



# The Ballad of Allison and Bandit

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*I didn't fall down a rabbit hole, get sucked up by a tornado, or tear a hole into another dimension...*

*I just woke up one day and everything was different.*

~\*~

## CHAPTER ONE

Allison Gale, age 14, had light brown eyes that were oversized for her face. While, on some, this would be considered beautiful, on Allison, due to her flat almost mournful eyebrows, it caused her to resemble a Margaret Keane painting.

In contrast, her mouth was small--barely visible. And her light blond hair lay so flat against her pale scalp that on first glance she appeared to be bald.

If it weren't for Allison's nose—which, like many girls in her age-group, she hadn't quite grown into—she would have resembled an alien. Between her looks and her somewhat peculiar nature, Allison had a tendency to make people she met quite uncomfortable.

However, unlike most 14 year old girls, Allison Gale was not uncomfortable with *herself*.

I considered these facts from where I stood, safely across the street. I was contemplating talking to Allison, but wanted to weigh the pros and cons before rushing into anything. There were a lot of reasons *not* to talk to Allison Gale, but the facts were these: It was summer, and I was lonely.

My name is Bandit.

I was also 14. I had dyed black hair that I'd sheared into a short chunky cut. It was my first time cutting my own hair, so it stuck out at awkward angles from the top of my head, but I didn't really care. It looked sorta punk.

My eyes are dark brown and were thickly lined with black make-up. At first kids had teased me saying that I looked like a raccoon. Eventually it was noted that my make-up also made me look like a cartoon burglar, a Beagle Boy—a bandit—and the new nickname stuck.

No one had called me by my real name in months. I doubt anyone even remembered what it was. That was just how I liked it.

Finally, having come to a decision, I crossed the street. It was a decision I would never forget.

"Hey," I said blandly, giving Allison a slight nod with my head.

Allison looked at me blankly for a moment and then issued a hello. She took a bite from the round object she had clutched in her hand. When I had been observing her from across the street, I had assumed it to be an apple or a pear...

"Is that...an *onion*?!" I asked, recoiling slightly.

Allison nodded, chewing.

"Doesn't that gross you out?" I probed, full of curiosity now. My eyes were prickling and had already begun to water from being in such close proximity to Allison's bizarre snack. I couldn't imagine trying to *eat* it, especially with nothing to wash it down with.

"I have no sense of smell," answered Allison simply.

When I did not immediately get that look of clarity one gets when they accept and understand an answer, Allison elaborated.

"You know that old experiment? Where you blindfold someone, pinch their nose shut really tight, and then tell them to eat a slice of apple and a slice of onion? Without their sense of smell, they can't tell the difference," she said, adding, "It's like that for me too, except all the time. It's called Anosmia."

"Oh," I said. And then I added the phrase people always say when they don't know what else to say: "I'm sorry."

Allison shrugged. "It's okay," she said. "I've always been this way. Plus, since I can't taste the difference really, I save a few pennies 'cause onions cost less than apples. They're the same nutritional value anyway."

I considered these points. I also marveled at the twist of fate—the bitter irony—that would give a girl with such a predominant nose no use for it except for breathing. To me, this explained many of Allison's oddities. A girl with no sense of smell and very little sense of taste would have a very altered sense of disgust and, I imagined, a very poor understanding of

death.

It's the smell of death, really, that gets to people. Why, when they come across dead things, their hands instinctively fly up to cover their noses and mouths to keep from retching. The smell of death is what alarms animals and makes humans feel ill. Not the sight.

It's why one can easily watch death in movies or see it in photographs, but have trouble dealing with it in person. Why someone can drive by a roadkill or see it out a window and think "Oh, how sad," but not feel real disgust until they're up close to it, shoveling it off the sidewalk...

"Okay. Well...bye," said Allison, giving me a vague wave goodbye.

I watched in silence, almost in a trance, as Allison walked down the street still eating her onion. I would have to try to make contact with her again.

I was in need of a friend who would never understand.

## CHAPTER TWO

I met up with Allison Gale again the next afternoon. She was wandering around on the same side street. Only a block or two from my house. I knew she lived somewhere around there because I had seen her around the neighborhood over the past year or so, but I didn't know *exactly* where she lived because, up until the day before, I hadn't cared.

"New Millennium next year, you know," I said, sidling up to her on the sidewalk.

I figured if I pretended like I belonged there, she would think I did too. Sort of along the same line as "if you look good, you feel good." All that crap. You know what I mean. And I picked a hot topic. Everyone was buzzing about the Millennium and it was still months away!

"Not for another year actually," she said. "2001 is the true Millennium, not 2000."

"Ugh. You're one of *those* people," I said. "You probably start your week on a Sunday too."

"That's when the calendar starts the week," she shrugged, as if it were the most reasonable thing in the world.

"The week starts on Monday," I insisted. "It's called the week*end*. END! They should always be at the *end* of the week!"

"Actually," she said, "I like to think of Saturday and Sunday as book ends. And Monday through Friday are all the lovely books—except that *I* get to write them."

Well, she had me there. If you thought of the weekend as "book ends" to a week's worth of "books," then Sunday could be the first day and still be an "end" to the week.



Out loud I said, “That’s the fruitiest thing I’ve ever heard.”

This was not going at all as I’d planned.

I decided to take things in the opposite direction and just keep my mouth shut.

We walked for several more blocks in silence. She stopped once to pick up a fallen leaf and tear it into tiny pieces, but she said nothing. Finally, I couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Aren’t you going to ask me why I’m following you?” I demanded.

“No.”

“Why not?”

She shrugged. “Because you aren’t bothering me. So I don’t really care.”

“You don’t think it’s weird?”

“Of course it’s weird,” she said. “But there’s no one else around, so you’re probably not here to play a prank on me. I see no benefit for you to harm me in any way. And you aren’t bothering me... I just figured you were lonely.”

“Lonely?” I felt my ears flare. “Why would you say that?”

“Because you’re alone.”

Okay. Get me on the obvious, why doesn’t she? I sighed. She had me pegged.

“Yeah; all right,” I admitted. “I guess I am lonely.”

“But you have friends,” she said. “I’ve seen you with them at school.”

“Not anymore.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah.”

I didn’t want her to ask any more questions. Yes, I did have friends. I *had* friends. I left them. It was my choice. But they didn’t seem to mind, seeing as none of them had called or written to me all summer. Forget ‘em. I didn’t want their pity. I didn’t need their false sympathy—their whispers behind my back.

Allison was staring at me. I squirmed under her gaze. Was I really lonely enough to try to hang with this weirdo? Didn’t I have other things to do?

I cringed inwardly. Of course I had other things to do.

I just didn’t want to do them.

But...

“Look, I’ve gotta go,” I said. “I have to get home to...do...something.”

She tilted her head and blinked at me. Ugh. She looked creepy. Like something out of *Men in Black*. I turned away and started walking toward home.

She called after me: “You can follow me around again tomorrow, if you want. I was going to go to the park!”

“Maybe,” I called back. “I’ll think about it.”

And, darn it; I actually meant it.

### CHAPTER THREE

When I got home, my mother was sitting on our couch, the vacuum cleaner a little ways in front of her. It didn't look like she'd done any vacuuming.

*Well, at least she tried,* I thought.

Yesterday, I had come home to find her staring at the computer monitor, watching dancing cartoon hamsters...which she proceeded to do for another two hours. When Dad got home, I was blamed for my mother getting distracted and not looking for work.

Dad was pretty touchy about anything work-related. He hated his own job and often came home complaining about it.

The other day I asked him why he didn't just quit and find a different job. Or start up his own business like he'd always wanted to.

He told me he was lucky just to have a job.

I told him that was like stubbing his toe on the coffee table every morning and thinking he was lucky just to have a toe.

He told me to show some respect.

Except, that's the thing about respect: When you have to order someone to respect you, you don't deserve it. Respect isn't just something you can demand. You have to earn it.

Thank God I kept *those* thoughts quiet.

But he and Mom had a deal going: She was supposed to either do chores or look for work. Lately, she'd done neither. And it was another eight months before I turned 15 and could get a permit to work legally.

I didn't want to get bawled out again for Mom not doing her "work," so I grabbed the handle of the vacuum cleaner and prepared to do her chores myself. That's when she noticed me.

"I'm sick," she said.

"I'm sorry," I said. I didn't know what else to say.

I had suggested to Mom that maybe she was Depressed, and not sick—since she had been to hundreds of doctors at this point and shown no physical signs of illness. They called her a—and this is an exact quote—"medical mystery." I think she secretly enjoyed that.

She had chastised me for the Depression suggestion, claiming that any negative feelings could be driven away by prayer. And that if I ever felt anything like Depression or anger that I simply wasn't praying hard enough. To her, negative emotions were like unto demons. Tiny possessions to be driven out.

In that case, I must be Legion.

"I'm sick," she said again. "Is your dad home yet?"

"No," I said. "He's at work."

"You better call him," she said. "Tell him to come home and take me to the hospital."

I looked at the clock on our VCR. I shook my head.

“Can it wait?” I asked. “He only has two hours left.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m dying. I need to go to the Emergency Room.”

“Emergency Rooms are expensive, Mom,” I said, trying to reason with her. “Can’t you wait for Dad to earn the money—at work—before we go?”

She seemed to think this over. Finally, she said, “Okay, I’ll drive.”

“What? I thought you said you were dying?”

“I can drive,” she said. “Call your dad and tell him to meet us at the ER after he gets off from work. And get me a barf bag. I think I might be sick on the way.”

She shoved her large cumbersome body up off the couch with a mighty lunge and waddled off toward her car. My mother wasn’t morbidly obese, just a little “big” for her age, but from the way she moved you would have thought she weighed upwards of 600 pounds. I sighed.

Typical Friday afternoon.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

There are two types of chairs in hospital waiting rooms.

In the cheap clinics and 24-hour places, they've got smooth plastic chairs. They're usually brightly-colored, resembling ketchup and mustard bottles, and they're very slippery. It's for easy clean-up. The later you go into a waiting room—and the more “affordable” the hospital or clinic—the more strange, gross things you're bound to see. And the longer the patients will have to wait.

Eventually those “easy clean-up” plastic chairs become porous from wear and start to stain. Residual blood, vomit, and feces from patrons gone by start to speckle their surfaces like 1980s splatter art made from bodily fluids. They get to a point where they can *never* be wiped fully clean.

In the higher-end hospitals—the urgent care facilities and emergency rooms with regular hours and set prices—the chairs are always square. They'll come in different colors and textures (usually some shade of dark gray or maroon), but one thing always remains the same: Their square shape.

These fully-padded boxy-looking chairs with their glossed wooden arms look more comfortable than their cheaper counterparts, but it's a lie. They're worse.

Have you ever tried sleeping in a perfectly square chair?

The backrest only comes halfway up your back—there's no way to lean back. Your two choices come down to sitting sideways with your back and head against one arm of the chair and your legs thrown over the other arm (which leaves you folded awkwardly in the middle, and the careless/messy appearance of this position usually isn't appreciated by passersby); or, you can do your best impression of a cat and curl up your body right smack in the middle of the cushion. And that only works if you're short or extremely flexible. Fortunately for me, I am both. So I get to keep my options open.

Of course, if you had my mother, you wouldn't be sleeping in *any* position—no matter what kind of chair you were treated to that night.

On this particular night, my mother had decided to get sick during regular office hours. I was sitting on a square chair and starting to nod off when my mother cooed, "You go ahead and sleep, Dear. I'm sure someone will wake you up to tell you if I die."

Would you be able to sleep after something like that?

With one statement, no matter how nicely she mewed it, she managed to say:

*These could be our last moments together, and you want to **sleep**?*

*If you were a **good** daughter, you would be here for me, no matter how tired you were...*

*I AM DYING!!!*

I admit (but don't tell anyone else) that I think my mom is "full of it" most of the time when it comes to this "sick" stuff... But what if there really *is* something wrong with her? Physically wrong. What if she has some sort of Cancerous tumor that's buried so deep inside her that it's eluded all scans.

What if she *did* die?

When people asked me about it, did I really want to tell them that at the time of my mother's death, I was taking a nap in an uncomfortable square chair? I could almost see the look of confused disappointment on the asker's face—and they weren't even real!



When someone's in the hospital, you're supposed to be there for them, right? Saying encouraging words, holding onto their hand, staring into their eyes... Not taking a nap.

I thought about Sis.

What was I doing when she died?

I don't even know...

I was probably sleeping.

## CHAPTER FIVE

I don't know if you've ever been to an Emergency Room on a Friday evening, but, unless you absolutely have to: Don't.

Especially not if you can't afford to go to a *good* one. No Emergency room is great, but clinics or "cheap" ones are the worst. We were in the waiting room for three hours and spent another five hours in the back rooms before the doctors finally gave my mother some Gas-X and told us to go home.

I'd only had three hours of sleep when I met up with Allison on the sidewalk the next morning.

"You came," she said.

"Yeah."

"I didn't think you would," she said.

"Who am I to pass up a trip to the park?" I yawned. Maybe being around all those trees would help wake me up. Extra oxygen, right?

We walked in silence toward the park. It was only a few blocks away, down at the end of the hill. It was a beautiful park. They kept the focus more on trees and less on swing sets and jungle gyms. I guess you could say it wasn't very "kid friendly," but that's what I liked about it. Though, somehow, it still managed to be crowded on Saturdays.

There was the usual hodgepodge of people using the built-in BBQs and picnickers. And that one guy with a soccer ball who had no one else to play with. Not one guy in *particular*, just "that one guy." Go to any park on a Saturday. You'll see "him" and his ball there, I guarantee it.

And, of course, there was a birthday party.

I was about to steer clear of the party people, when Allison held her finger to her lips and motioned for me to stay where I was. Fine with me, but what the hell was she up to? Before my eyes, I saw her line up with the rest of the kids—they must have been about 11 or 12—waiting to be served a slice of birthday cake. And they gave her one!

She headed back toward me and motioned for me to start walking again, away from the birthday party. I didn't hesitate to follow *those* instructions. I thought she was going to get busted for sure! And there I was hanging out with her. That would just figure. I barely knew the girl and there I was about to get busted for...cake...thievery? Whatever.

Whatever just happened, I'm pretty sure it was bad and I was going to get slammed for it because of some "guilty by association" law.

"You want it?" she asked, offering the cake to me.

"No!" I said, aghast. "I'm not going to eat stolen cake!"

Plus, it was vanilla. Gross.

"I didn't steal it," she laughed. "They gave it to me!"

"Yeah, but you didn't know them," I said.

"The people handing out the cake didn't know *most* of the people there," she said, taking a bite of her ill-begotten cake. "The guests weren't their friends. They were their kid's friends."

"Yeah," I countered. "But you weren't one of their kid's friends."

"I could have been," she mused.

I shook my head and sighed. There was no use arguing with her. Wasn't there a saying for a situation like this? Arguing with a crazy person...makes you crazier than they are...? Is that a real thing? I don't know. If it isn't a real saying, it should be.

"Hey, you can't even taste that cake, can you?" I said, suddenly remembering her lack of smell.

"No, not really," she admitted.

"So why bother?"

"I like sugar. Plus it was nice to be a part of a birthday party. I don't really get invited to many."

That made sense. I almost felt a little sorry for her, but I brushed the feeling aside. I didn't want anyone feeling sorry for me and how I am, so I thought she probably didn't want anyone feeling sorry for her either. Plus, to my mind, it was her own fault that she didn't get invited to any parties. Didn't she have any impulse control? Didn't she know that it was socially unacceptable to walk into a stranger's party and take their birthday cake? And she *knew* she was weird! If she wanted people to like her so badly, why didn't she just conform? Couldn't she at least *act* normal?

"How did you even get away with that?" I asked her, watching her finish off the last of her slice through the corner of my eye. I had to admit, it was a bit like watching a magic trick—seeing her just walk up and be served like that.

"Oh, it's because I'm White," she said, throwing away her plate in a nearby trashcan.

"Come again?"

“All the people at that party were White. I’m White. I fit right in,” she shrugged. “All White people look more-or-less alike. They weren’t going to notice that I didn’t belong there.”

She was giving me a headache. I tried to think about what she said from several different angles and just couldn’t get my brain to follow her line of logic.

“Don’t try that at a Korean birthday party though,” she said. “They don’t take it very well...”

“What?!”

“I don’t look Korean,” she said, frowning. “They spotted me right away.”

“You...” I couldn’t believe it. “You’ve done this *before*?!”

“Oh, sure,” Allison said. “Every Saturday.”

“Are you homeless or something? Why do you need to take other people’s food?”

“No,” she said curtly. “I’m not homeless.”

