

# MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX

Author of the Shadow Children series



## DOUBLE IDENTITY

 SCHOLASTIC

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藏书章

MARGARET PETERSON HADDIX

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Kristen  
Richard  
and many others who are gone.*

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## —ONE—

### My mother is crying.

She is trying to do it silently, but from the backseat of the car I can see her shoulders heaving up and down, her entire body racked by sobs. I look out the window at the darkness flowing past our car, and all the pinpoints of light on the horizon seem far, far away. My mother always cries, now. In the beginning, back in the summer, I used to try to comfort her, used to ask her—stupidly—“Is something wrong?” And she’d force her face into some tortured mask of fake happiness, her smile trembling, her eyes still brimming with tears: “Oh no, dear, nothing’s wrong. Would you like some milk and cookies?”

That was before today, before my father hustled the three of us into the car and we drove for hours and hours across unfamiliar states, the light fading and the roads we are on getting smaller and smaller, more and more remote.

I do not know why my mother is crying. I do not know where we are going.

I could ask about our destination, if nothing else. A thousand times today I've started to open my mouth, started to squeak out, "Can you tell me . . . ?" But then I'd look into the front seat, at my mother's silent shaking, my father's grim profile, the mournful bags beneath his eyes, and all the questions I might ask seemed abusive. Assault and battery, a question mark used like a club. My parents are old and fragile. I'd have to be heartless to want to hurt them.

A red traffic signal flashes overhead, and my father comes to a complete stop and stares at the empty crossroads for whole minutes before inching forward. He's an insanely careful driver. My mother is too—or was, before she started crying all the time and stopped doing anything else.

I turn my head, looking away from both my parents. We're on the outskirts of a small town now. I squint out the window at a dark sign half-hidden in bushes: WELCOME TO . . . It's S—something, something—field, the letters in the middle covered by branches. Springfield? Summerfield? I've lost track of what state we're in. Indiana? Illinois? Could we possibly have crossed over into Iowa? Maybe one of those I-states has a cluster of seasonal villages I've never heard of: Springfield, Summerfield, Winterfield, Autumnfield. Maybe Mom and Dad are just taking me on yet another educational field trip, like when we went to the Liberty Bell and Independence Hall.

I can't quite believe this, but the thought cheers me up a little. Even educational field trips are better than sobbing and grimness.

A row of fast-food restaurants glows on the other side of my



window, and this cheers me too, even though I'm not hungry. Wendy's, McDonald's, Burger King, Taco Bell—so well lit, so safe, so sane, so ordinary. I'm so busy wallowing in the comfort of their garish lights that I almost miss hearing the first words spoken in our car in hours.

"Those are new," my father murmurs.

I glance again at the golden arches outside my window. Nothing looks particularly new to me. But . . . has my father been in this town before?

My mother doesn't answer him. Still, I peer out the window with renewed interest. In a matter of minutes, we come to a town square, with a soaring courthouse and a quaint row of shops. The shops are closed, their signs dark. Spring/Summerfield has gone into hibernation for the night or the winter or maybe even the entire century. Our headlights throw a brief glow on a flaking-away billboard on the side of a building, and I could swear part of the sign is still advertising a circus from 2006. Years ago.

My father turns onto a residential street, turns again, then once more. He pulls up to the curb and shuts off the engine in front of a dark house surrounded by huge trees. The sudden silence is horrifying, and it seems to catch my mother off guard. A tiny whimper escapes her, the sound amplified in the stillness. Surely my father hears her now; surely he and I can't go on pretending she isn't crying.

"Wait here," my father says. He does not look at Mom or me. He gets out of the car and gently shuts the door. He stands still for a second, looking at the house. Then he opens the wrought-iron gate and walks slowly toward the front door.

The streetlights illuminate little more than a square or two of

sidewalk, so I can barely see my father as he hobbles up the porch steps. I squint. I imagine that he is pressing a doorbell now, maybe tapping lightly on a screen door. All I can hear is my mother gulping in air in the front seat. Her shudders are practically convulsive now. I reach out, planning to put a comforting hand on her shoulder. But before I can touch her, she plunges forward, burying her face in her hands, sobbing harder.

I pull back.

Up on the porch, a light clicks on, warm and bright and startling after all the darkness. I can see everything on the porch now. It's enormous, wrapping around the entire front of the house and the sides as well. Sometimes I play a game where I pretend I'm a movie set designer: This porch would fit very well into one of those heartwarming family dramas set in the early 1900s. I can picture a dozen children dressed in lacy dresses and knickers lounging on all the white wicker chairs, whiling away long summer afternoons playing marbles and checkers, whispering innocent secrets, laughing at innocent jokes.

That porch is a happy-looking place, and my father—burdened, stoop-shouldered, cadaverously thin—doesn't seem to belong on it.

