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CHAZ HAYDEN

WALKER
BOOKS

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For Melinda.
You would have loved this.

ONE

MOST KIDS probably wake up to the sound of an alarm clock or the smell of breakfast cooking. Maybe, if they're really lucky, they get woken up by their parents with kisses and hugs and all the things parents are supposed to say to make their children believe it's going to be a great day.

My sister, Beatrice, mostly knows waking up to the beeps of hospital machines and doctors poking at her during their morning rounds. And since I spend almost every minute next to her, that's mostly all I've known, too.

"I'm just going to take your temperature," a nurse whispered to Beatrice.

It was barely light enough in the room for me to see that Beatrice was already awake and sitting up. After ten years of the same routine, your body starts to anticipate the disturbance, but that doesn't make it easier.

Beatrice waved good morning to me. Then she opened her mouth for the thermometer and uncovered her arm from her blanket so the nurse could wrap a blood pressure cuff around it. Everything was a sad reflex.

"How long have you been awake?" I asked her.

“Maybe an hour. I’m so excited, I couldn’t sleep.”

Beatrice was getting discharged today, which was a pretty big deal since she hadn’t been home in almost two weeks. The nurse smiled at Bea’s enthusiasm, but I’ve dealt with hospitals long enough to realize her smile wasn’t one that expressed any agreement with what Beatrice said. Instead, it was just full of pity. My heart sank.

“Bea, you could’ve woken me up,” I said. “We could’ve talked instead of you just sitting alone in the dark.”

“It’s okay. You looked like you needed rest.”

I laughed. Sometimes Beatrice sounded more like my parent than my ten-year-old sister.

Hospitals are an easy place to lose track of time. The rooms only have one small clock, and you try your hardest not to look at it because then you’ll know exactly how much of your life you’ve spent in this place, which is a scarier reality than the reason you’re even in the hospital. For Beatrice, it was pneumonia again.

My sister has a disability called spinal muscular atrophy – she was born with it. There’s a whole bunch of medical jargon that goes along with SMA, but the idea is Beatrice has weak muscles. She’s never walked and probably won’t ever walk. And SMA affects her respiratory system, which is common, from what her doctors tell us. Hence all the pneumonia.

Anyway, the nurse finally left, and before there was even a moment to get my bearings, the doctor came in and flipped on all the lights. The fluorescent bulbs made sure I was definitely awake. But that’s how mornings are in the hospital. There’s no time to hit the snooze button or slowly come to your senses while watching cartoons. One moment it’s silent and all the patients are sleeping, and the next it’s a full-fledged, nonstop business.

“How are we feeling today, Ms. Beatrice?” Dr. David asked. He was flipping through her chart and didn’t even acknowledge my presence, which I actually liked. All of his focus was always on my sister.

“I feel great,” she told him. “I’m ready to go home.”

“Yeah, I bet. Let me take a listen to your lungs.”

Bea followed every order to take a deep breath in, cough, and breathe normal. After a few repetitions, Dr. David took the stethoscope out of his ears and wrapped it around his neck. I believed Bea when she said she felt better. I mean, she’s been sick enough that she really understands her body. At least that’s what other doctors have said, including Dr. David, but after he finished listening to her lungs, he had almost the same expression as the nurse.

Dr. David looked at me. “And how are you, Reed?”

“Fine.” I kept my answer short. I knew he was stalling.

Dr. David noticed my foot anxiously tapping the floor. He sighed. “Fair enough.”

“So, what? Am I getting discharged today?” Beatrice impatiently asked.

“Your labs show that the infection hasn’t fully gone away. And when I was listening to you, I heard a lot of congestion rumbling.”

“But I feel fine,” Bea tried to argue. But then she coughed and it sounded wet, and we all knew it didn’t help her case.

“I’m going to schedule a respiratory therapist to come do more chest PT,” Dr. David said. “I also want another X-ray of your lungs.”

Beatrice pulled the blanket over her head, and Dr. David recognized that was his cue to leave. I was disappointed just

like my sister, but there was nothing I could do. We'd been through the routine so many times that I understood that truth.

"Yo-Yo" – that was Bea's nickname for me – "can you give me your laptop, please?" Her tiny voice barely made it out from under the blanket.

"Sure." I reached into my backpack to grab the computer, but all my crap inside was a mess and everything came spilling out, knocking over an empty can of Diet Dr Pepper that was next to my feet.

In hindsight, I should've picked up everything immediately, but I felt bad for Bea and I was focused on giving her the one thing I knew would distract her. So, I left all my notebooks and homework on the floor, grabbed Beatrice's favorite unicorn pillow, and got her set up. Her fingers immediately went to work.

"What are you doing on there?" I asked.

"Checking the respiratory therapy schedule. Yesterday I was waiting all day."

"Bea, you can't hack the hospital." Now *I* was sounding more like the parent.

"I don't think you mean *can't* because you know I could if I wanted to. But I don't need to. The other day I saw Dr. David type in his password on the nurse's laptop."

"That's still hacking and it's illegal. Not to mention you're only ten and shouldn't know anything about that."

Bea ignored me. Honestly, I don't know what else I expected her to do. I mean, she spends most of her life in a hospital, and there's only so much basic cable and Disney movies a kid can handle. So, last year I let her start playing around on my computer, and then one day we watched a show

about the dark web and hackers. After that she was obsessed with becoming “the best white hat,” whatever that means.

“Ugh, see, I told you.” Beatrice pointed at the screen. “They scheduled me for the afternoon, which really means evening.”

“Well, now you know and don’t have to wait.”

“No way. I’m going to change it. The sooner the mucus is gone, the sooner I can go home.”

I was going to argue with Bea that there were other factors that determined when she’d be discharged, but I caught sight of the clock on the wall and confirmed the time with my phone: I was going to be late.

“Crap, I gotta go,” I said as I shoved my notebooks and stuff back into my backpack. “Are you okay to be alone until Mom gets here?”

Beatrice nodded, refusing to break concentration on the laptop.

I didn’t like the idea of her doing shady stuff on the internet without some kind of supervision. So, to distract her until our mom arrived, I ripped out a page from one of my notebooks and threw it onto her bed.

“Here,” I said. “Read my history paper. You can fact-check me before I turn it in tomorrow.”

Beatrice finally glanced away from the screen to the essay – the only ten-year-old whose concentration could be stolen by homework. She frowned. “World War Two didn’t end in 1948.”

She always fell for the mistakes. “Now you have something to keep you busy that won’t have the police busting into your hospital room.” I kissed her forehead. “I love you.” Then I raced toward the door.

“Love you, too, Yo-Yo.”

Sadly, I knew my way through the hospital hallways, which came in handy when I was rushing to get out. Like, I knew by the north-side elevators there's a vending machine stocked with Diet Dr Pepper. So I headed that way and grabbed a fresh can for my morning caffeine.

Once I was in the elevator, I checked my reflection in the mirrored walls and gave my hair a quick comb with my fingers. It honestly didn't help much.

But I kept staring at myself the rest of the ride down. I'd been making this same trip since I was a kid. I didn't understand everything back then, but I knew my sister was sick all the time, and I knew my parents were scared all the time.

Not much had changed since. Beatrice still got sick all the time, and we were still scared all the time. The only difference was I had one less parent. And now I had a beard. At least I'd convinced myself it was a beard.

As soon as I exited the elevator, I recognized a voice I unfortunately couldn't ignore.

"I can park wherever I want," she said. "I practically live here."

I turned to see my mom arguing with hospital security. First the news Bea wasn't getting discharged and now that. I should've known it was going to be one of those days.

I walked over to them. "Hey, Chuck, what's going on?"

"I'm trying to get your mom to move her car," Chuck told me. "She's parked in an ambulance spot."

Through the glass front doors, I saw our car parked crookedly across the red painted lines. It was taking up almost two spots.

"And I'm trying to tell you there's no handicap spots,"

my mom said. "I've got a wheelchair in there and a daughter who's getting discharged today."

"Mrs. Beckett, I don't know what to tell you. You can have the valet park it for you or—"

"I'll handle this," I interrupted. "Thanks, Chuck." I pulled my mom away from the security desk. "Give me the keys."

"I'm not paying for valet. They charge a fortune, *but it should be validated for parents of a patient!*" She made sure that last part was loud enough for everyone in the lobby to hear.

"I'm not going to valet. I'll find you a spot. I think I see an actual parking space right in front."

I didn't have my license yet and had hardly even practiced driving, but I figured I could handle a parking lot. And it's not like I had much of a choice, anyway.