I guess I hurt her feelings. I didn’t mean to, to be honest. I just couldn’t fathom why someone would come to the park every Saturday for *those* reasons.

Again, I found myself walking in silence beside her.

I looked around. There was a man talking on a cell phone. Must be rich. And there was a boy of about 9-years-old in the sand pit playing with a Darth Maul action figure. Poor kid. I mean, Darth Maul was the best part of that movie, but, when I saw it on opening week last month; I wanted to

demand my money back. I mean, I'm not a nerd or anything, but even I was pretty outraged. Can't imagine what it must have been like for the people who had been waiting 16 years to see it. That's longer that I've been *alive!*

Allison bent down and picked something up at the foot of a tree. She held it up for me to see. It was a floppy gardener's hat, probably left by one of the men who had come to do maintenance work earlier in the morning.

"Free hat!" she beamed, placing it on her head.

I wasn't going to argue. And, after what I'd witnessed earlier: I wasn't even surprised.

## **CHAPTER SIX**

Allison wasn't on the sidewalk the next day. Or the next. Or the next.

I hadn't slept in days.

Well, not any kind of sleep that counted anyway. An hour here or there.

The term "dead tired" came to mind.

Dead. Tired?

Maybe.

No.

The dead might be tired, but it wasn't likely. It was the people the dead left behind that were tired.

I groaned at this thought and felt my shoulders droop.

I stopped walking and looked ahead. I knew the route well—I'd traveled it thousands of times before—but I still looked to see where I was going. Just how much further it was until I was home again.

Not that I was in any hurry to be home. Chances were good that, as soon as I arrived there, I would be wishing I were outside again. But that was me all over: I often enjoyed my journeys more than my destinations.

Both of the sidewalks lining the street, as well as the street itself, were strangely empty. The only "person" I could call upon if something went awry was a dead skunk—run over by a car, but still alive enough to crawl, bleeding, onto the sidewalk to die. I doubted he would be much help.

The skunk was giving off a powerful stink that, although it hurt my sinuses, I couldn't help but respect. It was a mix of the familiar musky "skunk juice" smell mixed with the stench of his death.

Rotting corpse, cooking in the sun.

Dead tired.

I decided to go home to take care of my mother.

You know, I used to get excited when my mom would show up at places unexpectedly, like at my school or somewhere where I was hanging out. I'd be like "That's *my* mom!" Volunteer the information. Point her out with pride.

Now people have to drag it out of me. Like a confession.

"Is that your mom?"

"Who? Her? [Like I don't know who they're talking about].  
Ummm...yeahhhhhh..."

Embarrassing.

And I know it's "typical" for girls my age to be embarrassed by their moms. But I look at other girls' moms and they're so...normal. It's like their daughters are being hyper-critical for *no reason*. It's weird.

It's different with me. I swear.

My mom used to be really cool. *So* cool. And then, recently, she's gone a bit...insane.



Things happened.

Mom changed.

She got “mysteriously ill” and she’s just a bit “off” now.

But explaining to people that she “used to be” cool doesn’t do any good. No one cares what you “used” to be. They only care what you are in the moment.

In the case of my mom, it’s best just to avoid the subject altogether.

Best to avoid *people* altogether.

I felt so alone.

I found myself hoping that Allison would turn up on the sidewalk again soon.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Allison was bald.

Let me clarify: She didn't just *look* bald; she *was* bald. No hair at all. With her large beak-like nose, she looked a bit like that vulture from *Looney Tunes*.

"It was the hat I found last Saturday in the park," she said, not even waiting for me to ask. "It was filled with lice."

"They, uh, make shampoos for that now, you know," I said.

"Feh!" she scoffed. "My parents said that if I was going to go around putting trash on my head that I had to spend my own money to take care of it. And I wasn't going to spend my allowance on lice shampoo! I had more important things to buy. It's not like my hair was really doing anything useful for me."

"But you look like a Cancer patient!"

This gave Allison pause for thought.

"Huh," she said. "Maybe that's why people have been so nice to me lately..."

I sighed, shaking my head. "So what was more important to spend your money on than saving your hair?" I asked.

"Chalk," she said, holding up a bag of sidewalk chalk.

Chalk.

Chalk?!

Well, who was I to talk, I guess. I'd chopped off most of my own hair myself. What good *was* hair anyway?

"*Dark* chalk," she elaborated. "Not pastels."

"Oh," I said. I didn't really know what else to say.

"Clearly you're not getting how awesome this is," she said, scowling at me.

I had to laugh. I'd never seen Allison get sassy about anything, especially not something as silly as sidewalk chalk. I hadn't played with sidewalk chalk since I was a little girl. I was a *teenager* now. I was "beyond" sidewalk chalk. But something about her so adamantly insisting that it was "awesome" made me curious. Made me game to try.

"All right," I said. "Show me how awesome it is."

She took out a piece of dark blue chalk and handed it to me. She had a dark purple piece in her own hand. She pointed down at the square of sidewalk we were standing on.

"Help me color this in," she said.

I got down on my knees and started coloring. The dark blue chalk was rich with color. I felt myself getting into the "zone" and becoming obsessed with filling in the square of sidewalk—I didn't want any light gray showing through.

Soon Allison and I crossed paths and she was adding dark purple to my dark blue and vice-versa. I was getting chalk dust on my clothes and my skin, but I didn't care. The chalk was growing smaller with each pass on the sidewalk. Soon it was a nub and I could feel my knuckles scraping the

cement, but I didn't care; I continued to color. Eventually, I could feel my knuckles bleeding, and I watched mindlessly as my fingers, with only a speck of chalk remaining, scribbled over an already darkened sidewalk.

"Bandit," said Allison, calling me back to reality.

"Huh?"

"Try this," she said, handing me some white chalk.

I watched as she put a few white dots here and there on our blue/purple sidewalk square. Stars. I watched as she created the Big Dipper—as she confessed it was the only constellation she knew—and added a "shooting star" (or maybe her hand just slipped) to the dark surface. I added a few stars to my side too.

"What now?" I asked.

The sidewalk square had become the night sky. It was beautiful. I didn't want it to ever be washed away.

"Now we make it bad ass," she said, handing me an orange piece of chalk.

She began scribbling something in yellow on our night sky. Lightning? I wasn't sure. I bent back down to the ground, prepared to destroy our newly built Universe. I drew a fiery ball—a giant blob of anger ready to rain down on an unsuspecting planet.

Allison's wild yellow streaks met up with my orange ball, giving it a tail. It was a comet now. It was a brilliant comet. Better than Hale-Bopp, even.

"Okay," she said proudly. "Now, without looking at each other, we'll each write the most bad ass word we can think of on it, okay?"

“Sure,” I said, selecting a wicked shade of lime green. I bent over the sidewalk for the last time.

When I looked up, I saw that she had written the word “Cougar” in hot pink. I had written “Jugular.”

“Cougar Jugular,” Allison said, standing up to look at our work. “Cool.”

“Sounds like a band name,” I said, dusting off my hands on my pants as I stood up.

“Yeah,” she nodded. “And our first album will be about giant comets and this can be the cover art.”

I laughed.

We had turned the sidewalk into the night sky and drawn on it with chalk.

In the real world, it was yet another scorching sun-shiny day in late June.

And I had to go home.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

My family is a bit religious. Before Sis died, we used to go to church and everything. My mom still considers herself “devout,” even though we no longer go—even though she hasn’t touched her Bible in months. She still believes that prayer will solve all of your problems.

My dad takes a different approach.

I think most Christian girls are intimately familiar with the back of their father’s hand.

Respect.

Obey.

I think God is awesome. And Jesus seems like a super cool guy.

Yeah.

I believe in God.

I can also understand why God hasn’t helped my mother. God has a million things to do. He has to look over *all* the people—everyone!—all over the world. He also has to control the elements and spin the planets and all the other stuff He does every day all the time.

I can understand why He can’t take time out to give my mother some special attention. To fix my family. I get that.

I believe in my Father, but not in my father.

My father isn’t a god. My father doesn’t have a million things to do.

My father does nothing.

He just watches as my mother dies from the inside out.

Sometimes I look back and I can't believe my father and I used to be the best of friends.

My dad and I used to watch movies together on the weekend. My dad's a real movie buff. Pop culture buff, really—movies, music, television—he loves it all. Knows a lot about it. I used to really look up to him.

After Sis died about a year ago and Mom first started going to hospitals all the time, Dad and I didn't take it all that seriously. Sure, it was a little scary the first time. But after she'd gone twice and was told it was "just gas," it was almost funny.

I remember one time early on we were at an Emergency Room that looked the way I imagined war hospitals to look. The way they always showed them in movies, you know? Just cot after cot of misery. No curtains for privacy. They just kept shoving more and more people, more and more crappy little beds, into that one long room.

That's what going to a hospital is like when you aren't rich. You don't get basic human rights like privacy or personal space. They treated the patients like they were already dead. The room was a mass grave and they just kept shoveling in bodies.

We were there for hours. People either got better on their own accord and walked out or...

You know, some guy bled all over me that night.

He got freaked out being hooked up to his IV—it had emptied out hours before we had even gotten there (the guy had said he'd been there since morning!)—and he started ripping it out of his arm.

But he was an old dude, right? So he was on all kinds of blood thinners. So when he tore all the stuff out of his arm, his blood started spraying everywhere. He started crying out “Help me, help me,” and so I took the pillowcase off his pillow and wrapped it around his arm to stop the bleeding. I had to press really hard. I thought he was going to break. He was so fragile.

His blood got all over my hands.

I probably have AIDS now or something. That's what I get for showing kindness to strangers.

No one ever talks about AIDS anymore. Not like they used to anyway. Now it's all about Y2K. When I was a kid, AIDS was all the rage, so-to-speak. Grown-ups used to scare the crap outta me telling me AIDS horror stories. And that was only a few years ago! What happened?

Well, I, for one, have not forgotten the tales of the AIDS boogeyman of Olde. And I don't think pinning some stupid ribbon to my chest is going to make a difference. It's not going to protect you, and it certainly isn't a cure...

But I digress.

I love that word. Digress.

But I digress about digressing.

So there I was at the ER, washing an old man's blood off my hands... And then my dad makes some crack. I forget what it was (so sue me, it was past 3am by that point!) and I made a surprisingly witty retort. And some random people started laughing!



Everyone was so close together in that room that everyone was in everyone else's business. You couldn't even *blink* in that place without someone else hearing it.

So, what the heck, right? My dad and I took it upon ourselves to entertain the troops. We started cracking jokes and racing wheelchairs down the hall like they were Mario karts. We were zooming around—really showboating!—for our captivated crowd.

Then, and this was the best bit, we stole a couple of surgical masks and started singing Soft Cell's "Tainted Love" to the beep-beep of some guy's heart monitor. Just like that Levi's commercial from when I was a kid! Man, we thought we were *so* clever. And some of the other patients even joined in. It was an honest-to-God musical number, right there in the emergency room.

The guy even flat-lined—right on cue!

Except, there was no one around to bring him back.

I can only hope that "Tainted Love" just happened to be his favorite song. It was the last thing he ever heard.

Once there was a dead body next to her, that's when Mom decided that her situation wasn't so dire after all. She just got up and walked out! We were there, stuck in the bowels of hell, because she was in "so much pain," for nine and a half hours...and she just got up and *walked out*.

I haven't had that much fun with my dad in a long, long time now. It was nice.

You know, except for the dead guy.

## CHAPTER NINE

“Why don’t we ever hang out together anymore?” my mom asked me one day.

Not this again. I pretended like I didn’t hear her. It wasn’t too hard. I had a book open in front of me—I just pretended to read it.

“Remember how we used to rent movies together?” she prodded. “We’d get a movie and you’d get chocolate-covered cherries and I’d get those mint things and we’d swap? Whatever happened to that?”

I sighed, closing my book.

“We never did that, Mom,” I said.

“Yes we did,” she insisted. “Remember? We rented *A Bug’s Life* and you said that you’d always had a crush on Dave Foley ever since he was on that TV show with—“

“Mom,” I said, stopping her mid-sentence. “That was Sis. I don’t even know who Dave Foley is. You did all that with Sis.”

“Huh?” she said, looking confused.

“We didn’t do any of that,” I said.

“But we used to hang out all the time,” she insisted again. “Remember a couple years ago when we saw *Titanic* together? We saw it in theaters! And I told you that I knew it was going to be a big deal and you didn’t even bother to listen to me!” She paused to laugh, tears coming to her eyes. “You were so angry that she let him go into the water! I ate all the popcorn and you didn’t even notice because you were so mad at that girl in the movie.”

“It sounds like you had a great time,” I said, “but I wasn’t there for that either.”

Mom looked at me, confused. She looked like she was about to cry. I didn’t know what to say. We had been over this before. We had done all this many, many times before.

“I’m going to be sick,” she said, looking up at me.

Ah. Something *else* we’d been through many, many times before.

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I was stuck in the elevator.

I guess it was bound to happen sooner or later. You go to hospitals enough times, you travel in elevators enough times, sooner or later you're going to get stuck.

I was stuck in general, I thought. I was supposed to be in summer school right now, getting a jump on high school. I had dropped out in order to take care of my mother.

So much for graduating a year early.

I wanted to get through high school as quickly as possible. I knew it was up to me to provide for my family, and that I was going to have to be quick about it. I was counting the months until my birthday—the birthday that would let me get a work permit. I wouldn't even *go* to high school if the government wasn't forcing me to. It's not like I was ever going to "be" anything when I grew up. I was designed to be a worker drone. Gotta make money for the Queen.

In middle school, people kept telling me that "this was the time to start getting serious." High school. These were the grades that "mattered," the ones that would set my future. Get me into college.

Yeah.

Right.

I'd met some high school kids. A group of "best students" from the new magnet school that had opened up came and spoke in the auditorium at the end of the year, trying to prepare all us middle schoolers for what was coming...

Apparently all you need to be a “best student” in high school is the ability to fog a mirror.

I waited in the elevator for someone to come get me un-stuck. Eventually a repairman in overalls (Can you believe it? How cliché!) came and got me out.

I was on the wrong floor.

But I knew this floor well. It was the Maternity Ward.

Long before my mother became “ill,” she would have us stop by the hospital on full moon nights.

On full moon nights, it was always packed. Something about the full moon seems to put a lot of ladies into labor. We’d stand there and stare at the babies. Around us would be the new fathers and other relatives who had stopped by to welcome them into the world.

They kept the newborns behind glass. It was a bit like going to the zoo or an aquarium. Except they were little people in miniature hospital beds.

The glass was soundproof so you couldn’t tell if they were screaming or yawning.

My mom would stare at all the babies and smile. She’d point out all the cutest ones and the ones that had “personality.”

My dad and I were a bit indifferent to it all, I guess. We were a lot alike back then. We were amused by her pleasure, but we also had better things to be doing than looking at someone else’s kids.

I used to think sometimes that my mom wanted another baby... Now I think maybe she wanted to *be* one of those babies.

To have her whole life ahead of her; to be filled with so much potential...

I guess Mom didn't really have much of a childhood. She was never the "favorite" child—her younger sister filled that role. It had to hurt to be the lesser of only two children. To be the Tails-side of an otherwise lucky coin.

She wasn't treated very well.

My mom's own mother died when she was only a few years older than I am now. They never really got to make amends. She never really got the mother she always wanted. The childhood she'd always desired.

She never got to be taken care of.

I turned the corner and there it was. That wall of glass with all the newborns behind it. I stopped and stared at them for a moment. Nearly all of them were sleeping.

It all seemed so pointless.

I had to get back to the right floor. I didn't want to go back. I just wanted to get out of there.

## CHAPTER TEN

It was the Fourth of July.

I'd been going for walks with Allison Gale on a near-daily basis for about a month. My mother had decided that she "felt sick" and demanded that my father take her to the hospital. But, for whatever reason, she had me stay home this time. "To watch the fireworks," she had said.

Since there was no one home to have to explain her to (or them to her), I invited Allison to my house for the first time. She said she'd be over as soon as she was done scooping out her cat's litter box—a task she described as "kind of like raking a Zen garden, but with poop in it."

I guess not having a sense of smell did have *some* advantages, but I gotta say that still grossed me out.

She came over in the late afternoon and immediately asked me if I had any chocolate milk. Some houseguest!

"If you can't taste the chocolate in chocolate milk, why bother drinking it at all?" I asked.

"It's still refreshing," she said. "And I like the pleasant brown color." She blushed a bit and added, "Plus the sugar gives me a bit of a buzz."

I shrugged. To each their own. I was never a fan of chocolate milk, but she had gotten me in the mood for it. Group mentality, I guess. I wonder what that says about me? Oh, well.

I rummaged through the kitchen cupboard and found the syrup. Ugh. Sugar-free. I held it up for Allison to see.

