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Katrin van Dam

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Mom lost her job today.

Maybe that's not quite the right word. *Lost* makes it sound like, if we just looked hard enough, her job would turn up somewhere, maybe under a sofa cushion or in the back of a drawer. The only thing she *lost* is her mind, but that's not exactly breaking news. So what happened today, if we're being strictly factual, is Mom got fired.

And really, it shouldn't have come as a huge surprise to any of us. Her supervisor at the day care had been telling her for months that she couldn't talk to the parents about the Next World Society, but I guess Mom just couldn't hold it in anymore. So this morning, one of the dads was dropping off his kid and Mom slipped him a pamphlet. And that was that.

When I get home this afternoon, she's sitting at the kitchen table, logged on to the NWS site as usual. As she explains why she's not at work, I look for some sign that she's freaking out, but she just stares at me with those huge gray eyes and smiles. "I was going to quit next month anyway," she says, and I can feel my ears getting hot. "Now I'll have that much more time to prepare."

“Mom,” I say, as calmly as I can. “Have you thought about where you’re going to get another job?”

“Sweetie, please just trust me,” she says in her breathy little-girl voice. “I don’t need another job. Departure is only three months away.”

I don’t really remember when Mom became a Next Wordler. I do remember the day the divorce was final, exactly five days before my tenth birthday. I wonder, sometimes, how long it took Dad to realize that she had gone off the deep end and she wasn’t coming back.

“Mom,” I try again, keeping my voice low and even. “What about money? What about food, and rent, and . . . electricity and stuff?”

She blinks up at me. “Oh, Rooney. I know it’s hard for you to accept, but none of those things matter anymore.”

And that’s when I know I won’t be quitting the Java Connection.

I shut myself in the bathroom and glare at my reflection. Long brown hair frizzing in the humidity, hazel eyes blazing, neck and cheeks flushed red, broad shoulders clenched with rage. “Way to go, Mom,” I mutter under my breath. “Way to take care of your family.” Griping about it is kind of satisfying, but it’s not going to put food on our plates, so I take a deep breath, splash my face with cold water, change into a clean shirt, and head out.

The one good thing about the house we live in now is that it’s a pretty short walk to the center of town. Sure, it’s tiny, and Mom has to sleep on the living room sofa. The wallpaper is peeling, and the heat doesn’t work so well in the winter. There’s no air conditioning, either, but it doesn’t get that hot in Vermont anyway. At least it’s not supposed to, although this summer, no one

seems to have pointed that out to whoever's in charge of the weather.

Crossing Maple, I spot Mercer in the window and wave. As he waves back, he sticks out his lower lip and blows a floppy brown curl out of his eyes.

The bell jingles as I pull the door open. "Hey, what are you doing back here?" Merce asks. "Did you forget something?"

"No, I just need to talk to Maddie," I say. "Is she in back?"

"Yup." He's still looking at me curiously. "Everything okay?"

"Long story. I'll tell you later. I'm just hoping she hasn't hired anyone for the fall yet. I need to pick up more shifts."

Mercer raises his eyebrows but keeps his mouth shut as I walk past him into the back room.

Maddie barely glances up from her calculator. "What's up, Rooney?" she asks.

"I was wondering, are you still looking for someone to fill those afternoon shifts?"

That gets her attention. "I thought you said you wouldn't have time to work once school starts."

"There's been a change of plan." Her eyes are scanning mine for more details. "I could use the cash" is all I say.

Maddie nods. "How many days can you do?" she asks.

"As many as you need," I tell her. I might as well. My senior year is ruined at this point, no matter what.

"You walking home?" Mercer asks when I come back out. It's after three, and Amber, the girl I'll be replacing when she goes back to college, has started her shift. Mercer drops his apron in the back room and we head out together.

Merce and I have known each other since the day I moved to

Stonebrook. The first house Mom rented was just down the street from his. We were close to the town center then, too—we pretty much have to be since Mom doesn't drive—but on the other side of Maple. Mercer would never say “the better side” but you don't have to be a genius to notice that the houses where we live now are smaller and crappier and a lot closer together.

“You have a minute?” he asks as we walk down Main. “Come get some tomatoes. They're getting a little out of control.”

For as long as I've known him, Mercer has had a garden. When we were little, it was just a few square feet, but at this point his yard is more garden than lawn. When we get to his house, he pulls the screen door open and we both brace ourselves as Mingus comes barreling toward us, curly black fur flying, nails scrabbling on the kitchen tiles. Mercer bends down to scratch the dog behind the ears, then hands me a couple of mesh bags. “You can give them back later,” he says as Mingus and I follow him out into the backyard.

