

## Major Tom

Out of the three of us, Miranda had almost always been the sweetest to August, hugging him and playing with him long after Ella and I had moved on to playing something else. Even as we got older, Miranda always made sure to try to include August in our conversations, ask him how he was doing, talk to him about *Avatar* or *Star Wars* or *Bone* or something she knew he liked. It was Miranda who had given Auggie the astronaut helmet he wore practically every day of the year when he was five or six. She would call him Major Tom and they would sing “Space Oddity” by David Bowie together. It was their little thing. They knew all the words and would blast it on the iPod and sing the song out loud.

Since Miranda’s always been really good about calling us as soon as she got home from summer camp, I was a little surprised when I didn’t hear from her. I even texted her and she didn’t reply. I figured maybe she had ended up staying in the camp longer, now that she was a counselor. Maybe she met a cute guy.

Then I realized from her Facebook wall that she’d actually been back home for a full two weeks, so I sent her an IM and we chatted online a bit, but she didn’t give me a reason for not calling, which I thought was bizarre. Miranda had always been a little flaky, so I figured that’s all it was. We made plans to meet downtown, but then I had to cancel because we were driving out to visit Tata and Poppa for the weekend.

So I ended up not seeing either Miranda or Ella until the first day of school. And, I have to admit, I was shocked. Miranda looked so different: her hair was cut in this super-cute bob that she’d dyed bright pink, of all things, and she was wearing a striped tube top that (a) seemed way inappropriate for school, and (b) was totally not her

usual style. Miranda had always been such a prude about clothes, and here she was all pink-haired and tube-topped. But it wasn't just the way she looked that was different: she was acting differently, too. I can't say she wasn't nice, because she was, but she seemed kind of distant, like I was a casual friend. It was the weirdest thing in the world.

At lunch the three of us sat together like we always used to, but the dynamics had shifted. It was obvious to me that Ella and Miranda had gotten together a few times during the summer without me, though they never actually said that. I pretended not to be at all upset while we talked, though I could feel my face getting hot, my smile being fake. Although Ella wasn't as over-the-top as Miranda, I noticed a change in her usual style, too. It's like they had talked to each other beforehand about redoing their image at the new school, but hadn't bothered to clue me in. I admit: I had always thought I was above this kind of typical teenage pettiness, but I felt a lump in my throat throughout lunch. My voice quivered as I said "See you later" when the bell rang.

## After School

“I hear we’re driving you home today.”

It was Miranda in eighth period. She had just sat down at the desk right behind me. I had forgotten that Mom had called Miranda’s mother the night before to ask if she could drive me home from school.

“You don’t have to,” I answered instinctively, casually. “My mom can pick me up.”

“I thought she had to pick Auggie up or something.”

“It turns out she can pick me up afterward. She just texted me. Not a problem.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“Thanks.”

It was all a lie on my part, but I couldn’t see sitting in a car with the new Miranda. After school I ducked into a restroom to avoid bumping into Miranda’s mother outside. Half an hour later I walked out of the school, ran the three blocks to the bus stop, hopped on the M86 to Central Park West, and took the subway home.

“Hey there, sweetie!” Mom said the moment I stepped through the front door. “How was your first day? I was starting to wonder where you guys were.”

“We stopped for pizza.” Incredible how easily a lie can slip through your lips.

“Is Miranda not with you?” She seemed surprised that Miranda wasn’t right behind me.

“She went straight home. We have a lot of homework.”

“On your first day?”

“Yes, on our first day!” I yelled, which completely surprised Mom. But before she could say anything, I said: “School was fine. It’s really

big, though. The kids seem nice.” I wanted to give her enough information so she wouldn’t feel the need to ask me more. “How was Auggie’s first day of school?”

Mom hesitated, her eyebrows still high up on her forehead from when I’d snapped at her a second earlier. “Okay,” she said slowly, like she was letting out a breath.

“What do you mean ‘okay?’” I said. “Was it good or bad?”

“He said it was good.”

“So why do you think it wasn’t good?”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t good! Geez, Via, what’s up with you?”

“Just forget I asked anything at all,” I answered, and stormed dramatically into Auggie’s room and slammed the door. He was on his PlayStation and didn’t even look up. I hated how zombified his video games made him.

“So how was school?” I said, scooching Daisy over so I could sit on his bed next to him.

“Fine,” he answered, still not looking up from his game.

“Auggie, I’m talking to you!” I pulled the PlayStation out of his hands.

“Hey!” he said angrily.

“How was school?”

“I said fine!” he yelled back, grabbing the PlayStation back from me.

“Were people nice to you?”

“Yes!”

“No one was mean?”

He put the PlayStation down and looked up at me as if I had just asked the dumbest question in the world. “Why would people be mean?” he said. It was the first time in his life that I heard him be sarcastic like that. I didn’t think he had it in him.

## The Padawan Bites the Dust

I'm not sure at what point that night Auggie had cut off his Padawan braid, or why that made me really mad. I had always found his obsession with everything *Star Wars* kind of geeky, and that braid in the back of his hair, with its little beads, was just awful. But he had always been so proud of it, of how long it took him to grow it, of how he had chosen the beads himself in a crafts store in Soho. He and Christopher, his best friend, used to play with lightsabers and *Star Wars* stuff whenever they got together, and they had both started growing their braids at the same time. When August cut his braid off that night, without an explanation, without telling me beforehand (which was surprising)—or even calling Christopher—I was just so upset I can't even explain why.

I've seen Auggie brushing his hair in the bathroom mirror. He meticulously tries to get every hair in place. He tilts his head to look at himself from different angles, like there's some magic perspective inside the mirror that could change the dimensions of his face.

Mom knocked on my door after dinner. She looked drained, and I realized that between me and Auggie, today had been a tough day for her, too.