"Sugar-free chocolate syrup. Such a...I don't know. It's not the taste," I said, playing with the bottle in my hands. "At least not with this brand

anyway. I know you won't be able to taste it, but it's actually really good. *Too* good. If you gave it to me and I hadn't seen the bottle, I wouldn't be able to tell the difference between this and the real stuff. It drives me insane. Makes me wonder what else in my life is fake—an imitation—pretending to be real.”

“Oh, I don't know,” she shrugged, taking the bottle from my hands and heading over to our fridge to prepare the milks. “I think people like a certain amount of ersatz in their lives. A lot of things are artificial or pretending to be something they aren't... People, for instance, must always be ‘fine’ when asked how they are or they're looked at as abnormal. People who are genuine are often seen as bizarre. Sociopaths.”

“I wouldn't go that far,” I said.

“No, it's true. You're looking at me like I'm a weirdo right now. The thing is, are you really appalled by my point of view or are you backing away slowly because that's what's expected of you?”

She got me. I didn't know what to say. I just stood there like a total doofus, gaping at her. She handed me my cup of chocolate milk and said,

“We don't want fake. But we don't want reality either. We want a *better* reality. And to do that, we have to fake it.”

I went into the next room, suddenly feeling very grown up. I was alone in the house on a holiday, talking about psychology with a peer. I sat down on the couch and sipped my chocolate milk. I felt myself wishing it were coffee. Not so much because I preferred the taste or that I needed the caffeine (I was awake enough, thanks), but because it would have added to the whole “grown up” illusion that I was beginning to enjoy.

Allison stopped by our fireplace mantel and I felt myself cringe. I stood up, hurrying to usher her into the next room, but it was too late. She was already reaching up...



“Is this you?” she asked, holding up one of the picture frames that lined our mantel.

“No,” I said.

She squinted at the picture. “She looks just like you,” she said. “It’s the hair mostly, I guess. Same haircut. And the same make-up.”

The picture was of a girl, older than I am now (but she looked young for her age). She had short black hair and brown eyes lined thickly with eyeliner. My mom was in the picture too, with her arm around the girl. She was laughing.

“It’s not me,” I said. “It’s Sis.”

“Oh,” she said, putting the picture back down.

Before she could ask questions, I reminded her that it was the Fourth of July and that we should head outside if we were going to watch any fireworks.

The noise was deafening, but it wasn’t enough to drown out my thoughts.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

The following week, I was in the park with Allison again. It was hot out and I hadn't had much sleep, but I was enjoying her company. It was coming on mid-July and I'd been hanging around her for about a month and a half. I'd gotten pretty used to having her around.

"So, are we friends now?" asked Allison, almost as if she'd read my thoughts.

"Yeah," I said. "I think of you as a friend."

"So then..." Allison started nervously, "Would you like to go farther with me?"

I didn't know what to say. I turned away, suddenly feeling very awkward. The tips of my ears were burning.

I'd gotten propositioned by girls a few times since I'd cut my hair. I guess it goes with the territory—being flat-chested with short hair... And I'm not especially fashionable. They'd asked me if I wanted to "experiment" with *their* sexuality. Theirs. Not mine. I probably don't even have a sexuality. I don't have that kind of time.

"Look," I said, "I really like you, but I'm not... I mean... It's nothing personal. I don't really want to go with boys either."

Allison looked confused. With anyone else, this probably would have been my first hint that something was wrong; however, Allison *always* looked a little confused, so I pressed on.

"I like things with you the way they are," I said. "There's no need for us to go any further."

“Oh,” said Allison, disappointed. “Well, if you really want to just stay at the park... I was hoping we could go farther, but if you don’t trust me enough yet, that’s okay.”

Okay. Now I was the one who was confused.

“Wait,” I said, holding my hands up in the nationally-recognized ‘time out’ gesture. “What are you talking about?”

“I wanted to go farther with you,” said Allison. She then spaced her hands out as if she were showing me how big the catch of the day was. “Faaaaaaaaaaaaarther.”

It looked more like she wanted to go *wider* with me, but I didn’t argue. I motioned for her to continue.

“Distance,” she said. “I want to go a farther distance... To a different park! But I didn’t know if you trusted me enough yet to go that far with me alone.”

Oh.

*Oh!*

So that’s what she meant! My face flushed. I nodded.

“I’d love to go farther with you,” I said.

Allison looked elated. “That’s fantastic!” she said. “Let’s meet on the sidewalk corner, yeah? We’ll need an early start. It’s about four or five miles from here!”

Five miles? Jeez. What had I gotten myself into?

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“Look!” my mom said, holding it up to my face. “It’s a hamster!”

“I can see that,” I said.

“Like the website,” she elaborated, doing a little shimmy.

“Yeah,” I said. “That’s...that’s great.”

My head was reeling. I went to my room, closed the door, and let out a breath I didn’t even realize I was holding.

A hamster. My mother had bought herself a pet hamster.

I felt betrayed.

My mother had time to care for a pet hamster? To *love* a pet hamster? *My* mother?

Last I checked, my mother didn’t even take care of herself! No, she expected *me* to do that... And I’m only 14! I’m not exactly a child anymore, but I’m still too young to be taking care of a child of my own—especially a 40-year-old one who was “mysteriously ill” all the time.

How could she? How *dare* she?

How could my mother invest time and love into a hamster, but not her own daughter?

I fell asleep with my face buried in my pillow, my face soaked with my hot, angry tears. I couldn't *wait* to go on that five-mile walk with Allison in the morning.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

I woke up at 8am that morning. It was a Tuesday, but days of the week never seem to matter when you're on summer vacation.

I checked my calendar to see if I was allowed to take a shower that day. That was...a new thing. My dad's current job didn't pay as much as the last one he'd had and I was told we'd all have to make money-saving "cut backs" here and there, like on water usage and so on.

Except...well...my dad got to take daily showers because he had to be presentable for work, and my mother took daily showers because she was "sick" and therefore entitled to special treatment.

In other words, no one was chipping in on the whole water conservation thing except me.

Whatever. In a few more months, I'd be 15. I'd get that work permit and start pitching in cash. Once I had some monetary worth, I'd start showering regularly again. Until then, I'd chip in any way I could. Even if it meant I was a stink factory on some days. Teenage hormones and not showering don't exactly mix.

Tuesday was a shower day, but I decided to save it for later. I figured after walking five miles with Allison, I might actually *need* it. Like, really need it.

I hit play on my tape deck and started getting dressed. It might sound weird, but for the last few months I'd taken to listening to "Dreams" by Fleetwood Mac every morning as I got ready to face the day. I mean that. Every. Day. I had it on an old cassette and every morning I'd play it, listen, and then rewind it for the next morning. I often woke up feeling angry for "no reason" and, for whatever reason, that song had a calming effect on me. Not a lot of my friends liked oldies, but they didn't know what they were missing.

*“Dreams of loneliness, like a heartbeat drive you mad. In the stillness of remembering what you had, and what you lost...”*

It was a sweltering 90-something degrees out, but I passed over my assortment of tank tops and went for my favorite t-shirt. I liked this shirt because I could raise my arms in it and it didn't show my armpits. I hadn't worn a tank top since I'd hit puberty.

I wasn't allowed to shave. My legs and armpits were a hairy mess. I did take some comfort in seeing Sarah Michelle Gellar's abundance of forearm hair on the rare occasions I got to watch *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* on TV, but I also knew that Ms. Gellar wasn't sporting tumbleweeds in the folds of her upper arms.

You see, even though my peers were shaving in elementary school, my mother wouldn't let me shave until I was done with middle school. Because that's how it was done “in her day.” Then I put it off for one more year because my mom had said that once I started shaving, that I wouldn't be her little girl anymore. That she would lose me as her daughter because I'd be all grown up. I couldn't do that to her, no matter how much personal shame and ridicule it brought me. I just couldn't do it.

She had already lost so much.

Then again, after last night, I might change my mind. If my mom wanted something furry in her life to baby, she could just use her hamster.

For the time being, I put on my t-shirt with the slightly-longer-than-average sleeves. It was a little heavier than I would have liked for the weather, but you'd be surprised what you can get used to if you do something often enough—your internal thermometer is not immune to acclimatization if you force it to. Wear warm clothes in the hot weather for long enough and your body just starts to think it's normal. Even if everyone around you is giving you funny looks.

I pulled on my jeans—to cover my hairy legs, naturally—and finished tying my shoes. I put the final touches on my eyeliner right as the song ended.

*“When the rain washes you clean, you’ll know...”*



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I met Allison at what had become our “usual” spot on the sidewalk.

“So which way is this ‘other’ park?” I asked.

To the West, the road sloped down into the Valley—where all the poor people lived. To the East, the road led up into the mountainous areas—where the rich lived. It seemed only fitting somehow that the upper class would live on a higher elevation...

“That way,” Allison said, pointing toward the mountains.

I nodded. Inside I was a little disappointed. It had been a while since I’d been to the Valley. I used to go there all the time when I was a kid.

I used to like to talk to the homeless people. To most, they were just a part of the landscape—they were permanent “fixtures” to the area, like an over-sized rock that everyone liked to sit on or a particularly twisted tree families had been having picnics under for generations. People were aware of them, but they were something to be passed by.

The first homeless man I’d ever stopped and talked to had a harmonica. I didn’t really know what a harmonica was before that, but I’d recognized the sound from listening to Barry McGuire’s “Eve of Destruction” on the radio. I told him so. He told me he knew the song and that it was one of his favorites as he’d been in the Vietnam War.

I mentioned that the song was in protest of the war and he told me “as it should be.” He talked about some of the horrors he’d seen. The death. How his buddy had sacrificed himself—throwing his body on a grenade—to save *his* life.

He told me how he had always wanted to be worthy of being saved. To make his friend's death mean something. But, in the end, he was a coward. He told me he blew off his own big toe (and part of the one next to it) with his own gun just so he could be sent back home.

I remember looking at his worn out old boots and noting that they looked vaguely military in nature. I wondered if they were the same boots he'd worn during the war. And then realized that, inside those boots, he only had eight and a half toes...

And then he cried. Silently. Tears were coming out of his eyes, but he didn't make a sound. His story was over.

He went back to playing his harmonica. I gave him a quarter. It was all I had.

A lot of the homeless people I've met have been war veterans. You can almost always tell. They always bring a piece of the war back with them. Usually in the way they dress. They always have a piece of clothing on them that's military, whether it's their shoes or part of their old fatigues. Apparently army jackets are pretty durable against the elements. But I guess that's to be expected. If I were in the military, I'd want my jacket to be nearly invincible. From what I've heard, sometimes the clothes are all that's left of the man.

One homeless veteran I talked with was particularly chatty. He was more than happy to tell me no end of stories. He would hang out by the donut shop. He was in a wheel chair and had a long beard and scruffy hair. But he had startling olive green eyes. They matched his jacket, but they shone out of his dirty face like gems hidden in stone.

He told me that he wasn't a "bum." He preferred the term "hobo."

When I asked him the difference between a bum and a hobo, he told me that they were the same, but hobos liked to travel—which is what he did. He made it clear from the beginning that eventually he'd be leaving me for "greener pastures." He said that eventually he'd become part of the

scenery and people would no longer be willing to give him change. They wouldn't even notice him anymore.

One time it was raining and I was very concerned for him. I told him so. It was the one time he touched me. He looked up at me and gave me a gentle pat on the elbow and smiled.

“Don't you worry about me, Sweetie,” he said. “The rain...makes people generous.”

He said that when people saw him sitting there in the rain in his wheel chair, getting soaked to the bone, they were more willing to hand over their pocket change. He said on rainy days, he made more money than on any other day. He said that night he expected to be eating a hot meal. He might even get a dessert.

He also joked that he was getting a free shower.

Eventually he left for greener pastures. I saw him get onto the bus. They had to lower the special ramp to let him get on. He didn't see me. Didn't even look back.

I haven't seen him since.

He was replaced by a bum with only one eye.

I asked him about it. I was just a child; I didn't know any better.

He told me that he was born that way. That his eye had never formed. Where there should have been an eye was just a mass of flesh. Like an eye-patch made of skin that was permanently affixed to his face.

He had a long ponytail, but the top of his hair was akin to Einstein's hair—all over the place. His personality was a bit “all over the place” too.

His thoughts were scattered and he was a little bit scary. He was angry all the time, but for no reason in particular.

He told me he wished he'd been born without *both* his eyes. He said that the world was sick and we were all just tumors infecting it. That humans were no more than a walking disease. And he was tired of seeing us. He was so tired.

Then there was the lady bum. Or so we all thought.

She was blonde with skin like old leather. She stood outside the supermarket with her cup, asking the passing cars for change. Everyone liked her. She was the Miss America of the homeless community.

One day a curious reporter stayed until after dark. He saw her hop into a car and drive East, to the rich part of town.

She went home to a mansion.

It was in all the papers. She was exposed. There was public outrage for a few weeks.

No one likes to feel ripped off.

It's one thing to be generous; it's another to be taken for a fool just for the sake of feeding someone's neurosis.

Her scam made it hard on the real homeless. No one wanted to give anymore. "What if they're faking it?" No one wanted to take the chance.

None of them had names.

Then again, neither do I. Not anymore.

“You ready to go, Bandit?” Allison asked. “We should get going before it heats up too much.”

“Absolutely,” I said.

We took off down the sidewalk and headed East, into the freshly risen sun.

## **CHAPTER FOURTEEN**

We had been walking for about two hours. We'd passed by block after block of residential neighborhood and were finally coming up on the local shopping strip.

It was very quaint. The locals joked that it was the "Mayberry" of the area. It looked fake. Like a movie set. You expected to go around to the back of the buildings and have them not be there—to just see plywood.

A cherished joke among the locals was that they rolled up the sidewalks at night. If you lived in the area, you grew up hearing it.

Allison stopped in front of the toy store. Their window proudly displayed hand-crafted wooden toys along with the more-expected name-brand toys. It was a good mix: Enough oddities to make them special with enough normalcies to not be off-putting.

I watched as Allison leaned in to peer more closely at the baby toys. She looked up at me.

"You think you'll ever have kids some day?"

"No," I said. "If I wanted to constantly clean up after someone who doesn't appreciate me, I could just stay living with my mom forever."

She thought about my answer and then smiled.

"I wonder if my future kids will be able to smell things," she said.

At just the mere mention of the ability, my sense of smell woke up. I was suddenly aware of the scent of the trees and the flowers in the shop's window planter. Smelling. It was something I did all the time, but didn't even realize it. I took it for granted.

“I was born able to smell the world,” Allison said. “I just don’t remember it...”

“What happened?”

“My parents... They didn’t mean to. They wanted to paint my crib red because they’d heard it increased brain activity—that it was a stimulating color for babies—but I was sleeping at the time and they didn’t want to disturb me,” she said. “So they painted the crib while I was still in it. The problem was, they painted it with cadmium red. It’s very poisonous. I was surrounded by it and couldn’t get away. I breathed in too much of it. And, well, it was the last thing I *ever* smelled...”

“Parents will mess you up,” I said, but then conceded a little by adding, “Even if they don’t mean to.”

Allison shrugged in semi-agreement. “I’ll probably ‘mess up’ my kids somehow too. But it won’t matter. Everyone grows up differently, and the world just keeps changing.”

Huh?

“You want to go eat?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Sure.”

We walked down the block to the diner on the corner. It was built in the 1980s, but, like most diners, was eternally trapped in the late 1950s.

The jukebox near the entrance was a dead giveaway.

The hostess gave us the hairy eyeball. “Just you?” she asked. We nodded. She sighed and led us to the back. Guess she thought a couple of kids wouldn’t be spending much money.

We got the menus. There was the usual diner fare. Fried goods, breakfast dishes, about ten variations on your basic cheeseburger, and the occasional “health food” item hidden away in the back.

“I don’t want anything,” said Allison. “I ate before I left.”

Figures. Now I was going to be the weirdo eating by herself.

At least I wasn’t physically by myself. There are few things more depressing than someone eating at a diner alone.

I looked around to see if I could spot anyone by themselves. There was always one.

I spotted him. He was seated diagonally from us, staring into space.

He got up to use the payphone. We were within earshot of said payphone, so I did what any bored teenager would do in that situation: I eavesdropped.

“I just got out,” he said. “The doc...he said it’s terminal...No...No...Inoperable....No. No....Don’t cry...No...Maybe a few weeks, maybe less. Maybe if I’d gone in sooner...No...Look, I’m going to get something to eat. Then I’ll be back. I need a little time...Yeah. Yeah, okay. I’ll be back right after....You too. Bye.”

