

—The—
Four Corners



Visit Shine-A-Light Press on our website:

www.ShineALightPress.com

on Twitter: @SALPress

And on Facebook: www.facebook.com/SALPress

Visit The Four Corners on our website:

www.TheFourCornersBooks.com

on Twitter: @4CornersTrilogy

And on Facebook: www.facebook.com/TheFourCornersBook

Visit C.S. Elston on his website:

www.cselston.com

on Twitter: @cselston

And on Facebook: www.facebook.com/cselston

The Shine-A-Light Press logo is a trademark of Shine-A-Light Corp.

The Four Corners

Copyright © 2015 by Christopher Scott Elston

Second edition printed February, 2020

All rights reserved. Published by Shine-A-Light Press. Shine-A-Light Press and associated logos are trademarks and/or are registered trademarks of Shine-A-Light Corp. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without written permission of Shine-A-Light Corp. For information regarding permission, please contact the permissions department at www.shinealightcorp.com.

Publisher's Note: *The Four Corners* is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination and any resemblance to actual persons or events is coincidental.

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, New International Version*, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society.

Book Layout and Cover Illustration by Joe Ingalls: JoeIngallsDesign.com

Illustrations by Madison McClean

Author's Photo by Christie Bruno

ISBN 978-0-692-43551-9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2015906519



Printed in the U.S.A.
U.S.A. \$15.99

For my family, whose confidence, love and support allowed me to take many steps of faith on the road to becoming the man I was created to be.

Still walking. . .

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my original proofreaders: My parents, Doug and Judy; my father-in-law, Craig; and my wife, Andrea. They have all been supportive in numerous ways, not the least of which is having read drafts of the book before publication and offering valuable feedback. My dad, in particular, has been my greatest grammar coach starting way back when. As a child, I would leave him notes to tell him I loved him when I had to go to bed before he got home from working late and asked him to correct them to make me a better writer. Andrea, a fantastic educator of twenty years, also helped me by creating the educational literary unit and helping me to create the faith-based study that are each available as a free download on “The Four Corners” pages of both ShineALightPress.com and cselston.com.

Thank you to Heritage Christian Academy in Bothell, Washington for allowing me to test the book out in a couple of your classrooms during the editing process. The suggestions from both teachers and students were quite fun and also very helpful.

I would like to further offer a warm ‘thank you’ to my niece, Madison McClean, for providing her beautiful artwork for the interior of this book. I adore the images the story inspired her to draw and am grateful for the opportunity to share them with everyone who reads this book.

Appreciation also has to be extended to Joe Ingalls who did the beautiful cover illustration and jacket design as well as the layout for this book. His hard work makes mine shine brighter than it otherwise would have.

Finally, sincere gratitude goes out to Liana who, for this second edition, picked up where Joe left off.

Table of Contents

Part One *Of Interest*

- Chapter One – *Kinsey* 3-8
- Chapter Two – *Tatum* 9-14
- Chapter Three – *Just Kids* 15-20
- Chapter Four – *Jill* 21-26
- Chapter Five – *Matriarchs* 27-32
- Chapter Six – *Grant* 33-38

Part Two *The Disappearance*

- Chapter Seven – *Divided We Fall* 43-48
- Chapter Eight – *Billowing* 49-55
- Chapter Nine – *The First to Go* 57-62
- Chapter Ten – *Panic* 63-68
- Chapter Eleven – *Those Who Followed* 69-74

Part Three *The Awakening*

- Chapter Twelve – *Alone* 79-84
- Chapter Thirteen – *Strangers* 85-91
- Chapter Fourteen – *Friends* 93-99
- Chapter Fifteen – *A New Kind of Family* 101-106
- Chapter Sixteen – *Remembering* 107-112
- Chapter Seventeen – *Uprising* 113-119

Part Four *A New Beginning*

- Chapter Eighteen – *Birth* 123-128
- Chapter Nineteen – *Preparation* 129-135
- Chapter Twenty – *A World Aware* 137-143

Part Five *Pushing Through*

- Chapter Twenty-One *Know Your Enemy* 147-153
Chapter Twenty-Two *The First Assault* 155-160
Chapter Twenty-Three *An Uncommon Adversary* 161-168
Chapter Twenty-Four *The Second Assault* 169-174
Chapter Twenty-Five *Another Round of Killing* 175-181
Chapter Twenty-Six *Resolve* 183-189
Chapter Twenty-Seven *Hiding* 191-197
Chapter Twenty-Eight *No Safe Place* 199-205

Part Six *Shared Struggle*

- Chapter Twenty-Nine *Revelation* 209-215
Chapter Thirty *Joint Voyage* 217-222
Chapter Thirty-One *The Enemy's Grab Bag* 223-228
Chapter Thirty-Two *The Perished* 229-234
Chapter Thirty-Three *The Final Assault* 235-240

Part Seven *The Gathering*

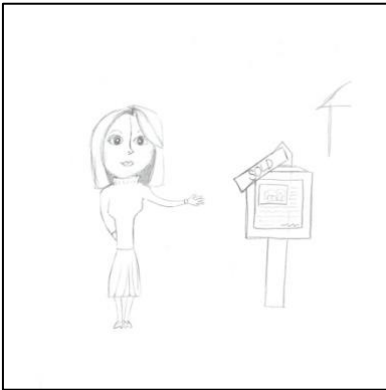
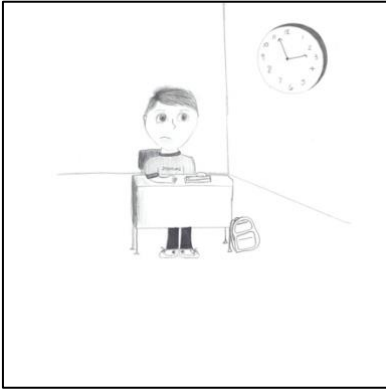
- Chapter Thirty-Four *Yin* 245-250
Chapter Thirty-Five *Yang* 251-256
Chapter Thirty-Six *The Last Battle Begins* 257-262
Chapter Thirty-Seven *The War Concludes* 263-267
Chapter Thirty-Eight *Home* 269-273

Reader's Guide

Pages 278-279

The Four Corners

C.S. Elston



PART ONE
Of Interest

CHAPTER ONE

Kinsey

Kinsey Snyder wasn't a particularly interesting nine-year-old boy. Maybe this was because he didn't seem to have any real interests. He didn't have a favorite musical group, book, super hero, movie or even television show. He didn't belong to any clubs or teams. He didn't sing either solo or in a choir, act in any plays, or play any musical instruments. He didn't participate in class or, really even recess for that matter, and he didn't have any true friends. Instead, he lived a relatively lonely life of self-imposed inaccessibility.