"So you want to tell me what's up?" she asked nicely, softly.

"Not now, okay?" I answered. I was reading. I was tired. Maybe later I'd be up to telling her about Miranda, but not now.

"I'll check in before you go to bed," she said, and then she came over and kissed me on the top of my head.

"Can Daisy sleep with me tonight?"

"Sure, I'll bring her in later."

"Don't forget to come back," I said as she left.

"I promise."

But she didn't come back that night. Dad did. He told me Auggie had had a bad first day and Mom was helping him through it. He asked me how my day had gone and I told him fine. He said he didn't believe me for a second, and I told him Miranda and Ella were acting like jerks. (I didn't mention how I took the subway home by myself, though.) He said nothing tests friendships like high school, and then proceeded to poke fun at the fact that I was reading *War and Peace*. Not real fun, of course, since I'd heard him brag to people that he had a "fifteen-year-old who is reading Tolstoy." But he liked to rib me about where I was in the book, in a war part or in a peace part, and if there was anything in there about Napoleon's days as a hip-hop dancer. It was silly stuff, but Dad always managed to make everyone laugh. And sometimes that's all you need to feel better.

"Don't be mad at Mom," he said as he bent down to give me a good-night kiss. "You know how much she worries about Auggie."

"I know," I acknowledged.

"Want the light on or off? It's getting kind of late," he said, pausing by the light switch at the door.

"Can you bring Daisy in first?"

Two seconds later he came back with Daisy dangling in his arms, and he laid her down next to me on the bed.

"Good night, sweetheart," he said, kissing my forehead. He kissed Daisy on her forehead, too. "Good night, girlie. Sweet dreams."

## **An Apparition at the Door**

Once, I got up in the middle of the night because I was thirsty, and I saw Mom standing outside Auggie's room. Her hand was on the doorknob, her forehead leaning on the door, which was ajar. She wasn't going in his room or stepping out: just standing right outside the door, as if she was listening to the sound of his breathing as he slept. The hallway lights were out. The only thing illuminating her was the blue night-light in August's bedroom. She looked ghostlike standing there. Or maybe I should say angelic. I tried to walk back into my room without disturbing her, but she heard me and walked over to me.

"Is Auggie okay?" I asked. I knew that sometimes he would wake up choking on his own saliva if he accidentally turned over on his back.

"Oh, he's fine," she said, wrapping her arms around me. She walked me back into my room, pulled the covers over me, and kissed me good night. She never explained what she was doing outside his door, and I never asked.

I wonder how many nights she's stood outside his door. And I wonder if she's ever stood outside my door like that.

## Breakfast

“Can you pick me up from school today?” I said the next morning, smearing some cream cheese on my bagel.

Mom was making August’s lunch (American cheese on whole-wheat bread, soft enough for Auggie to eat) while August sat eating oatmeal at the table. Dad was getting ready to go to work. Now that I was in high school, the new school routine was going to be that Dad and I would take the subway together in the morning, which meant his having to leave fifteen minutes earlier than usual, then I’d get off at my stop and he’d keep going. And Mom was going to pick me up after school in the car.

“I was going to call Miranda’s mother to see if she could drive you home again,” Mom answered.

“No, Mom!” I said quickly. “You pick me up. Or I’ll just take the subway.”

“You know I don’t want you to take the subway by yourself yet,” she answered.

“Mom, I’m fifteen! Everybody my age takes the subway by themselves!”

“She can take the subway home,” said Dad from the other room, adjusting his tie as he stepped into the kitchen.

“Why can’t Miranda’s mother just pick her up again?” Mom argued with him.

“She’s old enough to take the subway by herself,” Dad insisted.

Mom looked at both of us. “Is something going on?” She didn’t address her question to either one of us in particular.

“You would know if you had come back to check on me,” I said spitefully, “like you *said* you would.”

“Oh God, Via,” said Mom, remembering now how she had



completely ditched me last night. She put down the knife she was using to cut Auggie's grapes in half (still a choking hazard for him because of the size of his palate). "I am so sorry. I fell asleep in Auggie's room. By the time I woke up ..."

"I know, I know." I nodded indifferently.

Mom came over, put her hands on my cheeks, and lifted my face to look at her.

"I'm really, really sorry," she whispered. I could tell she was.

"It's okay!" I said.

"Via ..."

"Mom, it's fine." This time I meant it. She looked so genuinely sorry I just wanted to let her off the hook.

She kissed and hugged me, then returned to the grapes.

"So, is something going on with Miranda?" she asked.

"Just that she's acting like a complete jerk," I said.

"Miranda's not a jerk!" Auggie quickly chimed in.

"She can be!" I yelled. "Believe me."

"Okay then, I'll pick you up, no problem," Mom said decisively, sweeping the half-grapes into a snack bag with the side of her knife. "That was the plan all along anyway. I'll pick Auggie up from school in the car and then we'll pick you up. We'll probably get there about a quarter to four."

"No!" I said firmly, before she'd even finished.

"Isabel, she can take the subway!" said Dad impatiently. "She's a big girl now. She's reading *War and Peace*, for crying out loud."

"What does *War and Peace* have to with anything?" answered Mom, clearly annoyed.

"It means you don't have to pick her up in the car like she's a little girl," he said sternly. "Via, are you ready? Get your bag and let's go."

"I'm ready," I said, pulling on my backpack. "Bye, Mom! Bye, Auggie!"

I kissed them both quickly and headed toward the door.

"Do you even have a MetroCard?" Mom said after me.

"Of course she has a MetroCard!" answered Dad, fully exasperated. "Yeesh, Momma! Stop worrying so much! Bye," he said, kissing her

on the cheek. "Bye, big boy," he said to August, kissing him on the top of his head. "I'm proud of you. Have a good day."