I averted my eyes from him as he walked back to his table. But I couldn’t keep my eyes from boring into him once he’d been seated.

Terminal. A few weeks to live. Good God.

I looked him over. He was balding, just on the top of his head, but didn’t do the whole comb-over thing. So he was realistic. I liked that in a person.



He was also wearing a jacket that had “Inventor’s Club” embroidered on the back in gold letters. I wondered if he’d invented anything.

He looked like he was in his forties or thereabouts. I wasn’t the best at guessing ages. He looked like he was old enough to have lived...but still too young to die.

I watched him intently as the waitress took his order. What does a dying man eat? This could very well be his last time visiting a sit-down restaurant. This could be the last food order he ever makes.

“I’d like the house salad, no dressing, and a strawberry malt with extra whipped cream,” he said.

Huh. Go figure.

I looked across the table at Allison. I could tell that she’d been eavesdropping too.

“Was it sudden?” she asked.

“Was what sudden?”

“The death in your family.”

I stiffened.

It’s always sudden. Death.

Even if the person has been dying for ages—if they’ve had some sort of prolonged illness—their death will be sudden. The way they’re here one minute and gone the next.

That moment when they leave you behind...

It's *always* sudden.

Out loud, all I said was, "Yes."

I ordered the double-bacon cheeseburger and onion rings. Allison and I both drank water.

Guess that hostess was right about kids being cheapskates.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“How much further is it?”

My heels were starting to drag. We’d been walking for nearly 4 hours. We’d long since left the shopping district behind and had climbed uphill into the wealthy residential neighborhood.

“It’s right around this corner,” said Allison.

When we turned the corner, the landscape changed. We had stepped onto an enormous parking lot. What the heck?

“Exactly what kind of a park is this?” I asked.

“A really, really *big* one,” answered Allison.

We had been walking for miles, but I was somehow reinvigorated. I don’t know if I hadn’t been as tired as I originally thought (maybe I’d been secretly working out in my sleep?) or if my curiosity had given me a second wind, but I couldn’t wait to get across that parking lot. I doubled my strides and arrived at the entrance in no time at all.

There was a small line-up of people waiting to get in. Allison and I lined up behind them. Allison paid and went in first, waiting for me just beyond the entrance.

“Five dollars,” said the boy at the register. (He was a teenager, not much older than I was).

“I don’t have that much,” I said. I’d spent the bulk of my money on lunch.

“Well, it’s only two dollars if you have a student ID with you,” he said.

Ugh. Well, all right. I didn’t have a choice.

I hated my ID card. I had graduated 8<sup>th</sup> grade only a couple months ago, but it already seemed so long ago. And I looked so babyish in my ID card photo.

I fished it out of my wallet and handed it over.

“You look different,” said the boy.

“I dyed my hair.”

“In the picture or in real life?”

I laughed. The picture had been real life at one point. That’s exactly what a picture is: Proof that you had lived through that moment in time.

“Um, in real life?” I said. “My hair now isn’t the real me.”

“Oh, okay,” he said. “Two dollars.”

As I handed over the money (relieved that I still had enough to place a payphone call if there was an emergency), I asked him, “What is this place, anyway? It’s not a park, right?”

“It’s a botanical garden,” he said, adding, “Over 150 acres of land filled to the brim with natural wonders! There’s the, uh, rosarium, the bird sanctuary by the lake, the oak forest, the...um... Well, there’s lots of stuff. This is my first summer volunteering here. I don’t have it all down yet. It’s big.”

Wow. That big, huh?

I joined Allison on the other side of the entrance gate.

“Did you want to look in the gift shop?” she said, gesturing toward a small building to our right.

“No,” I said. “I can see the inside of a store any old time. I wanna see this giant garden!”

She smiled and nodded, heading off down the path, past a food court. So far, I wasn’t impressed. It didn’t seem that great. Just as I was about to say so, I saw it.

It was...massive.

I didn’t know where to look first. In front of us there was a gigantic lawn of lush green grass. To our left, there was a Japanese rock garden, contentiously raked so every smidge of gravel was in place. To our right, there was a gigantic oak tree—it must have been hundreds of years old—with colorful flowers surrounding its base.

And those were just the things I could see right off the bat. This place went on for miles! Or it looked like it did at least. Not really sure how many miles are in 150 acres. But it was *big*.

And it was beautiful.

Everywhere I looked, there were trees and flowers and...life.

I think I may have literally gasped aloud. I stood there, glued to the spot, unable to take it all in. It was as if my brain had short-circuited.

“Which way do you want to go first?” asked Allison.

I chose to go to the right.

Just past the huge old oak was the rosarium the boy had mentioned (I could smell the roses!) and a large planter of red, orange, and yellow flowers. They were flowers I’d often seen growing around this time of year, scattered about here and there, but I’d never seen so many of them collected in one space.

“The orange ones are our state flower,” said Allison. “They’re illegal to pick.”

“I’m not even going to ask how you know that,” I said. “I can already guess.”

She grinned sheepishly and I laughed.

It felt like I was *really* able to laugh. Like the extra oxygen from all the trees and plants had filled my lungs to the brim and I’d expelled it heartily. I laughed again just to feel it rumble in my chest.

As we walked, I looked around me. I looked everywhere! Right, left, forward, behind—even up at the sky! Everywhere I turned, there were things to see. It was another world. A cleaner, better world.

Allison’s voice broke my thoughts: “You’d better get off the tracks.”

Huh?

I looked down to see I’d been standing on miniature railroad tracks—no more than a foot wide, but fully functional. I followed the tracks with my eyes and saw a replica diesel train (painted a cheery yellow) up ahead. I laughed.

On the train sat several (ahem) rotund older women, children of various ages (the youngest was a baby sitting in one of the plump women's arms), and a thin old man wearing an engineer's uniform sitting at the front. They looked ridiculous straddling the tiny train, waiting for the ride to start.

"You want to go on?" asked Allison.

"It's a ride for kids," I said.

"We are kids," she said, adding, "Plus it's pretty exciting if you sit in the back. It has a crack-the-whip effect."

Well, what the heck, right?

We ran up to the back of the train and crouched down, straddling its "body." The elderly man at the front pulled out a wooden train whistle and blew it twice ("whoooooo-whooooooooooooo") and called out "A!! aboard!" A small crowd of people gathered around to see us off, waving at us. I felt my face flush, but smiled and waved back anyway.

I felt the train start up beneath us. It rumbled to life and started off down the track.

Even though it was small, and even though we were crouched on it awkwardly, it felt like we were riding on a real train. That feeling of the tracks underneath us. Of the train gripping them as it propelled itself forward.

I looked around at the passing scenery—a sneak preview of what we might be seeing next. Everywhere I looked there were trees and flowers. We even passed over a stream!

It reminded me of the time I'd been on a train as a small child. I was about nine years old, I guess. It was the first time I'd made a trip on my own.

My mother had decided that it was important for me to meet my extended family. So she sent me off to see her grandfather, my great grandfather.

She knew she had a pretty big personality and that I was a bit shy, so she sent me out ahead of her and Dad so I'd have a chance to get a word in edgewise and *really* get to know the guy. I guess she thought if she was there with me all along I'd just fade into the background until the trip was over. Which was probably true.

So there I was, on my first train ride, alone. I remember looking out the large window and watching all of the scenery pass by. How each town we passed through was distinctly different. Some were good, some were bad, some were bustling with people, some were practically ghost towns. I also saw a lot of graffiti scrawled on the tunnels and in the storm drains. I learned a lot of new (bad) words that day.

I enjoyed the journey so much, I wasn't sure I wanted to arrive at the destination.

When I finally arrived at the final train station in my great grandfather's town, I remember being confused. It looked more like one of the California Missions I'd been to than a train station. The architecture was very...robust. There were arches everywhere and it had a red tile roof and a courtyard with flowerbeds in brick planters. I almost didn't get off the train.

Fortunately, the conductor had been told to keep an eye on me and made sure to give me the boot.

My great grandfather was waiting for me.

He was a very tall man—definitely over six foot—and looked like he worked out. Not like some super muscleman or anything, but he looked



fit, you know? Like an old movie star, but with no hair. He was an intimidating figure, but I instantly liked him.

We stopped to eat at a Denny's before heading back to his place. It didn't seem to matter how far away I went, there was always a Denny's. He had the chicken fried steak. I don't remember what I had. But I do remember the waitress gave me a pack of crayons and a small orange & green dinosaur toy.

I also remember him dipping his French fries in malt vinegar. I tried it too, but it was too strong for me. He said I'd like it when I was older. He was right: I kinda do. But only in small doses. Maybe I'm still not old enough.

His town smelled sweet and sour at the same time. He said it was because he lived next to both an orange orchard and an oil drill. Oranges and oil. It was a strange smell, but it was distinct. I can almost smell it now just thinking about it.

When we got to his home, there was a bowl of Cheez-Its on the table, about a dozen cans of chicken noodle soup in the cupboard, and bottles and bottles of cream soda in the refrigerator. I asked him if that was all he ate and he shrugged and said, "That and marzipan."

He had a pillow shaped like a duck on the couch. He said that his town had been founded by a couple of men who had stumbled upon it while out duck hunting. I liked that pillow. It was flat like a regular pillow, but certain details of it popped out here and there.

Great gramps offered me his bed to sleep in, but I insisted on sleeping on the couch. I wanted to stay with the duck pillow. I missed my stuffed animals back home and wanted something to hold onto. The dinosaur toy from Denny's just wasn't snuggly enough.

He offered to sing me a song in German if I promised not to tell anyone. I was a bit old for lullabies at bedtime, but I couldn't resist a chance at hearing this giant of a man belt out a song in his native tongue. I nodded.

His singing voice was fantastic. The song wasn't a lullaby at all, but something very rollicking that involved a lot of what looked to be marching and several punches in the air. It was pretty exciting!

"What was that?" I asked him. "What did you just sing?"

A sly smile crawled across his face. "I can't tell you," he said. "Maybe when you're older."

"Does it not translate?" I pressed.

"It does. But...let me put it this way...I don't actually know any songs for children. So I sang one I do know," he said, adding, "Don't tell your mother."

The song remained our little secret. I never did get to find out what it was.

My parents met up with us the next day and although I stayed with my great grandpa for three days in total, that first day alone with him remained my favorite.

He passed on two years ago, but I was all right with it for the most part. He missed out on being 100-years-old by only three months. I wish he'd been able to make it; but 99 is pretty darn good, I'd say. He'd lived a very full life.

The train trip to see him had taken hours, but it was well worth it.

My train trip with Allison was over almost as quickly as it had begun. We'd arrived back where we started and were instructed to get off. My legs were a bit wobbly at first—I felt extremely tall!—but I got my "land legs" back quickly.

I was anxious to continue our journey.

“Where do we go next?” I asked. “Which of these paths do we take?”

“Oh, any of them will do,” shrugged Allison. “But we could also go that way.”

I followed where her finger was pointing. All I saw was dirt and trees. It looked like an honest-to-God forest straight out of a fairytale. But the kind with the gnarled oak trees, mysterious mushrooms, mossy rocks, and questionable brambles that red riding hood had to go through on her way to visit her grandma. Or the type the hero wandered through before finding the tower with the princess.

“There’s no path there,” I said.

“Does there need to be?” asked Allison. “We’re allowed to go anywhere so long as it doesn’t strictly say otherwise. We just have to watch out for snakes and poison ivy and stuff...”

“Let me get this straight,” I said, barely daring to believe it. “We can go *anywhere* we want in this place? We can just...wander?”

“Sure,” said Allison. “I mean, there’s a lot of stuff to see on the main path too, but I like going my own way. It’s quieter. Just, you know, watch out for snakes and—“

“Poison ivy. Got it.”

“And spiders. They won’t hurt you, but it feels ‘ucky to walk through their webs.”

“I don’t mind spiders,” I said. “And I’m wearing hi-tops, so I feel pretty good about the snakes. I’ll just stamp my feet or something to let ‘em know I’m coming. Let’s go already!”

And, just like that, we left the real world behind us. We had entered the forest.

## **CHAPTER SIXTEEN**

Allison was certainly right about there being a lot of spiders. I saw some that had hindquarters nearly the size of a dime (counting the legs they were about the size of a quarter). I kid you not. They were huge!

“That’s a cross orb-weaver,” said Allison as we dodged the fifth or sixth one that was blocking our path. “You can tell ‘cause of its round body and round web!”

“They’re the only ones who make a web like that?” I asked.

“Well, pretty much, yeah,” she said. “Orb-weavers have round webs like that, no matter what kind they are.”

I thought about the title character from *Charlotte’s Web*, a book I’d read in elementary school, and realized that she probably looked like the orb-weavers we’d been passing. I giggled to myself thinking of Charlotte being introduced to the audience with “Baby Got Back” as her theme music.

“Their webs are beautiful,” I noted, peering closer at the one closest to us.

“Oh, it’ll make a new one by tonight,” said Allison. “Once evening starts to come, it’ll consume this web and start building a fresh one.”

“I can’t imagine a new web being better than this one.”

“Doesn’t have to be,” she said. “It just has to be just as good. Also, keep your arms up as we pass by this next part. There’s a lot of poison oak sticking out. You don’t want it to touch your skin.”

We were deep into the thick of things now and seemed to be heading upward.

At first, I could still hear the other garden visitors chatting around us. We were still close enough to the main paths to hear voices, sometimes even catch a glimpse of someone walking by, but not anymore. We were somewhere civilization had forgotten.

The “path” we had chosen for ourselves was getting more and more difficult to navigate, but I had no doubt in my mind that it was leading us *somewhere*.

Allison stopped suddenly, thrusting her hand back to grab my arm, forcing me to halt.

I stood stark still. Was it a snake? I started to doubt my earlier confidence in my hi-tops’ abilities to shield my ankles sufficiently from poisonous bites. It also dawned on me that no one knew we were here.

“Shhh,” cautioned Allison.

She gently motioned for me to step up beside her.

It wasn’t a snake.

It was a deer.

He hadn’t seen us. He was on the small side with a few of those little white spots on his sides. I knew he was a baby because of cartoons I’d seen as a child (as embarrassing as it is to admit some of my real-world knowledge stems from cartoons). He must have been born in the late spring. Since it was only summer, he was probably still at the age where he still needed his mother.

And then there she was. Appearing out of the thick with a second fawn at her side. A beautiful doe. She had gigantic eyes and large ears. She was nearly the same color as the bark of the oak trees that surrounded us—sort of a grayish brown—and I could have easily lost sight of her had I not had my eyes locked on her every movement.

She dipped her black nose to the ground, nibbling on something light green growing out of the ground. Grass? I wasn't sure.

“What are they doing here?” I whispered.

“They must have jumped the fence at the top of the mountain,” Allison whispered back. “They do that sometimes. They like to eat the roses and the camellias.”

I tried to imagine eating flowers, but all I could think of were the kind made out of hard icing they sometimes decorate cakes with.

“So they're not supposed to be here?”

“According to the garden, no” whispered Allison. “But the deer probably feel differently.”

I watched the doe and her two fawns shuffling through the leaves on the ground to find the edible greens underneath. It was hard to believe that such delicate nibbling could ever be considered destructive.

And then my heart stopped.

“Oh God,” I whispered, tugging on Allison's hand. “It's a buck.”

I felt as if the atmosphere had immediately changed. He was an intimidating presence—larger than the doe, and he had antlers!

“Should we tell someone?” I asked. “What if he gores someone...?”

Allison seemed un-phased by the situation. She smiled.

“But, what if he doesn’t?” she whispered back.

We watched them. The family of deer. They were moving as a single unit now, walking together as a clump—the buck and doe in the back with the two fawn walking together in front of them. They looked as though they were pulling an invisible carriage.

We watched them until they disappeared, bounding off in the other direction. A happy family off to their next destination.

Allison and I continued our trek up the mountain, finally reaching the top.

A rusted chainlink fence stood at the peak, creating a border between the garden and the *real* wilderness that lay beyond it.

It was so hot I had to take off my make-up. My eyeliner and mascara felt thick and gritty as I wiped it off onto my palms.

It felt like we had really climbed closer to the sun.

We stood at the top, looking down at the garden. It was unrecognizable. A massive clump of dark green. We looked out toward the parking lot—which was actually pretty large—and at the town beyond.

We could see everything from up there.

*I* could see everything.

And I wanted it all.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“I want a garden like that,” I said.

Allison and I had been walking home pretty much in silence since leaving the botanical garden. We were exhausted. I had spent the past half hour or so silently thanking God that our return trip was mostly downhill.

“Mmm,” said Allison, nodding.

Guess she was too tired to talk.

She looked like she was thinking about something. I didn't want to ask what. I was pretty sure she'd end up telling me either way. Nothing seemed to stay exclusively in Allison's brain for very long.