Kinsey even looked ordinary. He was of about average height for his age, just slightly over-weight, and appeared a little bit on the sloppy side. He even wore neutral colors and on the rare occasion that his clothes included any patterns, they were quite subtle. At some point in the not-too-distant past, Kinsey had simply stopped caring about the way he looked and it showed,

but only slightly. If it showed too much, that would be interesting. Instead, nothing Kinsey said or did ever really stood out. And, nothing he chose to keep hidden ever really stood out either. No, Kinsey Snyder most definitely was not interesting.

Of course, this wasn't the way Kinsey wished his life to be. It just so happened that this is the way it was. He wanted friends but he was too afraid to make them. He knew many of the answers to the questions his teacher asked but was too worried that if he finally raised his hand he would somehow say it wrong and be laughed at by the other kids. He wished he knew how to play the guitar but, he didn't want to ask his parents for lessons because then they would know if it turned out he wasn't any good. He wanted to be athletic but he was terrified that if he played at recess, he would be picked last when everyone was divided into teams. Then, in order to make the situation even worse, his deep fear was that he would prove all of them right for doing so by dropping the ball or throwing it to the wrong team or some other stupid thing. So, it had become easier for Kinsey to just not try. Not trying had recently developed into a theme for his entire life.

Although Kinsey didn't realize it yet, not trying is worse than failing. Failure is a chance to learn how to succeed. Not trying is the acceptance of a life where success will never be possible. He had no way of knowing, but soon Kinsey would find himself in a

The Four Corners

situation where he would have to change course and try something bigger than anything he'd ever been faced with - even bigger than anything he'd ever imagined. And, the stakes associated with both success and failure in the situation Kinsey would soon be facing would affect the rest of his life. In fact, that unforeseen situation would put that very future at risk. Kinsey was about to face an unimaginable matter of life or death that would change everything he had ever known.

Until then, however, Kinsey would continue to live an isolated life of self-defeat. On that rare occasion when someone did ask him to play something, Kinsey would just shake his head as if silently saying "No, thank you." Because of this, people had mostly stopped asking.

Similarly, if his teacher called on him, Kinsey would merely shrug his shoulders as if silently telling her "I don't know the answer" - even though he probably did. As a result, Mrs. Shilley had stopped calling on him in order to protect him from embarrassment. She had talked to his parents, tried to talk to him and even tried to get him to talk to the school counselor. So far, nothing had even remotely improved the situation. For all intents and purposes, by not trying at anything else, Kinsey was subconsciously trying to make himself invisible - and he was doing a pretty good job of it.

Having essentially withdrawn from the world and into

himself, Kinsey Snyder had become almost completely silent in the presence of anyone other than the person solely responsible for keeping his sanity alive: his sister. The otherwise silent life that Kinsey had chosen to lead was stirring up some strong emotions. Emotions are powerful forces, capable of destroying lives or saving them, generating peace and grace or causing fights and even wars.

Emotions can only stay bottled up for so long. The consistent choice to stay silent meant that emotions had been building inside of Kinsey like lava in a volcano for quite some time and it wouldn't be long before they just had to erupt out of him.

But, for now, Kinsey sat in the back of the classroom in his chair with a desk attached to it, which made it immobile and totally uncomfortable. In fact, if Kinsey had been a more imaginative boy, he might have pictured it being made in a dungeon by a bitter old man who hated children and wanted to find ways to slowly torture them. As much as he hated that chair/desk combination, however, Kinsey's mind was elsewhere as he found himself staring at the clock – silently and without drawing any attention to himself whatsoever, of course.

As was usual at the end of the school day, Kinsey had nearly forgotten there were even other kids in the room and had completely tuned the teacher out. Mrs. Shilley had started to re-

The Four Corners

cap the day, as if he and his forgotten classmates hadn't already experienced it with her, but Kinsey didn't hear a word of it. Instead, he had turned his attention to the second hand on the clock above the whiteboard. He followed it with a slight head-nod like someone jamming to the beat of his favorite song flowing out of a set of headphones that only he could hear. Kinsey, however, was simply counting down the seconds until the final bell, the bell that announced his freedom.

To him, that bell somehow sounded different than the other bells that he heard throughout the day. The first bell, the one that began the school day, was absolutely the worst. But, then they somehow improved as the day progressed. The final bell actually managed to sound chipper, genuinely happy even, like a bird fresh from slumber stepping up onto the edge of its nest and bending its legs while raising its wings, ready to take flight. To Kinsey, it was a glorious sound. So, counting the seconds until he heard that magnificent ring had become a habit starting sometime the year before.

Maybe it was because he was happy to be done with the school day. Maybe it was because he was going home where he could sit in his room and not be bothered. But, more than likely, it was because it announced his favorite part of the day: his walk home with the only person he ever really wanted to talk to. She was his very favorite person in the entire world and, luckily, the

C.S. Elston

one who was always waiting for him when he got out of school. She was his older sister Tatum and, unlike Kinsey, she was very interesting.

CHAPTER TWO

Tatum

What made Tatum Snyder so interesting wasn't some magical power or incredible talent. Nor was it a long list of awards or accomplishments. She wasn't even particularly creative or inventive. She was, however, quite inspirational. The old saying about people who are handed lemons by life but somehow manage to make lemonade, described Tatum in a nutshell.

Tatum was smack dab in the middle of most of the same trials and misfortunes that Kinsey was. But, her ability to face reality head-on made her quite different from her younger brother. And, it showed in nearly everything that she did.

Tatum actually liked school and she had always demonstrated it by participating both in class and on the playground. She never watched the clock the way Kinsey did

because she was genuinely engaged in whatever the teacher was saying. Not that Tatum didn't enjoy their after-school walk home together but, school was much more fun than being at home, especially since she had finally advanced to junior high this year.

Not surprisingly, she had embraced her new surroundings, and all of the challenges they provided, with grit and enthusiasm. Her good grades remained steady as always and she loved the fact that she was given the opportunity to learn from five teachers each day instead of just the one per year in elementary school. Furthermore, she had managed to hold on to her old friends while, at the same time, making new ones.

Also in contrast to her younger brother, Tatum took pride in the way she looked and, had therefore taken on a nearly regal appearance. She got up early in the morning and spent time choosing and then ironing her clothes, fixing her hair just the way she wanted it, and even applying just a hint of make-up.

Being the mature, reliable girl that she was, Tatum had begun to take over a lot of motherly responsibilities since her mom had decided to start selling houses. She did some of the household chores and often ordered dinner from one of the local restaurants that delivered. But, the main thing Tatum had taken over was caring for Kinsey. She made sure he was ready for school in the morning, helped him with his homework at night, and with pretty much everything else he was supposed to do in between.

The Four Corners

Tatum would have enjoyed more free time to be social and possibly even join one of the sports teams at her school but, for the most part, she was okay with the role she had taken on at home. Someone had to do it. Truth be known, she believed the job belonged to one of her parents. Likely, her mom since it had been hers to begin with. Her mom had never officially quit, but she had slowly stopped doing the job and someone needed to pick up the slack. Tatum was there to do it. Sure, there was a bit of resulting frustration with her mother hidden underneath Tatum's calm and collected exterior but such was life and Tatum embraced it with the same vigor that she embraced everything else.