"Bye, Daddy! You too."

Dad and I jogged down the stoop stairs and headed down the block.

"Call me after school before you get on the subway!" Mom yelled at me from the window. I didn't even turn around but waved my hand at her so she'd know I heard her. Dad did turn around, walking backward for a few steps.

"*War and Peace*, Isabel!" he called out, smiling as he pointed at me. "*War and Peace!*"

## Genetics 101

Both sides of Dad's family were Jews from Russia and Poland. Poppa's grandparents fled the pogroms and ended up in NYC at the turn of the century. Tata's parents fled the Nazis and ended up in Argentina in the forties. Poppa and Tata met at a dance on the Lower East Side while she was in town visiting a cousin. They got married, moved to Bayside, and had Dad and Uncle Ben.

Mom's side of the family is from Brazil. Except for her mother, my beautiful Grans, and her dad, Agosto, who died before I was born, the rest of Mom's family—all her glamorous aunts, uncles, and cousins—still live in Alto Leblon, a ritzy suburb south of Rio. Grans and Agosto moved to Boston in the early sixties, and had Mom and Aunt Kate, who's married to Uncle Porter.

Mom and Dad met at Brown University and have been together ever since. Isabel and Nate: like two peas in a pod. They moved to New York right after college, had me a few years later, then moved to a brick townhouse in North River Heights, the hippie-stroller capital of upper *upper* Manhattan, when I was about a year old.

Not one person in the exotic mix of my family gene pool has ever shown any obvious signs of having what August has. I've pored over grainy sepia pictures of long-dead relatives in babushkas; black-and-white snapshots of distant cousins in crisp white linen suits, soldiers in uniform, ladies with beehive hairdos; Polaroids of bell-bottomed teenagers and long-haired hippies, and not once have I been able to detect even the slightest trace of August's face in their faces. Not a one. But after August was born, my parents underwent genetic counseling. They were told that August had what seemed to be a "previously unknown type of mandibulofacial dysostosis caused by an autosomal recessive mutation in the *TCOF1* gene, which is located on

chromosome 5, complicated by a hemifacial microsomia characteristic of OAV spectrum.” Sometimes these mutations occur during pregnancy. Sometimes they’re inherited from one parent carrying the dominant gene. Sometimes they’re caused by the interaction of many genes, possibly in combination with environmental factors. This is called multifactorial inheritance. In August’s case, the doctors were able to identify one of the “single nucleotide deletion mutations” that made war on his face. The weird thing is, though you’d never know it from looking at them: both my parents carry that mutant gene.

And I carry it, too.

## The Punnett Square

If I have children, there's a one-in-two chance that I will pass on the defective gene to them. That doesn't mean they'll look like August, but they'll carry the gene that got double-dosed in August and helped make him the way he is. If I marry someone who has the same defective gene, there's a one-in-two chance that our kids will carry the gene and look totally normal, a one-in-four chance that our kids will not carry the gene at all, and a one-in-four chance that our kids will look like August.

If August has children with someone who doesn't have a trace of the gene, there's a 100 percent probability that their kids will inherit the gene, but a zero percent chance that their kids will have a double dose of it, like August. Which means they'll carry the gene no matter what, but they could look totally normal. If he marries someone who has the gene, their kids will have the same odds as my kids.

This only explains the part of August that's explainable. There's that other part of his genetic makeup that's not inherited but just incredibly bad luck.

Countless doctors have drawn little tic-tac-toe grids for my parents over the years to try to explain the genetic lottery to them. Geneticists use these Punnett squares to determine inheritance, recessive and dominant genes, probabilities and chance. But for all they know, there's more they don't know. They can try to forecast the odds, but they can't guarantee them. They use terms like "germline mosaicism," "chromosome rearrangement," or "delayed mutation" to explain why their science is not an exact science. I actually like how doctors talk. I like the sound of science. I like how words you don't understand explain things you can't understand. There are countless people under words like "germline mosaicism," "chromosome rearrangement," or

“delayed mutation.” Countless babies who’ll never be born, like mine.

## Out with the Old

Miranda and Ella blasted off. They attached themselves to a new crowd destined for high school glory. After a week of painful lunches where all they would do was talk about people that didn't interest me, I decided to make a clean break for it. They asked no questions. I told no lies. We just went our separate ways.

I didn't even mind after a while. I stopped going to lunch for about a week, though, to make the transition easier, to avoid the fake Oh, shoot, there's no room for you at the table, Olivia! It was easier just to go to the library and read.

I finished *War and Peace* in October. It was amazing. People think it's such a hard read, but it's really just a soap opera with lots of characters, people falling in love, fighting for love, dying for love. I want to be in love like that someday. I want my husband to love me the way Prince Andrei loved Natasha.

I ended up hanging out with a girl named Eleanor who I'd known from my days at PS 22, though we'd gone to different middle schools. Eleanor had always been a really smart girl—a little bit of a crybaby back then, but nice. I'd never realized how funny she was (not laugh-out-loud Daddy-funny, but full of great quips), and she never knew how lighthearted I could be. Eleanor, I guess, had always been under the impression that I was very serious. And, as it turns out, she'd never liked Miranda and Ella. She thought they were stuck-up.

I gained entry through Eleanor to the smart-kids' table at lunch. It was a larger group than I'd been accustomed to hanging out with, and a more diverse crowd. It included Eleanor's boyfriend, Kevin, who would definitely become class president someday; a few techie guys; girls like Eleanor who were members of the yearbook committee and the debate club; and a quiet guy named Justin who had small round

glasses and played the violin, and who I had an instant crush on.