Mom started digging through her purse for the keys. I'm not sure how they could be lost so fast. "Well, I'm not waiting for you to come back. I wanna go see my baby."

"Fine. I'll leave the keys with Chuck."

Finally, she handed over the keys. "What time did Dr. David say she'll be discharged? Because I have—"

"She's not getting discharged today. The infection is still in her lungs."

Mom buried her face in her hands, rubbing her eyes and then fixing a messy ponytail. "Sorry, I'm just ... exhausted."

I knew she was telling the truth. It wasn't just the dark circles under her eyes or the fact that she just got off a double shift. I recognized something deep inside her because I felt the same way.

"I have to go," I said. "I'm late for school."

Mom nodded and I left. My own day hadn't even begun yet.

TWO

MY MOM used to do all the mom things like bake sales, PTA, and help with my homework. A lot of people will think our life started going downhill when Beatrice was born, but that's the furthest thing from the truth. My parents were really proactive when she got diagnosed and never fought about her care. At least I never heard them if they did.

No, Mom didn't fall apart until Dad died. After the accident, I watched her slowly start to drift away, until she was only a floating body; around but not really present – though even that wasn't really true anymore. Most of the time she was either working or sleeping, which meant I became the person who took care of my sister and did all the things that needed to be done to keep her alive.

Things had gotten even worse over the past couple of weeks. Something about this latest trip to the hospital seemed to have hit my mom harder than usual, and she'd been acting more erratic and detached since then.

Honestly, it was almost worse knowing that our mom had it in her to be a good mom – a *great* mom, even. I couldn't help feeling like she was choosing to let us down, which

I knew wasn't fair but was how I felt a lot of the time.

Anyway, after riding a public bus to the apartment and then pedaling my bike the few blocks to school, I was, in fact, late. All the side doors to the building were already locked, which meant I had to check in with the main office and get judged by the secretary.

"Don't you have an alarm?" she asked.

"Not a conventional one."

"What does that mean?"

"Never mind," I said as I signed the attendance sheet.

"I'll need to see your student ID."

I flopped my backpack on the floor and started rummaging through it. I searched every pocket and crevice until I figured my ID was probably lying on the floor next to Bea's hospital bed.

"I don't have it," I said.

She sighed, now utterly disappointed in me. "I can't let you in without a valid ID."

"So, what? I'm just supposed to miss an entire day of school? You know who I am. I've checked in here before."

"I guess you can get another ID. They're printed in the art room, but hurry. She usually leaves before the end of homeroom."

I took off down the hallway.

"And come back so I can properly check you in!" the secretary called after me.

My footsteps pounded on the linoleum as I raced to the art room, which was on the opposite side of the building. When I got there and saw who would be printing my ID, I seriously considered ditching and just taking a full day of absence.

Unfortunately, she saw me before I could make my escape.

“What do *you* want?” Helena Shaw asked.

“New ID. I forgot mine and apparently that’s a big deal.”

“It’s for everyone’s safety. I suggest putting it on a lanyard with other important items like a house key.”

“Noted.”

Helena walked over to a computer at the far end of the room and clicked around a few times. A minute later a large printer started making noise and shook the table it was standing on.

The new ID wasn’t some chintzy, temporary paper one. It was a legit piece of plastic identical to the one I’d left at the hospital.

Helena caught me staring at it. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just thought these came from some professional printer.”

“Nope. They’re all done here by me.”

I chuckled. “Like you don’t waste enough of your time for this school being student council president and prom queen.”

“We haven’t had prom yet.”

“You know what I mean.”

Helena clicked her tongue like how girls do when you get them all annoyed. “Is there anything else you need, or can I move on with my day?”

As reluctant as I was to spend another minute in Helena’s company, I did have a question for her. “Actually, yes. Why did you get rid of all the vending machines?”

“Do you know that almost twenty percent of teens are considered obese?”

“Do *you* know that some teens don’t have the ability

to make lunch every day? Grabbing something from the machines is the only chance they get to eat."

Helena rolled her eyes. "They can use that money to buy lunch. The school just cut lunch costs."

"Trust me, a candy bar and a bag of chips is a lot healthier than anything the cafeteria is cooking up."

Helena looked like she wanted to continue arguing, but lucky for me the bell rang. I headed back to the office to prove I was actually a student.

THREE

HELENA SHAW was one of those students who put a lot of effort into school – doing all the extra-credit problems, spending weeks on her reports and dioramas, working on the yearbook, and running for student government and whatever else. But people like her never realize how lucky they are that they have nothing else to worry about but what goes on within the four walls of a classroom.

I didn't have that privilege. When the final bell rang, I had to think about how I would get back to the hospital.

Did I have enough bus money?

Would there be a lot of traffic?

Would I make it there in time to have dinner with Beatrice – and what would I have to deal with once I got there? Had Mom pissed off any of the nurses or Dr. David with her attitude? Had the authorities finally arrested Beatrice for hacking?

Even with all that, I was still a good student and in some top percentile or whatever. Part of the reason I was able to still get good grades was because of Beatrice, actually. She was a pretty decent study buddy.

Beatrice barely let me enter her room before rolling over to me in her wheelchair. She skidded across the freshly cleaned floors and almost crashed into me. “Watch it, daredevil,” I said. She never eased up, which is what I loved most about her.

“Sorry.” She backed up.

“It’s okay. I missed you today.” I gave her a kiss on the head and plopped my backpack in her lap. “Bring this over to your table. I have some English reading and calculus. We’ll start in a few minutes. I just want to talk to Mom first.”

While Bea meticulously lined up my homework, I sank into the chair next to our mom, who was pretty distracted by her phone. I wasn’t even sure if she noticed I arrived.

“How’d she do today?” I asked.

She didn’t look up.

“Mom?”

Finally, her thumbs paused their typing. “What?”

“How is Beatrice?”

“Fine. The respiratory therapist came in and got her to cough up a bunch of crap, and then they took her to get X-rays.”

“Any updates from Dr. David?”

Mom shook her head.

For a few minutes, I just watched Beatrice read through my class notebooks. I wasn’t sure she understood any of it but, honestly, who the hell knew. One time she hacked into a TV station and changed the schedule so she could watch a movie before her bedtime.

“Who are you texting?” I asked Mom.

“Nobody.”

“It’s obviously not nobody. You’ve barely stopped typing since I got here.”

She sighed. "His name's Seth. We met at the bar a few weeks ago."

"You work with him?"

"No. He's a customer."

Now I sighed.

"He's different."

After Dad died, our mom tried to date more times than I cared to count. The majority of the guys were jobless boozehounds or creepy businessmen, like this one guy who brought me and Beatrice random toys that seemed used, like they were taken from his actual children. It goes without saying that I never liked any of them, and thankfully none lasted more than a week. But now I was expected to believe this new guy was somehow different.

"Whatever," I said. I needed to change the subject. "I think we should send Beatrice to school."

Mom shook her head. "Your sister is way too fragile to go to school."

"I mean after she gets better. Just look at her." We both pivoted our heads toward Beatrice, still poring over my homework. "She wants to learn. Beatrice is ten years old and has never been in a classroom."

"Because my baby is sick. That is why I chose to homeschool her." Mom got up from the chair and ran over to give Bea a hug. Beatrice smiled, even though it looked like Mom was practically squeezing the life out of her.

"You mean *I* homeschool her," I corrected our mom. "Dad would want her in school."

Mom quickly released her hug. "Don't tell me what you think your dad would want. He's not here, and I'm alone

making the decisions. Your sister isn't well, Reed."

"Stop saying she's not well." My voice started to get loud. "I mean, she gets sick, but other than that she just has her SMA. There are plenty of kids at my school who are in wheelchairs and they're doing great."

I noticed Bea was getting upset with the yelling and Mom was a second away from totally exploding. I was about to drop the fight, but I didn't need to since Dr. David walked in.

"Oh, good. The whole family is here," he said.

Bea instantly forgot the fight and rolled over to Dr. David. "Are you here to say I can go home now? I did really good with the chest PT, even though the respiratory therapist was mean."

Dr. David laughed. "I'm afraid you still can't go home. But I do have your X-rays." He held up the photos to the light so we could see them. "I had them take images of Beatrice's chest and spine. You can see here that her scoliosis has gotten worse."

Mom gasped like it was a death sentence.

"Don't be too alarmed. It's common among patients with spinal muscular atrophy, and it's fixable. The problem is the curve of her spine is pushing on her rib cage." Dr. David pointed at the other X-ray. "The left side of her ribs are caving in on her lungs. That's why she keeps getting pneumonia."