That kind of responsibility might be too much for most twelve year-old girls but Tatum was not like most twelve year-old girls. She was stable, healthy, and didn't suffer from wide mood swings. She was the kind of girl who recognized problems, generated options, made choices, and followed through. While Kinsey had turned into a human tortoise, hiding in his shell, Tatum had transformed into a human cheetah, sprinting with purpose. That is what made Tatum Snyder so interesting.

Her life wasn't ideal, but she had the aptitude to make the most of the way things were. Instead of grumbling about the time she spent taking care of her brother when she could be hanging out with her friends, she enjoyed his company and put the energy

she would have wasted grumbling into making sure she took care of him the best that she possibly could.

On this day and at this hour, Tatum found herself where she usually did. Her school let out twenty minutes earlier than her brother's. So, she would gather the things she was taking home, walk two blocks to the elementary school, sit on the front steps below the branches of the tall maple tree, and read.

She had recently been assigned to read *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeleine L'Engle. It was no trouble getting into the characters in the book because it involved a girl and her little brother, to which Tatum could easily relate, even though the characters were quite different from Kinsey and herself. In the story, a stranger had appeared at their door claiming to have been blown off course and then explained that there was such a thing as a wrinkle in space and time called a *tesseract* and it was through this wrinkle that they could travel on a quest to find their father who had been missing for more than a year. Tatum was thrilled by the adventure and thankful for the selection made by her English teacher, Mrs. Chadwick. She could hardly wait to see where the story took her.

Therefore, as she sat in the shade provided by the large maple tree, she reached into her school bag, dug around until she found the book, pulled it out, opened it to her bookmark and began to read. She had to move quickly because the school bell would be ringing shortly and she knew from experience that Kinsey would

The Four Corners

be at her side only moments later.

She looked forward to seeing her little brother but she also treasured the opportunity to read quietly. Reading itself was a wonderful escape for Tatum but this was also a moment to herself, a break from the chaos of everyday life in this world but, more specifically, from the chaos that existed in the Snyder family. This was a moment of peace and calm. It was a brief moment but one that Tatum looked forward to every single day.

Tatum could have chosen to catch up on any homework during this moment but she very nearly always chose to read the novels that she had been assigned in her English class. The rare exception was when she had a test the next day in a subject where she didn't feel she otherwise had enough time to be fully prepared. On any other day, this was always a moment when she could enjoy the relaxation of dipping into the pages of a great story.

Just as the children in *A Wrinkle in Time* were about to be transported to another planet, that annoying school bell rang and Tatum was forced to slide her bookmark back in between the pages where she left off, stuff the book back into her school bag, zip the bag closed, and stand ready to greet her brother.

CHAPTER THREE

Just Kids

For Kinsey, the final school bell was a personal symbol of liberty. As such, when it began to ring, it started the fastest movement of his day. The habitually slow-moving nine-year-old boy could snap his book shut or gather his papers and have everything in his backpack, with no need to stop at his locker, and be on his way out the classroom door before the ringing stopped. He was almost always the first person to exit the building. Not because he prided himself on it or found some sense of achievement in it, but because he couldn't wait to get to the one moment in each day where he actually felt just a hint of joy.

For Tatum, the same bell ended the most tranquil few minutes she had in a day. She barely had enough time to pack back up and get to her feet as her focus shifted from relaxation to Kinsey. But, for her, human cheetah mode was always in full

effect.

Therefore, as they met up in their usual spot at the bottom of the Ronald Reagan Elementary School front steps to begin their journey home, their easy conversation immediately kicked into gear.

“Hey, buddy,” Tatum greeted Kinsey. “How was your day?”

The sky looked as though God had poured out a giant container of the deepest blue paint in the universe and then cranked the sun’s intensity up to the maximum setting to make sure no one missed it. Only, Kinsey was so focused on seeing his sister, he actually failed to notice.

“Okay,” Kinsey responded with a shrug. “How was yours?”

“Good,” Tatum said. “I got an A- on my science test. How’d you do on your math quiz?”

“B,” Kinsey responded a bit sheepishly.

“Not too bad,” Tatum said, trying to encourage him. “We’ll keep working on it. Long division confused me a little in fourth grade, too. Plus, Mrs. Shilley is a stickler for making you show your work.”

“No kidding,” Kinsey said as he cracked a slight smile, appreciating his sister’s support, and they walked in silence for a moment until the smile faded. It happened just as they turned the corner at Orchard Avenue and started down Strawberry Street. This was the landmark they reached each school day where

The Four Corners

Kinsey realized that they would be home sooner than he wanted to be. Not wanting to be either at school or at home, he wished that walk could last a bit longer. In fact, if he had the option of gaining a magical power, he'd choose the one that would allow him to stretch those streets out until blocks became miles just to make that walk last an hour or two. That longer walk would be enough to make the whole day worth his while.

Noticing Kinsey's faded smile, Tatum tried to keep the conversation going. "What kind of homework do you have?"

"Math, geography, and spelling."

"Need me to quiz you on anything?"

"Maybe spelling and geography," Kinsey thought out loud, "but not until later. Like, after dinner. So I can try to get it down myself first. Then maybe you can help me figure out the new math stuff after that."

"Okay," she responded as she scheduled the evening in her head. "We can do it around seven or seven-thirty then."

"Sure," Kinsey agreed. Another moment of silence allowed Kinsey's mind to drift back to where they were heading. "Think mom's home?" he finally asked.

"Doubtful," Tatum responded. "I heard her on the phone this morning saying something about an open house. I'm sure she'll be home by dinner though. Those things are usually over by four. Especially when they have them on weekdays instead of

weekends or evenings.”

“About the same time as dad then,” Kinsey said before laying on the sarcasm. “Great. Let the games begin.”

Tatum looked at her brother, sympathetically, as he stared at the sidewalk in front of his shuffling feet. She felt the pain, too. She had just been born with a little better equipment with which to handle it. She decided to try and make a joke out of it by saying, “They do almost make a sport out of it, don’t they? Like a couple of Olympians.”

“More like gladiators,” Kinsey insisted.

“You’re right,” Tatum agreed as she realized this was something no one could really make a joke out of. “More like gladiators.”

They stopped out in front of their house and Kinsey watched as Tatum opened the mailbox and pulled the mail out. He was deep in thought and working the courage up to ask a big question.

“Do you think they’re going to get a divorce?” Kinsey finally blurted out.

“Maybe,” Tatum responded. “I hope not. But, the way things have been going lately, I don’t know. They only seem to be getting worse.”

“Yeah,” Kinsey sadly agreed. They walked toward the front door while Kinsey collected the courage to get the next question out. Finally, as Tatum dug her keys out of the side pocket of her

The Four Corners

school bag and used them to unlock the door, he did. “What’ll happen to us if they do?”