When I'd see Miranda and Ella, who were now hanging out with the super-popular set, we'd say "Hey, what's up," and move on. Occasionally Miranda would ask me how August was doing, and then say "Tell him I say hello." This I never did, not to spite Miranda, but because August was in his own world these days. There were times, at home, that we never crossed paths.



## October 31

Grans had died the night before Halloween. Since then, even though it's been four years, this has always been a sad time of year for me. For Mom, too, though she doesn't always say it. Instead, she immerses herself in getting August's costume ready, since we all know Halloween is his favorite time of year.

This year was no different. August really wanted to be a *Star Wars* character called Boba Fett, so Mom looked for a Boba Fett costume in August's size, which, strangely enough, was out of stock everywhere. She went to every online store, found a few on eBay that were going for an outrageous amount, and finally ended up buying a Jango Fett costume that she then converted into a Boba Fett costume by painting it green. I would say, in all, she must have spent two weeks working on the stupid costume. And no, I won't mention the fact that Mom has never made any of my costumes, because it really has no bearing on anything at all.

The morning of Halloween I woke up thinking about Grans, which made me really sad and weepy. Dad kept telling me to hurry up and get dressed, which just stressed me out even more, and suddenly I started crying. I just wanted to stay home.

So Dad took August to school that morning and Mom said I could stay home, and the two of us cried together for a while. One thing I knew for sure: however much I missed Grans, Mom must have missed her more. All those times August was clinging to life after a surgery, all those rush trips to the ER: Grans had always been there for Mom. It felt good to cry with Mom. For both of us. At some point, Mom had the idea of our watching *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir* together, which was one of our all-time favorite black-and-white movies. I agreed that that was a great idea. I think I probably would have used this weeping

session as an opportunity to tell Mom everything that was going on at school with Miranda and Ella, but just as we were sitting down in front of the DVD player, the phone rang. It was the nurse from August's school calling to tell Mom that August had a stomach ache and should be picked up. So much for the old movies and the mother-daughter bonding.

Mom picked August up, and the moment he came home, he went straight to the bathroom and threw up. Then he went to his bed and pulled the covers over his head. Mom took his temperature, brought him some hot tea, and assumed the "August's mom" role again. "Via's mom," who had come out for a little while, was put away. I understood, though: August was in bad shape.

Neither one of us asked him why he had worn his Bleeding Scream costume to school instead of the Boba Fett costume Mom had made for him. If it annoyed Mom to see the costume she had worked on for two weeks tossed on the floor, unused, she didn't show it.

## Trick or Treat

August said he wasn't feeling well enough to go trick-or-treating later in the afternoon, which was sad for him because I know how much he loved to trick-or-treat—especially after it got dark outside. Even though I was well beyond the trick-or-treating stage myself, I usually threw on some mask or other to accompany him up and down the blocks, watching him knocking on people's doors, giddy with excitement. I knew it was the one night a year when he could truly be like every other kid. No one knew he was different under the mask. To August, that must have felt absolutely amazing.

At seven o'clock that night, I knocked on his door.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey," he said back. He wasn't using his PlayStation or reading a comic book. He was just lying in his bed looking at the ceiling. Daisy, as always, was next to him on the bed, her head draped over his legs. The Bleeding Scream costume was crumpled up on the floor next to the Boba Fett costume.

"How's your stomach?" I said, sitting next to him on the bed.

"I'm still nauseous."

"You sure you're not up for the Halloween Parade?"

"Positive."

This surprised me. Usually August was such a trouper about his medical issues, whether it was skateboarding a few days after a surgery or sipping food through a straw when his mouth was practically bolted shut. This was a kid who's gotten more shots, taken more medicines, put up with more procedures by the age of ten than most people would have to put up with in ten lifetimes, and he was sidelined from a little nausea?

"You want to tell me what's up?" I said, sounding a bit like Mom.

“No.”

“Is it school?”

“Yes.”

“Teachers? Schoolwork? Friends?”

He didn’t answer.

“Did someone say something?” I asked.

“People always say something,” he answered bitterly. I could tell he was close to crying.

“Tell me what happened,” I said.

And he told me what happened. He had overheard some *very* mean things some boys were saying about him. He didn’t care about what the other boys had said, he expected that, but he was hurt that one of the boys was his “best friend” Jack Will. I remembered his mentioning Jack a couple of times over the past few months. I remembered Mom and Dad saying he seemed like a really nice kid, saying they were glad August had already made a friend like that.

“Sometimes kids are stupid,” I said softly, holding his hand. “I’m sure he didn’t mean it.”

“Then why would he say it? He’s been pretending to be my friend all along. Tushman probably bribed him with good grades or something. I bet you he was like, hey, Jack, if you make friends with the freak, you don’t have to take any tests this year.”

“You know that’s not true. And don’t call yourself a freak.”

“Whatever. I wish I’d never gone to school in the first place.”

“But I thought you were liking it.”

“I hate it!” He was angry all of a sudden, punching his pillow.

“I hate it! I hate it! I hate it!” He was shrieking at the top of his lungs.

I didn’t say anything. I didn’t know what to say. He was hurt. He was mad.

I let him have a few more minutes of his fury. Daisy started licking the tears off of his face.

“Come on, Auggie,” I said, patting his back gently. “Why don’t you put on your Jango Fett costume and—”

“It’s a Boba Fett costume! Why does everyone mix that up?”

“Boba Fett costume,” I said, trying to stay calm. I put my arm around his shoulders. “Let’s just go to the parade, okay?”

“If I go to the parade, Mom will think I’m feeling better and make me go to school tomorrow.”

“Mom would never make you go to school,” I answered. “Come on, Auggie. Let’s just go. It’ll be fun, I promise. And I’ll let you have all my candy.”