I looked over to Bea, who was taking in all the information. She didn't look scared, just observant.

"So, how do we fix that?" I asked.

"Well, first I want to get your sister in to see a spine specialist. But she'll need surgery to correct the scoliosis and open her rib cage so she can breathe better."

"Surgery!" Mom cried.

I had the same panicked reaction as my mom, only I knew

I had to remain composed for Beatrice. Though my grip tightened around the chair I was standing next to, turning my knuckles white.

“Okay,” I said. “And when can she get the surgery?”

Dr. David sat down next to Bea and took off his glasses like doctors do when they are about to deliver more bad news. “We can’t schedule the surgery until her pneumonia is gone. Then I’ll want her to recover and get stronger before putting her under anesthesia.”

“But I’m already strong.” Beatrice held up her arm and tried to flex her muscles.

“I know you are.” Dr. David chuckled. “That’s why I know you’ll do great when it comes time for the surgery.”

Dr. David stood up and left, and it was barely a second later before our mom headed for the door, too.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“I need to get out of here,” she said, looking at her phone. “I have somewhere to be.”

“Somewhere to be? Your daughter was just told she needs major surgery! Don’t you want to process with us for a minute?”

“I really can’t stay, Reed. I’m already running late.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing, but then I saw Beatrice had already moved on to digging through my backpack again. It was like I was the only one who understood the seriousness of what Dr. David said. I thought I was losing my mind.

“Mama, can you bring me some chocolate cake from the restaurant?” Beatrice asked.

“Mama’s not going to work,” she told her.

“So, you’re not going to work, but you have somewhere more important to be?” I asked. “Are you going to see that guy you’re texting?”

“Reed, I am the parent. Don’t talk to me like that. And his name is Seth.”

“Whatever. Just go.”

After Mom bailed, I just stood in the middle of the room and stared at the floor, and it felt like my chest was going to explode. I tried to breathe, but it wasn’t helping. I was almost hyperventilating.

“I’m gonna go get some ice chips from the machine,” I told Bea. “You want some?”

“Yes, please.”

I raced out of the room and down the hall to the ice machine I knew better than I wanted to. For a moment I just stood there and stared at the machine. But then I started kicking and punching the metal box, tears pouring down my face.

I couldn’t stop. It was like something took over my body, and I kicked and punched, wanting to scream at the machine and scream at the sky. Wanting to scream at my dad for not being there and beg him to come back.

But I couldn’t scream. I had to be strong for Beatrice. I guess I was the only one who wanted to.

Eventually, I calmed down and filled up a cup with the classic hospital crushed ice. When I got back to the room, Bea was trying to read my chemistry textbook.

I sat next to her and just watched.

“Why do you and Mom fight so much?” she asked.

“We just care a lot about you. You know we’ll do anything to get you better, right?”

Bea nodded.

“And you know we love you a lot, and we’re going to keep you better once this is all over?”

Bea nodded again.

“Everything is going to be okay.”

“I know.” Bea looked at me and smiled, and for that split second, I actually believed everything was going to be okay.

For the rest of the night, we ate crushed ice and pretended we were professional glass swallows. Eventually, I put Beatrice in bed and lay next to her until a nurse came in to slip on the mask for her breathing machine.

None of it was normal, but it was our normal.

FOUR

I'VE NEVER been close to normal long enough to really know what it looks or feels like. But I had a better sense of what it *wasn't*. It wasn't sleeping next to my little sister in a freezing-cold hospital room.

It also wasn't wearing the same clothes for three days straight because you hate hospital showers and hate going to your apartment because it's so empty and depressing. But that morning Beatrice told me I was starting to smell and kids in class sat farther away from me than usual, so after school I stopped by the apartment to take a shower.

When I got there, I saw Mom's car in the parking lot, even though she was supposed to be with Beatrice. My temper flared. How hard is it to spend time with your kid?

Inside, I saw my mom making out with some guy I'd never seen before.

"What the hell?" I yelled.

Mom jumped off the couch and struggled to button her shirt. "Reed! I didn't know you were stopping by today."

"Stopping by? I live here!"

"I just didn't know you were coming home. I'd thought you'd be with Beatrice."

"You're supposed to be with Beatrice! I've been at school all day."

Mom looked somewhat guilty, though how she could've forgotten a routine we do literally every day was beyond me. There was a pause long enough for me to remember there was another person in the room with us. The famous Seth, I assumed.

He hadn't even moved from the couch and just sat there with his shirt open, acting like a family crisis wasn't happening two feet away from him.

Who doesn't at least stand up when someone walks in on you making out with their mom?

Mom caught me eyeing him. "That's Seth. Seth, this is my son, Reed."

Seth nodded at me. "What's up, man?"

I really hated that guy.

Mom sat back down next to Seth. "So, how was school today?"

"Don't do that," I told her.

"Do what?"

"Act like you care or want to hear about my day."

"Well, I do. I'm your mother."

I laughed. "I'm going to take a shower and then I'm out of here."

"You don't have to leave so fast. Do you want to grab a bite to eat with us?"

I looked at Seth, who still hadn't buttoned up his damn shirt. "No, I don't want to grab a bite to eat with you and Seth. Beatrice is still alone at the hospital."

My mom didn't argue or even offer to drop off food. I heard them leave as soon as I got in my room, which I actually didn't mind. It was probably best for everyone if they weren't there when I came back out.

The bus ride to the hospital was when I finally started to cool down. For most of it, though, I was so pissed, I tried not to punch a hole in my seat.

Were they even dating, or did they just meet at the apartment and grope each other on the couch when Mom was supposed to be with Beatrice?

"How long have you been alone?" was the first thing I said when I got to Bea's room.

She was sitting on her bed, occupied by the computer. "I don't know. A few hours, I guess."

"Beatrice, you gotta tell me when Mom doesn't show or when she leaves, so somebody is always with you."

"You understand I'm in a hospital, right? What could happen to me?"

"That's not the point."

"Then what is the point, because you're always saying I can't be left alone, and then it's either you or Mom here or the nurses and doctors. I don't get any privacy."

"You're ten years old. You don't need privacy."

"Well, I at least should get *some* time to myself. It's really not fair."

I sat in the recliner next to her bed and took a moment to breathe. She was fine, obviously. I know Bea is feeling well when she still has her sass.

"Dad used to sit with you in the hospital all day and all

night," I told her. "Did I ever tell you that?"

She shook her head.

"Well, he did. And he used to say that it doesn't matter if you're in the hospital and surrounded by doctors and nurses. You don't deserve to be alone."

"So, Dad told you to never leave?"

"He didn't have to tell me. When he died, I just took over. I knew he'd want somebody to."

Beatrice lowered her eyes. She practically sank into herself. "I don't want you to be stuck with me all the time."

"I'm not stuck with you. If anything, you're stuck with me – even when I smell."

That made her laugh. "You don't smell today."

"That's because I finally took a shower." I climbed into Bea's bed and put my armpit in her face.

"Gross, Yo-Yo. You're so immature."

I rested my head on her unicorn pillow. "But you still love me, right?"

"Not when you block me from using the computer. Move your big head."

"What are you doing on there, anyway?" I asked.

"I was talking to Zigzag."

"Zigzag? Your dark web friend?"

"Don't say dark web. But, yes, they're helping me reconfigure the firewall I built because it had a pretty big back door."

I didn't understand a single word she said. "I really don't like that you talk to people on the dark web, especially someone named Zigzag. You have no idea who they are."

"So?"

"So, you're a little kid and they could be some internet perv."

Who knows what kind of people hang out on the dark web?"

"I told you to stop saying dark web. And, second, you don't have to worry. Zigzag can only see my username."

"Which is what?"

"WheelieCool. Get it? Because of the wheels on my wheelchair."

"I got it." I sighed. "But you seriously think Zigzag hasn't hacked into the computer and knows exactly who you are?"

Beatrice shrugged. "Maybe. Although my VPN is registered in Canada under the name Larry. Also, this is your laptop, so Zigzag probably thinks I'm some teen boy named Reed Beckett. Either way I'm safe."

She wasn't making me feel any better. I closed the laptop and moved it to the end of the bed where she couldn't reach it.

"Hey," she whined.

"Chill. You can go back on it later. It's homework time." I rolled out of the bed and went digging through my backpack. "Here, I brought this for you." I placed a crumpled piece of paper on her pillow.

"What is it?"

"It's algebra homework from my freshman year. I found it when I was going through my locker today."

