I asked.

“Funny that our road’s called Fox Hill and there are no foxes around.”

“Probably there used to be foxes,” I said. “Probably they shot them all.”

“Who?” Charlotte asked, taking the book from me.

“I don’t know. The Pilgrims. The pioneers.”

“Oh. Yeah, probably. Well, I was thinking we could try to get Rose’s cat over here to walk on it. Wouldn’t that make more sense than Brownie, or just any old dog or cat? Rose’s cat probably senses things about Rose.”

“I don’t know if Rose was very close with her cat. She never talked about him.”

“Teenagers don’t talk about their pets,” Charlotte snapped at me, as if this were common knowledge. “It doesn’t mean she doesn’t love him.”

Charlotte and I bundled up and went outside to the grassless patch we’d discussed. Charlotte had brought a sketch pad for practicing symbols. She sat scribbling beneath the big maple tree while I started digging in the dirt with a garden shovel that Charlotte had found in the garage. I scratched at the ground to loosen it and in some places shoveled scoops of dirt around to even out the area.

“You can make it bigger,” Charlotte said, erasing something on her pad. “There’s hardly any grass on that side, so it doesn’t really matter if you dig into it a little.”

“Okay.”

I cleared a rectangle of about three by five feet and then split it lengthwise with a one-inch ditch. Then I joined Charlotte, sitting on the long root of the maple.

“This is what I have so far,” she said. “I think we should use the top box for ‘Where,’ the bottom one for ‘When.’ Where she is and when she’s coming back.”

“Okay.”

“And here are some of the symbols we can use.” She let me take the sketch pad from her.

I pointed at the first symbol. A rectangle with a small tail on its lower left side.

“Still in Connecticut,” Charlotte explained.

I nodded, recognizing the shape of the state. We’d had to draw it about a hundred times in fourth grade. I moved my finger to a crudely drawn airplane.

“Far away,” Charlotte said. “In a different state.”

A Saturn-like symbol. “Aliens took her. Outer space.”

I looked up. “Aliens? That’s not funny. That’s stupid.”

“The way she talked about it, I just thought we should include it.”

“Fine.”

Four vertical lines: “She’s stuck somewhere, and she’s trying to get back. The lines are like prison.”

I stiffened, trying not to picture Rose in a prison, or worse.

A stick figure with a few lines of hair flying behind, arms out. Smudged on the bottom because Charlotte had erased and redrawn the legs a few times to perfect the angles of legs in a running motion.

“She ran away,” Charlotte said.

I nodded and moved down to the “When” symbols.

A moon and sun: “Tonight.”

A cross: “Before Sunday.”

A Christmas tree: “Before Christmas.”

A small grid of squares: “Not for a long time. That’s a calendar. Many days.”

“That’s it?” I said.

“That’s all I have so far. You can add some if you want.”

I handed the pad back to her. Something was missing. I wasn’t sure if it belonged in “Where” or “When.” It would be a pretty easy symbol to do. A skull and crossbones or the horse-shoe hump of a gravestone.

I stared at Charlotte. I felt nauseous, but her face showed only curiosity.

“What is it?” she said.

“But what about . . . ?”

Charlotte cocked her head, waiting. Maybe we just weren’t going to say it. Like when I said something especially gloomy to my mother, about rain on parades or squirrels choking on acorns or whatever it might be, and she’d say, *We’re not going to think about that, Nora*. So this was something similar. We weren’t going to think about it, and we certainly weren’t going to talk about it.

“Nothing,” I said, kneeling in the first dirt rectangle. I was grateful to have something to do to take my mind off what we weren’t going to think about. I put my hands in the dirt, smoothing it with my fingers, and then set to work. Mashing the soil together with my index fingers, I raised the frames of the first row of boxes.