He didn’t argue. He got out of bed and slowly started pulling on his Boba Fett costume. I helped him adjust the straps and tighten the belt, and by the time he put his helmet on, I could tell he was feeling better.

## Time to Think

August played up the stomach ache the next day so he wouldn't have to go to school. I admit I felt a little bad for Mom, who was genuinely concerned that he had a stomach bug, but I had promised August I wouldn't tell her about the incident at school.

By Sunday, he was still determined not to go back to school.

"What are you planning on telling Mom and Dad?" I asked him when he told me this.

"They said I could quit whenever I wanted to." He said this while he was still focused on a comic book he was reading.

"But you've never been the kind of kid who quits things," I said truthfully. "That's not like you."

"I'm quitting."

"You're going to have to tell Mom and Dad why," I pointed out, pulling the comic book out of his hands so he'd have to look up at me while we were talking. "Then Mom will call the school and everyone will know about it."

"Will Jack get in trouble?"

"I would think so."

"Good."

I have to admit, August was surprising me more and more. He pulled another comic book off his shelf and started leafing through it.

"Auggie," I said. "Are you really going to let a couple of stupid kids keep you from going back to school? I know you've been enjoying it. Don't give them that power over you. Don't give them the satisfaction."

"They have no idea I even heard them," he explained.

"No, I know, but ..."

"Via, it's okay. I know what I'm doing. I've made up my mind."

“But this is crazy, Auggie!” I said emphatically, pulling the new comic book away from him, too. “You have to go back to school. Everyone hates school sometimes. I hate school sometimes. I hate my friends sometimes. That’s just life, Auggie. You want to be treated normally, right? This is normal! We all have to go to school sometimes despite the fact that we have bad days, okay?”

“Do people go out of their way to avoid touching you, Via?” he answered, which left me momentarily without an answer. “Yeah, right. That’s what I thought. So don’t compare your bad days at school to mine, okay?”

“Okay, that’s fair,” I said. “But it’s not a contest about whose days suck the most, Auggie. The point is we all have to put up with the bad days. Now, unless you want to be treated like a baby the rest of your life, or like a kid with special needs, you just have to suck it up and go.”

He didn’t say anything, but I think that last bit was getting to him.

“You don’t have to say a word to those kids,” I continued. “August, actually, it’s so cool that you know what they said, but they don’t know you know what they said, you know?”

“What the heck?”

“You know what I mean. You don’t have to talk to them ever again, if you don’t want. And they’ll never know why. See? Or you can pretend to be friends with them, but deep down inside you know you’re not.”

“Is that how you are with Miranda?” he asked.

“No,” I answered quickly, defensively. “I never faked my feelings with Miranda.”

“So why are you saying I should?”

“I’m not! I’m just saying you shouldn’t let those little jerks get to you, that’s all.”

“Like Miranda got to you.”

“Why do you keep bringing Miranda up?” I yelled impatiently. “I’m trying to talk to you about your friends. Please keep mine out of it.”

“You’re not even friends with her anymore.”

“What does that have to do with what we’re talking about?”

The way August was looking at me reminded me of a doll's face. He was just staring at me blankly with his half-closed doll eyes.

"She called the other day," he said finally.

"What?" I was stunned. "And you didn't tell me?"

"She wasn't calling you," he answered, pulling both comic books out of my hands. "She was calling me. Just to say hi. To see how I was doing. She didn't even know I was going to a real school now. I can't believe you hadn't even told her. She said the two of you don't hang out as much anymore, but she wanted me to know she'd always love me like a big sister."

Double-stunned. Stung. Flabbergasted. No words formed in my mouth.

"Why didn't you tell me?" I said, finally.

"I don't know." He shrugged, opening the first comic book again.

"Well, I'm telling Mom and Dad about Jack Will if you stop going to school," I answered. "Tushman will probably call you into school and make Jack and those other kids apologize to you in front of everyone, and everyone will treat you like a kid who should be going to a school for kids with special needs. Is that what you want? Because that's what's going to happen. Otherwise, just go back to school and act like nothing happened. Or if you want to confront Jack about it, fine. But either way, if you—"

"Fine. Fine. Fine," he interrupted.

"What?"

"Fine! I'll go!" he yelled, not loudly. "Just stop talking about it already. Can I please read my book now?"

"Fine!" I answered. Turning to leave his room, I thought of something. "Did Miranda say anything else about me?"

He looked up from the comic book and looked right into my eyes.

"She said to tell you she misses you. Quote unquote."

I nodded.

"Thanks," I said casually, too embarrassed to let him see how happy that made me feel.



## Part Three



SUMMER

You are beautiful no matter what they say

Words can't bring you down

You are beautiful in every single way

Yes, words can't bring you down

—Christina Aguilera, “Beautiful”

## Weird Kids

Some kids have actually come out and asked me why I hang out with “the freak” so much. These are kids that don’t even know him well. If they knew him, they wouldn’t call him that.

“Because he’s a nice kid!” I always answer. “And don’t call him that.”

“You’re a saint, Summer,” Ximena Chin said to me the other day. “I couldn’t do what you’re doing.”

“It’s not a big deal,” I answered her truthfully.

“Did Mr. Tushman ask you to be friends with him?” Charlotte Cody asked.

“No. I’m friends with him because I want to be friends with him,” I answered.

Who knew that my sitting with August Pullman at lunch would be such a big deal? People acted like it was the strangest thing in the world. It’s weird how weird kids can be.

I sat with him that first day because I felt sorry for him. That’s all. Here he was, this strange-looking kid in a brand-new school. No one was talking to him. Everyone was staring at him. All the girls at my table were whispering about him. He wasn’t the only new kid at Beecher Prep, but he was the only one everyone was talking about. Julian had nicknamed him the Zombie Kid, and that’s what everyone was calling him. “Did you see the Zombie Kid yet?” Stuff like that gets around fast. And August knew it. It’s hard enough being the new kid even when you have a normal face. Imagine having his face?