While we were up on the mountain, Allison had reached into her pocket and pulled out the floppy hat she'd found at the park. She put it on her head.

“That hat gave you lice!” I protested.

“That wasn't the hat's fault,” she said.

Allison cracks me up.

She assured me she'd washed it since then. Besides, it was hot. That I could get. My black hair was absorbing way more heat than my natural hair color did, but at least I *had* hair to protect my head. Allison's blonde locks were starting to grow back, but she still had nearly nothing. Maybe about a centimeter's worth of fuzz?

We were nearly home by the time Allison decided to speak.

“So...your sister...died...?”

I felt myself stiffen. Then I sighed. I think, deep down, I knew this was coming. And I think, even more deep down, I had wanted it to.

“Sis...wasn’t my sister. She was my mother’s sister,” I said. “Her *younger* sister.”

Allison was visibly surprised, but I plowed on before she could say anything.

“It was like she was my sister too. We were really close. She was my best friend. Someone I looked up to. I loved her very, very much,” I said.

I felt the heat starting to crawl up my neck and onto my face. A hard lump was forming in my throat and my eyes were starting to itch. I swallowed and forced myself to go on.

“She died in an accident. She was trying to get her pilot’s license. It was a windy day... I don’t know. Something happened. The plane crashed. Exploded, I guess. She and the guy training her were both killed,” I said. “It was hard on all of us, but especially Mom and me. Dad wasn’t really as close. She wasn’t *his* family, you know? But, just like that, she was gone. Up in flames...”

I stopped, swallowing hard. Allison fidgeted uncomfortably.

“That must have been strange for your mom,” she said. “I mean, her sister looks just like you. It’d be kind of like seeing *you* in the coffin, I guess.”

“We didn’t go to the funeral,” I said.

I was still bitter about this fact. I glared out into space and continued.

“No one told us. By the time we even found out she was dead, she had already been buried.”

“But how...?”

“Everyone assumed that because we were so close to her that we’d already know. So no one bothered to call us,” I said. “By the time someone at the funeral noticed we were missing and thought it was odd, it was already over.”

“Oh,” she said, then added, “Well, you know what they say about making assumptions.”

“It makes an ass out of you and me,” I nodded. “Yeah.”

“So you never got to say goodbye?”

“I did,” I said. “In my own way. Mom didn’t.”

I could tell she wanted to ask me what I did to say goodbye to Sis, but I didn’t want to talk about it. Thankfully, we had reached my house. I excused myself and went inside.

I locked myself in my room and pulled out an old cassette tape from under my bed. A tape of “Oldies But Goodies.” I popped it into my Walkman, closed my eyes, and listened to “Oh, How Happy” by Shades of Blue.

When it finished, I rewound, and played it again. And again. And again. Just as I had done on the night I got the news that Sis was dead and buried.

Gone from my life forever.

But not forgotten.

*“You have stood by me, in my darkest hour, and oh, how happy you have made me...”*

I buried my face into my pillow and sobbed.

It just wasn't fair. It just wasn't fair. It just wasn't fair.

I punched my pillow as hard as I could.

When you live a reckless life, you don't get as much sympathy when you die. It's “to be expected.”

“Well, what did she *expect* to happen,” they say.

They analyze you after the fact. Talk about your “obvious” death wish. How, by living that way, you proved you didn't *want* to live in this world.

Well, if the person did have a death wish—and if it was so “obvious”—then why didn't anyone help them *before* they died?

In the old days, people would do dangerous things all the time. They were called things like “adventurers” and “discoverers.” When *they* were reckless, they were rewarded.

These days, they're branded as “immature” and their peers discuss their “death wish” after they've passed.

Maybe because everything worthwhile in the world has already been discovered?

Sis had one of those old souls. She had to get out there and do it all. She had to go on adventures, she had to discover the world and all its elements for herself.

She went skydiving, she went kayaking in fierce rapids, she even went swimming with sharks. She did it all!

She did it all and then she was gone.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Mom didn't feel well in the morning, so I was taking care of her hamster. She wasn't the type of "I don't feel well" that required us making one of our frequent trips to the hospital (that would probably come later...), but she felt ill enough that she didn't want to get out of bed to clean his cage or, you know, feed him.

Mom named her hamster Huey. It means "bright mind." Or was it "bright soul?" I forget. I think it's German. I mostly know it as the name of the helicopters they used during the Vietnam war. (My favorite hobo used to tell me stories about trips he'd make in his corps' Huey).

I liked Huey the hamster.

He was a teddy bear hamster (or a "long-haired Syrian" as Allison corrected me one time) with sort of an all-over orangeness to his fur. But he had a white belly. So he was a bit like one of the fifty-fifty bars you get off an ice-cream truck: Orange on the outside and vanilla in the center. And he was sweet like one too.

He had bulgy black eyes and liked to sniff at everything. If I held him in my hands and kept absolutely still, sometimes he'd forget that he was sitting in the palms of a giant and begin to bathe himself.

He'd put his hands (they had fingers, so I couldn't bring myself to call them paws) up to his face and he'd sort of lick his fingers—like he'd just had a bucket of fried chicken—and then he'd rub his nose with his hands. Then he'd do the movement again, but a little higher up on his nose. He'd keep moving higher and higher up on his face until he was wiping his whole head down. He'd even get his arms in on the action! And then once his head was done he'd start in on the rest of his body...

I'd always wanted a pet of my own, but I was always told I was "too young."

Oh, well.

Mom was taking a nap, so once I was finished cleaning Huey's cage and refilling his food dish and water bottle, I went outside. Allison was already waiting for me.

"You're here early," I noted.

"You're not wearing your make-up today," she said.

"Oh yeah," I said, reaching a hand up to my face. "I just didn't feel like putting it on today for some reason. I dunno. So...What's up?"

"I had an idea," she said.

She was wearing her floppy gardening hat, a faded tie-dyed t-shirt (it looked like she had done it herself as part of a crafts project many years ago), and bellbottoms. Bellbottoms were "in" in our town right now, but I had a feeling Allison wasn't wearing them to be fashionable. In fact, they didn't look like they were new—they looked like they were from whenever the last time bellbottoms were considered "in."

An addition to her ensemble she didn't usually have was the bag she was carrying.

It was a leather purse (it smelled like the saddle shed at the ranch I would go horseback riding at as a kid) that had a design tooled into it. The design looked to be of a man riding a dying donkey through the desert. There were cacti and some flower-looking things. And a large temple in the background. But the temple looked a bit warped. Like the person tooling the leather had run out of room but still wanted to cram it into the design anyway. It was sort of...squished.

I didn't know Allison owned a purse, but this one seemed to suit her for some reason. It was a bit wonky.

It was also very pungent, but I knew she had no idea.

“What’s with the bag?” I asked. “You usually just shove everything in your pockets.”

“That’s true!” she said, seemingly surprised that I’d noticed. “But I needed a little extra room today. For these...”

She pulled out a handful of what looked to be miniature onions with green stems.

Okay, they didn’t just *look* like miniature onions. They *were* miniature onions.

“Onions,” I said.

“Yes,” she agreed. “I found them at the bottom of my onion drawer and it gave me an idea.”

I had a friend with an onion drawer. Which was her idea of a snack drawer.

I was going to ask her how these sprouting onion babies had come to be, but I figured she’d just give me a funny look. Say something like “Well, I don’t talk to the onions; how should I know?”

Instead, I asked, “What was your idea?”

“We could plant them!”

Blank stares on my end.



“We could have a vegetable garden,” she explained.

A garden. I smiled. Yes! I wanted a garden of my very own.

It wasn’t exactly what I had pictured in my initial vision—I had wanted flowers and ferns—but they’d at least be green! And it’d give us something to do.

“I love that idea!” I said, and meant it.

“And we can eat them once they’re full grown,” Allison added, getting excited.

“All right,” I laughed. “But I’m not eating mine raw.”

My mind was abuzz with the possibilities. I couldn’t wait to plant our onion garden and start watching them grow. We decided that the front corner of my front lawn would be a great place to put it. It had once been a flower bed, but the sprinklers didn’t reach it (you had to water it via hose) so my mom had given up on it. As it was, our lawn as a whole was looking pretty ragged.

I went into the garage and grabbed a gardening trowel and a tool that looked like a miniature rake (Allison called it a “cultivator”) and we got on our knees and went to work on the square of soil.

We stabbed and clawed at the weeds with our gardening tools, eventually resorting to using our hands. We pulled out dandelions and yanked on the crabgrass. I could feel my knuckles scraping against hidden rocks in the soil and my fingernails becoming thick with dirt. My palms itched, but I kept going. We had to keep going until our square of dirt was completely empty.

Eventually the time came when we declared it “good enough” and stepped back to survey our work.

“I guess we should plant them now,” Allison said.

“Have you ever grown your own onions before?” I asked.

“No,” she said. “But I figure it can’t be too hard if they started doing it on their own without me.”

That made sense, I guess.

We dug holes together. As a child, I used to dig holes looking for buried treasure. Lately, a hole in a ground made me think of graves. I had almost forgotten that holes in the ground could be used for other things. Good things.

We started putting the onions into the ground. There were fourteen in total. We tried to space them out a bit. We gave them each about the width of a full-grown onion apart. I figured it was kind of like baking cookies: The dough always starts out small, but you have to give it room to spread on the pan. Except, you know, underground.

I went to grab the gardening hose to water our crop.

The hose felt hard and stiff—brittle. It had been a long time since my family had last used it, maybe years. I turned it on and yelped aloud when it started spitting out water from its middle.

It was cracked. Unusable.

I started to feel deflated, like all our work had been for nothing, but I brushed the feeling aside—I was determined to make this work. I *needed* this garden.

I wondered how they did it in the old days before garden hoses. I guess they used watering cans? But my family didn’t own a watering can.

Then I remembered something I'd learned in world history class: The Masai women. They would carry water in buckets! (They also thought a man jumping really high was pretty sexy if I remember right, but that's a bit off topic).

I didn't have a bucket, but we had plenty of cups in the house.

I folded the hose back up—wincing as the crack widened—and went inside to the kitchen. I filled up two coffee mugs with water and took them back outside to Allison. I handed her one.

“Cheers,” I said, tapping my mug against hers.

And then we let it fly. We tipped our mugs, letting the water splash down onto the soil, watering our plants.

But it wasn't enough.

We ended up making several trips back and forth; refilling our mugs, watering our plants, and refilling them again.

It took a while, but eventually our patch of dirt had darkened, fully-watered.

The mid-July sun was beating down on us. And I might have imagined it, but I thought I saw heat waves coming up off of the ground. I thought I could almost smell the onions—like they were simmering in the water we'd just poured on them.

My mom was probably awake by now. And my dad would be coming home from work soon. I figured we'd be making another pointless trip to the hospital later tonight...

I sat down on the ground, looking out at the street and our feeble crop, my head resting on my knees. I was pleased with our work. Allison sat down next to me, cross-legged. It was like we were having an invisible picnic. There was no blanket and no food, but it had that feeling. Like one of the tea parties I'd thrown my stuffed animals as a little girl—pouring out air into empty cups.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Each day Allison came over, we'd run back and forth with our mugs of water, watering our onion crop. It had become a ritual. Before we did anything else that day, we *had* to water our garden.

Things seemed to be progressing nicely. The sprouts were getting larger! They were by no means impressive, but they were definitely getting larger. I could tell.

"Do you think Y2K will shut down other electronic stuff?" Allison asked. "Like Tamagotchis? Or do battery-operated things not count as electronic?"

"It doesn't work like that," I said. "Not that anything's going to happen either way. Though, if it did, it might be good for society to start over. Get a clean slate."

"Do you think it'll happen the year after? For the real Millennium?"

"Oh, not this again..."

We had a brief argument over the Millennium, which spurred a conversation about the Mayan calendar and the supposed end of the world (which I believed in about as much as I did the Y2K hype). Which then spun into a conversation about what we each considered the worst type of natural disaster. I said tsunami. She said volcano.

That was about when my mom appeared beside us and asked what we were doing. I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"Gardening," I said. "It's a vegetable garden."

She looked down at our crop. I was secretly proud of our progress. Our spouts really looked like something—bright green and jutting up out of the ground!

“Are they all the same vegetable?” she asked.

“Oh, um, yeah,” I said. “They’re all onions.”

“Why onions?”

I didn’t have an answer for her. There was an awkward silence. After a while she shrugged it off.

“Looks fun,” she said. “Maybe you can make a nice soup out of them once they’re full grown.”

Mmm. Soup. I hadn’t even thought of that. I started salivating thinking of a bowl of French onion soup I’d once had at a restaurant...

“Your dad will be here soon,” my mom said on a more serious note. “Once he gets here, we’re going to go to the hospital. I don’t feel very good.”

“Oh,” I said. “Okay.”

She went back inside the house without another word. I stood there in silence. Any plans I might have had for the day were a moot point now. This day was going to be just like every other. I sighed.

“Is your mom all right?” asked Allison.

“Oh jeez,” I said, suddenly mortified. “I’m so sorry. I forgot to introduce you.”

“Is she ill or something?” she asked, ignoring my faux pas.

“I don’t know,” I said.

I honestly didn’t. I couldn’t even begin to describe what was wrong with my mother. What the past year alone had been like. I’d made more trips to the hospital in the past few months than most people make in their entire lives. And I was sick of it.

I hated hospitals. They were hell. Each trip we made to a hospital, a clinic, to some random emergency room... Was like a mini trip to hell.

It was always the same. It was nothing but illness and death and the fear of death.

I was tired of waiting rooms. Of sitting and waiting and waiting and waiting. Suffocating under the weight of the never-ending *wait*. Waiting to be checked-in. Waiting to be seen. Waiting for answers that never *ever* came.

I was sick of hospitals.

Sick of waiting for my life to begin.

I just wanted it all to be over already.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Something strange happened at the hospital today.

I was minding my own business, getting myself a Twix from the vending machine just outside the building when a man came up to me.

“Haven’t I seen you here before?” he asked.

I recognized him as one of the doctors.

“Oh. Yeah,” I said, slightly embarrassed. “I’ve seen you before too. We’re here a lot.”

Inwardly I wanted to smack myself in the head. Of course *he* was there a lot. He was a doctor!

“Are you the daughter of one of the nurses?” he asked.

“No,” I said. “My mom comes here a lot. They usually give her a Gas-X or one of those ‘GI cocktails’—you know, the green-ish ones—and send her home again.”

“Oh,” he said. “Okay. Yes. I know your mom...”

I wasn’t really sure what to do at that point. I had put my money in and selected E3 to get my Twix bar and I’d heard it drop into the slot, but it seemed rude to bend down and get it while he was still standing there. Was he going to keep talking? I didn’t know what he wanted.

“This happens a lot?” he said, thinking.



“Well, yeah,” I said. “We’re here pretty much every week. She goes to other hospitals too, but she rotates them. But we always end up here eventually.”

“You are in no way obligated to answer this,” he said, “but does mental illness run in your family at all?”

That was a weird question. A bit rude. But he’d piqued my curiosity.

“No. I don’t think so,” I said, then, in the interest of honesty, added, “Well, my grandma’s half-sister was pretty crazy, but my mom says it she got that from the *other* side of the family, not ours. Which I hope is true because she had to be locked up...”

My face flushed. I didn’t want him to think badly of my family, but he was a *doctor* for crying out loud. I felt like I had to be honest. To me, lying to a doctor was akin to lying to a judge—either way you’d be in big trouble!

He put his hand up to his chin and stroked it, seemingly in deep thought. I was starting to get a bit anxious about my candy bar. It was summer and chocolate had a tendency to melt...

“Has your mother been to see a gynecologist?” he asked.

“Jesus! You think my mom’s pregnant?” I said, shocked out of my gourd.

“No, no,” he said. “I don’t think anything yet. But has she?”

“No,” I said. “Why would she see a baby doctor about a bellyache?”

“Gynecologists perform other duties besides delivering babies,” he said. “And it might not be a bellyache. You say she’s been here a lot, right? Always for the same thing?”

“Yes.”

He had my full attention. I felt like I was watching a detective in a movie unraveling a difficult case. Or a TV lawyer about to deliver his final speech that proved the prosecution had been at the scene of the murder.

“You see,” he said, “emergency rooms aren’t for diagnosing anything...long-term. They’re for, well, emergencies. They’re here to make sure you don’t die. And that’s about it. They’re a quick fix.”

“Like when you put a plug in a tire just so it holds enough air to get you home,” I said. “But you still have to go to the real mechanic to buy a new tire.”

“Er, yes, exactly.”

“So the baby doc is the mechanic?”