“Hey,” Tatum blurted out as she pushed the door open and pulled her keys back out of the lock. She turned and grabbed Kinsey by both shoulders so she could look him in the eyes. “Nothing will ever separate us.”

“But, what if we don’t have a choice? We’re just kids.”

“We always have a choice and I will always choose you.”

“What about courts and lawyers and judges and all of that stuff? We can’t do anything about that,” Kinsey exclaimed with tears in his eyes.

“There’s always a way,” Tatum reassured him. “Even if we got separated temporarily, we’ll always find a way to wind up back together. I promise. Okay?”

“Okay,” said Kinsey, feeling just a little better.

“Now get upstairs and do your homework,” she told him. “I’ll bring dinner up when it’s ready and then you’ll have about an hour left to prepare for the hot seat.”

“Hot seat?”

“Yeah, the hot seat. My quizzing you on spelling and geography.”

“Oh, right.”

“So get going,” Tatum said as they stepped inside and she shut the door behind them.

Kinsey, back to his more typical speed, walked slowly up the stairs as Tatum set her bag down and started flipping through the mail. She quickly realized that there was really nothing of importance to her. Of course, her mind wasn't really on the mail anyway. She was more focused on the promise she had made to her brother. She had promised him that nothing would keep them apart and she meant it with every fiber of her being.

However, neither of them could possibly understand just how hard that promise would be to keep and that the forces working against them were far greater than anything that had ever crossed their minds. The burst of emotion that would finally soon spew out of Kinsey would bring about circumstances they couldn't possibly foresee. In fact, no one in the Snyder family was aware of how difficult things were about to get and the least suspecting member was the most distracted person: Tatum and Kinsey's mother, Jill.

CHAPTER FOUR

Jill

Although every bit as physically, fashionably, and mentally put together as her daughter, Jill Snyder's life had always been full of distractions. She started out as Jill Wagner but met Grant Snyder in high school. She was a cheerleader and he played football and basketball so, she fell in love watching him play his sports and hanging out with him after the games.

He wasn't the best player out there but, he was pretty good and she could tell it was primarily because he labored so hard at it. His good looks and natural charm didn't hurt, but that strong work ethic was the first quality that captivated her. After all, she was a hard worker, too. Good grades were very important to Jill and, although she was naturally bright, she put in the over-time to ensure she remained among the top students in her class.

A strong drive, however, was one of the very few qualities that Jill and Grant had in common. In fact, the many ways in which they proved that opposites definitely do attract were far

greater in number. She was a girly-girl and embodied everything that came with it while he was about as manly as a teenage boy could be.

Grant was Jill's first major distraction.

They went to college together intending to get married as soon as they graduated but, they were so in love with each other that they decided they couldn't wait that long. Toward the end of their freshman year, they began to plan a wedding and got married the summer after their sophomore year.

They both intended to finish school but, half way through their junior year, Jill found out that she was already pregnant with Tatum. This was a terrifying and yet thrilling time for them. The thought of having their own family was a source of intense excitement and joy.

They spent countless hours talking about what they loved about the families they grew up in and what traditions they wanted to continue. For example, Jill had grown up driving nearly four hours to get to a lake on the other side of the Cascade Mountain Range where her family spent a week every summer. Lake Chelan was a tradition she absolutely wanted to continue. Grant had no problem with that and they had every intention of keeping that up.

They also spent a significant amount of time discussing the things they were adamant about doing differently. For example,

The Four Corners

Jill had a father whom she loved dearly. He was a good man and a hard worker. It's probably the genetic gene pool from which she got her drive. However, that drive caused him to miss a lot of birthdays and recitals when she was growing up. That was something she and Grant intended to do differently. They were determined that they would always have time for each other and for both the child they were having and any additional children they eventually had. She was determined that, that priority was going to be a new and improved tradition in the family she and Grant were creating together.

Although the responsibility of having a brand new human being who was completely dependent on them for their every single need scared both Jill and Grant like crazy, the fear was outweighed by the adventure of it all. And, they were determined to make it a great adventure.

Kids were Jill's second major distraction.

Love and family are two of the best kinds of distractions people can experience. Unfortunately, not all distractions are positive.

After eight or nine years of being a terrific wife and a wonderful mother, Jill began to experience doubts about her adequacy as a woman. She looked up to women with great careers as positive role models and she started wondering if she had sold herself short by not finishing college and starting a career.

Life is made up of choices and the consequences, either positive or negative, of those choices. Jill choosing to love Grant resulted in the addition of even more love to her life in the form of a husband and children. That was a good choice and a positive consequence.

However, distractions, like life, come with choices and consequences. While creating a family resulted in positive consequences, Jill had entered a time in her life when many of her major choices were resulting in negative consequences. And, unfortunately, she was not their only victim.

Doubt was her third major distraction.

As the doubts snowballed and began to take control of Jill's life, she tried to fix them by volunteering for charities, taking classes, and eventually, getting her real estate broker's license. Choosing to better one's self is a noble thing but ignoring existing responsibilities because you've decided to add new ones can create a dump truck full of problems. In other words, Jill's newly self-imposed distractions began to crowd the original ones out of her life, which ultimately made things more difficult for her because she was losing sight of the positive distractions she once cherished.

These new distractions often led to fights with Grant and made both Tatum and Kinsey feel ignored. The more Jill did things solely for herself, the more unsettled her family became.

The Four Corners

And, the more unsettled, and therefore unhappy, the family became, the more she resented them for not letting her be who she wanted to be.

However, without realizing it had happened, she had become a lot like her dad. Like him, she was a good person. But, also like him, she had become so driven that she was missing out on a very important part of life.

In fact, while she mentally justified her actions by the fact that she made it to every birthday, she was no longer as present as she told herself she was. She often went outside to make or take phone calls in the middle of cake and ice cream or the opening of gifts. And, the tradition of going to Lake Chelan started to fade, when Jill decided she didn't have time for a vacation because summer was the busy season for residential real estate. Chelan was something her dad had never missed. This meant that, in some ways, she had become an even worse version of something she had once vowed not to tolerate in her own family.

So, there she was, a real estate agent with a family at home who didn't even realize how good she was at it. And, she really was good. She had always been a flirtatious woman and it benefited her in her new occupation. Let's face it, when a couple bought a house, the woman typically had to be the most impressed with it but, the house itself was pretty much out of

Jill's control. The ability to boost the man's ego, however, was within Jill's control and she was excellent at doing it in a tactful way that didn't threaten the man's wife. This came in very handy. After all, the man was often the one signing the check. And, today she got one step closer to a very big check.

As she pulled into her driveway, she was completely focused on all of the little things that had to be done in the next twenty-four hours in order to ensure that this deal closed the next day at 2:00 p.m. She turned the ignition off, gathered up all of her things from inside the car, and rushed into the house without so much as a thought about seeing her family or the fact that dinner-time was looming.