The door opens and a woman appears. I can't see her face very well, but she has white hair and is wearing a plush red dressing gown. Or robe—I know it's just an ordinary robe, but I've gotten into that old-fashioned mindset. The woman surprises me by stepping out onto the porch and throwing her arms around my father. He stands there awkwardly, like he's not sure he wants to be hugged. He glances back anxiously toward our car, toward Mom and me.

The woman releases him from the hug but still keeps one

hand on his arm. She says something I can't hear. I glance toward the front seat again, where my mother still has her face buried, trying not to hear or see anything. I reach over and grip a knob on the door beside me. We are the only people I know who still have manual controls for rolling our car windows up and down. This is a fairly new car—only a year old—so my dad must have asked for the nonelectronic controls special. Maybe he even paid extra. Usually I'm embarrassed that my parents are so low-tech, but tonight I'm grateful. I roll down the window in total silence.

My father is answering the woman.

"Oh, Myr," he chokes out. "I hate having to ask this of you. . . ."

He glances toward the car again, and I crouch down into the shadows, hoping it's too dark for him to see whether a window is open or closed. The woman pats his arm, cradling her hand against his elbow.

"You know I'd do anything for you and Hil," she says. I like her voice. It's throaty and rich, and if I were pretending to be a movie director instead of a set designer, I'd cast her in my historical drama as the wise old governess, or maybe the kindly housekeeper.

"You'd do anything?" My father repeats numbly. "Even now? After—?"

"Even now," the woman says firmly.

My father makes a garbled noise and then he begins sobbing, clutching the woman against him, weeping into her shoulder. Unlike my mother, my father does not cry quietly. His wails roll out like a wave of pain, and I scramble to roll up my window. My mother cannot hear that. I cannot bear to hear it

myself. I am not used to my father's crying. I've had no time to harden my heart against him.

I sit still for a few minutes, breathing hard, staring at the back of my mother's seat. *Crazy, all this is crazy. Why didn't they just let me go to school today, like usual?* I latch on to that one word, "usual," and let it float through my mind a few more times. I call out its brother and sister words and form a comforting litany. Usual. Ordinary. Normal. Safe. Sane. Typical. Sane, safe, typical, ordinary, usual, normal.

*My parents have never been normal.* . . . That's a traitorous thought, and I hunt it down and stomp it dead.

I glance back at the scene on the porch, and I'm relieved to see that my father has gotten control of himself again. He's not clutching the woman in the red robe anymore. They're not even touching, just talking earnestly. I roll down my window again.

At first, their voices are indistinct—it's like they're trying not to be overheard. I hear my own name once or twice: "Bethany is . . . Bethany does . . .," but the rest of the sentence is always lower-pitched, and I can never tell what my father thinks I am or do. Then the woman asks something and my father shakes his head violently, vehemently.

"Oh, no," he says, loud enough for me to hear, loud enough for me to be sure of what he's saying. "She doesn't know anything about Elizabeth."

*Elizabeth?* I think. Something about the name or the way he says it stabs at me. Whoever she is, Elizabeth is important.

My father is still shaking his head, and the woman gives her shoulders a slight shrug.

"All right, then," she says.

"Thank you," my father says. He retreats from the woman and the light beaming out from her porch, and I think, *That's it, now we can go home.* But I barely have time to roll up the window before my father's standing beside the car, leaning down, opening my door.

"Bethany, honey?" he says, and his voice is all wrong—too hearty, too cheerful, too fake. "We're going to let you stay with your aunt Myrlie for a while. What would you think of that?"

*Aunt Myrlie?* I think. *Aunt?* I thought all my parents' brothers and sisters were dead. I thought my family was just Mom, Dad, and me.

My father doesn't wait for my answer. He's hunched over the trunk now, pulling out a suitcase. Just one. Mine.

This is crazy, because I am twelve years old, almost thirteen, but I've never spent a single night away from my parents. I've been invited to sleepovers, of course, but there was always some reason my parents had to come and pick me up early—I had a swim meet the next day, my mother didn't want me tired out for school, it just wasn't a good time. . . . Three of my friends went away to camp last summer, and I asked to go too, but I didn't ask very persistently because I knew what the answer would be, the same one I always got: *No. Maybe another time. When you're older.* I'd thought "when you're older" was just code words for "never," but here my father is, plunking my suitcase down on the sidewalk. It sits there looking alone and abandoned, and my father moves back to my car door to see why I haven't gotten out.

"Bethany?" he says.

"I have a social studies test tomorrow," I say. "First period."

And that's a ridiculous thing to say, because even if we drove

all night, we wouldn't be home in time for me to make it to school first period. But I guess all day long, as I watched my mother cry, as I watched the unfamiliar landscapes fly by, I'd been holding on to the notion that however strange today was, tomorrow would be normal again, just another ordinary school day.