“Perhaps,” he said. “If my colleagues have been treating her intestines with no real results then maybe the source of the problem lies elsewhere.”

“Wow,” I said. I was impressed.

“We won’t know for sure until we try,” he said. “Though I probably shouldn’t be telling you any of this.”

“I won’t tell,” I said. “So long as you don’t tell my mom I took the Lord’s name in vain earlier.”

“No problem,” he said, giving a serious nod. “I’m going to recommend your mother see her gynecologist. Past that, I’d suggest a GI specialist, but that could get costly. But... we’ve done all we can do for her here. So you keep on her about going, you got that?”

“Got it!” I said. I almost saluted him, but I stopped myself just in time.

He went back inside the building and I followed him. I wanted to be there when he made the recommendation to my mom in case he needed back-up.

It wasn't until we got home that I realized I'd forgotten my Twix in the vending machine.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I had a choice to make:

To dye or not to dye.

My roots had grown out and I was starting to look a little peculiar.

Though, to be honest, I kind of liked it. It had been a while since I'd last seen my natural hair color. It was a bit like seeing an old friend. If you're the kind of person who has friends growing out of their heads, I mean.

But that decision would have to wait for another day. Allison was coming early today.

I was going to be home alone for the bulk of the day. My mom had decided to take the emergency room doctor's advice and see her gynecologist. And I was to stay at home. I guess it was fine for her to drag me along to this generic hospital and that, but as soon as someone specifically started prodding at her lady parts, she got weirded out. Which was perfectly fine by me!

I checked on Huey's food & water supply (both full) and gave him a little snuggle against my cheek before heading outside.

Our onions were coming along really nicely! They were getting taller every time I looked at them. It was really exciting.

Allison and I went through our daily routine of watering our garden with coffee mugs and then relaxed on the lawn.

"Lot of ants today," observed Allison.

“Yeah.”

“Maybe we could put ‘em in an ant farm,” she suggested.

“Ugh. No. I don’t like ant farms.”

“What? Why?” she said. “I’d love to be in an ant farm. It’s an easy life. You’re with all your closest friends, it’s safe, you get better food than you would in the wild—and you don’t even have to look for it!”

“That’s just it,” I said. “You might be with your closest friends, but eventually those friends and family die and then their bodies get stacked up in a corner of the tank. And the tank is so trapped and limited it’s not like you can escape them. You’d have to see them every day. Besides, ants aren’t supposed to have easy lives. They’re workers. Their whole lives—their whole *purpose*—is to work. To bring food to the queen. When you scoop them up and put them in an ant farm, they’re no longer with their queen. So any work they do is rendered pointless. They no longer have a purpose.”

“What if their purpose was to be in an ant farm?” said Allison. “To bring joy to someone else?”

“I don’t know...”

“There are many ways to live,” said Allison, looking up at the sky. “And life doesn’t always go exactly according to plan.”

Well, she had that part right, at least.

I was starting to sweat. I was glad I’d forsaken my make-up routine. It would have been melting off my face at this point. Ugh.

“You wanna go inside?” I asked. “No one’s home today so we don’t have to worry about being quiet.”

“Sure,” said Allison.

We went inside the house and headed toward the back to my room. Once we got there, Allison kicked off her shoes and sat on the edge of my bed. I didn’t have the heart to tell her that her feet stank. I knew it didn’t make a difference to her.

Besides, my feet stank too. It was hot! And having a friend with no sense of smell meant that I could kick off my shoes as well and be comfortable without feeling ashamed of bodily odors. A definite plus!

“You wanna see something?” I asked.

“Sure.”

I opened up my closet and pulled out a plain white collared shirt and a navy blue skirt. I held them in front of me, the way you do when you’re sizing-up clothes at the store but don’t want to bother going to the fitting room.

I had never worn this outfit, but it was very important.

“What’s that?” asked Allison.

“It’s my uniform,” I said. “I’m going to be going to that new magnet school in September... I got accepted.”

“Oh wow!” she said. “That’s so cool!”

I laughed as she reached out to touch the hem of my uniform’s skirt. I didn’t think it was *that* cool, but I was pleased that she thought so.

None of my other friends were going to the magnet school, including Allison. They were going to the public high school that had been around ever since ever. I had mixed feelings about that. I didn't exactly envy them—I liked the idea of going to a school that was a bit smaller (and it wasn't exactly a “private” school so it wasn't going to cost my family anything for the exclusivity)—but I was going to miss having familiar faces to turn to.

It was part of the reason I'd distanced myself from my old friends. I knew I wasn't going to be seeing them much either way after we started high school. I figured it would hurt less if I was the one who left first. If it was my *choice* to leave rather than having them ripped away from me by circumstance.

Besides, we had been growing apart for a while anyway.

They all knew that my family was in a bit of financial trouble. They all knew what was going on with my mom. With Sis. With me.

I was tired of them staring at me. Of pitying me. Of calling me a “drag” whenever I tried to open up to them—to be honest about what I'd been feeling. I was tired of hanging around friends who pretended to understand but didn't at all.

I thought no empathy would be better than false empathy.

It was why I was initially drawn to Allison. I didn't think she could *ever* understand me. But now...I wasn't so sure. In some ways it felt like she understood me better than anyone I'd ever known.

“What shoes are you going to wear with this?” Allison asked.

That was something I was actually pretty excited about. Everyone had to wear more or less the same clothes, but our shoes were up to us. They had to be plain colors—no patterns—but they didn't have any regulations other than that.

I pulled out a box from under my bed. It contained a pair of black boots. They were cheap synthetic, but they looked like they were made from leather. My favorite feature? The left boot had a small pocket on the side, just above the ankle, that closed with a metal snap.

I figured I could store my payphone money in it. Or a good luck charm. If I ever found a good luck charm. I'd always wanted to...

Allison nodded her approval. "Those are great," she said. "I wish I had some like that. That pocket looks handy."

"I know," I said, beaming.

I had gotten the boots for about eight dollars at Payless. They were cheap shoes that would probably fall apart after about a year, but they were *cool*. That was pretty much all that mattered to me.

"Your school is pretty small, right?" she asked.

"Very," I said. "This is only gonna be their second year of being open. And they only took on Freshmen last year. So those kids are Sophomores this year and then I'll be with the new batch of Freshmen... They don't even *have* Juniors and Seniors yet. It's a little weird."

"My high school is huge," Allison said. "Lots of kids. Blending into a crowd will be such a blessing. I can't wait to go."

"I always wanted to be special," I admitted.

"You are special," she said. "But you're special for the right reasons. I'm 'special' because I'm considered abnormal. For an abnormal kid, fading into obscurity is the next best thing to being truly accepted."



I didn't bother to ask her why she considered me special. Just knowing that she did—and that it was for the “right” reasons—was enough to inflate my ego nearly to bursting. It was an unexpected compliment that I would never forget.

“I accept you,” I told her.

And I meant it. When I had first met her I too had judged her as an oddball. And she was! But it was now what I liked most about her. I felt nothing but gratitude for having her in my life.

She smiled at me.

“I know you do,” she said. “Maybe someday others will too... Though probably not until I'm older,” she mused. “I'm ahead of my time.”

“Seems like everyone is either too early or too late,” I half-joked.

But sometimes you get lucky.

Sometimes the timelines match up perfectly.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I didn't know what to say when they told me. When my parents sat me down and told me the news that the gynecologist had found something inside my mother.

A mass of uterine fibroids.

They found them first by the manual pelvic exam and then confirmed the findings with an ultrasound. They'd done some other stuff too. Blood tests and whatnot. I was relieved that it wasn't Cancer, but the fact that she had some foreign lump—well, lumps—growing inside her was still worrisome.

She was going to have to have surgery: A hysterectomy.

I felt a huge wash of guilt when they told me that.

I should have never doubted her. She actually did have a real problem—an actual *physical* sickness. I felt ashamed for all the times over the past year that I'd thought she was faking it. That she was just trying to get attention.

I also felt relieved.

Maybe this would finally fix her. Maybe, after this, things could finally go back to normal. Maybe I'd get my mom back!

But what if I didn't?

What if they lost her...?

Even “routine” surgeries can go wrong. And that fact scared me.

My mother was going to be having a very invasive surgery—they were going to be removing one of her organs!—and there was always that possibility that things wouldn't go as planned. That I would lose my mother for good.

I told Allison these feelings as we watered our onions the next day.

"It'll be okay," she said. "Hysterectomies are really common. Did they try other things first?"

"No, not exactly," I said. It was weird to be discussing the inner-workings of my mom's uterus with someone, but it was too scary to keep to myself. "She was already on the Pill so they figured putting her on a different one wouldn't make much of a difference. And then the other methods might be a bit costly, especially if they ended up not doing the trick. Besides...they said...they said she's bleeding to death."

My mother had always had heavy periods—I knew this much from her idly complaining about it during "that time" of the month—but I had no idea just *how* heavy they really were. A few of the doctor's she'd seen over the past year had noted that she was Anemic, but I figured that it would clear up once she'd started putting iron in her orange juice at breakfast time. But apparently her red blood cells simply couldn't build back up...because she was losing them again as fast as she built them through her period.

"Oh," said Allison. "Well, that's no good."

"No. It's not."

"Well, the surgery should help."

"I guess so, yeah," I said. "The doctor said that it would be cheaper and more efficient just to remove the uterus. They told Mom that she was pretty close to menopause age anyway..."

“Are they taking out the whole thing?” asked Allison.

“Um, no,” I said. “They’re leaving her ovaries, I think.”

“That’s interesting,” said Allison. “If they leave the ovaries, she might never hit menopause. Menopause comes when a lady runs out of eggs, but if she doesn’t have a uterus for her eggs to release into, they’ll just kinda sit there. She’ll get to keep them. So there’s a good chance she’ll never know what her ‘menopause age’ would have been. Cool, huh?”

She’d be forever young.

“Yeah,” I said. “I guess that’s cool. I mean, my babysitter from when I was a kid was going through menopause a few years ago and it seemed pretty terrible. I think I could definitely live without my mom getting hot flashes...”

But there was one other thing that was bothering me that I couldn’t quite put into words.

“Allison... Do you have any siblings?” I asked.

“Nah,” she said, shaking her head. “I have a cat. That’s close enough, I think.”

“I guess so.”

I thought about Huey and wondered if he would ever feel like a brother to me. I doubted it.

After my mom’s surgery, she wouldn’t be able to have any more children. I was going to be an only child forever.

Before, there was always that possibility that, someday, my parents might have another kid. That I'd have a little brother or sister to look after. Sure, they'd be *much* younger than I was, but stranger things have happened. Mom and Sis were born kinda far apart, so why not me and my sibling?

I thought that they'd have another child so that if I messed up they'd still have someone to pin their hopes on. But now there was just going to be me. Forever.

I'd never know if I was the best kid my parents could have had—the “favorite”—or if I was simply the default.

“I saved a bunch of my toys from when I was a kid,” I confessed. “I thought maybe someday I'd be passing them down to a little brother or sister...”

“What kind of toys?” asked Allison, clearly interested.

“Well, I sold a lot of them, but I kept the coolest ones. Mighty Max and some Ghostbusters action figures...”

“Wow!” she said. “Do you have the toilet monster? I always wanted that one.”

“Actually, I do,” I said. “And the werewolf and the mummy...even the grandma with the eyes that bug out and the big tongue...”

“Granny Gross Ghost!”

Allison was clearly excited. I smiled. They *were* pretty cool toys.

“Yeah,” I said. “I loved my childhood. It was just over too soon.”

Allison rolled her eyes.

“You’re always talking about your life like it’s already over,” she said.  
“You’re still living it, you know.”

I guess I hadn’t thought of it that way. It hadn’t felt like I’d been living my life in a long time now. But there I was: Alive and breathing.

“What I want to know is why we’re standing around being depressed when we *could* be playing with Ghostbusters toys,” Allison said pointedly.

I laughed.

We spent the rest of the day digging through my old toys. (There were more than I’d remembered!). We made up voices. We made up stories.

We played.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

My mom's surgery was scheduled for the morning.

I couldn't sleep.

I had tried to sleep. I had even tried drinking some warm milk. I didn't like it. And it certainly wasn't helping me relax.

I stared up at my ceiling. Sis and I had glued some plastic glow-in-the-dark stars to it the summer before she died. They had shone brightly when I first turned off my light and got into bed, but they were starting to fade.

I tried remembering what we'd named them all. We'd built our own galaxy and given each star in it a name. But my memory of that moment, like the stars themselves, was starting to fade.

I heard a soft knock at my door. It was my mom.

"I can't sleep," she said.

"Me either."

I didn't invite her in. I didn't have to. She invited herself, walking through my door and sitting on the edge of my bed. I guess that was her prerogative. It was her house—she could go where she liked.

I didn't used to mind, but now that I was older, having my mother in my room made me nervous. I didn't have anything in my room that I wanted to hide—it was just an odd sort of uncomfortable feeling. It didn't really stem from anything in particular. It was just there.

“I *was* asleep,” she said. “But then I woke up.”

“How come?”

“I was dreaming about the dragon from *Mulan*,” she said. “I dreamt that he took my uterus and was using it as a purse. It was round and shiny and sort of a pearly pink. But then he grew really big and turned silver and was floating around. Like he was made of silvery smoke, but you could still tell he was a dragon. And then that Enya song started playing... ‘*Sail away, sail away, sail away...*’”

Then she turned to me and, in all seriousness, asked: “What do you think it means?”

I was completely flummoxed. I didn’t think a dream about Mushu using my mom’s organ as a handbag could mean anything. It was just *weird*.

I did my best to put my arm around her in a comforting fashion, but it felt awkward. I wasn’t the best at this.

“I’m sure it’s fine,” I said. “You’re probably just hungry.”

“I am pretty hungry,” Mom admitted.

I was too to be honest.

My mom had to fast for at least 8 hours before her surgery—more, if possible—so, since her surgery was first thing in the morning, we’d all eaten an early dinner. And then Dad and I didn’t eat anything later on out of solidarity.

“It’s going to be strange to not have my uterus,” she said. “I’ve always had it.”

“I know.”



“I had a hard time giving birth to you, you know,” she said. “Maybe this was why. Maybe they’ve always been in there. Growing...”

“Maybe.”

“I wonder if I’ll feel empty without it,” she said.

I desperately wanted to comfort her, but I’d actually been wondering the same thing. Once her uterus was gone, what would be left? Was there just going to be this big hollow place inside her? How did that even work?

I was filled with questions, but I didn’t think it’d make her feel any better if I asked them. Instead I said:

“Well, even empty space isn’t *really* empty.”

“I guess that’s true,” she said, seemingly satisfied.

We chit-chatted for a while longer until she eventually left. I have no idea if she got any sleep. I didn’t.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR**

We got to the hospital early in the morning.

I don't know what it was about the hospital early in the morning, but it always looked kind of gray to me. This particular hospital—the good one (we weren't taking any chances with Mom's surgery)—was on top of a hill so, early in the morning, there was always a thick fog around it. And the building itself was sort of silver... It just seemed overall gray to me. I dunno.

It made me feel tired to look at it. Well, that, and the fact I hadn't had any sleep probably contributed quite a bit.

Dad and I waited with Mom as the doctors got everything prepared. We'd gotten there early, but they still didn't call her name until about an hour after her appointment time.

Once they called her name and took her to the operating room, Dad and I were alone. We'd each brought a book with us. He seemed to be pretty into his. I was only pretending to read mine. I was too nervous to pay attention to what was written on the pages.

Instead, I was people-watching. I was holding my book like a cartoon detective holds a newspaper in front of his face when he's shadowing a suspect, glancing over occasionally to look at the people coming into the lobby.

There were a lot of people carrying teddy bears and flowers. My mom's surgery was taking place on the same floor as the gift shop, so I guess that made sense. But it was still strange to see a bunch of adults carrying stuffed animals.

And then I saw her: My seventh grade English teacher.

Without thinking, I got up and walked over to her.

“Hi,” I said.

“Oh,” she said, somewhat dazed. “Hi there.”

“I was in your English class,” I said. “I sat toward the back.”

“I remember,” she said, nodding. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t expecting to run into anyone I knew here.”

“Me neither.”

She looked worried. Vulnerable. I watched as her hands gripped a stuffed fish. It had an orange body with purple spots. It was a Beanie Baby, but it must have been a new one—I hadn’t seen it before. (I liked to scope out the Beanie Babies in the gift shop whenever we came to this hospital).

“That’s a nice fish,” I said.

“Oh,” she said. “Thank you. I got it for my mom.”

“Is your mom here too?”

“Yes. She had to have open-heart surgery this morning.”

“Oh wow,” I said. “My mom’s having surgery right now. She’s having her uterus out.”