So I just went over and sat with him. Not a biggie. I wish people would stop trying to turn it into something major.

He’s just a kid. The weirdest-looking kid I’ve ever seen, yes. But just a kid.

## The Plague

I do admit August's face takes some getting used to. I've been sitting with him for two weeks now, and let's just say he's not the neatest eater in the world. But other than that, he's pretty nice. I should also say that I don't really feel sorry for him anymore. That might have been what made me sit down with him the first time, but it's not why I keep sitting down with him. I keep sitting down with him because he is fun.

One of the things I'm not loving about this year is how a lot of the kids are acting like they're too grown-up to play things anymore. All they want to do is "hang out" and "talk" at recess. And all they talk about now is who likes who and who is cute and isn't cute. August doesn't bother about that stuff. He likes to play Four Square at recess, which I love to play, too.

It was actually because I was playing Four Square with August that I found out about the Plague. Apparently this is a "game" that's been going on since the beginning of the year. Anyone who accidentally touches August has only thirty seconds to wash their hands or find hand sanitizer before they catch the Plague. I'm not sure what happens to you if you actually catch the Plague because nobody's touched August yet—not directly.

How I found out about this is that Maya Markowitz told me that the reason she won't play Four Square with us at recess is that she doesn't want to catch the Plague. I was like, "What's the Plague?" And she told me. I told Maya I thought that was really dumb and she agreed, but she still wouldn't touch a ball that August just touched, not if she could help it.

## The Halloween Party

I was really excited because I got an invitation to Savanna's Halloween party.

Savanna is probably the most popular girl in the school. All the boys like her. All the girls want to be friends with her. She was the first girl in the grade to actually have a "boyfriend." It was some kid who goes to MS 281, though she dumped him and started dating Henry Joplin, which makes sense because the two of them totally look like teenagers already.

Anyway, even though I'm not in the "popular" group, I somehow got invited, which is very cool. When I told Savanna I got her invitation and would be going to her party, she was really nice to me, though she made sure to tell me that she didn't invite a lot of people, so I shouldn't go around bragging to anyone that I got invited. Maya didn't get invited, for instance. Savanna also made sure to tell me not to wear a costume. It's good she told me because, of course, I would have worn a costume to a Halloween party—not the unicorn costume I made for the Halloween Parade, but the Goth girl getup that I'd worn to school. But even that was a no-no for Savanna's party. The only negative about my going to Savanna's party was that now I wouldn't be able to go the parade and the unicorn costume would be wasted. That was kind of a bummer, but okay.

Anyway, the first thing that happened when I got to her party was that Savanna greeted me at the door and asked: "Where's your boyfriend, Summer?"

I didn't even know what she was talking about.

"I guess he doesn't have to wear a mask at Halloween, right?" she added. And then I knew she was talking about August.

"He's not my boyfriend," I said.

"I know. I'm just kidding!" She kissed my cheek (all the girls in her group kissed each other's cheeks now whenever they said hello), and threw my jacket on a coatrack in her hallway. Then she took me by the hand down the stairs to her basement, which is where the party was. I didn't see her parents anywhere.

There were about fifteen kids there: all of them were popular kids from either Savanna's group or Julian's group. I guess they've all kind of merged into one big supergroup of popular kids, now that some of them have started dating each other.

I didn't even know there were so many couples. I mean, I knew about Savanna and Henry, but Ximena and Miles? And Ellie and Amos? Ellie's practically as flat as I am.

Anyway, about five minutes after I got there, Henry and Savanna were standing next to me, literally hovering over me.

"So, we want to know why you hang out with the Zombie Kid so much," said Henry.

"He's not a zombie," I laughed, like they were making a joke. I was smiling but I didn't feel like smiling.

"You know, Summer," said Savanna, "you would be a lot more popular if you didn't hang out with him so much. I'm going to be completely honest with you: Julian likes you. He wants to ask you out."

"He does?"

"Do you think he's cute?"

"Um ... yeah, I guess. Yeah, he's cute."

"So you have to choose who you want to hang out with," Savanna said. She was talking to me like a big sister would talk to a little sister. "Everyone likes you, Summer. Everyone thinks you're really nice and that you're really, really pretty. You could totally be part of our group if you wanted to, and believe me, there are a lot of girls in our grade who would love that."

"I know." I nodded. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she answered. "You want me to tell Julian to come and talk to you?"

I looked over to where she was pointing and could see Julian

looking over at us.

“Um, I actually need to go to the bathroom. Where is that?”

I went to where she pointed, sat down on the side of the bathtub, and called Mom and asked her to pick me up.

“Is everything okay?” said Mom.

“Yeah, I just don’t want to stay,” I said.

Mom didn’t ask any more questions and said she’d be there in ten minutes.

“Don’t ring the bell,” I told her. “Just call me when you’re outside.”

I hung out in the bathroom until Mom called, and then I snuck upstairs without anyone seeing me, got my jacket, and went outside.

It was only nine-thirty. The Halloween Parade was in full swing down Amesfort Avenue. Huge crowds everywhere. Everyone was in costume. Skeletons. Pirates. Princesses. Vampires. Superheroes.

But not one unicorn.

## November

The next day at school I told Savanna I had eaten some really bad Halloween candy and gotten sick, which is why I went home early from her party, and she believed me. There was actually a stomach bug going around, so it was a good lie.

I also told her that I had a crush on someone else that wasn't Julian so she would leave me alone about that and hopefully spread the word to Julian that I wasn't interested. She, of course, wanted to know who I had a crush on, and I told her it was a secret.

