

THE THINGS WE MISS

Leah Stecher

Praise for the Book:

★ “Stecher’s speculative, heartrending debut eloquently portrays the joys and sorrows of being in seventh grade—and the importance of remaining present.” —***Publishers Weekly*** (starred review)

“A powerful story about the joy and pain of growing up.” —***Kirkus Reviews***

“In the resonant novel *The Things We Miss*, a girl learns that running away doesn’t solve problems, and that being present is an act of love.” —***Foreword Reviews***

"Magical and heartbreaking! You will read this book in one gulp." — **Jennifer L. Holm**, *New York Times*-bestselling author of ***The Fourteenth Goldfish***

About the Book:



From debut author Leah Stecher comes a heartfelt contemporary middle grade about a girl who has trouble fitting in and finds a way to skip all of the hard parts of life.

J.P. Green has always felt out of step. She doesn't wear the right clothes, she doesn't say the right things, and her body...well, she'd rather not talk about it. And seventh grade is shaping up to be the worst year yet. So when J.P. discovers a mysterious door in her neighbor's treehouse, she doesn't hesitate before walking through. The door sends her three days forward in time.

Suddenly, J.P. can skip all the worst parts of seventh grade: Fitness tests in P.E., oral book reports, awkward conversations with her mom . . . she can avoid them all and no one even knows she was gone.

But can you live a life without any of the bad parts? Are there experiences out there that you can't miss?

This moving middle grade novel about mental health, body acceptance, and self-confidence asks what it truly means to show up for the people you love-and for yourself.

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LEAH STECHER

BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS
NEW YORK LONDON OXFORD NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Inc., part of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
1385 Broadway, New York, NY 10018

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First published in the United States of America in May 2024 by Bloomsbury Children's Books

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
available upon request
ISBN 978-1-5476-1302-1 (hardcover) • ISBN 978-1-5476-1303-8 (e-book)

Book design by Yelena Safronova
Typeset by Westchester Publishing Services
Printed and bound in the U.S.A.
2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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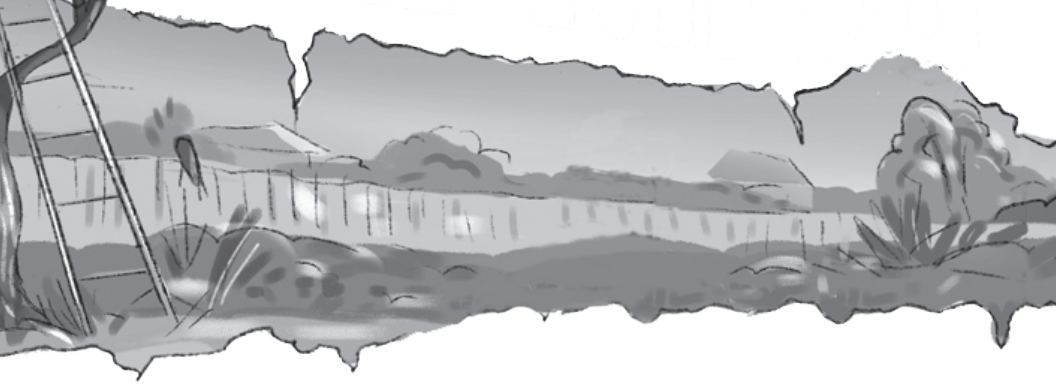
TK

PART 1

“Where to, Admiral?”

“Anywhere. Anywhere but here. And step on it.”

—*Admiral K*, Season 2, Episode 5



1

I overslept on the morning of my dad's funeral.

It was almost two years ago, in the middle of fifth grade. I remember that Mom woke me up for the first time with a gentle hand on my back, rubbing comforting circles between my shoulder blades. She sat on the edge of my bed, tucked my hair behind my ear, and said, "It's time to get up," as though she was apologizing.

I didn't mean to do it. I didn't mean to close my eyes after she left the room and gently slip out of reality like a thief sneaking out the back door. I didn't mean to curl into a ball under the covers, squeezing my body into as small a shape as I could manage, as though someone might not notice me there. Might let me sleep. Might let me wake up when it was all over.

I didn't mean to.

I remember that when Mom woke me up for the second

time, she let out a little sound that was halfway between a gasp and a sob. That sound—small and sharp and broken—punctured my cozy sleep cocoon. I don't remember a lot from the day of the funeral, but I remember that sound perfectly. It was exhaustion and exasperation and sorrow all rolled into one. And it was my fault she was making that sound. I'd taken this horrible day and made it even worse.

Because, who does that? Who nearly sleeps through their dad's funeral?

"J.P." Mom pulled back the covers, touched my shoulder, and waited until I sat up. Her eyes were red from crying. "It's *really* time to get up, sweetie. We're going to be late."

"I'm sorry," I said immediately, guilt burning away any lingering sleepiness.

