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Opening extract from
Crazy House

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James Patterson

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PART ONE

1

CASSIE

THANK GOD FOR PROGRAMMABLE COFFEEMAKERS, that's all I want to say. Actually, that's about all I *can* say until I've had that first cup. Right on time, 5:45 a.m., life's precious fluid starts seeping down to the carafe.

And thank God for coffee. Last year when we'd heard that a lot of coffee crops had failed, I thought the bottom of my life had dropped out. But this year coffee is back on the shelves at United All-Ways, and I for one am grateful.

Leaning back against the kitchen counter with my first hot cup, I looked out the torn window screen to see the barest hint of pink coming up over the tops of the trees by the Boundary. I guess people who live in cells by the ocean get to see the sun coming up over the water.

Actually, I don't know. I don't know if any people live near any ocean.

I felt the coffee igniting nerves throughout my body as I sipped and watched the sun come up. It was partly blocked by the carport where I kept my—

I bolted upright and peered through the ragged screen.

"No, she didn't!" I shrieked, wanting to hurl my coffee cup right out the window. It would have hit my truck *if my truck had been there*. Which it wasn't!

"Damnation, Rebecca!" I shouted, then wheeled and headed upstairs *just* to double-check. *Just* in case. Just in case my twin, Ridiculous Rebecca, was in fact still snoring in bed instead of *joy-riding in my truck*.

I slammed open her bedroom door, adrenaline making jumpy friends with all the caffeine in my system.

Becca's bed was empty.

Seething, I hurried to my room at the end of the hall, passing the door to our parents' room, which we kept shut all the time nowadays. In my room I threw on yesterday's jeans and a plaid shirt that I'd been too hasty in assigning to the dirty clothes pile. Jamming my feet into my perfectly worn cowboy boots, I started rehearsing what I would say to my sister when I caught up with her.

And I *would* catch up with her. There was zero doubt about that. Our cell was barely four miles across, a nice big crop circle. Becca had no place to run, no place to hide.

2

I PUSHED OPEN OUR SCREEN door so hard that one of the hinges busted, making it tilt crazily. *Watch it, idiot.* Anything I broke, I had to fix. It wasn't like there was anyone else to do it.

Halfway around the side of the house, I remembered to look at my watch. 5:55. Silently I mouthed *Crap!* I turned around, stomped up the steps, across the porch, through the broken screen door, and into our living room. Curfew wasn't over till 6:00 a.m., and I'd seen what happened to people who didn't think the Provost meant what he said about curfew. He really, really meant it. He meant *inside your house* from 10:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. Not in your yard. Not under your carport. Not leaning against your fence, enjoying the breeze. And he always, always knew.

My jaw was so tight it was starting to hurt. Since I had four—no,

three—minutes left to kill, I went back into the kitchen and cut myself a couple slices of bread. I had a PB & J in my hand by 6:01, and I hurried out to the carport where Ma's dinky purple moped was leaning against a pole.

Just looking at it bummed me out. For one thing it reminded me of Ma, which, obviously: bad. For another thing it reminded me of Becca, because she's the one who used the moped now, and I was ready to skin her alive. Third, it had a top speed of twelve miles an hour. Twelve. Miles. An. Hour. And that was on a full charge, which it had only if Becca remembered to plug it in the night before. Fourth, the pickup had been Pa's, and he'd left *me* in charge of it. There were only a few pickup trucks left in the entire cell. We'd only been allowed to keep it because it was so ancient that I practically had to push-start it. But I still loved it, I was still the one who used it, and now Becca had taken it, had left before curfew, and was probably already getting high with her loser doper friends.

And who would have to come up with some lame excuse about her tardiness or absence at school? Me. Who had to hope that somehow she hadn't already been seen out before curfew? Me. As mad as I was, I didn't want to see her go through that. I never wanted to see her go through that.

Ma's moped started easily enough and I wheeled it around, then got on and steered through our gate with my non-sandwich-holding hand. The more I heard the gentle hum of its little engine pushing us down the road, the madder I got.

My sandwich was gone by the time I reached Murphy's crossroads—not that there are any Murphys anymore. I guess

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“Forty-seven’s crossroads” didn’t have the same ring. At the big Healthier United sign I turned left to take the road to town, all the time searching the crop fields for the curved red roof of the pickup poking out above the wheat. Becca had several usual hangouts, and I circled down to the gully where kids went to smoke and generally be bad citizens. No one was there, and the tire tracks in the rutted mud looked a couple days old, at least.

By 7:30 I had puttered to all of Becca’s lairs. Though I’d found several of her red-eyed friends, none of them admitted seeing Ridiculous, and no one had seen my truck. She’d done an excellent job of disappearing. Damnation!

3

IT ALMOST KILLED ME TO chug up to school on Ma's moped, but of course I did it because I'm not the twin who breaks rules. I'm not the twin who makes things harder for everyone. I'm the twin who shows up for school every day on time, rain or shine, and I'm the twin who then goes to my after-school job at United All-Ways because our family needs money. Ma was gone, Da was . . . gone-ish, and who kept Ridiculous from starving her skinny butt off?

That would be me.

School was school. We studied farming, mostly: planting patterns, current approved crops, harvesting tips 'n' tricks. Our cell was an ag cell, but of course there were other vocations, too. I'd hoped to be assigned to higher schooling, but at sixteen they had labeled Becca an electrician and me a mechanic. The irony there was that

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Becca had clearly learned to hot-wire my truck, but she wouldn't know how to put the alternator belt back on once it slipped off its pulley, which it tended to do every couple hundred miles.