"Someone scribbled out all the answers."

"Yeah, I did. It's so you can solve the problems again. You think you can do it?"

Beatrice's eyes narrowed, and she poked out her tongue like when she's concentrating really hard. "Definitely," she declared. Bea never backed down from a challenge. She got that trait from our dad.

One way or another, I had to get her in school. For now, my

version of homeschooling would have to suffice – and I have to say that I was doing a decent job, because when Beatrice handed back the algebra homework, I realized she did way better than I originally had. I would never tell her that though. I still had to maintain the smarter older brother persona, at least for myself.

FIVE

BEATRICE MAY HAVE had Zigzag – though I’m not sure that some shady dark web character really counts as a *friend* – but my everyday routine didn’t really provide me with an opportunity to have friends. I’d had a best friend in elementary school, but when we stopped being friends, I didn’t bother trying to make new ones because everyone was doing things that I couldn’t do, like going to baseball practice or birthday parties on the weekends. It was easier for me to slide into the background and pretend I was still experiencing the same childhood as them, even though my life looked a whole lot different from theirs.

Don’t get me wrong, I’m not blaming Bea or my dad dying for my lack of a social life. Honestly, I think I always saw myself as more of a lone wolf. Plus, my ten-year-old sister was a lot cooler and more interesting to talk to than anyone at my high school.

“You think Miss Havisham is manipulative?” Beatrice asked me. She was reading my most recent English paper.

“She definitely is. She uses Pip in her sick game with Estella.”

“Well, did you ever consider that maybe she’s just a heart-broken old woman? Maybe she just desperately wants to be a part of a love story.”

“That doesn’t make her any better.”

Bea rolled her eyes and kept reading.

“There’s no right answer to the essay question,” I told her. “I picked the side that was the easiest to argue.”

“That’s just being lazy.”

I snatched the paper out of her hands. “Whatever. I didn’t ask for your opinion.”

It had been one of those days where it felt like every doctor and nurse in the hospital had been inside Bea’s room, so both of us were on edge. Plus I was still in a bad mood from having walked in on Mom and Seth the day before, and realizing that Mom was leaving Bea alone to hang out with her new boyfriend. And whether Beatrice would admit it or not, I know she got more anxious when our mom wasn’t around for all the testing.

“Yo-Yo, can you go to the cafeteria and get me some ice cream?” Beatrice asked.

“You have a tray of food next to your bed.”

Beatrice glared at the hospital lunch: a crusty turkey sandwich, apple juice, and an underripe banana.

“I’m not eating that gross stuff,” she said.

“Well, I don’t think you’re even allowed to have ice cream right now. The dairy usually makes you have more mucus.”

Suddenly she was screaming. “This is the worst day ever! I just want to go home!”

Beatrice looked like she was about to totally lose it. There was always a day during one of her hospital visits where

nothing goes right, and today seemed to be that day. Those days usually meant she was on the brink of either getting better or falling and landing deeper than where she was originally.

My phone buzzed. "Mom's on her way up," I told her. "She says she brought food."

"I don't care." Beatrice wouldn't look at me. One moment she was judging my literary theories and the next throwing a tantrum like an average kid her age. My sister was exhausting.

"What do you mean you don't care?" I tried to be playful. I gasped. "Maybe Mom has fries from the bar."

The smallest smile broke out on her face, even though she fought against it.

"You want me to get you in your wheelchair?" I asked.

"No."

"Yes. You eat better when you're sitting up." That was a sentence I'm sure nobody my age had ever said before.

I yanked all the blankets off Beatrice. Her hair was a mess, and it was so long she could almost sit on it.

"When was the last time a nurse gave you a bath?" I asked. "You smell like an enchilada."

"Don't be mean, Yo-Yo."

"Hey, you called me out when I stunk. I'm just making things even."

That finally got Bea to laugh and relax enough so I could get her dressed easier. I lifted both her arms to take off the oversize shirt she sleeps in.

"What do you want to put on?" I asked.

I held up a pink top with a rainbow and another shirt covered in mini pineapples. All of Bea's clothes were girly

with way too much glitter and fit her personality perfectly. I pretty much religiously wore black. I wondered what that said about me.

Beatrice pointed at the pineapple shirt, and I chose a pair of sweatpants that I knew wouldn't be impossible to get on her. I gently rolled her side to side on the bed, making adjustments until everything fit okay.

Then Bea wrapped her arms around my neck. I picked her up and carried her over to her wheelchair. For a ten-year-old, Beatrice luckily didn't weigh much, but I knew eventually she would get too heavy for me, and I wasn't sure what we would do then. I knew there were lifts or other things to help, but I didn't know how we could possibly afford them. Maybe I just needed to start lifting weights.

"Doesn't it feel better to be in your chair?" I asked.

Beatrice nodded. She was too stubborn to agree out loud. I remember our dad was like that.

One of the nurses came in to do their hourly check, and I asked if they could give my sister a bath later. Once again, I felt older than I should've. There's definitely a fine line between childhood and being an adult. People think that you're only an adult when you turn eighteen, as if an arbitrary number can somehow determine a person's ability to act mature and function independently. It's really not that cut-and-dry, though.

I'd been doing "grown-up things" for probably longer than most new parents, but they'd be seen as more adult than me just because of their age. I would even argue my sister was more of an adult than most adults. We were just the products of our circumstances.

And our circumstances were a dead dad and a mom

who thought it was fine to bring her sketchy boyfriend to the hospital. Because trailing behind our mom, who was carrying two bags of food from the bar, was Seth.

“What’s he doing here?” I asked.

“Seth bought us the food. Isn’t that nice?”

I turned to Seth. “Do you even have a job, or do you just live at the bar?”

“Reed, be nice,” Mom told me. “Seth has a great job that lets him be flexible during the day.”

She sounded chipper, and that disturbed me more than the sight of Seth standing in Bea’s hospital room. I hadn’t seen my mom chipper since my dad died, even with other boyfriends. In the past ten years, my mom has had two moods: careless and sleeping. Now some guy came along, and suddenly she could act like a functioning human again.

I probably should’ve been happy for her, for us. But all I felt was anger and resentment. Why could she act like that for him but not for us?

The question festered in my mind while I ate in silence. Pretty much everyone was silent including Beatrice, who didn’t take her eyes off Seth. He sat at the small table in the room and ate a burger, and once he was done, he whispered something in my mom’s ear. She shook her head and told him she wasn’t in a rush. A few minutes later, he tried again. Eventually, after the fifth time Seth whispered something to her, my mom got up and grabbed her purse.

“I’ll be back later, baby,” she said to Beatrice, following Seth out.

She didn’t even kiss Beatrice goodbye.

SIX

USUALLY I DIDN'T listen to the school's morning announcements. I especially never paid attention when Helena was sounding off another one of her student council president rules.

"Starting today, all students who leave campus for lunch must sign in and out with the main office." Helena's voice echoed through every room and hallway.

The kids in my homeroom all simultaneously groaned like they had practiced it or something, and they pretty much had. It seemed like every morning Helena was announcing a new rule. First it was getting rid of "unhealthy" vending machines, and then came the rule about no open-toed shoes, as if that fashion choice personally offended her. Last week she handed out lanyards in the cafeteria, and all students had to start wearing their IDs around their neck. I tried not to take that one personally, though it was hard not to suspect that she'd made the rule specifically to avoid having to print me another ID.

There was a pause over the loudspeaker, like Helena knew everyone was complaining and she needed them to finish

so she could continue. "This new policy has been enacted to ensure all students are accounted for in an emergency situation or school lockdown."

I'd never heard of a high school student council president who actually had the power to make changes. Most of them just passed out flyers about global warming or when to show up for pep rallies. If there was ever going to be a person who took the responsibility of being president of a bunch of teenagers a little too seriously, it was going to be Helena Shaw.

Except for the vending machines, the new rules didn't really affect me. I mean, I literally never wore sandals, and I had no car to drive to get lunch. And, to be honest, the rules kind of made sense. God, I couldn't believe I was actually on the same side as Helena about something.

Anyway, homeroom ended and the bell cut off Helena, who clearly wasn't finished talking. There was definitely going to be another announcement tomorrow. My bet was it would be a rule to not leave homeroom until we were officially dismissed by President Helena Shaw.

On my way to lunch, my phone rang. And it kept ringing and ringing in my pocket like a legit call.

My stomach flipped and I felt like I was about to throw up. Only one place ever calls me.

"Hello?" I answered.