She gave me a tired smile. "It's okay. I don't want to go either. I don't want this to be happening. But you'd regret it, if you missed it."

She thought I'd done it on purpose. Shame spiked through me, like an electric shock. "I didn't mean to fall back asleep," I insisted.

Mom didn't seem to hear. She was already rummaging in my dresser, pulling out my funeral outfit. She had bought me a new pair of black pants last week, and when she laid them out across the bed, I could see that they were a size too small. Somehow, that felt like my fault too.

I was already the tallest girl in the fifth grade, but it

wasn't a good kind of tall. Because I was also round. Tall and round—I was just *large*. I took up so much more space than the other girls. Mom said they would catch up, that I was just getting my growth spurt early. All I knew was that I was out of step with everyone else. That I was off the beat. That I was doing it wrong.

“Hurry up and brush your teeth,” Mom said. “We’ll eat breakfast in the car.”

It was April in Southern California, which meant the morning was cool enough to want another layer, but you could tell that the afternoon was going to blossom into one of those perfect, sunny days that would bring out the freckles on my pale arms. Mom and I were in the front row of chairs next to the casket. The dark wood was polished to a shine, and the sunlight bounced right off it. No matter where I looked, it sparkled like glitter in the edges of my vision.

The button of my too-small funeral pants pressed uncomfortably into my belly when we sat. Frizzy hair kept escaping from my low ponytail to whip around my head in embarrassing circles. Mom would have pulled it back into a French braid if we’d had time. If I hadn’t overslept. Every time a stray hair touched my face, I flinched at the reminder that I’d messed up. I shifted in my white plastic folding chair, trying to escape my pants, my hair, my whole self, and Mom put a hand on my thigh in a silent order to *sit still*.

I remember that I wanted to leave right after the service,

but Mom had to talk to so many people. People who wanted to murmur things like *so sorry for your loss, he was so young, such a terrible accident, so tragic*. My best friend, Kevin Takagi, waited with me while Mom stood by the grave and let everyone grasp her hand or her shoulder while her high heels sunk deeper and deeper into the dirt.

It was almost spring break, so Mom let me stay home until after the holiday. When I stepped through the door back into Ms. Thompson's fifth-grade classroom two weeks later, conversations died out. Everyone watched me walk to my desk, as though they thought I might break down and cry right next to the shelf of Abridged Classics for Kids. I felt their stares like individual laser beams, and I started to sweat under the heat. I hated having that many eyes on me. What else did they see? Could they see how many outfits I'd tried on while getting dressed this morning, looking for something that didn't exist? Something that would make me normal-sized? Make me smaller?

Miranda O'Donnell, with her perfect red hair and unfreckled porcelain skin, turned around in the desk in front of mine. "I'm sorry for your loss," she whispered, clearly reciting words her parents had given her. Once the official sympathy was out of the way, she licked her lips eagerly. "So, what was the funeral like?"

What was it like? Miranda was leaning so far forward in her chair that I thought she might fall right off the seat. Her eyes were wide, eyebrows lifted. Expectant. As though I had some great story to tell. Some big adventure to share.

I didn't know what to say. When I thought about it too much, I felt sadness sinking into each of my limbs like a heavy blanket.

"Zombies," I said finally. "Zombies came bursting out of all the other graves and attacked us. We had to run for our lives."

Like flicking a light switch, Miranda's face went from curious to confused. "What?"

I nodded. "I think my dad is a zombie now too."

It took me a second to identify the new emotion that took root in Miranda. Shock. Horror. "Why would you say that?" She looked around to see if anyone else was listening and raised her hand to get Ms. Thompson's attention. "That's a bad thing to say," she informed me.

Everyone was looking at me, *still* looking. But their faces had changed to match Miranda's. And I knew I'd done it again. Said the wrong thing. Been the wrong person. I couldn't even talk about my dad's funeral correctly.

Mom was there to pick me up after school, even though I normally had to go to afterschool care until 6:00 p.m. when she got off work. "So, J.P.," she said as I slid into the passenger seat. There was a small wrinkle between her eyebrows, and she was smiling with her mouth closed—amusement and confusion fighting for position on her face. "I got a call from Ms. Thompson at lunch today. She said you—" She coughed, collected her thoughts. "Well, she said you told your classmates that your father turned into a zombie at the funeral?"

“I didn’t know what to say.”

Mom put her free hand on my leg and made a soothing motion. “Oh, sweetie. There is no right thing to say. There’s no right way to grieve.”

Clearly there was, though. Clearly telling Miranda that the graveyard had turned into a massive zombie attack had been the *wrong* way to grieve. “Okay,” I said. We drove the rest of the way in silence.

It wasn’t until we were inside the house that I spoke again. “Why did I say that, though? What’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing,” Mom said firmly. I heard the sounds of jangling hangers where Pop Pop was unpacking his boxes in the downstairs bedroom. The noises stopped, and he joined us in the hallway, his bald head shining under the lighting fixture.