CHAPTER FIVE

Matriarchs

Both the side-by-side refrigerator and freezer doors were open wide as Tatum went back and forth between the two, rummaging through the various condiments, both regular and decaffeinated frozen coffee beans, breads of nearly every kind, random one-offs like key lime pie flavored yogurt and an orange, three different types of ice cream and about a half dozen flavors of popsicles – about a third of which were badly freezer burned. *There's quite a bit here*, she thought as she heard the sound of her mother's arrival coming from the garage. *But none of it adds up to an actual meal. I'll be flipping through take-out menus in five... four... three... two...*

Hurriedly entering the kitchen, Jill was immediately greeted by Tatum who popped her head out of the cool air and closed the freezer door. “Hey. Just in time.”

“Yeah?” Jill asked as she walked right past her daughter,

paying a minimal amount of attention. “What am I just in time for, honey?”

“Figuring out dinner,” Tatum said as she closed the refrigerator door. “I was just hunting for any and all available leftovers.”

“What’d you find?” Jill asked.

“Nothing that works,” Tatum groaned. “That’s why you’re just in time to rescue us from certain starvation.”

Jill walked back over to Tatum as she dug through her wallet. Finally, she found what she was looking for and handed it to Tatum. “Wish granted,” she said.

“What’s this?” Tatum inquired, knowing the answer but asking just to hear her mom’s response anyway. She took the white credit card and then watched her mom turn to leave.

“Dinner,” Jill responded. “Order something and have it delivered. Just make sure there’s plenty for all four of us. I’ll be in my office. I have a ton of work to do.”

What else is new? Tatum thought sarcastically to herself as she attempted to keep a feeling of bitterness from settling into her heart. She couldn’t keep it out completely though. A dash sprinkled its way in every night around this time.

As promised, Jill disappeared into her office completely unaware of just how routine this scenario had become. It wasn’t that Jill disliked her family or didn’t want to spend time with her

The Four Corners

kids. It was that a bitterness of her own had seeped into her heart in response to the resentment she felt from her family for the decision she had made to go back to work. It made her more determined to show how good she was at her new job because she thought that they might actually begin to understand and appreciate what she was doing if she could just prove that she was doing it well. This determination made her blind to the effect she was having. The more distant she became, the worse the situation got. The worse the situation got, the more determined she became. And, although she was not aware of it, the more determined she became, the more distant she got – starting the blind downward spiral all over again.

Tatum, on the other hand, was very aware as she went to the kitchen drawer near the phone and started digging through a ridiculously large stack of take out menus just as she had silently predicted she would be doing.

Tatum, of course, would have preferred for things to be quite different. She loved the idea of cooking something with her mom. Kinsey could even join them if he wanted to – which he probably wouldn't. Her mom used to cook all of the time when she and Kinsey were younger and she was very good at it. They had yummy homemade meals four or five times a week back then. Tatum's personal favorite was her mom's homemade clam chowder. At this point, Tatum would have happily settled for one

or two nights a week. Heck, the clam chowder could even come from a can for all she cared. Any other version of dinner at home would've been better than this one.

Or, instead of cooking, the four of them could even go out to eat together at a real sit-down restaurant. Of course, for that to be enjoyable, her parents would have to get along. Or, at least be civil. Heck, they wouldn't even have to talk to one another to make it a far more desirable situation than her current reality. But, this was the way things were.

Reality was Tatum putting dinner together each night from groceries her mom brought home or the previous night's leftovers. Or, even more common was ordering something to be delivered. Once in a great while, one of her parents brought something home from a fast food restaurant. But, that was rare because they had convinced themselves that take out was a healthier option. While that might technically be true for the body, Tatum was smart enough to know that this wasn't any healthier for their minds or their souls. The truth is her reality was also a house where it seemed like she and Kinsey were the only two people who really talked to one another. Unfortunately, there was absolutely no sign of her reality changing any time soon.

So, she continued flipping through the menus. She skipped all of the pizza places because she was sick-to-death of pizza,

The Four Corners

which six months ago she never would have thought was even possible. Pizza had always been a favorite in the Snyder house. Of course, to make things more complicated, they all liked different kinds. Her dad was a straight up pepperoni man. Just pepperoni wasn't enough for her brother, however, who liked a full-on meat extravaganza. Her mom liked the fancier stuff on her pizza pies like spinach, basil, garlic chunks, artichoke hearts, and white sauce. Tatum, on the other hand, could handle any of it but her favorite was a Hawaiian style pizza with Canadian bacon and pineapple. Maybe some red onion and red pepper flakes just to spice things up and add a little color to the pie. Everyone had their own unique favorites, but pizza in and of itself was a common ground for the Snyders. Unfortunately, she was burned out on all of it at that point, common ground or not.

What she really wanted right then was Mexican food, but she didn't know of a Mexican restaurant that delivered. *Might not be a bad idea for a business later on down the road*, she thought to herself. *Tacos To Go* or, *Burritos On The Run*. *Burritos On The Run would probably get made fun of. People would call us Burritos Give You The Runs*, she chuckled quietly. *Tacos To Go it is.*

Finally, she landed on a menu she hadn't ordered from in a while. She pulled it out, placed it on the counter, and started scanning the items while considering everyone and their assorted taste buds.

C.S. Elston

The hungriest member of the family was also the pickiest. Additionally, he was perhaps the only person more sensitive to and more disturbed by the family's routine than Tatum and Kinsey. He was the pepperoni pizza-loving family patriarch, Grant.

CHAPTER SIX

Grant

‘The Brick’ - that was Grant Snyder’s nickname from early in his childhood. Almost everyone, including his parents, still called him ‘The Brick’. His immediate family was the one exception. Jill was the only one who called him Grant and both Tatum and Kinsey, of course, called him ‘Dad.’

His average height, coupled with the athletic build he still sported at almost 40 years of age made for a good-looking, stocky framed man who dressed well because he felt he should as a businessman, not because he wanted to.

The nickname, however, was not simply the result of his stocky build. Grant was always a rough-housing, activity-loving, tough-guy. He loved sports, cars, and being outdoors. He was ambitious, audacious, and strong-willed, qualities which served him well. He excelled in sports because of his hard work rather than some God-given talent, and that carried over into

adulthood.

He dated quite a few girls in the first couple years of high school and began to develop a reputation as a “playa.” But, that all changed when he got to know Jill. It didn’t take long before he knew that was it for him. He fell in love fast and hard with this beautiful girl who had a quick wit, big brain, and fun-loving personality. He decided quickly that she was the only girl he ever wanted to be with again. He was thrilled to marry her during college and, quite frankly, he was just as thrilled when she told him she was pregnant. He wanted to be the guy taking care of his family. He viewed that as his job and it was one he was happy to take on. He told everyone that his family meant the world to him and he truly believed it.