"Hi, this is Nurse Catherine from East Memorial Hospital. We're trying to reach your mom. Do you know where she is?"

"She's supposed to be with Beatrice. Why? What happened to my sister?"

"Oh, nothing. Beatrice is completely fine. We actually want

to discharge her today, and we've been trying to get ahold of your mom, but she's not answering our calls."

"I'm on my way," I told the nurse. My mind began racing, trying to figure out where my mom was and why she wasn't at the hospital again.

"Great, but we actually need an adult present to discharge your sister."

"Okay. I'll try to find my mom. Just tell Beatrice I'll be there in twenty."

As annoyed as I was with my mom, I couldn't really hold it against her for not being prepared for this. Usually we'd get a heads-up about Beatrice getting discharged, and we'd be as prepared as my family possibly could be.

This time was a surprise, since it had been less than a week since Dr. David said Bea's lungs were still infected. If Beatrice was really getting discharged today, it would be one of our shortest hospital visits: under three weeks.

I raced down the hall with only one priority: tracking down my mom and getting to the hospital. I didn't sign out with the main office like Helena said we had to. There was a long line, and I just wanted to get my sister home – though there wasn't much I could do without our mom.

The hospital didn't understand that I *was* the adult.

SEVEN

RUNNING DOWN the street to the bus and then sitting on the bus, I probably called my mom fifty times. I'd call and it would ring a few times and then go to voice mail, so I would text her and then try calling again. And they weren't just basic texts like "Where are you?" I literally spelled out that Beatrice was getting discharged and the hospital needed her there. At one point I even called the bar where she worked, forgetting it was too early for it to be open.

People on the bus must've thought I was a maniac or something because I kept nervously tapping my legs and asking the bus driver how long until we'd exit the highway. Part of me honestly thought they'd throw my sister in the parking lot until someone came to get her. I know that sounds absurd and from experience I knew that getting discharged takes hours, but those were my thoughts when the bus driver stopped every block for a pickup even if the bench at the bus stop was empty.

"Yo-Yo, what are you doing here?" Bea asked as soon as I burst into her room.

"You're getting discharged. I came to help bring you home."

"But you're supposed to be in school."

"It's fine. It's lunchtime."

"You'll go back later?"

"Yes."

"Do you promise?" Beatrice asked.

I rolled my eyes. "Yes, I promise, Mother."

Beatrice giggled and maybe it relaxed her a little, but I could see her face was still really anxious. And it wasn't because I ditched school; that was just the thing she focused on to ignore everything else, like the fact she was actually going home. Getting discharged is nerve-racking because you're going to a place that might be more comfortable, but it also doesn't have a staff of doctors and nurses in case of an emergency. And you keep wondering when the next emergency will be.

"Is Dr. David coming in?" I asked a nurse.

"Yes, he's just finishing the discharge orders, and then he'll be in to explain everything. But we need your mom here before you can leave."

"I know." I checked my phone. Still nothing.

When our mom finally showed up, she was wearing a tennis outfit, the kind with a white miniskirt and matching top. I'd never seen her look at a tennis racket, let alone play. And she had on a visor and brand-new sneakers – I didn't even recognize whoever she was trying to be.

Before I could say anything, Mom looked at me, frantic. "What's going on?"

"Beatrice is getting discharged today. You didn't read any of my texts?"

"My phone was off. When I turned it back on and saw all

your messages, I came straight over. Jesus, Reed, I thought something had happened!"

"You shouldn't have been gone in the first place."

She waved me off. "Beatrice told me I could go."

I looked at Bea, who avoided my gaze. But I didn't need her to actually say anything to know our mom was lying.

"So you chose to play tennis instead of taking care of your daughter," I said. "I didn't even know you *liked* tennis."

Mom sighed. "Beatrice, honey, do you care that Mommy left?"

"Well, um—"

"It's not about whether or not Beatrice cared," I interrupted. "It's about doing what you have to do for our family."

"Excuse me, but I do a lot for this family. I work very long hours to make sure we have a roof over our heads and food on our table. I think I deserve a little break from time to time."

"Dad never wanted Beatrice to be alone," I said quietly but sternly. "You know that." I wanted to say more, but just then I noticed something else was different. "Where are the earrings that Dad got you?"

Mom touched her ears. Where gold hearts once were, a pair of diamond hoops now dangled. "Oh, Seth gave these to me today for our one-month anniversary."

"That's not a thing. And where'd you get the money for that outfit, anyway? Or did Seth buy that for your month-iversary, too?"

"I don't appreciate your tone, young man," Mom said, trying to sound like an actual mom. But she didn't answer my question, and I didn't press the issue, since I was pretty sure I didn't really want to know, anyway.

I debated getting away from her for a bit by hitting up a vending machine on another floor to grab a Diet Dr Pepper and a bag of Doritos – I hadn't eaten lunch and was feeling pretty hungry – but I didn't want to miss Dr. David talking to my mom. She never fully absorbed what the doctors said; that had been my dad's job and then became my job. I had to be there, as much as I wanted to disappear.

Thankfully, Dr. David showed up quickly. "Great, everyone's here now," he said as he entered. "Today's your lucky day, Beatrice." He said that every time she got to leave the hospital. "The infection that was in your lungs is almost gone, and you seem strong enough to recoup at home."

"That's great," I said. "And when do you think she can have the surgery?"

"We'll see what the specialist says. I'm hoping at the end of next month, but that really depends on how quickly she regains full strength."

"What exactly does the surgery entail?" Mom asked nervously. "Does she really need it? It sounds so risky, and it's not like it's going to cure her."

"No, we can't cure Beatrice's SMA," Dr. David said patiently.

He walked over to my sister, pointing at her sunken side and twisting spine. Those were things I'd seen for years and known were strange, but a doctor explaining the details raises the stakes to another uncomfortable level.

"The surgery will try to correct Beatrice's spine and rib cage," Dr. David told us. "The hope is that her expanded rib cage will allow her lung to heal and lessen the number of times she gets pneumonia."

"What if she doesn't have the surgery?" Mom asked.

"Then Beatrice will continue to get serious cases of pneumonia, which will eventually cause permanent damage to her lungs as well as other parts of her body. She will also develop serious spine issues."

"Will I die without the surgery?" Beatrice asked.

"Beatrice!" Mom exclaimed. "Don't even *think that!*"

I saw in Bea's eyes that she wasn't scared. She just genuinely wanted to know, like any good hacker trying to hedge the risk.

"I'm going to be honest with you all," Dr. David said. "There are risks to both decisions. The surgery is long and risky, but not doing it is an even bigger shot in the dark."

"We're doing it," I decided. Mom stayed silent, which was as close to an agreement as we were going to get from her.

Dr. David nodded. "In the meantime, I want to set you up with private-duty nursing to make sure Beatrice doesn't have any setbacks."

"Private-duty nursing?" Mom asked. "What does that mean?"

"It's just nurses who will visit Beatrice at home. They'll administer her breathing medication and do chest PT like she got here. Honestly, it'll be a nice break for you and Reed."

Obviously, I thought it sounded like a great idea, and I wouldn't have to worry about who's with Beatrice and rushing home from school. But my mom was shaking her head through all of it.

"No. No, I don't think that's something we can do," she told Dr. David.

"Well, if you're worried about paying for it, I already checked and your state insurance will cover a few nursing hours each day."

Mom kept shaking her head.

"I'll just get you the information in case you change your mind," Dr. David said. He left and I hoped he wasn't thinking we were terrible people.

"Why don't you want the nurses?" I asked our mom.

"I just don't want anyone in our house and in our business."

"But it's for Beatrice. Someone to help take care of your daughter." I turned to Beatrice. "Tell Mom you want the nurses. They'll help you stay healthy. Plus, we need someone we can trust to be there." I glared at our mom.

"Well, I guess if it'll help..." Beatrice said. Her voice was quiet.

"Strangers in your house just want to snoop around," Mom interjected. "We've been doing fine on our own."

"How would you know?" I mumbled.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

The upside of the fight about the nurses was that Beatrice forgot all about my returning to school, which was good because it was another two hours until we were finally leaving. Beatrice rolled down the hallway toward the elevator and said goodbye to every nurse she passed. I wondered if she realized she had now stayed in every room in the pediatric ICU. I did, and I recalled each visit and its reason like I could see our ghosts lingering in the rooms. I was actually jealous of the people in the memories. They were naive and had hope that somehow that room would be the last room.

One room still had a dad in it, and I hated that one the most.