“Nothing,” he agreed. “We all say silly things sometimes. In fact, I think most of the things I say are silly.”

I shook my head. “That’s not the same.”

Mom smiled. “You’re right on that point. Your Pop Pop’s silliness is beyond compare. But, J.P., you’re just . . . growing up.” She tapped me lightly on the side of my head. “Your brain is still growing too. It grows and changes until you’re, gosh, in your twenties. Like a house that’s still being built. So, it’s okay if you haven’t figured it all out yet. That’s normal.”

“To be clear,” Pop Pop jumped in. “You don’t magically have things figured out in your twenties. Trust me.” He tried to subtly point at Mom and mouthed, *She didn’t*.

Mom rolled her eyes. “Dad,” she sighed. “I’m just saying that it’s more than okay to feel off balance at your age. It’s normal. And death is hard to talk about, even for adults.”

“Right.” Pop Pop nodded. “But maybe cool it on the zombie talk.” They both looked at me expectantly.

“Oh. Okay, yeah. No more zombies.”

But the truth had been clear to me from the moment Mom woke me up with that gasp of surprise. If everyone else was off balance, I was fully upside down and backwards. Everyone else must have gotten a set of instructions about how to exist—how to *not* oversleep on the day of your dad’s funeral, how to *not* freak out your classmates, how to *not* be too large for your pants, how to just *be normal*.

But no one had given me a copy.

2

It was the morning of the first day of seventh grade, and Mom was sitting on the edge of my bed, making a familiar expression. It was her *zombie attack at your father's funeral* expression. Her *you've fallen outside the range of normal human responses* expression. Her eyebrows were furrowed, but she was smiling, the crossed wires in her brain clearly visible on her face.

"We can't skip the first day of school photo, J.P." Mom brushed some of my tangled hair behind my ear. "You only get one first day of seventh grade. You'll want to remember it."

This was the worst alarm clock ever. "It's really not a big deal," I said. "We can skip the photo." *Please, let's skip the photo.*

Mom ignored me. "I have to get going in fifteen minutes, so get up and brush your teeth."

“We don’t have to, really.”

“Don’t be silly,” Mom said. “It’s tradition.”

I was smiling brightly in my first day of school photo from kindergarten. By the third grade, I looked uncomfortable, shoulders rounding forward as I stared back at Mom. Last year’s photo was the worst one. I had my arms wrapped around myself, shielding my body from view. Mom snapped it before I was ready—would I ever have been ready?—and my face was angled down and away from the camera. She laughed and said it was candid, and now it was one of seven framed pictures lining the hallway between the living room and the stairs.

A record, snapshot after snapshot, of my ever-expanding stomach. A log of discomfort. A history of first days, of possibilities that popped like a bubble as soon as I got to school.

It was a terrible tradition.

I pulled the covers back over my head as soon as Mom left the room, which was a mistake because it trapped my bad breath in there with me. Somewhere nearby Miranda O’Donnell was also waking up, and her hair was probably glossy and her breath was probably minty and she would probably take a perfect first day of school photo.

And I . . .

I would just look like me. And Mom would get teary-eyed about another milestone that my dad wasn’t here to see and tell me how pretty I looked. But then she would suggest that I change my shirt or my pants or my hairstyle,

and I would wonder why she bothered with the lie in the first place.

So I made a break for it.

I didn't stop to get dressed. I crept down the stairs in my pajamas and ran barefoot across the damp grass outside, heading straight for the treehouse.

It wasn't even *my* treehouse. Not technically. It belonged to the Johannsons' twin girls next door, who had asked their mom to paint scenes from *Alice in Wonderland* inside. But they were off at college and hadn't been inside the treehouse in years.

I spent a lot of time in that avocado tree after Dad died, when I needed to be alone and unseen. Mom joked that the treehouse was my "happy place," but that wasn't quite right. I didn't go there to feel happy. I went there to feel nothing. To just exist, without judgment or fear of saying the wrong thing.

Maybe that *was* happiness.

I did a cursory sweep of the space, shuffling a few leaves out the open doorway before settling down on an old cushion I'd placed on the floor. The wall directly across from me was painted with lime green polka dots and a row of fake gold picture frames, holding a cross-eyed hare, a frowning turtle, and the back of a colorful parrot. Behind me, the orange wall was painted with a tea trolley, complete with a teapot and several cups and saucers, all set on a white cloth. And the back wall, pale blue, had two

doors painted onto it, one comically large and one comically small.

I leaned my head back against the painting of the tea trolley and exhaled. But I couldn't get rid of the pit in my stomach.

The minutes ticked by. I breathed a sigh of relief when I heard the sound of Mom's car pulling out of the driveway. Then Pop Pop came to find me. His bald head peeked up through the treehouse floorboards, and he instinctively squinted against the bright colors that covered the interior walls.

