

• CHAPTER •

ONE

I AM ONLY GONE LONG ENOUGH TO GET THE EGGS.

Ba had asked me to stop by the Minute Mart after school, but I had forgotten and come straight home, only to have to leave again. I ride my bike, but with the eggs I have to ride fast-slow—slow enough that the eggs won't break but fast enough that I won't get in trouble. When I turn the corner to our street, I see my sister, Elaine, sitting on the steps. She had been inside when I left, but now she is outside, holding her binoculars.

“What are you doing, Laney? Looking for birds?” Laney usually looks for birds in the morning, but really, for her, anytime is a good time.

I move past her to open the door. The knob turns slightly but then stops hard.

“We're locked out?” I ask, trying to make it sound like it's not a big deal.

Elaine draws a quick, sharp breath of air. “I came outside to get my binoculars. I knocked but . . .” She stops.

“Do you think you locked the door on your way out? Or did the door lock behind you after you left?” I say the words a little more harshly than I mean to.

“I don’t know.” Now, for the first time, Elaine looks frightened. “I knocked and rang the doorbell, but I guess she didn’t hear me.”

I pound on the door, hard enough that I can feel it all the way down to my bones. I press the doorbell, too. “Mom! Moom!” I try all the variations, barking her name, dragging out the middle like a foghorn, standing away from the door and throwing my head back like a dog.

Nothing. Silence.

It’s probably okay, I tell myself. Elaine probably just locked the door without meaning to. Mom’s probably okay. She has to be okay. But then another voice edges in. Shouldn’t she have noticed that Elaine isn’t in the house?

I turn the doorknob a little harder, just to check, but it stays put. “Why don’t you wait here for Ba,” I say. I make my voice light. “I’m going to try the back door.”

“Can I . . .”

“No, it’s easier if you stay here,” I lie. I walk slowly to the corner of the house until Elaine can’t see me. And then I start running.

. . .

My legs feel heavy and dull. I can't go fast enough. The ground is wet and thick from the last of the snow. The back of the house might as well be a mile away, though I finally get there.

The kitchen door is also locked—we almost never open it in the wintertime—but there's a window, and that's all I need. If I stand in the right place, I can see through the kitchen doorway into the living room. My heart hammers against my chest, threatening to split me in two.

I don't know what I thought I was going to see, but she's there. She's still there. Mom. She's sitting on the couch, watching TV, the way she has for the last six months. From where I'm standing, it looks like the TV is making her curl and fade away, like a scrap of newspaper in the sun.

I look down at the ground and then look back up, double-checking. She is still there, inhaling, exhaling, blinking. She didn't lock us out on purpose. Elaine must have accidentally hit the lock button, and then Mom didn't hear her knocking.

I see the front door open, and Ba walks in, followed by Elaine. Elaine squeezes around him and heads for the living room.

Ba takes off his coat and carefully places it on a hanger. Then he takes off his shoes, one by one, untying

the laces and putting the shoes side by side on a rug by the door. He is so slow, so careful in the way he moves. He wasn't worried about the door being locked. I imagine him pulling up in the driveway, saying hello to Elaine and then unlocking the front door. He probably doesn't even notice I am gone.

Ba disappears briefly as he walks down the hallway, behind the wall, and then he reappears at the living room doorway. He sticks his head in for just a moment, and then heads upstairs. Like nothing is wrong. Like there is nothing even close to being wrong.

Through the window, it feels like I'm watching my own TV show, except the sound is off. Just like with real TV, I can't tell the characters what to do. If I could write my own TV show, Ba would hurry inside. He would know that something is wrong when Elaine is locked out. And he wouldn't act like Mom watching TV all day is normal.

I wonder how it is that he can see so little when I see so much.

"Peter, come here," Ba calls when I come inside. I put the eggs in the refrigerator and go upstairs, to where Ba is sitting on the edge of his bed.

I'm barely in the door when he looks at me and frowns. "You're tracking in mud."

I look down, and sure enough, there is a trail of muddy footprints behind me. I reach down and pull off my shoes, one by one. In the process, I get some of the mud on my shirt.

Ba closes his eyes and shakes his head. "I got a call from Miss Gunderson before I left work today," he says. He is a pharmacist at Merkimer's Drug. "Do you know what Miss Gunderson said to me?"

Here's what my father can see: reports from teachers, bad grades, unfinished homework.

I am sure the old bat has lots to say about me, not that I'm going to offer any guesses. Ba continues, "Miss Gunderson told me that you do not write your name on your paper. Not a single assignment. And you are the only one in her English class who fails to write down his name."

Miss Gunderson seems to take my existence in her class as a personal insult. Maybe she thought she was getting a different kind of student, the kind I was last year. I wasn't the smartest, but I did okay. *A pleasure to have in class.* That kid is gone, though.

"If I'm the only one, then she should know that the paper with no name is mine," I point out.

Ba ignores my comment. “Your teacher explained to me that her rules are there to ensure an orderly classroom. And one of those rules is that you must write your name on all your papers to receive full credit.” Ba pauses a moment to consider the full extent of my misdeed. “Is this some form of *rebellion*?”

“What? No.” It is just like Ba to think my forgetfulness is actually a criminal act.

Ba picks up the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and shows it to me, snapping the paper so it crackles. “Are you sure? Because look at this. These *high school students* had a sit-in in the cafeteria. Eight hundred of them! It’s that bad influence from the colleges.”