EIGHT

MOM DROPPED Bea's bag of clothes on the couch and walked out before I could ask where she needed to head back to, or who.

"Where's Mom going?" Beatrice asked.

"Not sure."

"But I wanna watch a movie with her."

"I don't know what to tell you, Beatrice." My voice got loud, angry. I fought to control it. My sister didn't deserve to be my punching bag. "Are you hungry? You want me to make something?"

"Yes, please!" I went to reach for the back of her wheelchair to push her into the kitchen. "Stop, I can do it."

I let her go and although the kitchen was barely fifteen feet away in our tiny apartment, Bea had a hard time getting herself there. She definitely lost a lot of strength while stuck in the hospital, which sucked and made me angrier than I already was. Just a few days ago, she was practically flying around her hospital room and almost crashed into me. Now she could barely move.

There were too many ups and downs, and nobody ever

seemed to know whether it was her muscles getting weaker from SMA or if she was always battling getting over being sick.

What if she didn't get back to full strength before her surgery?

What, exactly, was she supposed to look like when we went back to the hospital?

Those were the sorts of questions we should've asked Dr. David.

"Can you make pancakes?" Beatrice asked.

"Um, let me check what we have."

We had nothing. Literally not a single edible item in the whole apartment. All that was in the fridge was a Styrofoam container of leftover fries, but those were growing mold on them. Mom convinced me she had been going to the apartment to nap and take showers. Obviously, it wasn't *our* apartment she'd been going to.

I tossed the container of moldy fries in the overflowing trash. "I can go get you something."

"How? You don't have a car."

"I can ride my bike to Cheap Check." That was the convenience store down the street and our only option until Mom came home.

Beatrice didn't even take a second to consider that. "No, thanks." She yawned but I could tell it was fake. "I'm tired. I think I just want to take a nap."

"Well, first I want to give you a bath."

"No, Yo-Yo," she whined. "I'm too tired for a bath."

"We always wash the hospital grossness off you when you get home. Besides, I don't know why you're complaining. You just have to sit there. I'm doing all the work."

Beatrice groaned again and locked her tires as if I couldn't easily unlock them myself. I'll admit I didn't really want to give her a bath and would've rather taken a nap, too, but I knew the nurse only gave her a subpar sponge bath after I had to ask a hundred times. And my mom definitely wasn't doing it whenever she got back later, even if she was in the right headspace.

While the bathwater was heating up and I got organized with towels and clean clothes to put on Beatrice, I realized those were all things a nurse would do. My sister would definitely prefer having a nurse give her a bath over me. She was still young enough where I think it was all right for me to give her a bath, but eventually she'd get older and then it would be strange for me, her brother, to do that.

Maybe not, though. I guess you hear about siblings taking care of each other when one of them is sick, but most of the time that's temporary because they'd either get better or they'd die. Beatrice wasn't getting better. If she had the surgery, maybe she'd stop getting pneumonia so often, but she'll always have SMA, which means someone will always need to care for her.

Was that somebody me?

I didn't mind; it was just another thing I wanted to know.

Anyway, right then neither of us had a choice. I was the person there and Beatrice smelled, so I gave her a bath.

"Are you gonna go back to school?" Beatrice asked while I shampooed her hair.

"You mean today or, like, ever?"

"I mean after I'm done with the bath. You can go back while I'm napping."

"The school day ended almost an hour ago."

Beatrice pouted. "I don't like that you miss things because of me."

"We've talked about this. I don't care about missing things."

"Well, then, what do you care about?" Bea asked. I couldn't tell if she was crying or if the bathwater was running down her rosy cheeks. "People your age are supposed to care about things, right? But you don't do anything. You're just always with me."

Then she lost it, in the bathtub and surrounded by bubbles. And I didn't know what to do.

I couldn't hug her, not when she was naked. Plus, I wasn't even sure if Beatrice was actually upset about my lack of hobbies or if there was something else going on.

"I'm scared, Yo-Yo," she whispered, watching a rubber duck float past. "I'm really scared."

"I know. I'm scared, too, and so is Mom. I think that's why she hasn't been around much. But you're going to be okay."

"How do you know?"

"Because somebody has to hack into my school and change my attendance record."

A small laugh escaped her. "That's not funny."

After a few more minutes, at which point Bea determined her fingers were pruney enough, I took her out of the bathtub. I draped one towel over her wheelchair so it wouldn't get wet and had another warm one waiting to wrap her up in. Our dad always warmed our bath towels.

Beatrice slept for about four hours. She pretty much passed out as soon as I plopped her in her bed, and I thought about

joining because I was exhausted, too, but I kept noticing how filthy everything was. It's kind of a strange thing for a teenager to care about, but I really couldn't ignore it. I mean, layers of dust had their own layers of dust, and it seemed like the garbage hadn't been emptied in weeks.

Did we always live like that? Or had things gotten worse since Mom had become distracted by Seth?

Either way, Beatrice for sure wouldn't stay healthy in a place this dirty. That was just common sense.

So, I spent the entire afternoon cleaning our apartment, trying to quietly vacuum so I wouldn't wake up my sister, and I had to empty the canister like twelve times.

By the time I finished, the sun had almost completely gone down. I peeked into my bedroom, which was directly across from Beatrice's. My bedsheets hadn't been touched in weeks. Even when I was home, I didn't usually sleep in my own bed; I had nobody to turn off the lights for me.

So, I did what I always do: collapsed on the floor next to my sister's bed.

We were silent, the only sound being both of our stomachs growling. Our mom didn't return until the next morning.

NINE

THE ONLY GOOD thing about the apartment was I could sleep in a little and not have to worry about catching public transportation. We lived right down the street from my school, so I just rode my bike.

The downside of being home was literally everything else. It was even more depressing than being at the hospital. There wasn't any food, which I was kind of used to, but at the hospital I could swipe something off Bea's cafeteria tray that got delivered to her room. And the vending machines came in handy a lot.

But that was all gone. Still, I guess it was a decent compromise for Beatrice not being sick.

"You have any extra cash for lunch?" I asked my mom.

She was occupied, chugging cups of black coffee, and pointed at her purse.

I rummaged through it but found only a few bucks. I'm not sure why I expected more.

"You have to stay home with Beatrice," I told her. Reminding my mom to be a mom had to be done even more when we were home, sadly. That was another thing that sucked.

"I know. I'm off from work today."

She'd said that other times, and then I'd find out she abandoned Bea to go be with Seth. I was starting to think my mom didn't even work anymore. Before Seth came into the picture, she practically never had a day off.

Beatrice called from her room, probably wanting to get up for the day. I took that as my cue to exit, leaving Mom to finally do mom things for once. No doubt my sister would give her instructions if she forgot.

When I got back from school, I thought I'd walked into the wrong apartment. The smell of actual food cooking greeted me and transported me back to my childhood. I could almost hear the music playing in the background and see the silhouette of my mom in the kitchen preparing dinner with my dad. I was just waiting for him to walk out and ask me about my day. He didn't.

"Hi, Yo-Yo," Beatrice said, focused on the TV. "Mom's making meat loaf."

Meat loaf? I didn't even know Mom knew how to make meat loaf.

I walked over and kissed the top of her head, but my eyes were quickly shifting around the apartment. Somehow it seemed brighter.

"How are you feeling?" I asked her.

"Good! Do you like my clothes? Mom and I went to the grocery store, and then we stopped at the mall and I got this new outfit."

Nothing was making any sense. My mom barely ever went grocery shopping – we survived on food from the bar, takeout, and whatever we could get from Cheap Check, plus hospital food, of course – let alone going to the mall. It was eerie.

And then it got more surreal, which I hadn't thought was even possible. My mom came out of the kitchen wearing an apron and hugged me.

"Reed, honey, how was your day? Are you hungry? We're having an early dinner."

"Okay" was all I could say.

My mom smiled at me, like really smiled. The same smile from when I was a kid and she'd tuck me into bed. I thought I'd never see that smile again, and when she walked back to the kitchen, I kept playing it in my head and comparing it to the one I used to know. Maybe they weren't exactly the same, or maybe I just told myself this one had to be different somehow.

Either way, it was a smile. My first in almost ten years.

"Do you need any help?" I asked.

"Nope. I've got everything under control."

I'm not joking when I tell you I legit pinched myself a few times. There could only be two explanations for my life suddenly flipping over and finally landing on the right side. Either my bike is a black hole to different dimensions, or our mom got hit in the head with a tennis ball and realized we needed her to be a mom again.

To me, one of those is obviously more plausible than the other. It's not the one you're thinking.

