

Welcome to *Falcon Quinn and the Black Mirror*. Please enjoy this first chapter. This story is © 2010 Jennifer Finney Boylan

FALCON QUINN

Chapter One

A Hole in the Ice

Falcon Quinn, thirteen years old, struggled toward the bus stop through the blinding snowstorm, carrying his tuba. He'd already begun to lose some of the sensation in his fingers and his toes, and the howling, gusting wind seemed, at times, as if it might blow his flesh right off his bones. It was a sharp, frostbitten morning in Cold River, Maine: March 21st, the first day of spring.

But it didn't feel like spring.

Falcon climbed upward, step after icy step, until he finally reached the icy crest of the hill and put down his tuba case and his school backpack. Megan Crofton was already standing at the bus stop, her flute tucked under one arm. Flakes of wet snow gathered in her long black hair.

“Hey Megan,” said Falcon.

Megan sighed, but did not look at Falcon. Instead she gazed toward the old cemetery across the street.

As boneyards go, this was a small one, really not much more than a clearing in an untamed forest of white pines. Some of the graves were decorated with American flags, marking the final resting spots of soldiers from the Revolutionary War. Also among the dead were Megan’s twin sisters, Dahlia and Maeve. A statue of a white-robed angel stood above the Crofton girls’ headstones, its face cast downward. The angel’s head was covered in fallen snow.

There was a grinding sound, and Falcon looked back to see his tuba case sliding down the hill which he had just ascended. Swearing quietly to himself, Falcon half-ran, half-slid toward his tuba, which was now gaining speed as it skittered back down the icy hill. Falcon could see now that unless he caught up with it soon, the tuba was going to slide off the road and sail straight out onto the frozen surface of Carrabec Pond, the lake on whose banks he lived with his grandmother in a beat-up trailer. This was the same grandmother from whom he had taken his leave only five minutes earlier, a discouraged old woman called Gamm, who spent a fair amount of time each day having inaudible conversations with people who were not there.

Halfway down the hill, Falcon slipped, and his rear end came down *hard* on the icy road. Incredibly, this did not slow him down. In seconds, Falcon found that he, too, was gliding out onto the ice of Carabec Pond, right to the place where the tuba had stopped, and then on past it. He came to rest about

fifteen feet beyond the tuba. It took him a moment to catch his breath, and to make sure he had broken no bones.

Today, Falcon thought, is *not* going to be a good day.

He looked around at the snow, at the white, frosted hills of Cold River, at the small trailers and houses that dotted the shores of Carrabec Pond. Smoke from woodstoves puffed from the chimneys.

Falcon got up and checked his watch; the bus was supposed to come in about three minutes, although what with the weather, and the general laid-back attitude of the driver, Mr. D., there was no way of knowing anything for certain. He took a step toward his tuba, and at that moment heard a sharp *crack*.

He looked down, and saw a series of concentric shatter-marks on the ice. The largest fault-line moved rapidly toward the place where the tuba was. Falcon took another step forward and heard another crack, louder than the first one.

“Uh-oh,” he said.

Then he started to run.

Falcon could hear the ice breaking behind him. He knew that if he looked over his shoulder he would see the open water, a jagged hole in the ice for each of the places where his foot had been. But he didn't have time to look back. All he could do was rush onward, grabbing the handle of his tuba-case as he ran. Just as he leaped onto the banks he heard a great splash, as a whole section of the lake-ice shattered, making a sound like a gunshot.

Falcon looked back at the place where he had been. There was a huge hole in the ice now, like a meteor had sailed through space and crashed through the surface. Then he picked up his instrument again and began to trudge once

more up the hill toward Megan, and the bus stop, and the forthcoming day of eighth grade at Cold River Middle School.