"Hey, J.P." Pop Pop looked at me, with my head tilted back against the orange wall, and I could see him deciding whether or not to ask about the photo. He switched into a theatrical voice, with a hint of a bad British accent. "Descend from your fortress, fair princess, and take your breakfast with me." He sounded just like the main character in *Around the Table*, his favorite daytime soap opera set in King Arthur's court in Camelot. The cheap CGI magic—which appeared on screen as multicolored lightning bolts—was his favorite part.

Pop Pop moved in with us right after Dad's car accident. He said he was lonely in his house anyways, and Mom wouldn't ever have to pay for a babysitter. But then, right after he moved in, he got lung cancer even though he quit smoking twenty years ago, and we wouldn't have let him leave even if he had wanted to. He was healthy now,

but he had to be “cancer-free” for five years before the doctors considered him to be totally in the clear.

“Is the queen upset with me?” I asked, trying to copy Pop Pop’s accent.

“Nay,” Pop Pop responded, before switching into his normal voice. “Of course not. Maybe just a little confused. She says we can take your photo after school instead. And that she loves you and she hopes you have a great day.”

“That seems unlikely,” I said glumly, adding, “oh, good wizard,” so I wouldn’t sound like a total grouch.

Pop Pop led the way back to the house. When we got to the kitchen, he tied a frilly pink apron around his waist and gestured proudly to a bowl of sloshing liquid. “I’m making pancakes,” he said with a giant smile.

“Oh! Really?” A mixture of emotions filled my chest, sadness tinged with nostalgia. Before he died, my dad always made pancakes on the first day of school.

“Your mom mentioned it was something that Charlie did,” Pop Pop said, suddenly sounding a little hesitant. “Is it okay?”

“It’s great,” I said firmly. “That’s really nice of you, Pop Pop.”

“Nice shmice,” Pop Pop said, waving a spatula in the air. “Pancakes are the kind of breakfast that ensure a good day. King Arthur has pancakes anytime he has to hunt down an evil creature in *Around the Table*.” Pop Pop ignored my snort of laughter. “What do you want, blueberry or

chocolate chip?” I gave him a look and he shrugged. “We don’t have to tell your mom.”

“Chocolate chip then. Duh.” Mom was a stickler about junk food. She said it was for Pop Pop—that we needed to keep his body healthy and that she had read studies linking processed sugars to different forms of cancer. But, looking down at the rolls of fat that formed under my shirt when I sat down at the oval table, I knew it was for me too.

Pop Pop added chocolate chips to the bowl and mixed vigorously. “Are you excited for school?”

“Nope,” I said confidently. “Not even after pancakes. Kevin and I don’t have a single class together this year.”

Pop Pop flipped three pancakes in the pan. “Well, you should be. In fact, I know something that you don’t know.”

“What?”

“I can’t tell you. But I’m sure Kevin will reveal everything on the walk to school.” He eyed the pancakes, then scooped them out of the pan and onto a plate. “For the Crown Princess of Rancho Nuevo.” He bowed and held the plate out toward me.

I couldn’t help giggling as I took it. “Thank you, gentle wizard.” Pop Pop bowed again and poured a new batch into the pan. “But seriously, Pop Pop. What is it?”

“Seriously, J.P., I can’t tell you. You’ll have to wait until you see Kevin. But”—he waggled his eyebrows—“I think I can promise that you’ll have a good day today.”

I sighed. But there was no way I'd get this secret information out of him, once he'd decided that it would be more dramatic to make me wait. He was a lot like the soap operas he loved—fully committed to wringing the most emotion possible out of every moment of life. “Fine,” I said, and cut myself a bite with extra chocolate chips. “But I doubt anything could make today a good day.”



My best friend, Kevin, was waiting for me at our usual corner, where Washington Avenue met 14th Street. It was exactly three blocks from my house and four and a half blocks from Kevin's house. It was where we met in the morning and where we often lingered at the end of the day before going home.

Our moms had conferenced together before sixth grade and agreed that we could walk to and from McKinley Middle School together *only* if we always walked together and *only* if we walked the same way each time. The four of us had sat at Mrs. Takagi's kitchen table and traced the route out on her tablet. “If I start walking this route backwards after school ends, I expect to find you on it. Every. Single. Day. Understood?” My mom looked at us both with raised eyebrows, and we nodded as seriously as we could.

Our moms were best friends, just like me and Kevin. After Kevin and I were born, four months apart, they even bought houses in the same neighborhood. Which was

great, because walking to school with Kevin was way better than taking the bus.

Kevin started waving when I was a full block away and kept it up until I reached him. I started walking absurdly slowly, just to drag it out, and he moved his wave into slow motion to match my lingering footsteps. “Happy first day of school!” he called.