While my mom finished making dinner, I joined Beatrice, who was watching some boring technology show on the Science Channel. Honestly, I didn't know what to do with myself. My mind was telling me to lean back and sink into the couch, but my body wouldn't let me.

"Has Mom been acting like this all day?" I asked Beatrice.

“Not the whole day. She was kind of grumpy after you went to school and when she was getting me dressed. But she was in a better mood when she came back home.”

“What do you mean ‘when she came back home’? She was supposed to be with you all day. You said you guys went shopping together.”

“That was after.”

“After what?” I asked.

Beatrice sighed. “This morning Mom got me in my chair, and while I was watching TV, she left. She wasn’t gone for very long. Like less than an hour. And when she got back, she took me shopping.”

It didn’t take a genius to figure out that Mom had seen Seth while she was supposed to be watching Beatrice. Suddenly the apartment didn’t seem so bright anymore.

“Dinner is served,” our mom called out.

Beatrice let me push her over to the table, which meant she was lying when she said she was fine. Or maybe she was just tired from her day out. It might have been the most active my sister had been in one day that didn’t involve doctors.

“Meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and green beans.” Mom pointed out the spread on the table. She was proud of herself and, in spite of myself, I kind of was, too.

“Thanks,” I said. “It looks great.”

“Yeah, I’m starving,” Beatrice added.

She was ready to dive face-first into a plate of food, and so was I. The last time I had a home-cooked meal might’ve been the casseroles our neighbors brought over after my dad died.

“Before you dig in, I have some exciting news,” Mom said.

Beatrice and I looked at our mom, concerned and confused,

because nothing exciting ever happens to us. I didn't even remember what excitement felt like.

But I guess our mom did because she grinned so wide, we could almost see all her teeth. She glanced back and forth between us, trying to get us to smile, I think, but I definitely wasn't joining in until I heard the news. Beatrice didn't budge, either.

"Seth and I are going on a vacation!" Mom announced.

"How is that exciting?" I asked.

"It means we're taking our relationship to the next level. He told me when we get back, he might ask us to move in with him."

I had so many different things I wanted to say, but for some reason I settled on: "He 'might'?"

"Well, we'll have to figure out the logistics and everything. But we're gonna be a family! Isn't that great?"

"We already *are* a family," I reminded her.

She waved that aside. "You know what I mean – you're going to have a mom *and* a dad again."

"Do I have to call him Dad?" Beatrice asked.

"No," I told her.

Mom glared at me. "Only if you want to, sweetie."

The room was spinning and so were the meat loaf and potatoes, and I realized I hadn't come home to a dream or a better alternate universe. This was a nightmare. This was hell. I mean, the guy had barely said one word to me and my sister, and suddenly he wanted to be a part of our family?

I wanted to puke.

Mom checked the time on her phone. "Crap, he's probably waiting for me outside."

She tossed her apron on the kitchen counter and smoothed out the dress she was wearing.

How had I missed that?

Then she raced over to the couch and grabbed two rolling suitcases.

How had I missed those?

"We're just supposed to stay home?" I asked.

"It's only for the weekend. We'll be back Sunday night."

"And this day of shopping and making us dinner was for what? So you could pretend you're a mom before you bail on us again?"

Looking at a mirror by the front door, Mom fidgeted with putting in the pair of earrings Dad had bought her – as if that made up for what she was doing. She disgusted me.

"Reed, I need this," Mom said. "Everything's just been a little too much lately."

"You've got to be kidding me right now!"

I looked over to Bea for backup. Her eyes were fixed on the uneaten food.

"Can you watch your sister until Sunday?" our mom asked.

"Do I have a choice?"

She ignored that and walked over to kiss Beatrice on the head. "Bye, sweetie. Keep your brother out of trouble, okay?" She glanced at me, but I looked away. "I'll be back before you know it."

And just like that, she was gone.

I couldn't move for what felt like an eternity.

"The meat loaf is dry," Beatrice announced.

Somehow I was able to collect myself to get us in bed. I hoped I'd wake up to my life before, which was pretty sad because that one sucked, too.

But I didn't. My stomach was still growling, my dad was still dead, and now so was my mom, at least to me.

TEN

AFTER MOM took off for her romantic getaway with Seth, I couldn't help wondering how, exactly, they'd met. The story of my parents' meeting was legend. My dad used to tell the story over and over again to our neighbors or random people we'd see. He'd always have a different spin each time or give details I hadn't heard, so I never got sick of listening and he never got bored telling the story, either. However he said it, my mom was always blushing at the end. Sometimes she'd get teary-eyed.

The gist of the story is that my dad was set up on a blind date by some of his buddies from college. Apparently, he was pretty nervous about the whole thing and decided to show up to the restaurant early to have a drink.

At the time, my mom was also bartending. Now that I think about it, serving drinks is probably the only thing she's good at. That and running away.

Anyway, she saw my dad sitting at the end of the bar, sweating through his blazer and just looking like a total wreck. She kept bringing him drinks and coaching him on what to say to girls and how to not act like a goof. I guess it

worked because my dad did go home with a girl that night, it just wasn't who he originally expected.

My dad always said he got stood up, but Mom insisted she saw a girl wandering around the restaurant but kept my dad distracted because she liked him so much. Either way, they both agreed they ended up with the right person, which was the part that always made people gush over how cute they were.

Nine months after they met, I was born and Mom dropped out of college. Dad graduated and they settled down in the suburbs like a perfect family, and for a while we basically were.

Occasionally I have a dream that I'm with my parents at the bar where they met. I'm myself but they don't know me, and in most of the dreams, I'll just watch them talking or sometimes I'll sit next to my dad and point out my mom bartending before she even notices him.

That night after my mom left, I had that dream again. But this time I sat far away from my dad and only talked to my mom until it felt like my tongue was going to fall out. And any time she would turn around to serve someone else or look at my dad, I'd demand another drink or pretend like I was going to faint.

Eventually, my dad left with another woman. Maybe it was the date he was originally supposed to meet. Maybe it was someone entirely different. It didn't matter.

"Yo-Yo" I heard through the fogginess of sleep. "Yo-Yo, wake up."

Flat on my back, I opened my eyes to the white of Bea's bedroom ceiling. We still existed, which proved dreams aren't real. "What? What time is it?"

"It's eleven o'clock. I want to get up."

As soon as I looked at the clock on the wall and confirmed it was actually almost the afternoon, I got to my feet as quickly as possible. There were things Beatrice had to do hours ago, like take her medication – not to mention it’s bad for her to lie in one position for so long.

The first time I’m truly alone with my sister, I mess it up.

“Why didn’t you wake me up earlier?” I asked.

“It looked like you were in a really deep sleep. Were you dreaming? What were you dreaming about? I had this dream where—”

“Beatrice, you have to be up at a certain time so we can follow the medication schedule Dr. David wrote.”

“But I feel fine.” She coughed. “I mean, I’ll be fine.”

I rolled my eyes, half blaming myself and half blaming her. Even though the routine was different after she got discharged, Bea knew what needed to be done.

“Let me just wash up quickly and then we can start,” I told her. “Where’s the paper we took home from the hospital?”

“On my dresser, I think. Mom was looking at it yesterday.”

I grabbed the paper that was already crinkled from a coffee stain and took it into the bathroom. I studied it while peeing and brushing my teeth and had it almost memorized by the time I splashed some water on my face.

“Okay, first thing you have to do is a nebulizer breathing treatment,” I announced as I walked back into her room. “Where did Mom put the medicine?”

Beatrice’s eyes were closed. She was a terrible faker.

“Stop. This is serious. We have to do all of this stuff, and you’re already three hours overdue.”

That only made her pretend to have a really annoying

snore, and Beatrice was so bad at it, she made herself laugh. It was funny, but I was too exhausted and anxious to laugh.

I pulled off the mask to her breathing machine that she always uses while sleeping and sat her up in the bed, propping her head with her unicorn pillow. She was still committed to the acting-asleep skit.

“Beatrice, seriously. What is your deal?” I asked.

She wouldn’t fully open her eyes, but I saw her peek at me. I guess this was a version of a hissy fit. Sometimes I forgot she was only ten.

“Are you still thinking about last night?” I asked.

Bea nodded.

“Yeah, me too. That kind of sucked, right?”

“Does Mom not love Daddy anymore?” she asked.

I slid down to the floor with my back against her bed and faced a picture of our onetime family. Our dad was holding Beatrice, and Mom had her arms wrapped around him. I was standing in front of them, but you couldn’t see my face. I was turned around, admiring everyone I loved. I know I was smiling. I remember.