My father’s disdain for the Vietnam War protestors is well known in our family.

“Tell me the truth,” demands Ba. That is his other big bugaboo—being honest.

“I’m not staging a protest,” I tell him. But it’s too late. Ba starts his rant.

“You have one job, and that is to focus on school. *Do your best*. These students here”—he thwacks the newspaper with his hand—“they are protesting the *vending machines*. When I was a student in China, I would never have dreamed of doing such a thing. We stood up when

the teacher entered the room. The teacher commanded the highest authority.”

What I want to say is, *But back then, there wasn't a war in Vietnam or women fighting for equal rights. You didn't worry about getting bused to a different school because everyone in China looks the same.* My father didn't even have a TV; I'm not sure they were even invented back then. It's not the same.

When my father is satisfied that a rebellion is not imminent, he has another question. “Are you writing about the baseball players again?”

I shake my head. Last year, I wrote about baseball for every assignment I could. I wrote a haiku about laying down a bunt. My essay on a famous landmark was on Forbes Field. After managing to work in a reference to the Pirates in all my spelling word sentences, my teacher called and said that maybe I should take a break from writing about baseball for a while. But I haven't written about baseball in a long time.

You would think that my father, man of science and great believer in cleanliness and order, would love baseball. Out of all the sports, it is the most precise, the most mathematically pleasing. There are nine positions, nine

innings, three strikes at bat, and three outs for each team. Baseball is so exact that it is the only sport I know of that officially assigns *errors* to players when they screw up.

Maybe after this latest run-in with Miss Gunderson, Ba would like to assign an error to me. Ba is convinced that if I just work harder, if I just stop making mistakes, I will be a great student, but the truth is, even if we get past the no-name-on-paper and unfinished homework, it's still not going to happen. But my father has enough troubles as it is without me bursting his bubble. I just hope by the time he figures things out, the disappointment won't be too hard.

Maybe by then, Mom will feel better.

On the way to dinner, I duck into the living room to check on Mom. It's dark, but it's always some kind of dark, even as the days are slowly getting longer. The only real light is from the flicker of the television.

"Hi, Mom." I don't really need to have the light on to see her. She's in the same position as when I looked through the back door. She is sitting on the far side of the couch, next to the telephone table. She has one arm across her stomach and one arm folded up so that her hand is against her cheek. I want to sit next to her, just for a moment, and pretend we live in the Before. Back then, Mom might watch TV for a few minutes before cooking dinner or while she was waiting for the timer

to go off for a pie in the oven. She would put her arm around me and ask about my day. I'll tell you that I've thought about all the times I said my day was *not bad*, without really appreciating how good it was to have a not-bad kind of day.

But instead I sit near her at the end of the couch, not next to her, because we live in the After. In the After, Ba is making scrambled eggs in the kitchen. In the After, Ba yells at me if he thinks I'm bothering Mom, and I'll take anything I can from her, even a quiet moment.

Ba appears in the doorway. "Leave your mother alone, Peter. She is tired."

"Will you come eat with us tonight?" I ask her.

A commercial comes on, temporarily illuminating Mom's face. She closes her eyes and shakes her head. "I'm not hungry."

I'm disappointed, but not surprised.

"Come, Peter," says Ba, more urgently this time. I slide out of the living room, past Ba, into the harsh light of the kitchen. Elaine is already waiting at the table, tapping her fork against her plate.

"Cut it out," I tell her.

Elaine scowls at me, and then taps on her plate a few more times just to make a point. She stops when Ba walks back into the kitchen, though.

It's not a big table, but there is a lot of space for just the three of us. Sometimes Elaine or I have to get up and walk around the table to get the bottle of soy sauce that's been left too close to the far end or the milk jug that's just out of reach. It would be easier to stretch across the table, but Ba won't allow it. It's not proper. When Ba has to work on Saturdays, and Elaine and I eat lunch alone, we stretch across the table until our stomachs are in the middle and our legs are hanging off the ends. We feel like we're getting away with something, even though we're the only ones there.

Ba brings the frying pan over to the table and begins serving eggs. They tumble out of the pan, dry and rubbery. Ba adds two buttered triangles of toast to each plate. That's dinner.

There was a tiny sliver of time when the ladies in the neighborhood brought us dinners. They brought over every kind of casserole. Tuna noodle. Chicken à la king. Shepherd's pie. I think they chose those dishes because they're soft and warm, and that's what you need when you're sad.

How are you doing? they would ask, usually holding a casserole dish with two oven mitts. Their voices would be extra soft and clear. They would lean forward slightly

and look down the hall. “How is your mother? Are you being a good boy for her?”

“She can’t come out right now,” I would repeat the words Ba had told me to say. “Thank you for asking about her.”

I remember liking the dinners, the fact of them—foil-wrapped gifts. It made me feel secure to know they were there. But Ba hated them.

He couldn’t bring himself to refuse, to say *no*. That would be too rude. But I could tell from the way he accepted the pans that he hated them, and not just because he likes Chinese food better than American. No matter how good the food smelled, he would never say anything but thank you. He would say the words like he was trying not to let his lips touch his teeth. The fact that those ladies showed up with their casseroles meant that they knew about us—these people who didn’t really know us except for the fact that we lived on the same street. We were exposed.

Eventually, the casseroles stopped coming; that was an unspoken signal that we were supposed to go on with our lives and act like everyone else. I bet that made Ba feel better. I still miss them.