August was absent the day after Halloween, and when he came back, I could tell something was up with him. He was acting so weird at lunch!

He barely said a word, and kept looking down at his food when I talked to him. Like he wouldn't look me in the eye.

Finally, I was like, "Auggie, is everything okay? Are you mad at me or something?"

"No," he said.

"Sorry you weren't feeling well on Halloween. I kept looking for Boba Fett in the hallways."

"Yeah, I was sick."

"Did you have that stomach bug?"

"Yeah, I guess."

He opened a book and started to read, which was kind of rude.

"I'm so excited about the Egyptian Museum project," I said. "Aren't you?"

He shook his head, his mouth full of food. I actually looked away because between the way he was chewing, which almost seemed like he was being gross on purpose, and the way his eyes were just kind of closed down, I was getting a really bad vibe from him.

“What project did you get?” I asked.

He shrugged, pulled out a little scrap of paper from his jeans pocket, and flicked it across the table to me.

Everyone in the grade got assigned an Egyptian artifact to work on for Egyptian Museum Day, which was in December. The teachers wrote all the assignments down on tiny scraps of paper, which they put into a fishbowl, and then all us kids in the grade took turns picking the papers out of the fishbowl in assembly.

So I unfolded Auggie’s little slip of paper.

“Oh, cool!” I said, maybe a little overexcited because I was trying to get him psyched up. “You got the Step Pyramid of Sakkara!”

“I know!” he said.

“I got Anubis, the god of the afterlife.”

“The one with the dog head?”

“It’s actually a jackal head,” I corrected him. “Hey, you want to start working on our projects together after school? You could come over to my house.”

He put his sandwich down and leaned back in his chair. I can’t even describe the look he was giving me.

“You know, Summer,” he said. “You don’t have to do this.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You don’t have to be friends with me. I know Mr. Tushman talked to you.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“You don’t have to pretend, is all I’m saying. I know Mr. Tushman talked to some kids before school started and told them they had to be friends with me.”

“He did not talk to me, August.”

“Yeah, he did.”

“No, he did not.”

“Yeah, he did.”

“No he didn’t!! I swear on my life!” I put my hands up in the air so he could see I wasn’t crossing my fingers. He immediately looked down at my feet, so I shook off my UGGs so he could see my toes weren’t crossed.



“You’re wearing tights,” he said accusingly.

“You can see my toes are flat!” I yelled.

“Okay, you don’t have to scream.”

“I don’t like being accused of things, okay?”

“Okay. I’m sorry.”

“You should be.”

“He really didn’t talk to you?”

“Auggie!”

“Okay, okay, I’m really sorry.”

I would have stayed mad at him longer, but then he told me about something bad that had happened to him on Halloween and I couldn’t stay mad at him anymore. Basically, he heard Jack bad-mouthing him and saying really horrible things behind his back. It kind of explained his attitude, and now I knew why he’d been out “sick.”

“Promise you won’t tell anyone,” he said.

“I won’t.” I nodded. “Promise you won’t ever be mean like that to me again?”

“Promise,” he said, and we pinky swore.

## Warning: This Kid Is Rated R

I had warned Mom about August's face. I had described what he looked like. I did this because I know she's not always so good at faking her feelings, and August was coming over for the first time today. I even sent her a text at work to remind her about it. But I could tell from the expression on her face when she came home after work that I hadn't prepared her enough. She was shocked when she came through the door and saw his face for the first time.

"Hi, Mom, this is Auggie. Can he stay for dinner?" I asked quickly.

It took a second for my question to even register.

"Hi, Auggie," she said. "Um, of course, sweetheart. If it's okay with Auggie's mother."

While Auggie called his mother on his cell phone, I whispered to Mom: "Stop making that weirded-out face!" She had that look like when she's watching the news and some horrific event has happened. She nodded quickly, like she hadn't realized she was making a face, and was really nice and normal to Auggie afterward.

After a while, Auggie and I got tired of working on our projects and went to hang out in the living room. Auggie was looking at the pictures on the mantel, and he saw a picture of me and Daddy.

"Is that your dad?" he said.

"Yeah."

"I didn't know you were ... what's the word?"

"Biracial."

"Right! That's the word."

"Yeah."

He looked at the picture again.

"Are your parents divorced? I've never seen him at drop-off or anything."

“Oh, no,” I said. “He was a platoon sergeant. He died a few years ago.”

“Whoa! I didn’t know that.”

“Yeah.” I nodded, handing him a picture of my dad in his uniform.

“Wow, look at all those medals.”

“Yeah. He was pretty awesome.”

“Wow, Summer. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah, it sucks. I really miss him a lot.”

“Yeah, wow.” He nodded, handing me back the picture.

“Have you ever known anyone who died?” I asked.

“Just my grandmother, and I don’t really even remember her.”

“That’s too bad.”

Auggie nodded.

“You ever wonder what happens to people when they die?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Not really. I mean, I guess they go to heaven? That’s where my Grans went.”

“I think about it a lot,” I said. “I think when people die, their souls go to heaven but just for a little while. Like that’s where they see their old friends and stuff, and kind of catch up on old times. But then I actually think the souls start thinking about their lives on earth, like if they were good or bad or whatever. And then they get born again as brand-new babies in the world.”

“Why would they want to do that?”

“Because then they get another chance to get it right,” I answered.

“Their souls get a chance to have a do-over.”

He thought about what I was saying and then nodded. “Kind of like when you get a makeup test,” he said.

“Right.”

“But they don’t come back looking the same,” he said. “I mean, they look completely different when they come back, right?”

“Oh yeah,” I answered. “Your soul stays the same but everything else is different.”

“I like that,” he said, nodding a lot. “I really like that, Summer. That means in my next life I won’t be stuck with this face.”