Falcon Quinn was a slightly-smaller than average thirteen year old boy, with curly blonde hair, a thoughtful smile, and eyes that were two shockingly different colors—the left one black as a shadow, the right one the blue of a Maine sky in summer. Occasionally, the black one ached, as it did at this moment, as Falcon arrived back at the crest of the hill with his clumsy, heavy tuba in one hand. Megan Crofton was still standing there, her breath coming out in small clouds.

At that exact second, there was a huge blasting sound, accompanied by a huge blasting presence. “DUDE!” it said. A giant face the size of the full moon, seemed to take over the horizon. This, of course, was the face of Max Parsons, who lived next door to the graveyard, and even though he was an eighth grader, like Falcon and Megan, he was almost six feet tall and weighed nearly two hundred and fifty pounds. He shaved, too.

“YOU’RE OUTTA CONTROL!” shouted Max joyfully. “That was the most EXCELLENT THING I have EVER SEEN!” He threw back his head. “Whoo-hooo! It’s like the freakin’ ICE CAPADES, dude!” He laughed, and laughed. Then Max slapped Falcon on the shoulder in celebration.

Falcon fell down, and once more started sliding back down the hill. Max, however, reached out and grabbed Falcon by the foot, got his hands in Falcon’s armpits, and lifted him back onto his feet. “Oh my god there you go again!” shouted Max. He laughed and laughed. “Look, you got me crying! I think I’m gonna drop a load in my pants!” Max wiped the tears out of his eyes. “This is the most incredible day, ever!”

“Glad you’re entertained, Max,” said Falcon.

“Oh, come on. Dude. Don’t be like that. You have to admit. It’s hilarious. You’re like, one super slippy-dippy, you know, Frosty the Excellent Snowman.” He looked concerned for a second. “You are all right, aren’t you, man? You’re okay?”

“I think so,” said Falcon.

“Okay then,” said Max. He looked over at Megan. “Hey Crofton! Was that excellent or what?”

Megan just sighed, angrily, and didn’t answer him.

“Oh come on,” said Max. “You have to admit. That was incredible. He’s like, some kind of superhero with these, like, super penguin powers. Like, he was working in some lab, and he got bitten by this, radioactive penguin. Or, you know, whatever.”

Megan looked down the street, as if the school bus was approaching, which it wasn’t.

“Hey, Crofton? What’s your super power?” He stepped closer to her. “If you had one, I mean.”

She cast a quick glance at the huge boy, and then looked away.

“I mean like, super-speed, or super-strength, or---“

Megan rolled her eyes, looked at her watch, then glanced down the street again with an exhausted expression.

“Or, I don’t know—“ said Max. “Maybe something exotic like, X-ray vision, or like that super-breath that Superman has, like he can melt cheese, or make cup-a-noodles, just by like, breathing on his lunch. Would you want that?”

Megan didn’t look at him.

"I know, I know," said Max. "How about being able to make yourself all rubbery, like Plastic Man? Or, wait—how about super-stickiness like Spiderman? I mean get this: You can *actually* spin a web, like: *any size!*"

Now Megan turned to face him again. There were tears in her eyes.

"Max," said Falcon. "Can you lay off her, maybe?"

"*Lay off her?* I'm just making conversation! Trying to keep things entertaining. Hey, we're stuck here in the freezing snow, it's so wrong to try to make the time pass faster?"

"I think she wants to be left alone," said Falcon.

"Okay, okay, fine," said Max. "I'm just saying. I just want people to be happy. I'm trying to keep the party *going*. You know what would be good? If we had some Jell-O. I'm serious."

"*What?*" said Falcon.

"If we had Jell-O, we'd all be laughing. Because of the way it wiggles and everything. Wait, I think I got some puddin' in my lunchbox. Hang on."

Max took his backpack off his back and started pulling things out of it.