As I got closer, his first day of school outfit came into focus. Jeans rolled up to his ankles, revealing bright yellow socks above his brown shoes. The yellow matched his shirt, the front of which was casually tucked into his jeans. There was a silhouette of a monkey’s head on the shirt, with the words “A Bathing Ape” written around it. His aunt Yui had given it to him at the end of his summer in Japan, to celebrate his “internship” at her costume design shop. Kevin had whispered the price to me the first time he wore it, and I told him to take it off immediately and put it in a glass case somewhere. But he said no, fashion was meant to be worn.

Kevin used a forest green cross-body bag instead of a backpack, and it was already bursting at the seams with brand new binders and extra issues of the Admiral K comic book—she was my dad’s favorite comic book character and then mine and then Kevin’s. Personally, I liked the TV show better than the comic. Kevin agreed, but he wouldn’t admit it. He said you had to respect the original artistry of the printed issues.

He used words like “artistry” and “intention” ever since

he got back from his internship. I did my best not to roll my eyes.

I didn't beat around the bush. "You look awesome," I said first, both because he did and because he liked it when people noticed his clothes. Then right to business. "Pop Pop said that you know something. What is it?"

Kevin's eyes flitted over my own outfit—baggy T-shirt over baggy jeans. My usual *blend into the background* style. I could tell he wanted to say something, but that was a battle he'd stopped fighting ages ago.

"Kevin." I crossed my arms when he hesitated. "Secrets create weakness, remember?" Admiral K liked to say that, arms folded across her chest, as she looked over the crew of the spaceship *Artemis*. *Secrets create weakness*, she'd say, *and I do not tolerate weakness in my crew*. And then someone would step forward, shoulders hunched over in shame, and admit that they'd been the spy, they'd leaked the top secret information, they'd traded the backup rotator link for extra food rations.

Kevin and I, we took that very seriously.

"Funny you should say that." Kevin's eyes were practically sparkling with excitement, and I felt myself leaning in, hands tightening around the straps of my backpack. "What," he asked, "is the greatest television tragedy of all time?"

"That *Admiral K* wasn't renewed for a sixth season and left us all on a cliffhanger. Duh."

"Duh, indeed!" Kevin had a flair for the dramatic too.

He and Pop Pop got along really well. “But the universe is finally righting this wrong.” I gasped before he could say it, anticipating the words. “We are getting an Admiral K movie!”

“Oh. My. God. Omigod! *Holy space rot!*” I grabbed Kevin, and then we were jumping in place, my backpack thudding against my back each time I landed. “We’re getting a movie!”

“We’re getting a movie!” Kevin shouted back.

We didn’t stop jumping until we were both out of breath. Then we just grinned at each other. “It’s called *Class K Emergency*,” Kevin added.

The gears in my head immediately started turning. “Class K . . . That means they’re skipping ahead, right? Past Classes I and J?”

“It must,” Kevin agreed.

“Wow.” A hint of sadness crept in around the edges of my joy. “Dad would have loved this.” Dad was the one who had introduced me to Admiral K and her crew of misfits. He liked that the spaceship *Artemis* made room for anyone who didn’t have a home.

Kevin patted my arm sympathetically. “We’ll just have to love it twice as much, to make up for him not being there.” Kevin always knew exactly what to say.

“Yeah.” I nodded, blinking away the surge of emotion. “Okay, what else do you know?” I asked, getting back to business. This was the best news I’d had . . . maybe ever.

Kevin filled me in on the rest of the announcement as

we walked to school. There wasn't much information yet, just a November release date. Kevin said that they'd been filming in secret for months, but the director was so paranoid about potential leaks that they didn't announce anything to the press until filming had wrapped.

For the first time since I was a little kid, I walked into the first day of school with a huge smile on my face. If Mom had been hiding in the bushes, she could have snapped an amazing first day photo.

Maybe Pop Pop had been right. Maybe seventh grade wouldn't be that bad after all.

3

My optimism lasted until fifth period PE.

I'd practically run to the locker rooms to get changed before everyone else arrived, but somehow Jessi Moaziz was already there, casually putting her backpack into a locker and reaching for the button on the side of her brown pleated skirt. The fabric was several shades darker than her copper skin and poofed around her feet, as though she'd fit several petticoats under it. She waved at me before I could dash for the farthest corner with the most places to hide. For just a second, I hesitated. Two fat girls changing side by side? That doubled the reasons for someone to look.

But she was still waving, still smiling at me, so I reluctantly took the locker next to hers. Horribly close to the door.

Jessi was also in my English class this year. I liked her, but I didn't really know her all that well. I knew that her dad

was a lawyer because he came to talk to our class in the fourth grade, and I knew that Jessi could go into Lawyer Mode—like Admiral K slipping on a disguise—and put her hands on her hips and talk about things like *Rights* and *Title IX*. I knew that Jessi’s dad was the reason Rancho Nuevo High School now had a girls’ softball team. She seemed pretty cool whenever we talked, but I never talked to her for too long. I was worried someone might get a glimpse of us and dub us the “fat friends” or the “gross gang” or some equally horrible and cruel nickname that would crawl under my skin and poke at me like tiny needles. Better to not even risk it.