He pointed to his face when he said that and batted his eyes, which

made me laugh.

“I guess not.” I shrugged.

“Hey, I might even be handsome!” he said, smiling. “That would be so awesome, wouldn’t it? I could come back and be this good-looking dude and be super buff and super tall.”

I laughed again. He was such a good sport about himself. That’s one of the things I like the most about Auggie.

“Hey, Auggie, can I ask you a question?”

“Yeah,” he said, like he knew exactly what I wanted to ask.

I hesitated. I’ve been wanting to ask him this for a while but I’ve always lost the guts to ask.

“What?” he said. “You want to know what’s wrong with my face?”

“Yeah, I guess. If it’s okay for me to ask.”

He shrugged. I was so relieved that he didn’t seem mad or sad.

“Yeah, it’s no big deal,” he said casually. “The main thing I have is this thing called man-di-bu-lo-facial dys-os-tosis—which took me forever to learn how to pronounce, by the way. But I also have this other syndrome thing that I can’t even pronounce. And these things kind of just morphed together into one big superthing, which is so rare they don’t even have a name for it. I mean, I don’t want to brag or anything, but I’m actually considered something of a medical wonder, you know.”

He smiled.

“That was a joke,” he said. “You can laugh.”

I smiled and shook my head.

“You’re funny, Auggie.” I said.

“Yes, I am,” he said proudly. “I am cool beans.”

## The Egyptian Tomb

Over the next month, August and I hung out a lot after school, either at his house or my house. August's parents even invited Mom and me over for dinner a couple of times. I overheard them talking about fixing Mom up on a blind date with August's uncle Ben.

On the day of the Egyptian Museum exhibit, we were all really excited and kind of giddy. It had snowed the day before—not as much as it had snowed over the Thanksgiving break, but still, snow is snow.

The gym was turned into a giant museum, with everyone's Egyptian artifact displayed on a table with a little caption card explaining what the thing was. Most of the artifacts were really great, but I have to say I really think mine and August's were the best. My sculpture of Anubis looked pretty real, and I had even used real gold paint on it. And August had made his step pyramid out of sugar cubes. It was two feet high and two feet long, and he had spray painted the cubes with this kind of fake-sand paint or something. It looked so awesome.

We all dressed up in Egyptian costumes. Some of the kids were Indiana Jones-type archaeologists. Some of them dressed up like pharaohs. August and I dressed up like mummies. Our faces were covered except for two little holes for the eyes and one little hole for the mouth.

When the parents showed up, they all lined up in the hallway in front of the gym. Then we were told we could go get our parents, and each kid got to take his or her parent on a flashlight tour through the dark gym. August and I took our moms around together. We stopped at each exhibit, explaining what it was, talking in whispers, answering questions. Since it was dark, we used our flashlights to illuminate the artifacts while we were talking. Sometimes, for dramatic effect, we would hold the flashlights under our chins while

we were explaining something in detail. It was so much fun, hearing all these whispers in the dark, seeing all the lights zigzagging around the dark room.

At one point, I went over to get a drink at the water fountain. I had to take the mummy wrap off my face.

“Hey, Summer,” said Jack, who came over to talk to me. He was dressed like the man from *The Mummy*. “Cool costume.”

“Thanks.”

“Is the other mummy August?”

“Yeah.”

“Um ... hey, do you know why August is mad at me?”

“Uh-huh.” I nodded.

“Can you tell me?”

“No.”

He nodded. He seemed bummed.

“I told him I wouldn’t tell you,” I explained.

“It’s so weird,” he said. “I have no idea why he’s mad at me all of a sudden. None. Can’t you at least give me a hint?”

I looked over at where August was across the room, talking to our moms. I wasn’t about to break my solid oath that I wouldn’t tell anyone about what he overheard at Halloween, but I felt bad for Jack.

“Bleeding Scream,” I whispered in his ear, and then walked away.

## Part Four



JACK

Now here is my secret. It is very simple.

It is only with one's heart that one can see clearly.

What is essential is invisible to the eye.

—Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*

## The Call

So in August my parents got this call from Mr. Tushman, the middle-school director. And my Mom said: “Maybe he calls all the new students to welcome them,” and my dad said: “That’s a lot of kids he’d be calling.” So my mom called him back, and I could hear her talking to Mr. Tushman on the phone. This is exactly what she said:

“Oh, hi, Mr. Tushman. This is Amanda Will, returning your call? *Pause.* Oh, thank you! That’s so nice of you to say. He is looking forward to it. *Pause.* Yes. *Pause.* Yeah. *Pause.* Oh. Sure. *Long pause.* Ohhh. Uh-huh. *Pause.* Well, that’s so nice of you to say. *Pause.* Sure. Ohh. Wow. Ohhhh. *Super long pause.* I see, of course. I’m sure he will. Let me write it down ... got it. I’ll call you after I’ve had a chance to talk to him, okay? *Pause.* No, thank you for thinking of him. Bye bye!”

And when she hung up, I was like, “what’s up, what did he say?”

And Mom said: “Well, it’s actually very flattering but kind of sad, too. See, there’s this boy who’s starting middle school this year, and he’s never been in a real school environment before because he was homeschooled, so Mr. Tushman talked to some of the lower-school teachers to find out who they thought were some of the really, really great kids coming into fifth grade, and the teachers must have told him you were an especially nice kid—which I already knew, of course—and so Mr. Tushman is wondering if he could count on you to sort of shepherd this new boy around a bit?”

“Like let him hang out with me?” I said.

“Exactly,” said Mom. “He called it being a ‘welcome buddy.’ ”

“But why me?”

“I told you. Your teachers told Mr. Tushman that you were the kind of kid who’s known for being a good egg. I mean, I’m so proud that