When he finished college, he combined his experience working in a camping supply store with his business degree and opened his own sporting goods store. It turned into a successful business with four locations and potentially a fifth one approximately a year away. This meant a lot of hours and a lot of trips out of town for conferences and meetings with suppliers. As a result, he missed too many birthdays and anniversaries, which he ultimately realized wasn’t going unnoticed. He also knew that this was something he and Jill had agreed would never happen before Tatum was born and it broke his heart to go back on his word but he truly didn’t know how to avoid it and still

The Four Corners

keep the business running smoothly.

Grant did take notice of the fact that Jill was understanding about his absence when it had first started to happen. After all, she wanted him to be successful. Not just because she wanted the income that came with it but, she truly wanted it for him. She believed in him and his tenacious ways and felt like he deserved the success because he had earned it.

Once the absence had become a regular occurrence, Grant assumed, Jill most likely felt that it was too late to say anything at all. As the business grew, Grant's absence snowballed. And, it was something they had never spoken about. Grant felt guilt, and he assumed, Jill felt animosity.

When Jill decided to go back to work, Grant felt betrayed. He convinced himself that she was taking over part of his job and forcing him to take on part of hers. They weren't having financial troubles so it just didn't make any sense to him. He couldn't understand how she could do this to him without even asking how he felt about it. They started to fight a lot. Antagonism and sullenness began to replace love in their relationship.

She was very good at her job in the same way that he was good at what he did. Even though he could see that, he wouldn't admit it to her. After all, she had also been very good at being a wife and mother and he didn't understand why that wasn't enough for her. He also couldn't understand why Jill was willing

to do this to the family that they had created together. In his mind, she was clearly wrong and his anger was absolutely just.

Grant “The Brick” Snyder found himself where he often did at this time of night during the week – sitting in his car, parked in the driveway. He loved his kids but his frustrations with Jill had made it difficult to come home. Nights were typically spent either, apart in silence or, up close and personal, screaming in each other’s faces. Tonight, he would experience a little bit of both.

Deep down inside his soul, Grant knew that he still loved his wife. He certainly loved who she used to be. And, he privately hoped that person was still in there somewhere. He just found it increasingly difficult to imagine because he felt he hadn’t seen her in a long time. He missed her terribly and, the blame, he felt, was rightly placed on this new person who had replaced the woman he married.

What Grant failed to realize was that everyone goes through changes. He had changed some over the years, too. But, the basic make-up of who a person is usually stays the same. They can’t change how their body, mind and soul were created. Nor can they change where they come from. People can mask those things either on purpose or without even trying, but they can never hide them completely.

The things that do in fact change from time to time can be

The Four Corners

either bad or good. People can become addicted to things that take over their lives and destroy them, or they can conquer those same addictions. People can become lazy or careless and waste their lives, or they can find purpose and become more productive and make a positive difference in the world at large or in their small community. People can grow selfish or rancorous. They can grow more loving and kind. People can become hostile and unforgiving. They can also become sympathetic and offer grace.

In short, some things are impossible to change. The things that are changeable can be either destructive or constructive. While Jill may have thought she was making a positive change in her life, the way in which she went about it created a negative environment for the people she truly did care about most and the vicious cycle had finally spun out of control. Instead of looking at it from her point of view and trying to understand what it was that caused the inner void she was trying to fill, Grant couldn't see past his feeling of betrayal and he had finally reached his breaking point. Sadly, everyone in the Snyder household had reached that point.

Home is meant to be a sanctuary: a place of solace, peace, and most of all, love. For Grant, home had become a dreaded place of provocation, turmoil, and most of all, resentment. He imagined the entire family probably felt much the same way he did. But, that didn't offer any comfort. It only made him angrier.

C.S. Elston

After waiting for as long as he felt he could, he knew it was his duty to head on inside and endure another round. So, he finally mustered up the courage to climb out of the car and start toward the house to do just that.



PART TWO
The Disappearance

CHAPTER SEVEN

Divided We Fall

Family time had essentially ceased to exist in the Snyder household and this night was no exception. It was a typical Tuesday night in early November, a night which painted a perfect picture of how truly absent any trace of unity had become.

A traditional family dinner, usually prepared by one or both parents, often the mom, is typically shared around a table without the distraction of any electronic devices. Instead, these are replaced with live conversation between family members with topics bouncing from subject to subject. It might start with “What did you do today?” and spread to some variation of sports, school, work, the possible existence of life on other planets, or even the latest adventures of SpongeBob Squarepants. But, family dinners at the Snyder house were far from traditional.

Tonight, Tatum had ordered dinner from Happy Feast, a

local Chinese restaurant she had called at least a half dozen times in the past. They were delivering Chicken Chow Mein, Vegetable Fried Rice, Kung Pao San Yan, and Cream Cheese Crab Fried Wontons.

When Happy Feast's deliveryman rang the doorbell, not surprisingly, Tatum was the one who answered. "Hi," she greeted him warmly.

"Hello," the short and squatty deliveryman with a head full of white hair replied while letting loose a smile that would spray sunshine into the darkest of places. "I just need a signature."

"One second," Tatum responded as she grabbed the food and the receipt from the man and spun around toward the kitchen having absorbed a bit of the deliveryman's cheerfulness. "Mom!" she yelled toward Jill's home office. "You need to sign the guy's receipt!"

Jill popped out of her methodically organized home office while continuing a conversation, through her cell phone's Bluetooth earpiece, in which she was attempting to politely convince a seller that he had overpriced his house. She appeared just long enough to grab the receipt from Tatum's hand, sign the restaurant copy, hand it off to the deliveryman, and close the door before promptly returning to work without saying a word to anyone other than the person on the phone. Unlike Tatum, she had missed an opportunity to make a brief connection with a

The Four Corners

friendly man who would have added a bit of joy to her evening by simply being his happy-go-lucky self.

Tatum sighed as she looked over the top of the bag of food she had set on the counter and watched her mom return to her office. It was a reminder of everything wrong in the Snyder household but she didn't know what she could do to fix any of it. So, having allowed her mother to quickly but unwittingly zap her own bit of newfound happiness, she swallowed her disappointment and began to unload the white take-out boxes with the red dragons on the front.

The food looked and smelled delicious. Interestingly enough, it was being shared "family style" but, certainly not with any sense of togetherness. She filled two plates with food, one for herself and one for Kinsey. She chose nearly equal portions but gave Kinsey a little extra fried rice because she knew he liked it better than the Kung Pao San Yan.

Tatum took the plates upstairs and knocked on Kinsey's bedroom door as Grant went into the kitchen to prepare a plate for himself. Kinsey's room was very neatly organized, a lot like his mother's home office. They likely shared this trait because they both spent as much time in their own spaces as they could.

"Dinner," Tatum said through the door.

"Come in," Kinsey responded as he set his geography textbook down. "Thanks," he added as the door opened and he

stood up to take the plate. “What’d we get?” After a brief inspection, “Oh, Happy Feast. Looks good.”

“Doing your homework?” Tatum asked.

“Yep,” Kinsey replied. “States and capitals. You?”