“Hey,” I said. “I like your skirt.” If she spun around, I bet it would have spun in a giant circle with her. Jessi was shorter than me, and rounder than me. She was more *ball*, and I was more *generally oversized*. But she didn’t seem interested in hiding herself. Her thick black hair was pulled into a French braid, and she was wearing gold hoops in her ears that fell halfway down to her shoulders and matched the gold bracelet on her right wrist.

“Thanks!” Jessi looked delighted. “I spent way too long picking out my first day of school outfit,” she admitted quietly, rolling her eyes at herself. “I got this at Valerie’s Closet.”

“Valerie’s Closet?”

“Oh, it’s great! It’s for, you know”—she gestured first at herself and then at me—“bigger girls? Everything is cut better. It’s down on Lincoln Ave.”

“Oh.” I felt my face turning red. Obviously I was a *bigger girl*. I just didn’t really talk about it, out of some vague hope that if I didn’t mention my weight no one else would notice it either.

Jessi didn’t seem to be aware of my discomfort. She kept talking as she unbuttoned her skirt and took the time to fold it neatly before pulling on her PE shorts. As though she didn’t care if people saw her thighs.

“I’d been looking for a skirt like this for a while, honestly,” she said, “but they always cut the waist so small and to find one that was the right size around the waist, the skirt itself was, like, five hundred miles of fabric. Like it’s made for a professional basketball player.” She shook her head, and the fluorescent lights bounced off her hoops.

I cared very much if people saw my thighs. I stripped as quickly as I could, tugging my too-tight gym shorts up faster than the spaceship *Artemis* entering warp speed. But I looked nothing like Admiral K. I looked like a beach ball. A gray beach ball with frizzy brown hair and arms dotted with freckles and a stomach that was stretching the waistband of the McKinley Middle School PE shorts to its absolute limit. The red line they left around my waist, a bright circle cutting me in half, would probably take hours to go away. The shirt collar hugged my neck and made me feel like I was being strangled, even as the rest of the shirt flowed down like a giant gray circus tent. There had been a phone number on the PE uniform order form, instructing parents to call for *additional size options*. Jessi must

have called. But the idea of asking Mom to get on the phone and explain that her daughter needed *additional size options* made me want to sink through the floor. Instead, I would just be squeezed and strangled by my uniform all year.

More of my classmates were entering the locker room now. Including—my stomach plummeted straight through the floor—Miranda O'Donnell. Her minions, Grace Mills and Natalie Davis, were one step behind. Grace was white with beach blond hair and had been Miranda's best friend since the second grade. Natalie was Black with long box braids and had completed their terrifying trio when our elementary schools came together for middle school last year.

The universe was punishing me. That was the only possible explanation for having all three of them in my PE class.

Miranda flounced into the locker room, red hair shimmering like a Disney character. She noticed me immediately. Her eyes ran up and down my body, seeing where the shirt was too tight around my throat and the shorts were too small, and made an exaggerated sad face, her shiny lip gloss highlighting her upside-down smile. Over the years, Miranda had perfected her niceness. She sharpened it like a knife, hid her fangs behind a sweet smile, and protested that she was just trying to help. Maybe she really meant it. Any second now, she was going to pass me a hair tie and say sympathetically, *You need this more than I do.*

Or reach into her backpack and offer me old editions of her mom's diet magazines, *Just in case you're interested.*

"You know, I was *just* thinking that we should start a petition to force the school to use more size-inclusive PE uniforms," she said to me sweetly. "Would you sign it?" Behind her, her minions did their best to look pityingly at me. Grace couldn't quite manage it—she put a hand on her hip and popped her right leg, so she could express sympathy for my fatness in the most flattering way possible.

Behind me, Jessi shut her locker door very loudly. I knew without looking that her hands were on her hips, gathering up her energy to fire back at Miranda, like one of Admiral K's ion cannons charging before a big shot.

If Jessi fired back, everyone would look at us. Which was the last thing I wanted.

Luckily, she was interrupted by the sound of a fist loudly banging three times on the door to the locker room. Our PE teacher, Mr. Waters, followed this up by calling out, "Hurry it up, guys." Everyone scrambled for lockers and gym shirts, and I managed to escape amid the chaos.

But outside wasn't any better.

Once the class was assembled on the soccer field, Mr. Waters clapped his hands together for attention. "Alright, listen up. First day of school, first big announcement. The Waters Fitness Test starts next month." He smiled and did some jazz hands to indicate that we should be excited by this news. Everyone groaned.

As Mr. Waters waited for the protests to die down, he

tied his shoulder-length gray hair back into a ponytail. He had on sunglasses with one of those old-man straps around the back, so you couldn't lose them during all your strenuous activity.