She seemed to brighten. “Mom’s, huh?” she said jokingly. “Nothing but trouble.”

I laughed. I felt my stomach clench from nerves—it seemed unsure what to do with my change in mood. I'd been nervous and brooding all morning, but something about talking to an adult, someone who was going through the same thing I was, was very comforting.

I knew she was probably faking her nonchalance (her white-knuckled grip on her stuffed offering was proof of that), but I also figured that if she could laugh and put up a tough front: So could I.

“We’ll have to give them a talking to later,” I said.

“Absolutely,” she replied, putting on a stern face for dramatic effect. “Mine won’t hear the end of it from me, that’s for sure.”

I giggled again, remembering why she’d been my favorite teacher that year. It felt like a million years ago. I’d been so young back then.

“I have to go now,” she said, adding, “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” I said. “You too.”

Small world.

I stayed on the lookout for anyone else I knew, but no one else showed up. It was an endless parade of strangers, coming and going.

My mom’s surgery was over in about 3 hours, but it felt like 6. I had spent most of the year waiting for my mom at various hospitals, but this was the first time it really felt like it meant something. It wasn’t an idle wait this time. We were waiting *for* something.

My dad and I went into her hospital room to see her as soon as we were allowed, but she was knocked out still. The nurse said they’d doped her up with a lot of morphine.

I put Mom's Walkman cassette player on the side table next to her hospital bed along with a mixed tape I'd made her. I'd made it about a week ahead of time in preparation for her surgery, but I'd tacked on Enya's "Sail Away" to the B-side this morning as a last-minute inside joke. Except there wasn't enough space left on the tape and the song got cut off halfway through. Oh well. Hopefully she wouldn't mind.

Mom was supposed to stay at the hospital all day and all night. They were going to release her sometime the next day.

I was prepared to camp out and stay with her. Do the good daughter thing. I had my book (I was for sure going to read it this time) and a few other things. And the nurse had already told me that my mom should start moving around as soon as she was able to in order to prevent blood clots from forming, so I figured I'd be acting as a crutch later on in the day, walking her around the hospital hallways. (I'd already done a lap around the hallway earlier to make sure I could find my way back to her room without asking for help, so I figured we were good to go).

Dad was sitting on the doctor's stool since I was sitting on the only "guest" chair. We both stared at her, sleeping, for what seemed like forever.

I'm not sure if it was an hour or a half-an-hour (or maybe it was just fifteen minutes), but she eventually woke up and started talking to us.

She asked if the nurse was around. She wanted more painkillers. Dad told her that they'd set it up so all she had to do was press the red button attached to her IV and pain meds would drip into her system.

"Just press it every hour or so," he said, gingerly putting her fingers around the button.

She pressed it. And then pressed it again. And again.

Dad thought better about letting her be in charge of her own medicine distribution, gently taking the button away again. He looked at me and kind of shrugged, not knowing what to say. I had to hold back a giggle.

“It’s only been a few minutes, Mom,” I said. “You gotta take it easy with that stuff!”

“Really?” she asked, surprised. “It felt like hours passed. How long have we been talking?”

“This is the first we’ve talked.”

“Oh,” she said, her eyes starting to droop (I guess the morphine drip had finally reached her system!), “I must have been dreaming earlier.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “We can talk about that later. I’m going to stay here with you.”

She forced her eyes back open. “What? No.”

“No?”

“No,” she said. “It’s summer vacation. You should be out having fun.”

That was weird. Since when?

“You should go work in your garden,” she said. “I like your garden.”

And, just like that, she was asleep again. I stared at her. I didn’t know what else to do.

What was I supposed to do?

Of all the things I'd expected that day, her not wanting me to be there wasn't on the list at all.

"Well, you heard her," said Dad. "Let's go eat."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Dad wasn't much of a cook, so we decided that eating out was probably the best option. We chose to go to the Sizzler, a place neither of us had been to in a couple years.

I liked the Sizzler. I always ordered the all-you-can-eat salad bar. Mainly because it wasn't strictly salads: It was everything. More of a buffet, really.

I started off with the broccoli cheddar soup while Dad waited for his order. He'd gotten a steak meal and the all-you-can-eat salad bar. Which I didn't really understand: Why'd he order *two* meals? He hadn't even made any trips to the salad bar yet. Oh well. More for me.

I went back for my first plate of food. I grabbed some fried chicken, a scoop of spaghetti, some onion rings, and some creamed corn. I felt like I hadn't eaten in days. I plopped myself back at the table and dug in.

"You look a lot better without all that crap on your face," Dad said. "I'm so glad that trend's done."

It took me a second, but I realized he was referring to my make-up.

"Oh," I said. "That wasn't a trend. That was just...me."

"Whoops," he laughed. "Sorry."

"It's okay."

"Well, you look good," he said. "You don't need all that gunk."

"Thanks."



I shifted uncomfortably on my side of the booth. It had been a while since I'd last been alone with my dad. I saw him every day after he came home from work, but I wasn't really sure how to interact with him one-on-one.

I took comfort in the fact that he looked like he was feeling as awkward as I felt. Our lives had revolved around Mom for so long that it was hard to do anything without her.

Mom...

"Do you think," I said, "that this will fix Mom?"

"The surgery?"

"Yeah."

He thought about it for a minute.

"I don't know," he said.

Not the answer I was hoping for.

"How come?" I asked.

"Your mom hasn't really been herself for a while," he said. "Your aunt's death hit her really hard. She hasn't been the same since then."

"It hit me really hard too," I said.

I saw his eyes soften. I guess he hadn't considered that I'd been in mourning too. I guess I didn't blame him. I wasn't exactly open about what I was feeling.

"Did you want to talk about it?" he asked.

"No," I said. And then I thought better of it, "Not here anyway. I don't want to start crying in public. It'd be weird."

"Understood."

He fidgeted, looking over my head toward the kitchen. Guess he wanted his steak. It was going to take a while—he'd ordered it well-done. I went back for my second plate (mashed potatoes, some orange slices, a slice of lasagna, and an unknown lump of...something...that smelled beefy) and sat back down.

"Your mom wasn't always like that, you know," Dad said, jumping right in (I guess he'd been thinking while I was dumping food on my plate). "She used to be very independent when we first started dating."

"Really?" I asked. I couldn't quite believe it. For the past year, my mother could barely go to the bathroom without someone with her. I couldn't imagine her ever being described as "independent."

"Oh yeah," he said, nodding seriously. "She would do stuff on her own all the time. She was a lot like her sister, actually. She was always taking off without notice. Going on dangerous hikes. Just up and go like it was nothing!"

I chewed my food slowly so I wouldn't miss a word. This was a side of my mother I had never seen—couldn't even imagine. I was halfway convinced that Dad had gotten mixed up and was talking about someone else. He couldn't be describing *my* mother. No way.

“She used to like to fly out to this lake—second deepest lake in the states, I think—and stay there overnight. She’d get herself a room and play in the casinos there,” he said. “She’d do stuff like that all the time. Just go off on her own on some adventure...”

“Why’d she stop?” I asked.

“Oh,” he said. “She stopped when you were born.”

“Oh.”

I wasn’t sure how to feel about that.

Was it my fault Mom wasn’t cool anymore? But I remembered her being pretty cool when I was young. I didn’t think it was my fault, but I started to feel a bit guilty.

“Good thing too,” added Dad. “That kind of life’s dangerous. I mean, just look what happened to your aunt.”

His steak had finally come. I watched blankly as he unfolded his napkin and lay it across his lap, as if we were somewhere fancy. He cut into it and took a bite. He closed his eyes.

“You know,” he said. “I completely get what that one guy was talking about in *The Matrix*. I would definitely want to be plugged back in.”

“Cypher?” I said, confused.

“Yeah,” Dad nodded. “Him. He knew what he was talking about. The Matrix was where it was at—for the food alone! The real world stunk in that movie.”

“Sometimes the real world stinks here too,” I said.

“That’s true, I guess,” said Dad. “But you could do all sorts of things in The Matrix. That was a great movie, huh?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I liked that one.”

“Did you want to be Neo?”

I thought about it.

“No,” I said honestly. “I...I wanted to be Agent Smith.”

“Oh, good choice,” Dad said approvingly. “I would be him too. He knew what it was all about.”

I smiled, happy my dad hadn’t chastised me for wanting to be the villain.

“Too bad he died at the end, huh?” Dad said.

“Oh, he’ll be back,” I said confidently.

“What other movies were good this year?”

“I dunno,” I said. “Lots of stuff. I can’t think of any when you put me on the spot.”

“That *Mystery Men* movie that’s coming out next week looks good,” he said. “Trailer made me laugh. We should go see that when your mom’s better.”

“Maybe,” I said.

I watched as he finished his meal. And then, to my surprise, he went to the salad bar. Wow! He really was going to eat two meals!

But what he came back with wasn't anything I could, in good conscience, describe as a "meal."

It was a big pile of desserts.

Actually, it was as if he'd gotten one of everything from the dessert bar and then poured soft-serve chocolate ice-cream over the entire thing. It looked disgusting, but probably tasted delicious.

"What is that?" I asked, pointing at his plate.

"Dessert."

"It's a heap!"

He shrugged. "Your mom won't let me eat desserts," he said. "I figured if this was my only shot I should make the most of it."

My eyes widened.

"You're being naughty!" I said.

I cringed inside after saying it. I sounded like such a kid.

"Absolutely," he said, shoveling a spoonful of ice-cream-laden apple cobbler into his mouth.

I took a trip to the dessert bar myself and helped myself to some soft-serve ice-cream (in a *bowl*, the way it was supposed to be) and Oreos. I

made a point of eating it as daintily as possible, just to set a good example for my dad.

“What’s something you’ve always wanted to do but couldn’t because your mom wouldn’t let you?” he asked.

I was aghast. My own father. Conspiring!

“Nothing,” I said, trying to show *some* loyalty to my mother.

“I think I’m going to watch *The Simpsons* if it’s on later,” said Dad. “I’ll have to check the TV Guide.”

I laughed, scandalized. My mother hated *The Simpsons*. She said that the characters were morally bankrupt (though she’d never stayed long enough to see a full episode—if she had, she’d know they usually learned their lesson) and she hated Marge’s voice.

I figure any show that had just finished up its tenth season must have *something* going for it. Mom said it just went to show the sad state the world was in.

Mom pretty much only watched Disney movies.

My dad continued to plan his evening as we finished our meal. I laughed as he came up with more and more things he could do without my mother there to scold him and no work to go to in the morning: Cartoons all night, cold cereal with marshmallows for dinner, rowdy action movies that had an above-average amount of swearing... He had it all figured out.

In the end, he ended up going to bed early. But I like to think he fulfilled his cartoon-watching junk food laden plans in his dreams.

As for me, I spent some quality time with Huey. I put him in his hamster ball and let him roam freely throughout the house as I gave his cage a thorough cleaning.

And then...nothing.

I thought about my lunch with Dad. About his pile of forbidden desserts. About how Mom wasn't home.

The house felt so empty without her. We were a family of three and two-thirds of us were at home, but somehow the biggest presence among us was missing.

*“What’s something you’ve always wanted to do...?”*

I had an inkling of an idea, but it just seemed so...impossible.

Or was it?

I tip-toed past my parents' bedroom (my dad was snoring loudly) and into the bathroom. I shut the door as silently as possible behind me. My heart was starting to race.

Was I really going to do this?

I opened the medicine cabinet and glanced around. Nothing. I closed it again and continued my search. And then I found it—in the left-hand drawer by the sink: My mom's razor.

My breathing quickened as I removed the cap. I turned it in my hands, inspecting it under the light. It had two blades and they both looked sharp. But I guess they were supposed to.

I took off my t-shirt and set it aside. I looked at myself in the bathroom mirror, wearing only my jeans and my bra. I looked okay, I guess.

I raised my left arm and cringed at the tuft of armpit hair. The me in the mirror didn't look pleased about it either.

I turned on the sink and wet my right hand, trying to cup some of the water. Then I rubbed my wetted hand under my left arm. I then took some hand soap and lathered up the hair as best I could.

I wasn't entirely sure what I was doing, but I had a good general idea from what friends had told me and things I'd read in magazines. First I had to make the area slick. And then...

I was scared of "step two" in the plan. If I cut myself, I didn't know what I'd do. I'd sooner bleed to death than admit what I'd been up to!

I took a deep breath and raised my left arm above my head once more. I held the razor in my right hand—the metal blades were cold when they touched my skin—and made a slow, steady, downward scraping motion.

I had to hold back an exclamation of joy as I saw a strip of hair disappear before my eyes. It was too good to be true.

I worked swiftly and quietly, quickly shaving both armpits.

I rinsed Mom's razor as best I could and returned it where I'd found it. I even did my best to put it in the drawer in the *exact* angle it had been facing when I found it. Leave no trace!

I raised both of my arms above my head and grinned as my mirror self delighted in her newfound smoothness. We waved to each other, arms raised high in a faraway greeting.



And, oh, when my deodorant touched my bare skin. It was amazing. It felt as if I were using it for the first time. It felt like I could actually feel it working—like it was actually protecting me from unwanted stench rather than just matting my underarm hair.

I felt clean.

I felt confident.

I felt like an adult.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

When we picked up Mom from the hospital, it felt like everyone was staring at my armpits. They weren't of course—no one could even see them under the t-shirt I was wearing—but I was feeling the increased paranoia of a guilty woman.

And yet, I also had a cluster of happy butterflies floating around in my stomach. I kept feeling the corners of my mouth twitch upward in a smile.

Mom seemed to be in a pretty good mood too, especially for someone who'd just had a major surgery the day before. She would have been downright peppy if the doctor hadn't told her to take it easy.

The doc had told Dad and me that Mom's recovery should take about four to six weeks. So, with any luck, she'd be feeling more-or-less herself by the time I started high school on September 7<sup>th</sup>. It was Sunday, August 1<sup>st</sup>, so that meant I had about five weeks before starting my new life as a high school girl.

A high school girl with incredibly smooth armpits.

Mom seemed happy to be back at home and eating familiar food. She said she wanted to spend most of her time resting either in bed or on the couch (though I was sure to remind her about moving around to prevent clots!) and asked if I could continue to take care of Huey for her. I didn't mind at all.

It was hard to believe it was my last month of summer vacation. It had gone by so quickly!

Once Mom was comfortable, I decided to head outside. I'd told Allison that I would be free as I knew that Dad would be home to help take care of Mom. And, boy was he! I could have been imagining it, but it seemed like he was *overly* taking care of her. I laughed, thinking that maybe he was

overcompensating as internal penance for being such a rogue the night before.

I sat down on the front lawn and waited for Allison to arrive. It didn't take long.

"Did you water our garden yesterday?" Allison asked.

"No," I admitted. "I didn't."

It wasn't that I'd forgotten—though that probably would have been understandable considering all that went on the day before—it was just that I didn't like to do it alone. It seemed like it was only a real garden when someone else was there to share it with.

"That's okay," she said. "It doesn't look like it made much of a difference. They're huge!"

She was right. Our onions seemed to be growing at an increasingly rapid pace! Each day there was a visible difference to their height.

"Well? Shall we?" she said, smiling.

"Let's."

We went about our usual routine of watering our garden with coffee mugs. We even had a few races down the driveway to see who could get to them first while holding a full mug of water. It was especially difficult because we also had to be sure not to splash out any of the water as water conservation was still on the forefront of my mind! But the challenge just made it more fun.

We collapsed on the lawn in a fit of laughter. I could feel myself starting to bake in the August sun, but I didn't mind.

“Hey,” said Allison, her tone suddenly serious.

“Hmm?”

“I’m gonna be gone at the end of this month.”

“Oh no,” I said, sitting up. “You’re moving?”

“No, no,” she said. “My family always goes on a camping trip the last week of August.”

“Oh,” I said. “So you’re going to be gone...until school starts?”

“Yeah,” she said. “We’re coming back the day before. Labor Day.”

I couldn’t believe it. I’d spent my whole summer with Allison and had planned to continue to do so until school started. I knew we were going to be separated once we started high school, but I figured we had a good five weeks left together. And now it was only four. It just didn’t seem like enough time.

“I was going to ask if you wanted to come with us,” Allison said. “But then the thing with your mom...”

“Yeah...”

“I figured you’d need to be here for her.”

“Yeah.”

We sat in silence for a bit. The mood had changed and I didn’t like it. I wanted things to go on as they were forever.

I was determined to have one last hurrah.

“Promise me,” I said, holding up my pinky. “Promise me we’ll spend Labor Day together.”

She looked at my pinky suspiciously. Like she didn’t want to enter into a binding contract without reading the fine print. She looked up at me with woeful eyes.