“Yeah,” Tatum sighed in preparation to add a hint of sarcasm. “I’m doing grammar. Awesome. Enjoy your dinner. I’ll be in to quiz you in about an hour or so, okay?”

“Thanks,” Kinsey said after they nodded in agreement and before watching his sister leave. He returned to his spot, sat back down in front of his book, and dug into his food.

Tatum took her plate to her messy room and was about to try and clear a space on the desk where she could set her dinner. After a bit of head-swiveling inspection, she ultimately decided to set her plate on a closed Washington State History textbook because there just wasn’t enough desk space for everything and she didn’t want to take the time to clean and organize while risking her food getting cold. Even though they enjoyed each other, she and her brother did their homework and ate their dinners separately at opposite ends of the hallway in their own, very dissimilar rooms.

Downstairs, Grant had loaded up his plate and grabbed a second beer from the refrigerator before walking to the family room to plop down on the couch and watch the season opening University of Washington Huskies basketball game against St.

The Four Corners

Martin's. The irony of spending most of his evenings alone in a room named for family involvement was not lost on him. Tonight, when he first got home, he had a brief conversation with Tatum about what to expect for dinner sprinkled with a couple of pleasantries about the day they had each had. Otherwise, he hadn't seen or talked to anyone else in the family the entire night. And, now, he was eating his *family style* dinner in the *family room* - alone and, except for the television, in complete silence. Little did he realize that, that was about to drastically change.

On the opposite side of the house, Jill continued working in her office for another half hour. She had emails to answer from sellers, potential buyers and the higher ups at the main office. She also had fliers to organize and send to the printer for houses that had been on the market for a while and were either running out of existing fliers or had been forced to slash their asking prices. In addition, she had just received two new listings, which of course, would also require fliers. The latter would take the most time since she had to organize pictures and write text to plug into one of her templates.

Finally, she reached a good stopping point and headed into the kitchen to fill her plate. She took what was left of the barely warm Chinese food, zapped it in the microwave for about a minute and a half, and marched it back to her office to continue working. It wasn't much of a break but it was all she felt she could

allow herself.

This had become the standard routine around the Snyder household. So, there they were, eating their dinners separately in the four corners of the house. Not one of them had any idea how much they would eventually regret these wasted nights. Unbeknownst to them, the catalyst for that regret was quickly getting closer. The separation they now voluntarily chose for themselves would soon be amplified and forced upon them with an intensity that they could not begin to imagine.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Billowing

Jill left her office and hustled toward the kitchen. She was carrying her dirty plate and silverware, which now contained only the saucy remnants of dinner, and an empty water glass that she was planning to refill. She entered the kitchen and placed the dirty dishes in the nearly full sink. When she turned to approach the refrigerator, she noticed that the refrigerator door was just barely open and she knew exactly who was at fault because this was a repeated infraction. The compounded frustrations from all of the previous events, coupled with irritations from much bigger problems in her marriage relationship, all boiled back to the surface and she instantly became hot-tempered. Setting her glass down on the counter hard enough to release a hint of rage but not hard enough to break it, her blood pressure rose quickly as she stared at the ever so slightly ajar refrigerator door.

“Grant!” she yelled.

Grant sat in the family room, having moved only a few times either to get more beer or to use the restroom. The sound of his wife’s voice was a shrill reminder that he was not in a place of solace. He thought briefly before responding and realized that he must not have fully closed the refrigerator door when he grabbed his last beer. This was a long-standing pet peeve of Jill’s. If he had to guess, he would probably estimate the argument that was coming was approximately the 200th that had started over this very thing. However, they both knew that the refrigerator door had very little to do with what they were really fighting about. Tonight, the fight would quickly evolve and the true underlying cause of their anger would, as it eventually always does, rear its ugly head.

“Yeah,” Grant yelled back, feigning innocence.

“You know how I knew you were home?” she asked.

“The sound of the basketball game on the TV?” Grant suggested with no real hope of being accurate. Also knowing all too well she didn’t have any deep concerns over what the score of the game was, he decided to update her anyway. “Huskies are up by eight about twelve minutes into the second half, by the way.”

“Good for them!” she drowned in sarcasm as she shouted back with venom in her voice before continuing to press on the

The Four Corners

matter she actually wanted to discuss. “I knew you were home because of the open refrigerator door!”

“Oh,” he said as if he hadn’t already guessed that was exactly what she was going to say. “Sorry. Must’ve hurried out of there because of the game and forgot. Won’t happen again.”

“I’ve heard that before,” Jill barked, unable to let it go. “Probably a thousand times.”

“I know,” Grant sincerely admitted. “I’m sorry.”

“Sure you are.”

Her persistence infuriated Grant, causing him to slam his beer on the coffee table. “I said I was sorry!” he shouted, no longer making any attempt to hide his feelings. “What more do you want from me?”

“I want you to stop doing it!” she yelled back, completely incensed.

Grant stood up, ready for battle. He stormed toward the kitchen as he yelled, “You know what I want? I want my wife back! The only way I knew you were home was because I saw your car. I haven’t seen you all night.” Grant finally entered the kitchen. “Oh, there she is. I’d practically forgotten what she looked like. Kind of pretty if you can see past the scowl.”

~

Upstairs, both Kinsey and Tatum had started listening to the fight from inside their rooms. They each opened their door and poked their head out. They looked toward the noise and slumped to the floor in unison. Then, sensing each other, they looked despondently toward one another.

“Game on,” Kinsey said.

“Yep,” Tatum agreed.

~

Marriage takes effort to work properly. All relationships do. Jill and Grant were both hard working people when it came to their jobs but neither of them had put any real effort into their marriage in a long time.

If you think of a relationship like a bank account, Jill and Grant made a lot of deposits and few withdrawals in the beginning because they were in love. As time went on, however, the deposits slowed down and the withdrawals remained steady. Unfortunately, this is a common pattern in many relationships.

When Jill went back to work and Grant became bitter about it, the deposits from both of them stopped completely but the withdrawals never did. In fact, lately, the withdrawals had increased exponentially. As a result, the account was essentially empty. This was the night it would finally be overdrawn.

The Four Corners

“Don’t you make this about something it’s not,” Jill shouted. “You always do that. You always try to turn the tables. I didn’t leave the refrigerator door open. You did!”

“Does that make what I said any less true?” Grant countered. Waiting for a response that was clearly never coming, he decided to ask again. “Well... Does it?”

“You’re avoiding your fault in this,” Jill demanded.

“Fault in what?” Grant asked. “The refrigerator? I already said I was sorry. I did it. I admitted to it. I apologized. Twice, actually. I even said I wouldn’t do it again. How is that avoiding my fault in the situation? It’s not, is it? The only person here avoiding anything is you. You’re avoiding the whole family!”

“And you’re not?” Jill asked. “What do you call eating dinner and drinking beer alone in front of the TV every night?”