"Anyways, you probably remember this from last year, but here's the deal," he continued. "There are four graded elements of the test. Sit-ups, pull-ups, the timed mile, and shuttle runs."

"Do we have to?" Miranda asked. For once, we were in agreement.

"Yup," Mr. Waters continued to beam. "This is an important rite of passage. I did the Presidential Fitness Test when I was your age, and my children did it, and even though they technically discontinued it years ago"—he dramatically put a hand over his heart—"it lives on in the Waters Test today. And everyone hates it. But that's part of growing up."

Miranda coughed pointedly into the crook of her elbow. "You know, I think I'm getting sick . . . It'll probably last at least a month."

Mr. Waters ignored her. "We're going to start doing timed miles once a week so you can get used to how it feels. Starting today. Okay, calm down!" he yelled over the protests that erupted from the class. "This is a good thing! You can try to beat your time each week."

I wasn't one of the groaners. I don't think I could have made a sound even if I wanted to. My fingers felt cold. My whole body felt cold. The hairs were rising on my arms, goose bumps forming under the warm sunshine. Was that

normal? I wondered if everyone could see the cold sweat starting to gather in my armpits.

“Complain all you like, but line up on the track.” Mr. Waters scanned the class as we reluctantly moved toward the track. I did my best not to look at him, not to make eye contact. It didn’t help. He found me, Billy Cohen, and Jessi among the crowd and nodded at us. “The more *zaftig* of you may want to line up at the back. Also, a reminder that the outside lanes are for walkers.”

The cold nerves that had taken over my body met the hot shame that flooded my face, swirling around to produce a faint nausea. He *had* to make it weird, didn’t he?

Next to me, Jessi looked angrily at Mr. Waters. She straightened up to her full, not very tall height. “*Zaftig*,” she muttered. “I think we all know what that means.”

“Fat,” Billy agreed.

“In Yiddish,” I added.

Jessi looked disgusted. “I should report him for that. Even if you say it in another language, it’s still discrimination.” I could practically see her switching in to Lawyer Mode.

“That’s just like Mr. Waters, though,” Billy said, and I nodded in agreement.

“Don’t bother with him,” I said quietly. If Jessi filed an official complaint, Billy and I would probably be involved and then Miranda would find out and pull me aside to not so quietly inform me that if I didn’t want people calling me *zaftig* I should consider eating more celery.

“You know what, though?” Miranda loudly asked Natalie, who was tying her braids back into one low ponytail. Natalie shrugged. She had her eyes fixed on the track, as though she was gearing up for the Olympic trials.

Next to her, Grace eagerly stepped up to hit the ball back. “What?” she asked, practically bouncing in place.

Miranda looked pointedly over at me, but let her eyes flick over Jessi and Billy as well. “I think it’ll be good for everyone to know their fitness levels. The truth can be hard, but it’s important to face it.” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jessi’s face screw up with anger.

For half a second, I wanted to join her. I wanted to set my blaster gun to *temporal fracture* and turn Miranda’s face into a Picasso painting. I wanted to take off down the track at a blistering pace and magically leave everyone in my dust.

I wanted . . . I wanted everyone to stop looking at me.

“Jessi,” I said quickly, before she could respond to Grace’s giggles. “Your shoe?” Distracted, Jessi looked down at her perfectly normal red Converse, with the laces neatly tied. “Oh, sorry, I thought it had come undone.”

Luckily, Mr. Waters blew the starting whistle before Jessi could process the fact that I’d actually, in real life, pulled the *your shoelaces are untied* trick. Which was the first, and probably last, time I had ever been happy for a timed mile to start.

4

Kevin picked up on my mood right away, as soon as we started walking home. “Happy Monday? TGIM?” he offered.

I grunted and adjusted the straps of my backpack, which were already digging into my shoulders.

Kevin cleared his throat and put his hands into his pockets. “Did something happen? You were in a good mood at lunch.”

I shrugged.

Kevin looked at me seriously. “*Secrets create weakness, J.P.*”

“Just Miranda. She’s in my PE class.” That was all I said, and that was all I had to say. Kevin got it right away. He winced sympathetically. He knew all about—and had been witness to—Miranda’s special blend of niceness and shame.

“She’s back at it?”

“She is,” I confirmed.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I shook my head as we turned off Montana Ave and entered the residential neighborhood where we both lived. “No thank you. Let’s talk about *Class K Emergency* instead.”

Kevin lit up like a sparkler. “I just saw this article on MovieSpin. Someone leaked a couple pages of the script, and Admiral K is going to—”

“No spoilers!” I clapped my hands over my ears. “I don’t want to know!”

Kevin pursed his lips in annoyance. “No fair. ’Cause you’re going to keep telling me all your theories about what’s going to happen, and, what, do I just pretend that I don’t know anything? Even when I totally, 100 percent do know something?”