"Hey, look at this. Long underwear." He held up a pair of long johns. Then he rooted around in his pack some more. Some old socks and a science textbook fell out. Then he extracted a triangle, for band, out of the pack. "Hey man! Got my triangle! It's band day!" With a small metal mallet he rang the triangle. "Ting!" he said. "Supper time!" He dropped the triangle into the snow, then got out a huge lunchbox. On the side of it were Shaggy and Scooby-doo. He opened up the lunchbox, dug down through his three sandwiches and his Go-gurt yogurt in a tube and his cheese sticks, until he got out some chocolate pudding.

"Here ya go, Crofton," said the enormous boy. "*Tiiiiime* for puddin'."

Megan turned to him, her eyes full of hate. They glistened with tears that had not yet fallen.

“Come *on*,” said Max. “It’ll cheer ya up.” He pulled back the foil top on the chocolate pudding and dug down into it with a plastic spoon. “Mmmm,” he said. “Tasty!” He held it toward her. “Have some?”

“She doesn’t want pudding,” said Falcon, wondering how it was he had gotten the role of Megan’s interpreter, since he didn’t know what she was thinking any better than anyone else.

“Dude,” said Max. “*Everybody* wants puddin’.” He dug down into the container with his plastic spoon again and removed an enormous glob of pudding. “Here ya go,” he said again. “It’s all you, man! It’s all you!”

Megan turned her back on the boys. Max shrugged. “Okay,” he said. “It’s your funeral.” Suddenly realizing that this was not a good thing to say to someone who was standing across the street from the graves of her own sisters, he blushed. “I mean,” Max stammered. “Whatever.” Then he peeled off the foil top and sucked the rest of the pudding directly out of its plastic cup. As he did this the enormous boy made a gurgling sound, like this: *glug glug glug*.

“I know what superpower I want,” said Megan. Falcon and Max looked over at her. Her soft black hair flapped around her face in the winter wind.

“What?” said Falcon.

“Hey,” said Max, surprised. “She said something!”

“I know what superpower I want.”

“Hey,” said Max. “It happened again!”

“What?” Falcon said. “What superpower do you want, Megan?”

“What I want,” she said. “Is the power to make everything go away.”

The tears flickered again in her eyes. For a long moment the boys stood there in silence.

“You mean,” Max said. “Like—a death ray, or something?”

“No,” said Megan.

In the distance, from the bottom of the hill, they heard the sound of a groaning engine. The school bus was approaching.

“When you say everything—” said Max. “You mean, like—*everything?*”

Now they could see the yellow bus cutting through the falling snow. The yellow blinking lights began to flash.

“Everything,” said Megan. “Starting with you.”

“That’s messed up,” said Max.

“You shouldn’t hate everything,” said Falcon.

Megan wasn’t looking at the boys any more. She was staring across the street at the creepy old graveyard. A big pile of snow fell off the head of the large marble angel.

“Why not?” said Megan.

“Because,” said Max. “It’s a great big world! Full of—stuff!” He spread his arms wide. “We’re alive!” he shouted. “WE’RE ALIVE!”

“I wish we weren’t,” said Megan. “*I wish we weren’t!*”

There was a low moaning sound from the graveyard across the street. Falcon looked at the old stones, but saw nothing. He returned his gaze to Megan.

“Megan—” said Falcon. “Do you want to, like—talk?”

The school bus approached them, the lights now flashing red. Max bent down and picked up the many things he had thrown into the snow, including his

triangle and the old shoes and the long johns and his lunch box. The door opened before them, and Mr. D.—an old, wizened man with a square jaw and a bald, bony, head, grimaced at them. The three eighth graders assembled themselves into a line, Megan first, then Falcon, and Max last.

Just before she stepped onto the bus, Megan turned to Falcon. “No,” she said. “I don’t want to talk. Not with you. Not with him. Not with anyone. Ever. Got it?”

There was a fury and an anger in her that scared Falcon. But it was also true that something in him was touched by how deeply she seemed to hurt. Falcon wanted to reach out to her and say, *It’s really all right. You’re not the only person who hurts.*

Instead, he just nodded, as she turned her back and climbed up the stairs onto school bus thirteen.