“Relaxing,” Grant fired back. “Anyone who wants to join me is more than welcome. What do you call hiding out in your office with the door closed? An invitation?”

“I have work to do.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” Grant said, sarcastically.

“Isn’t that what the beer’s for?”

“God knows I need something to knock me out in the middle of all your snoring.”

“I don’t snore,” Jill shielded.

“The heck you don’t, Chewbacca,” Grant sneered. “Just go

hole up in your sanctuary already.”

“Where else would I want to be?”

“Obviously not here.”

“You’ve got that right,” Jill blasted back.

“What do you know?” Grant observed. “We actually agree on something. I can’t remember the last time that happened. Can you?”

“Why don’t you just get it over with?” Jill scorned. “Divorce me already!”

~

Tatum and Kinsey shared a look of complete dismay that nearly stated *Here it is* without using any words. Their worst fears seemed to be on the verge of coming true. However, at that instant, neither of them could possibly know just how long it would be before they would be able to look each other directly in the eyes again.

~

After a brief moment of silence, in which Grant’s heart hardened nearly beyond repair, he responded, “You’ve got it.”

The Four Corners

~

And, there it was.

For Tatum, it was as though someone had poured liquid lead into her heart. The weight of sorrow is incalculable but, if it could be measured, it might be the heaviest substance on earth.

Kinsey, on the other hand, had been bottling his sorrow for far too long. He couldn't contain it any longer. His emotional bubble had irreversibly burst and the moment for him to explode had finally arrived.

CHAPTER NINE

The First to Go

Without any kind of warning, physical or verbal, Kinsey leapt to his feet and started sprinting. As years worth of pent-up tension and anxiety were unleashed in an outpouring of turbulent rage, he bolted from his bedroom doorway and sprinted down the hall, took a hard left at the staircase, and bounded down the flight of stairs, quickly reaching the front door. He forcefully swung the door open and continued his hasty escape. The emotive time bomb within Kinsey Snyder had officially been detonated.

Tatum watched, shocked and unsure of how, or even if, she should respond. It appeared that, for the first time in her recent memory, Kinsey was doing something with great focus and purpose. But, what was it and why? It was clearly connected to the fight between their parents, but that is where the clarity ended. Already in a heightened emotional state herself, also quite

clearly because of the raging fight going on downstairs and the “D” word being added to the mix, Tatum felt an expansion of negative feelings rising inside of her. It was as though her emotional immune system had finally been cracked open and Kinsey’s flare-up was extremely contagious. The whole Snyder family was being infected and they didn’t even realize it.

With Kinsey already outside, Tatum began silently trembling, as if there really was no reaction that could properly demonstrate the severity of what was happening all around her, until she finally and simply muttered, “Kinsey?”

She got to her feet and walked, slowly at first but with steadily increasing speed, and started wandering down the stairs and toward the doorway. Tatum was no longer paying attention to the fight between her parents. The fact that the intensity of their screaming had actually increased didn’t even register with her because Kinsey’s perplexing reaction had captured her total concentration and undivided attention.

When she reached the open door, she saw Kinsey still sprinting away from the house as fast as he could and heading directly toward the forest on the other side of the cul-de-sac. It sounded as though he was yelling something but she couldn’t make it out no matter how hard she tried. Perhaps it wasn’t actually words but more of an anguished groan from the depths of his soul.

The Four Corners

“Kinsey,” she said again but only a little louder than before.

Without another word, she suddenly started to chase after him. “Kinsey,” she was ultimately able to shout, but not until she reached the edge of their yard and just before she bounded over the sidewalk and into the street. “Kinsey!”

Tatum was older but, even if she hadn’t been, she was born a better athlete than Kinsey. She probably inherited it from her father. He had played a lot of different sports when he was growing up and, from what she had been told, he was pretty good at them. Of course, her mom had to be rather athletic to be a cheerleader in high school, too. Perhaps she got some of it from either side. Wherever it came from, she inherited more of it than Kinsey did and her speed enabled her to progressively gain on her brother. As she got closer to him, she could hear his screaming getting louder. Actual words were becoming clearer now.

“No more,” he was repeatedly shouting. “No more!”

It didn’t dawn on her until later, but this might have been the first time in years that she had heard her brother shout anything. He was a quiet kid of few words, and often even lethargic in both demeanor and speech. He even turned into a bit of a mumbler in certain settings. It mostly happened in a group of strangers or in a group that was too large for his comfort level. In those situations, he found it difficult to contain his nervousness.

No more what? Tatum wondered as she ran as hard as her body could carry her. He could have meant no more fighting. He could have meant no more neglect. He could have simply and generally meant no more of the pressure that had been pushing in on him from his exterior circumstances over the last several years. Maybe the poor kid was fed up with his entire life. *Whatever it is*, she thought, *he has clearly taken more of it than he can handle.*

This was also likely the first time Tatum had seen Kinsey exert this much energy. His lethargy wasn't laziness, it was a physical manifestation of both his unhappiness and feeling of helplessness to do anything about it. This had made him shy and somber, unwilling to participate or speak up about anything.

This complete shift in character was sudden and alarming. It was as though a dormant volcano had finally erupted and the built-up energy was scattering itself all over everything in sight. It was shocking, exciting, and terrifying all at the same time.

Tatum didn't know what to do, other than to chase him down and comfort him. She continued running after him, proud to see him finally letting his emotions out and, hoping desperately that she would catch him soon so she could hold him and promise again that nothing would ever keep them apart. Had Tatum taken the time to think back on her relationship with her brother, she wouldn't have been able to conjure up a single memory in which she had broken a promise to him. And, if she

The Four Corners

had to pick from all of the promises that she had made to Kinsey over the years, this would have been the most important.

There was no one in the world that she loved more than her little brother and she had felt that way since the day her parents gave her the good news that she was about five or six months away from becoming a big sister. Tatum never experienced the jealous feelings that many older siblings do. In fact, the months that followed her parents' announcement were excruciating with anticipation. It was like waiting for Christmas when you know what you're getting and it's the gift you want more than anything in the world. The day she met Kinsey in the hospital was just like Christmas morning. She immediately loved her little brother just as much as anyone possibly could.

Unlike a child's love affair with most individual Christmas presents, little had changed in her feelings for that gift over the nine years that followed. As they got older, the dynamic of their relationship changed some but, not the love or protective instinct that she had felt that first day. She would still do anything in her power to protect him from the horrors of the world around him, including the awful pain and dreadfulness that comes with a broken family relationship. She wasn't able to heal things between her parents who, in her opinion, seemed far more determined to punish than to love each other. But comforting Kinsey was something she could do. And, as she continued to

gain on him, she had every intention of catching up and doing exactly that.

She was just about to call his name one more time when she felt a strange energy field suddenly build in front of her like a strong head wind. It momentarily slowed her run to less than half speed. Then, swiftly and unexplainably, right before her eyes, Kinsey abruptly vanished into thin air.

—The— Four Corners

C.S. Elston