“What if I don’t make it back on time?” she said. “There might be a lot of traffic. I don’t wanna promise if I can’t keep it.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I said, pushing my pinky toward her insistently. “Even if I it’s only an hour—or a minute!—we gotta promise we’ll spend the last day of summer together. Okay?”

She reached out and locked her finger with mine.

“Okay,” she said. “It’s a deal.”

“Great!”

Then we just kind of...started at our intertwined fingers.

“What do we do now?” Allison asked.

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I’ve never actually done a pinky swear before.”

“Me neither.”

I started to get self-conscious. I was holding hands with another girl out in the open on my parents’ front lawn. I started to get a fit of the giggles. I couldn’t help it.

“Leggo my hand,” I laughed, attempting to shake her off.

“Noooooooooooo,” said Allison, laughing too. “What if we do it wrong and it breaks the seal?”

“We can’t stay connected like this forever! This is getting ridiculous!” My sides were starting to hurt from laughing.

Allison started to laugh so hard no sound came out. Which made me laugh even harder.

I don’t remember how we untangled ourselves from each other. Maybe we never did.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

“Did you shave your legs?”

My mom had walked into my room without knocking and I nearly died.

“No,” I said. (Not exactly a lie).

“Oh,” she said. “I found some hairs in my razor today when I bathed...”

No way was I gonna confess. If she thought I was going to fess up that easy, she was out of her mind.

“Didn’t shave my legs,” I said again, lifting up my jeans to expose hairy calves. “See?”

No way was I going to admit I had gone and grown up on her when she wasn’t looking. She’d been through enough without knowing I wasn’t her little girl anymore.

“I see,” she said, still eying me suspiciously. “All right...”

Whew! Close one!

But I’d better wear my t-shirt with the longer-than-average sleeves again just in case.

Allison had already been by earlier in the afternoon to help water the onions, but had to go home to take her cat to the vet. Nothing serious; just his yearly appointment. So I was using the free time to help tidy up. Mom had been moving around pretty well—and it was only the end of her first week of recovery!—but she still wasn’t supposed to do anything too strenuous.

I had already done all the vacuuming, so I was making my way through the house with a damp paper-towel doing some dusting. I had saved my room for last. I had a lot of knick-knacks that hadn't been cleaned for a quite some time.

I had a small shelf of just things Sis had given me. There was a stuffed rabbit with a lacey collar she'd gotten me in France. And a pearl oyster shell she'd gotten me on her trip to Japan.

I held the shell in my hand, carefully trying to dust it without breaking it. I could remember the day she gave it to me as if it were still happening—the way I just couldn't believe the shell she'd handed me had come from the other side of the world.

From one side, it was a dull gray. Covered with ocean crud. It was rough to the touch. From the other side, it was delicate and iridescent. She'd told me that they made buttons out of that kind of shell. That it was highly valued.

I liked both sides. I rotated the way I displayed it according to my mood. This time, I set it back down with its iridescent side facing up. It was a good day.

After I finished dusting my room, I decided to take care of Huey.

I was just returning him to his freshly-cleaned cage when Mom walked in. I gave her a nod hello and walked over to the sink with Huey's free-roam ball. It was great for keeping him safe and entertained while I was taking care of business but, without fail, he always seemed to pee in it.

As I was rinsing out Huey's ball, Mom said, "You've been taking good care of Huey for me."

"You're welcome," I said automatically. It wasn't until a second later that I realized she hadn't actually thanked me.



“He seems to be pretty taken with you,” she said, motioning toward his cage.

I smiled as I saw that Huey was standing up, sniffing the air in my direction. He was sort of wavering on his back legs. He did that whenever he wanted a treat.

“He just wants a treat,” I said. “I was trying to teach him to stand up on his back feet to get a treat, but then he just started doing it automatically.”

“More like he’s training you, huh?” Mom joked.

“Yeah,” I said.

I put Huey’s ball aside to dry and grabbed the treat bag. I offered it to Mom.

“You wanna do it?”

“No,” she said. “You go ahead.”

She watched me as I handed Huey his treat. He didn’t even eat it. He just shoved it in his cheek pouch for later. Silly hamster. I gave him a pat on the head.

“Would you...” Mom started. “...Would you like to *have* Huey?”

“Huh?” I said. “What do you mean?”

I didn’t think I’d heard her right. She couldn’t possibly mean what I thought she did.

“You’ve been the main person taking care of him,” she said. “And he seems to really like you. If you’d like to have him, you can. Unless you’re just taking care of him because you have to...”

“No, no! I love taking care of him,” I said. “But you said I was too young to have a pet.”

Mom looked at me and gave me a knowing smile. She reached up and touched my hair, just barely brushing against my face.

“I think you’re old enough now,” she said. “You’ve grown up so much.”

I stayed stark still. I didn’t even want to breathe. Breathing was for babies! Not for the proud new owner of a hamster such as I.

I didn’t want to do anything to mess up my newfound adulthood in my mother’s eyes.

“And we’ll talk more about the razor later,” she said as she left the room. “When you’re ready.”

She was totally onto me. Drat.

## **CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT**

The following weeks flew by.

Our onions continued to grow and grow, getting taller and taller every day.

But then...

Something weird happened.

“What’s that thing?” I said, poking at one of our onions with my index finger.

“I’m not sure,” said Allison, equally bewildered. “It looks like a flower.”

That’s what it looked like to me too. It was a white puffball, kind of like the head of a dandelion, which had several almost star-shaped flowers coming out of it in a giant cluster. And this onion wasn’t the only one—all of our onions had flowers.

“I don’t get it,” I said. “Are they supposed to do this?”

“I’m not sure,” said Allison. “My family never bought the ‘O’ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, so I couldn’t look up anything about onions...”

So that was her secret. I’d always wondered how she knew so many random facts.

“Well,” I said. “Maybe this means they’re, you know...done?”

“Oh,” said Allison. “Maybe. That would make sense, I guess. Lots of plants flower and go to seed right at the end of their lifespan. I just didn’t think it would happen so quickly.”

“Maybe we’re just really great at growing onions,” I said.

Allison shrugged. “Maybe,” she said. “Well. Shall we?”

“Let’s.”

We both reached down and grabbed hold of an onion stalk and pulled.

And then we both screamed like sissies and dropped them immediately.

Something had gone horribly, horribly wrong.

“Oh my God,” I said. “Oh. My. *God.*”

Allison didn’t say anything; she just stood there in stunned silence, looking at the onions we’d pulled up.

What the heck happened?!

For one thing, our onions just looked completely wrong. We’d been expecting large brown bulbs on the end of our green stalks, but nope. The onions we pulled up out of the ground looked like green onions. But bigger. Like mutant green onions. They were barely wider at their bases than they were at their tops.

Second, they were crawling with some sort of bugs! They were yellowish-white and wriggling. They looked kind of like grubs, but thinner.

“They’re living *inside* our onions!” I said, bending down to look closer.  
“Are they all like this?”

We pulled out the remaining twelve onions. Yes. They were *all* like that.

“What did we do wrong?” I wondered aloud.

“I don’t know,” said Allison.

We’d spent weeks working in our onion garden. We’d looked after them daily. And for what?

“All that work,” I said, slumping to the ground. “All that work and this is what we get.”

“It’s not so bad,” Allison said, sitting down next to me.

“Not so bad? They’re ruined!” I said. “We worked our butts off every day!”

“Well,” Allison said calmly. “Sometimes the work we do in life isn’t always for us.”

We watched the wormy-looking bugs wriggle around in our onions, trying to find their way deep inside, out of the glare of the sun. Some of them were so fat, they could barely move. I laughed.

“They do look pretty happy,” I admitted.

“I think they’re some sort of maggot,” said Allison, completely ruining the moment.

“Gross.”

We'd spent weeks building a paradise for maggots.

I laughed.

“Well,” I said. “I guess we won't be having any onion soup.”

“That's okay,” she said. “It was fun. That's what counts.”

“Yeah. It was.”

We gingerly picked up our failed onion crop, being careful to hold them by their tops—we didn't want to touch the bulbs and their (yecch!) inhabitants—and threw them in the green waste bin. We decided we didn't have the heart to kill the maggots, but we didn't want to keep them either. Come trash day, they'd be on their way somewhere else, living out their lives far away from us.

Allison had to leave early that day. It was the 27<sup>th</sup> of August and it was time for her to start packing.

She left the next day.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The following days were boring and lonely. Basically, what summer had been like before I started hanging out with Allison.

Except now I had a hamster to keep me company.

And I was no longer going on nightly trips to the emergency room with my mother.

So...better.

But still boring and lonely.

I was pretty much just counting the days until Allison got back. Which also meant I was counting the days until school started.

I guess I was ready for school to start. I wasn't really sure.

Mom's recovery was going really well, so she didn't really need me to look after her anymore like she did when she was "sick." She even seemed like she was in a better mood lately.

Even my dad had been in better spirits.

The other night, he was getting up from the couch to go get something from the kitchen and he stubbed his toe on the coffee table. I was ready to head for the hills (I didn't want to be in the same room with him if his mood went sour), but instead of becoming irate, he laughed. I could have sworn I heard him mumble, "I'm lucky I even have a toe."

I didn't know what to say. I guess not going to hospitals all the time must be saving my parents a bundle. They'd even said I could start taking daily

showers again if I wanted to (with my brand new shaving razor!) and we had even gone out to eat once or twice. I guess having all his hard work go toward fun things made Dad a lot happier than when all his cash was going toward sitting in waiting rooms every night. It certainly made *me* happier.

Or maybe my dad switched bodies with an alien. I dunno.

All I knew was that I was restless. I didn't know what to do with myself. I was itching to get out and *do* something, but I didn't know what.

I tried playing video games, but I'd played them all before. I'd tried reading books, but none of them held my attention long enough to really "take" me somewhere.

I looked out the window. I paced around in my room. I even tried phoning the Oldies radio station a few times to enter the contest they were having. All I ever got was a busy signal.

I guess my restlessness had started to drive my mom crazy because eventually she said, in her most exasperated tone, "Don't you have something to do?"

I felt like saying "Do I *look* like I have something to do?" but decided that would be rude so I just kinda stared at her.

"What about your garden?" she asked. "I haven't seen you outside in a while..."

"Garden's gone," I said sadly. "It didn't work out."

"Oh," she said. "That's too bad. I really liked your garden."

"Me too," I said. "I miss it."



She looked at me like she was thinking. I thought she was going to say something to me, but she ended up just nodding and walking away. Whatever.

I thought about playing a game with myself that I'd played when I was a kid. It was called "Hobo Soup" and it involved taking whatever canned items I could find in the cupboards and mixing them together in a pot. It didn't really matter what ingredients I used—the only rule was that they had to come from a can. (Needless to say, some versions of "Hobo Soup" turned out better than others).

Except, I wasn't hungry. My parents' rule when I played "Hobo Soup" was that I had to eat whatever I made. Which was fair, I guess.

I ended up doing a load of laundry.

You know you're desperate for entertainment when doing laundry seems like it might be fun.

Just as I was starting to fold my clothes, my mom came back into my room and told me to come outside with her. When I did, I saw two celled packs of flowers sitting by the now-empty dirt patch that had once been a maggot paradise.

"What're those?" I asked.

"Marigolds," said Mom.

The flowers had round ruffled heads and were in various shades of yellow and orange. They looked like tiny fireballs.

"I thought we could do some gardening together," she said, smiling.

"Really?" I asked. "You want to?"

She nodded. “Yes,” she said. “I thought it would be nice.”

I thought it would be nice too. But I wasn’t going to let her get hurt. I pestered her with all sorts of questions about whether or not gardening would be considered too strenuous during her recovery. She assured me that planting flowers wasn’t going to mess anything up, but I wasn’t so sure.

“What about when it comes time to water them?” I asked. “That’s a lot of work!”

“Really?” she said, obviously dumbfounded. “How come?”

“Because the hose is broken,” I said.

“It is?”

She walked over to the hose and inspected it. Then she disappeared. Typical Mom. Maybe Dad wasn’t making all that stuff up about her just up and leaving when she was younger—she did it all the time now in her own house!

She came back with a roll of duct tape and wound it around the crack in the hose. She put on three layers of tape and then set the roll aside. I watched as she turned on the hose and it worked perfectly fine.

I felt like an idiot.

“I...I didn’t know taping it was an option,” I said.

“It’s not a permanent fix,” she said. “But it should hold it for a while. Just until we can get a new one.”

“You fixed it with duct tape?”

“Oh yes. Duct tape can fix almost anything,” she said. “They even used it on Apollo 13.”

“The movie?”

“No, the real one,” she said, and then added, “Though I suppose they probably used it on the movie one as well. I have no idea.”

We spent the rest of the daylight hours on our hands and knees digging in the dirt, planting the marigolds. I was surprised when Mom told me that they acted as a natural pest repellent. Apparently most of the yucky bugs hated them, but the prettier bugs (like butterflies) found them very appealing. I’d have to tell Allison about that once she got home. Though, knowing Allison, she probably already knew. Unless her family was missing the “M” section of their encyclopedia collection as well.

“Your hair’s growing back out,” Mom noted.

“Yep,” I said.

“Are you going to dye it again?”

“Nah.”

“That’s good,” she said. “You always looked so good as a blonde.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“You know,” she said, pausing her gardening for a moment. “When your hair grows back out, you’ll look just like your aunt did at your age.”

We talked about Sis as we shoved the last of the marigolds into the ground. She would have loved our garden.

## **CHAPTER THIRTY**

It was nearly evening by the time Allison showed up at my place on the 6<sup>th</sup> of September. Labor Day.

My parents were in the back yard having one last BBQ with my uncle (Dad's brother) and his new girlfriend. I was out front watering the marigolds when I saw Allison walking down the street toward me.

"Nice plants," she said.

"Thanks!"

"Marigolds, right?"

"Yep," I said. I knew she'd know. "I'm almost done."

"You're using the hose," she noted.

"Yeah," I said. "Did you know we could just tape it and it'd work?"

"Sure," she said.

"What?!"

She shrugged. "I just figured you liked doing it the other way," she said. "I wasn't going to argue. It was fun."

"Next time just tell me," I laughed. "I felt like a total ditz when my mom taped it up like it was nothing."

“Nah,” she said. “I think we should sell the idea. We could make some exercise tapes. It’d be like... Two tapes in one. It’d show people how to get some exercise *and* how to garden.”

“We should probably work on perfecting ‘part two’ of that series before we release it,” I said.

“Yeah, probably,” she agreed with a knowing grin. I knew she was remembering the maggot incident.

I turned off the hose and put it away. “You have time for a walk?” I asked.

“Sure.”

We walked up the sidewalk where we had first met. I remembered how I felt when I first saw Allison from across the street, taking bites out of an onion. She’d had long hair back then. It felt so long ago.

“How was your trip?” I asked.

“It was great,” she said. “I wish you could have been there. We did all sorts of things. We went fishing—but I didn’t catch anything—and we went swimming in the lake and we went hiking. And I’m pretty sure I saw a bear, but he was pretty far away so I’m not *really* sure.”

“Wow,” I said.

“And everyone got bug bites but me,” she said. “I started to at first, but then I cracked open one of my onions and started rubbing it on my skin to make the bites feel better—it’s kind of soothing—but then I noticed that after I did that no *other* bugs tried to bite me so I just kept doing it. Worked great.”

Ah. That explained why she kind of smelled like soup. She must have come straight from her house to mine without rinsing off first. I chuckled.

“That sounds great,” I said.

“Maybe you can come with us next year!” she said.

“Maybe,” I smiled.

We reached the sidewalk square we had colored in with chalk. No traces of our self-made universe remained, at least not in the tangible sense. I would remember it for as long as I lived.

We used the square as our turning point and started to head back down the hill.

It was weird. This was our last day of summer. Our last day to be kids. The next day, we were going to be high schoolers. We’d be well on our way toward being real adults.

I couldn’t believe how much things had changed over the course of just one summer.

I felt... happy.

“Bandit?” Allison said.

“Yeah?”

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you all summer.”

“What’s that?” I said.

“What’s your real name?”

I laughed.

“Real?” I said. “This is more real than I’ve ever been!”

But, in the end, I told her anyway.

The End.



# About the Author

Lauren R. Tharp wrote this book.

She owns a large collection of books and a medium-sized cat.

She likes writing stories and eating sandwiches with extra mayo.

And she likes you!

Probably.

You seem all right.

**Visit Lauren online at <http://laurentharp.net>**

## In the summer of 1999...

After a death in her family, Bandit finds herself bored and alone. Bored and alone enough to begin conversing with the neighborhood oddball: Allison Gale--a large-nosed girl with no sense of smell... and a penchant for eating raw onions.