“I don’t know,” I told her. “Maybe. It’s hard to love someone who’s not here.”

“Do you still love him?”

“Of course. And I know he still loves us and is with us every day.”

“Mom doesn’t think so.”

“Well, maybe Mom is just feeling really lonely.”

“Are you lonely?”

“No.” I jumped up. “That’s impossible with you around.”

Beatrice opened her eyes and stuck her tongue out. That

was the signal we could finally start our day.

It took about ten minutes for me to find the medicine for Bea's nebulizer. Mom had put it in one of the kitchen cabinets, but as I was going through the new morning routine, I tried to organize everything next to my sister's bed. In addition to the medicines, she had a machine to help her cough and another that was like a tiny vacuum that sucked out all the mucus and boogers. It was kind of gross but had to be done.

"So, I just turn the machine on and put this mask over your face?" I asked.

"Yeah. And then use that other tube to suck out whatever I cough up."

I nodded, confident and terrified. I mean, it wasn't a big deal; I'd seen the respiratory therapists do it tons of times. But obviously I'd never tried doing it, and everything medically related is a lot more intimidating when you're on your own.

I covered Beatrice's nose and mouth with the mask and watched her tiny body jolt from every forced inhale and exhale. It felt like I was torturing her.

The instructions for the cough-assist machine were spelled out very clearly: five sets of five coughs. I yanked the mask off after only two coughs.

"Yo-Yo, what are you doing?" Beatrice asked.

"I'm not pushing too hard, am I?"

"It's fine. You're doing a good job."

I took a deep breath and we continued.

Halfway through, Beatrice's face was getting red from using so much energy, so we took a break. But she was getting up a lot of mucus, and after each round, her voice was a little bit stronger and louder.

“Did Mom do this yesterday?” I asked.

“No. She just did the nebulizer.”

“Well, we’re going to do it every day. Look how much you coughed up.” I pointed at the canister, which was already half-full.

Beatrice shifted her eyes to get a look. “It’s like aliens floating around.”

I laughed. “We should incubate them and see if we can grow another Beatrice.”

“That doesn’t make any sense, Yo-Yo.”

“I mean, it came out of you.” I tried to make myself sound like a mad scientist. “The mucus has your DNA.”

Beatrice wasn’t buying it. “That’s disgusting. I like the hospital where the suction is behind me so I can’t see it.”

I picked up the mask. “You ready for more?”

Bea nodded confidently, or as confident as someone can be who has to go through all that she does. But like me, she realized the new routine was making her feel better already. We just had to stick to it. I’d make sure we did, alone for two days or not.

“An hour and a half,” Beatrice said as she rolled herself out of her bedroom and toward the living room.

“What?”

“That’s how long it took from when you woke up to getting me in my chair.”

“You were timing me?”

“Yes. But I don’t think it’s accurate. It felt more like two hours.”

“Do you have somewhere to be that I don’t know about? Hacking date with Zigzag?”

Beatrice ignored me, her eyes flickering around like she was doing some quick mental math. "Ten minutes for the neb and then another fifteen doing cough assist. But then we slowed down drastically because you had to stop to use the bathroom."

"Sorry, I had to poop."

"It's fine. You made up time giving me a bath and getting me dressed."

"I could do that with my eyes closed."

"True. Those are definitely your strongest events."

"Thanks, Coach, I guess. Should I be writing these times down?"

Bea nodded and I raced into the kitchen to grab a pen. I noted the duration of every step of her morning routine as estimated by my sister, who was having a little too much fun critiquing me. Some of them seemed harsh, like how she had me timed down to the second for how long it took to brush her teeth. But I played along because it was keeping her mind off our mom.

"So, all together about eighty-eight minutes," I told her.

"It's a start."

I rolled my eyes. "Bea, you know getting you ready isn't a race or decathlon or whatever you think it is."

"I know. But I was thinking about what time we'll need to wake up so we can do everything and you won't be late to school. Right now you'll be very late unless we wake up at five o'clock."

"Don't worry about that," I told her. "Mom will be back to help."

Beatrice didn't answer me. She just turned around and

focused on the Science Channel. It was like she knew something I didn't, and suddenly I was the little sibling that needed protection.

"You want breakfast?" I asked, trying to fill the silence.

"Sure. What do we have?"

"Meat loaf."

"That's it?"

"Pretty sure. Unless other food magically appeared in the fridge overnight." When I'd put away the leftovers last night, I'd noticed that Mom hadn't bought any other food at the grocery store besides whatever it was she'd needed to make dinner. I don't know why I'd been surprised.

"Well, can you check?"

I think Beatrice was too occupied by the TV to remember that she'd gone shopping with Mom and therefore knew that we literally had no other food, but I went into the kitchen anyway just to appease her.

Obviously, when I opened the fridge nothing had changed. A pan of meat loaf and a bowl of potatoes stared back at me, both virtually untouched. Neither Beatrice nor I had had much of an appetite last night after Mom ditched us, and neither of us liked the idea of seeing that meal again, given everything it represented. But my stomach seemed to think it was on the verge of starvation. It felt like a canyon was being carved into it.

Whether I liked it or not, spite wasn't a part of the four main food groups. I heated up two plates and called over my sister. If I ate, then she would, too.

ELEVEN

THE REST OF the weekend went pretty smoothly. Beatrice played on the computer, and I actually got some homework done. Maybe other kids in my situation would've thrown some huge party, but not me. Beatrice probably would've loved it, but I had nobody to invite.

Anyway, my sister and I were watching TV when she randomly pressed the mute button. "What time is it?" she asked.

"Almost seven," I said, though I knew that wasn't really what she was asking. She was asking when Mom would be home. It had been exactly two days since Mom had left, but there was no sign of her yet.

And every time I cut off a sliver of meat loaf to heat up and eat, the sliver of chance that she would return also got pulverized in the microwave. Still, I couldn't quite believe that she would actually leave us.

"I'm gonna call her," I said.

The phone rang four times – I counted. It seemed like the only way to stop myself from totally freaking out.

When she answered, I didn't even waste time saying hello. I went straight to "When are you coming home?"

“Reed?” Mom responded. It sounded noisy wherever she was.

“Yes, it’s your son. Are you on your way back? It’s Sunday.”

“Oh, funny story. Seth actually knows the manager of the hotel we’re staying at in the city. They’re old college friends. Small world, right?”

I didn’t answer. My stomach dropped, predicting what was coming next.

“Anyway, he upgraded us to a suite, so we’re extending our stay,” she told me.

“What? How long?”

“I don’t know. We’re just sort of playing it by ear.”

“I have school tomorrow. And Beatrice and I need food.”

“There’s meat loaf.”

“We already ate all of it.”

“Already?”

“Mom, it’s been two days! It was the only food in the apartment.”

Mom sighed. “Reed, I don’t know what you want me to do. I’m not there.”

At that point in the conversation, I was ready to chuck my phone across the table. Somehow I resisted.

“Yeah, I realize you’re not here,” I said. “But Beatrice and I are hungry.”

She sighed. “There’s some cash in my dresser drawer. Feel free to help yourself.” I could tell she thought she was being generous. “Listen, I have to go. Seth bought tickets to a show.”

Then she hung up – and then I really did throw my phone at the couch cushions.

I searched through my mom’s dresser drawers, starting

with the bottom ones. But, of course, the money was stashed in her underwear drawer, which I dug through just to find a lousy twenty bucks.

I was putting the things I wish I hadn't needed to touch back in place when I felt something hard slide around the bottom of the drawer. I pulled it out and had to sit on the edge of Mom's bed when I realized what I was looking at.

It was my dad's driver's license. I had no idea that she'd kept it or why. But I stared at it a while longer before sliding it into my back pocket.

"You up for walking down the street to the Cheap Check?" I asked, heading back into the living room.

"Why do we need to go there?"

I sighed. "Do you have to question everything?"

My sister just stared at me, eyebrows up like the answer to that was obvious.

"We need food, Beatrice," I said.

"Why can't we just get a pizza delivered?"

I held up the small wad of cash. "A pizza costs more than twenty dollars to get delivered."

"We can just wait for Mom to get back, and then she can go get us something."

"Didn't you just hear me on the phone? Mom's not coming back tonight."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. They're staying on their vacation longer."

"Well, when *is* she coming back?"

"I don't know, Beatrice."

My sister got quiet, almost sinking in her wheelchair. "Maybe we can go to Cheap Check later," she told me. "Zigzag's