“Whoa, you weren't kidding!” The garden looks like a jungle, with vines sprawling everywhere. “This thing's going all Jurassic Park on you!”

“Yeah, the neighbors aren't crazy about it,” Mercer admits. “But seriously, what's so great about lawns?”

He quickly fills one bag with veggies, and the other with the little orange cherry tomatoes he knows I love. Then he sits on the bench under the one big shade tree. “So. What's the deal?” He pats the seat next to him. “Why are you taking that after-school shift?”

It would be nice to just let the world keep going as if nothing has changed. But not telling him about Mom would be like

trying to keep a secret from myself. Mercer is my best friend. Or more like my only friend these days. I'm not a total recluse or anything. I'm not that girl who sits alone in the cafeteria, scribbling stories about everybody dying in horrible accidents. I'm more like the girl who flies under the radar. Way, way under.

Back in middle school, I had more friends. I used to go to other kids' houses, hang out, talk about safe stuff like music and which boys I thought were cute. But by freshman year, Mom was getting more and more wrapped up in the NWS, and I started keeping a low profile. When girls in my class invited me to hang out, I told them I had to work or take care of my brother. I let them think it was just because we were poor, living on Mom's salary from the day care. It didn't feel great, but it was better than telling them the whole truth.

Eventually, people stopped inviting me, and I slipped into a social gray zone. Working on the *Stonebrook High Sentinel* was a perfect way to hide in plain sight. It gave me a crowd to blend in with, and writing articles let me stay on the outside without making people uncomfortable. Asking people to talk about themselves is a great way to deflect attention.

These days, when it comes to letting people see the real me, or what's going on in my life, it's strictly on a need-to-know basis. Mercer's the only one who gets an all-access pass.

"Mom got canned today," I tell him.

His brow creases with worry. "So you're going to pick up the slack until she gets another job?"

"Oh, she's not getting another job," I say airily. "She seems to think the bills are just going to pay themselves."

His jaw tightens. "No. That is *not* okay. It's your senior year!"

“Yeah, well, it’s not the end of the world . . . or IS it?” I say in my best movie-trailer voice.

Mercer lets out a snort and I stand up. “Listen, I need to go. Daniel will be home soon and I want to be there when Mom tells him.”

“Rooney,” Mercer says, grabbing my arm. “This is serious. You can’t quit the *Sentinel*. You totally earned that editor title. And besides, you need it for your applications.”

“Believe me, I know. But what am I supposed to do? Someone needs to pay the bills.”

“Yeah, but it shouldn’t have to be you,” he starts again. “That’s what parents are supposed to do.”

“You’re right. It’s messed up. But don’t worry, okay? I’ve already started my college essays. Nobody is more focused on getting out of here than me.”

He shakes his head again, a frustrated look on his face. “It’s just not right. This whole thing is crazy.”

“I know it is,” I say. “Thanks for the veggies. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

When I get home, Daniel is already there, and I can tell from the way he’s sitting that Mom hasn’t wasted any time sharing her big news.

“You okay, Bug?” I ask him. Daniel shrugs, not wanting to talk about it in front of Mom.

“Do you two mind having dinner by yourselves tonight?” she asks as a car horn sounds outside. “I’m going to a planning meeting with Susan. I don’t think I’ll be late.”

“It’s fine, Mom,” I tell her. It’s easier when she’s not around anyway.

“Super!” She stops flitting around just long enough to kiss us both and tell us she loves us, and then she’s out the door. As soon as she’s gone, I rub the kiss off my forehead.

Daniel and I scrounge around in the kitchen cabinets, looking for something to eat. “Looks like it’s PB and Js again,” I say, sounding as cheerful as I can while silently cursing Mom for never buying any food.

“That’s okay, I don’t mind,” Daniel says.

While Daniel makes the sandwiches, I dole out Mercer’s cherry tomatoes, slice up a cucumber, and put the rest in the fridge. Hopefully, we can make it last a couple of days.

Daniel’s pretty quiet over dinner. I ask him about his day, and he tells me about his enameling project at the Y, but I can tell his heart’s not really in it, and after a while, I tell him he can read if he wants. I don’t know what to say about Mom’s job, and I can tell he’d rather bury his nose in a book than have a conversation anyway.

At bedtime, though, we stick with our usual ritual. “So, what are they up to?” I ask as I angle the window fan to bring a little cool air into Daniel’s room.

He opens his sketch pad and shows me one of the careful pencil drawings inside. “Okay,” he begins, “they’ve found the road to the Cloud Castle, but it’s blocked by giant stones . . .” For the next fifteen minutes, I make the right noises and ask the right questions. But inside my head, I’m thinking about rent and the grocery list and calculating how long I can make my paycheck last.