“Yes. That. Do that, exactly.”

Kevin sighed. “You’re annoying,” he announced.

By unspoken agreement, we came to a stop at Washington and 14th, where our paths diverged.

“Obviously Kae Kroon will be the villain,” I said, purposefully ignoring Kevin. “She’s Admiral K’s only real threat.”

Kevin shook his head. “That’s too easy, though. We all expect it to be her. I think they’re finally going to introduce Evil Greg—his arc in the comics is so good.”

I wrinkled my nose. “But Greg is so boring!”

“Just in the show! In the comics he’s great.”

I shook my head. “I don’t know.”

“If you would just let me tell you this spoiler . . .”

“I’m leaving!” I spun on my heels, hands back up over my ears. “I’m leaving right now! See you later!”

I walked the three blocks quickly—as though Kevin’s spoilers might catch up with me if I didn’t hurry away—but turned just before I got to my house. There was a strip of untamed greenery that ran between our house and the Johannsons’ next door. Mom said it was on our side of the property line, and Mr. Johansson said it was on their side of the property line, and the disagreement had been going on for so long that it was more of a good-natured joke at this point. But no one mowed the grass there, so it grew tall and scraggly, thick with dandelions and other weeds. It also formed an easy path into our unfenced backyards and the treehouse.

I needed to shake off Miranda before I went home. Just like Admiral K heading to Nowhere when she needed a moment to breathe. In Season 1, Episode 5, Admiral K used her trans-matter jumper to open an emergency portal and accidentally ended up in this empty planet that was all soft and white, filled only with a gentle rushing sound. She called it Nowhere, and she would stop by occasionally over the next five seasons, just to think. Just to take a break. I was thinking about that trans-matter jumper as I climbed the three-rung ladder up the avocado tree and into the treehouse. I was thinking that if I had one, I

might use it to send Miranda to a planet full of rabid Oaxes that would assure her *this is all for your own good* before they ate her. Grace and Natalie too, for good measure.

I sat down on the cushion on the floor, closed my eyes against the aggressively bright colors, and tried to imagine Nowhere. I imagined that the ground in Nowhere was sort of soft, like a velvety sand. And that Admiral K might pick it up and let it run through her fingers as she wondered what to do about Kae Kroon's latest plot and whether her mechanic, Hal, was distracted lately, and would they have enough credits to bribe their way into the next port.

Except here was the part where Admiral K's eyes would open, full of determination. She'd rise and brush off her pants and step confidently to the next thing. She'd defeat her enemies and save her friends and never let anyone make fun of her.

When I opened *my* eyes, however, nothing had changed. I was still me, and Miranda was still Miranda, and middle school still sucked. And as much as I wished I could escape it and just jump ahead to some future time when I was less awkward and more confident, I didn't have a trans-matter jumper. I was stuck here.

I got to my feet with a sigh and gave the treehouse one last look. All these happy colors and childish themes—this was nothing like Nowhere. Maybe I'd ask the Johannsons if I could repaint it. I could do the inside of Admiral K's spaceship, with the console there under the windows

and a swirling portal where the two doors were. I'd call it my *get away from Miranda* portal.

I was looking at the back wall, imagining a black, starry circle surrounded by concentric white and blue and black rings, all swirling together, when my eyes focused on the larger of the two painted doors. It had wavy edges like a funhouse mirror and a large gold doorknob, and it looked surprisingly three-dimensional. I squinted at it. Was the light hitting the paint weirdly? Or was Mrs. Johansson more talented than I realized? I took two steps forward and reached out my hand to brush against the wall. I expected to meet reassuring flatness—plus some dust and flaking paint.

My hand closed around a doorknob. A real doorknob, sticking out of the treehouse wall. A real doorknob attached to what was suddenly a real door. I could see the gaps between the wavy edges and the rest of the treehouse.

I let go. "What the heck?"

Without my hand on it, the door flattened. It was paint again, only paint. It had always been paint.

Right?

I reached out again, slowly. And the doorknob reached back, unfolding into three dimensions. We met in the middle, my finger just barely touching its smooth metal surface. I could feel my heartbeat in my fingertip. "Holy space rot," I breathed.

I tried to think, but my mind was blank. Thoughts

sputtered out as soon as I had them. I was frozen there, one finger outstretched. I had no idea what to do.

Was it magic? Was it good? Was it bad? Was I supposed to open the door? Would opening the door unleash an evil demon on the world? Would opening the door take me to another planet? Had it always been a real door and I was making something out of nothing? Would the doorknob even turn? Did I need a key? Where could I find the key? Was this part of a magical quest? What was I supposed to do?

What was I supposed to do?

I grabbed the doorknob and it turned easily. The door opened easily too, almost without my pulling on it. I swallowed, and, before I could think about it properly, I stepped through.