"Bethany," my father says again, and some of the fakeness has chipped away and I can hear the ache in every syllable of my name. "You have to stay here so I can get help for your mother."

The emotion in his voice is completely raw now. I wince, the way I would if I were staring at an open, gaping wound. I could ask plenty of questions—*Where are you planning to go to get help for Mom? Why didn't you just have me stay with one of my friends back home? Who's this Aunt Myrlie, anyway? Who's Elizabeth?* But I can't even bear to meet my father's eyes.

I get out of the car.

My father circles around to the front and opens my mother's door.

"Hillary?" he says, too loudly. "We're here. It's time to say good-bye to Bethany."

Dad motions for me to come and stand next to him. So I'm there in time to see Mom staring dazedly out of the car.

"Nooo," she wails. And then she hurls herself at me, and wraps her arms around me so tightly I can barely breathe. I am taller than my mom now—I grew seven inches in the past year—and it crosses my mind that my height may be the only thing saving me from suffocation.

Mom buries her face in my shoulder, and I put my arms around her. But she's weeping so hard it's like trying to hold on to an earthquake. Her sobs shake us both. She won't let go until my father peels her hands off me.

"I'm sorry," he says, and I can't tell if he's apologizing to me or to her. She collapses back into the car and he leads me away. He retrieves my suitcase, he holds the gate open for me, we climb the porch stairs—all of it feels like a bad dream. Maybe that's why I'm so docile, so obedient. In dreams you don't have choices, you just do what you do, and in the morning you comfort yourself with the idea that none of it really happened.

The woman—Aunt Myrlie?—gasps when I come into the light.

"Bethie?" she breathes incredulously. "Oh, Bethie—"

"It's Bethany," I correct her, irritably. But I don't think she hears me because she's bounding across the porch and throwing her arms around me in total joy. I hold myself stiff, partly because she's a complete stranger and partly because I've just been released from my mother's sorrow-wracked hug and it's too much of a jolt to go from that to this spontaneous burst of delirious happiness. After a few seconds the woman releases me.

"Sorry," she mutters. "I forgot myself. You just look so much like . . ." She glances quickly at my father and lets her voice trail off.

"You see how it is," my father says gruffly.

The woman nods silently and now there are tears in her eyes too.

"Come on in," she says, holding the door open for us. I step across the threshold but my father doesn't follow. He looks down at the strip of metal dividing the wooden floor of the porch from the wooden floor of the foyer as if it's electrified and deadly. Or as if, once he crosses it, he can never leave again.

"I really should be going," he says, glancing back at the car and at Mom.

I step back toward my father. I've spooked myself thinking about dangerous, uncrossable doorways, and even though I am nearly thirteen I have to fight the urge to throw myself at my father's feet and wrap my arms around his legs and beg like a little child, "No, please, Daddy, don't go."

My father hands me my suitcase, like he knows what I want to do and that's his way of stopping me.

"You'll be fine with your aunt Myrlie," he says, the fake heartiness back in his voice. "And we won't be gone long."

"Will you be back for my birthday?" I say forlornly. I don't know why I ask that. My birthday is November 2, still more than a week away, and the question really does make me sound like a child. It's just that birthdays are a big deal in my family, and I'm not sure I can bear it if my parents are away then.

I fully expect my father to say, "Yes, dear. Of course we'll be back long before your birthday. With lots of presents." But I look up and my father is staring back at me in mute horror. He opens his mouth, but no sound comes out. He reaches out and brushes his fingers against my cheek, cradling my face in his hand. And then his hand slips away and he stumbles off the porch, down the walkway, back to the car. He moves like he's drunk, though he couldn't be. He's barely even eaten today, let alone had anything to drink. And I've been with him for the past fifteen hours. I would know.

Really, except for school, I've spent virtually every second of my life with my parents. How could I not know what's wrong with them?

How could they be leaving me now?



## —TWO—

“Well,” the woman says.

I’m still staring off after my parents’ taillights, staring at empty street. I’ve practically forgotten the woman is there. No—Myrlie, I remind myself. Aunt Myrlie. But I’ve never called anyone “aunt” before, so the name feels strange to me.

*I won’t call you that, I think defiantly. I won’t.*

Still, I tear my gaze away from the darkness where my parents used to be and glance at Myrlie. Up close, she doesn’t look so old, despite the white hair, despite the Mrs. Santa Claus robe. Her face has surprisingly few wrinkles, and her dark eyes are brimming with sympathy.

“Are you hungry?” she asks. “Would you like something to eat? I don’t keep much food in the house, seeing as how it’s only me living here now, but I’m sure we could scare up something. Peanut butter and jelly sandwich, maybe? Chicken noodle soup? Or—?”