Becca wasn't at school. My truck was not in the parking lot. My anger flamed—not only would Becca risk getting herself into serious trouble, but she was *dragging my truck down with her!*

“Cassie Greenfield, please come to the principal's office.”

I was so busy fuming that I didn't hear the first announcement.

“Cassandra Greenfield, please report to the principal's office.”

Heads turned to look at me, and our teacher quit lecturing, her hand frozen on the slide that showed less-wasteful irrigation methods.

Slowly I got up, grabbed my backpack, and left the class.

Standing awkwardly in the outer office, I told the secretary that I'd been called. I'd never been in here before—one of the few kids who had never, ever done anything to warrant getting called to the principal's office.

The inner door opened and our principal, Ms. Ashworth, stood there frowning, her arms crossed over her chest. She was tall and sticklike, and no one I knew had ever seen her smile—not even my pa, who had gone to school with her.

I stood up and she motioned me into her office. My heart was beating fast, like a mechanical tree-shaker trying to loosen every last pecan. I couldn't even swallow.

“Sit down, Cassie,” said Ms. Ashworth.

“Thank you, ma'am,” I said, and took one of the seats that faced her big desk. I gave a quick glance around but it pretty much looked

like what a school office should look like. In the corner hung the United flag on an eight-foot pole topped by a brass eagle. Our unit's flag with our mascot, a honeybee, on it. (A bee for Unit B, get it?) Our cell's flag, Cell B-97-4275. A framed photo of Ms. Ashworth with Provost Allen, shaking hands and smiling at the camera. A framed photo of President Unser, the one that was distributed when he'd celebrated thirty years in office.

"Where is Rebecca?" Ms. Ashworth got right to it.

I wished I could say "I don't know" and let Becca take whatever happened. But the stakes were too high, the outcome too awful. Even as mad as I was, I would never do that to my sister.

"She's home sick," I said.

Ms. Ashworth frowned. "Cassie, we don't get sick. Our cell enjoys perfect health, as you know."

Since I drove past the big Healthier United sign every day on my way to school, I did know that.

"No, not like sick with a virus or anything," I clarified, thinking fast. "I mean, sick from . . . overeating."

"Overeating what?" Ms. Ashworth knew that anyone having enough food to eat too much of it was as rare as someone coming down with a cold.

"Pears." It was like God had taken pity on me and dropped an idea into my brain. "We have a pear tree, and of course we pack up most of them for the Co-op. But when the pears get bruised, or have worms or something, we keep them and make pies or whatever. Can them for winter. The ones that aren't good enough for the Co-op." I spoke quickly now. "I told her not to, but Rebecca

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insisted on tasting all the ones I was cutting up. Some of them weren't even ripe. By lights-out she felt pretty bad, and this morning she was curled up moaning and wanting to throw up."

This was the best Becca excuse I'd ever come up with, and I congratulated myself silently. It was a shame that I'd only get to use it once.

Ms. Ashworth's pale-green eyes looked at me across her desk. "I don't believe you," she said.

4

MY HEART FELT LIKE IT was trying to climb out of my throat.

“I . . . beg your pardon, ma’am?” I stammered.

The crease between her straight pale eyebrows deepened. “It’s just you and Becca at the farm now, right?”

Heat made my cheeks flush. Everyone in the cell knew about Ma, knew about Pa.

“Yes, ma’am,” I mumbled.

“Your only sister is sick,” said Ms. Ashworth. “I don’t believe that you would just come to school and leave her.”

All I could do was stare at her, my brain’s activity crashing into a single, static line.

“I have a perfect attendance record,” I managed to say, hoarsely.

“Oh. And you’re trying to get a President’s Star?” the principal asked.

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I nodded. Any kid who never misses a day's school from kindergarten through graduation receives a gold star from President Unser himself. I was so close.

Her face softened the tiniest bit, as if she were a marble statue that had weathered for a hundred years. "I understand. I tell you what. You've already been marked present for today. I'm giving you special permission to leave school, go home, and keep an eye on Rebecca. But I expect you both back here tomorrow at eight a.m. on the dot!" Her face had toughened up again, but I nodded eagerly.

"Yes, ma'am! Thank you, ma'am! I'll stop at United Drugs, get some bicarb, and get right home."

"See that you do," she warned. "If I hear tell of you going anywhere else, doing anything else, you'll pay for it. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am, I understand."

Thirty seconds later I was putt-putting out of the school yard. Of course I really went to United Drugs and actually bought bicarb; Ms. Ashworth would know if I hadn't. But then I headed home, hoping against hope that Becca had come to her senses. And that she had brought my truck back.

She hadn't. Now I had to wait until 3:30 to leave the house again, thankful that today was one of my days off from United All-Ways.

By 5:00 I started to actually be concerned. I'd made the rounds again, asking Becca's friends to give her up, but they seemed sincere when they said they hadn't seen her today. One of them was even mad because Becca had promised to help him rewire his burned-out soldering iron, and she hadn't shown.

Dinnertime came and went. At 7:00 I was pacing the floors,

looking through our windows to the darkness outside, praying I would see headlights bumping over the worn track to our house.

When the numbers on the oven clock changed to 8:00, I was sitting at the kitchen table, more afraid than I'd ever been. Becca wasn't playing hooky. Becca hadn't taken my truck to piss me off. Becca was missing. And Becca was the ninth kid to go missing this year. None of them had ever come back.