

MIXED UP



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CHAPTER ONE

REEF MOODY

The instant Willis calls “Dinner!” the stampede is on.

Liam hip-checks me aside as I make for the stairs. He’s a high school senior—a football player—and outweighs me by a hundred pounds. Carolyn, 16, blows past me on the landing, planting an elbow in my sternum that plainly says: *Me first*.

I could probably catch up, but I’m not really hungry anyway and it isn’t worth the fight.

Fact is, I haven’t been hungry in almost a year.

By the time I make it to the kitchen, Declan, 14, is at the counter, loading up a plate while holding the other two back with a well-placed shoulder. While he’s the youngest of the Helmer siblings, he’s still got two years on me. Liam and Carolyn aren’t too bad. They ignore me, but at least it’s okay with them that I’m alive. Not Declan. Declan hates my guts. I’m not his brother. I’m not related to anybody in the Helmer house.

I’m the charity case.

By the time I make it to the hot plate, there’s only one piece of chicken left—the one nobody wanted. It’s small, dried out, and burnt at the edges. If I could, I’d give it back its feathers and send it on its way.

With a sigh, I scoop it onto my plate, add some rice and carrots, and head for the table. Like I said, I'm not hungry, but I know I might as well eat. If I don't, Willis and Jenna will ask questions. Jenna was Mom's best friend, and she worries about me. That's why I live with the Helmers.

Live—I hate using that word. I prefer to think of myself as a very long-term houseguest who's going to move out of here and go someplace else—*anyplace* else—as soon as I can. And however much I want that, multiply it by a thousand and you've got Declan. Here he was, the baby of the family, and along comes some poor orphan who's two years younger, with a sob story that would melt an iceberg. Presto, he has to share his room with the interloper.

Lost in my melancholy thoughts, I don't see the elbow come shooting out at me. With deadly accuracy, Declan delivers just the right amount of bump to the bottom of my dish. It isn't enough force to make me drop the plate, but carrots go flying, rice sprays against the wall like it's coming from a hose, and that dried-up little chicken cutlet hits the dining room carpet and sticks there in a stain of sauce.

Liam is a no-nonsense eater. He doesn't even look up. Carolyn laughs out loud and mutters, "Walk much, or just read about it?"

"Yeah, you clumsy oaf!" Declan chimes in. "Watch where you're going. That's *our* carpet you just ruined!"

Declan is always quick to talk about what's "ours," his real point being that it's not mine.

Never mind that the dining room carpet had plenty of stains to begin with before I got here, and that even brand-new, it was never the million-dollar Persian rug in the main reception room of Buckingham Palace. He gets just as possessive over “our” Tic Tacs and “our” toilet paper.

Jenna and I bump heads in our effort to clean up the mess.

“Sorry,” I mumble, even though I have nothing to apologize for. That’s another thing about being the charity case: Everything feels like it’s your fault, even when it isn’t. Just being there is offense enough. Besides, nobody saw Declan’s elbow. He has a knack for that.

Jenna sighs, but her words are delivered in a light, friendly tone. “Reef, what are we going to do with you?”

“Maybe I should practice walking with a book balanced on my head,” I offer in a pretty pathetic attempt at humor.

Actually, the pathetic part is that I don’t even try to tell Jenna and Willis what really happened—and that their darling son is a giant jerk. Why would I say something like that to the only people nice enough to take me in when Mom died? And, more to the point, why would they believe me? Declan’s their kid and I’m not.

“Tell you what,” Willis suggests in an attempt to sound cheerful. “I’ll scramble you a couple of eggs.”

“That’s fine. I’m okay with this,” I reply, picking a tuft of carpet fuzz off the chicken.

Meanwhile, Declan is stuffing his face like all this has nothing to do with him.

Eventually, I'm alone in the kitchen, gagging down scrambled eggs on toast, Willis's specialty. Ketchup makes it more bearable, but only a little. I hate feeling sorry for myself, especially since everybody else already feels sorry for me. Except Declan, of course. He wants me dead.

Dead. I drop my fork with a clatter. I've promised myself never to use that word in a joking way. Not now that Mom is dead for real.

Dead is no joke. It's permanent and final. Who knows that better than me?

At that awful thought, a mouthful of eggs and toast is just about reaching the point of no return in my throat. I want to spit it out, but after the mess in the dining room, I don't dare decorate the kitchen too. And I know I have to eat. Eating isn't a problem anywhere else. Just in this house.

I work up a Herculean swallow and choke it down. It scratches all the way to my stomach, where it sits like a bowling ball.

Don't barf, I command myself. *It'll make Declan too happy.*

The last time I saw my mother was on my phone. The nurse FaceTimed me so I could say goodbye. Mom was on a ventilator, so she couldn't talk to me. I remember all the tubes and monitors surrounding her. Her skin reminded me of the pages of really old books—yellowed and paper thin. The intensive care ward was crowded with doctors and nurses, each one wrapped in layers of protective gear. You could barely hear their muffled voices over the clicking, sucking, and beeping of the machines.

Violently, I shake my head to force the horrible picture away. It visits me every single night, so I refuse to put up with it during the day, when I'm in control of what I think about. Anyway, the worst part isn't that image or any image. It's the fact that what happened to Mom was my fault.

I turn it over in my head again and again, although all it ever does is make me feel even more miserable. I'm wracking my brain for that one crossroads, that instant in time when something could have gone a little differently and I wouldn't be living with the Helmers because Mom would still be here. I'm not sure what I think I'm "searching" for—I can already pinpoint the exact second that set this tragedy in motion. It was the moment Portia Banyon invited me to her birthday party.

No—that makes it sound like I'm blaming Portia. It wasn't the invitation. It was the fact that I talked Mom into letting me go.

The pandemic finally seemed like it was going to end. We thought Covid was almost over. Stores and restaurants were open. People were doing things again—going to movies, hosting get-togethers, shaking hands.

And yet Mom was really torn about me going to that party. She kept talking about how the virus was still out there. "In a few more months, everything will be back to normal," she told me again and again. "Then you can go to all the parties you want."

But I didn't want to go to all the parties; I wanted to go to this one. Portia was the most popular girl in our neighborhood.

Being invited was a big deal. It meant she knew I existed. And in spite of the fact that we'd been in classes together on and off since forever, this hadn't always been the case.

At last Mom gave in, even though it was obvious that she didn't want to. Guess I just wore her down. You get good at that when you're an only child.

Two days after the party, Portia wasn't in school. They said she had a fever of 103. The next day: me too. That afternoon Mom came home from work early. At first, I thought it was to take care of me.

It was to take care of herself.

We had all the classic symptoms—fever, cough, then a loss of taste and smell. A candy bar might as well have been a cake of soap. We took Covid tests, and the results were positive. Breakthrough cases for both of us.

We went home from the clinic to hunker down until we got better. I did. She didn't.

A week later, she checked herself into the hospital and I went to stay with the Helmers until my mother came home again.

She never did.



I always do my homework on my stomach on the living room floor. There's a desk in the room I share with Declan. But I spend as little time up there as possible, because there's also Declan.

I can't put it off forever, though. Eventually, I have to go to sleep, and the living room floor isn't an option for that, as much as I'd prefer it.

Declan is on his bed, listening to music on his phone. In his hands, he's turning over a roundish geode, with dramatic purple amethyst crystals on the inside.

"Mr. DeVine has one a lot like that," I comment. Mr. DeVine is our school librarian. He found his geode while rock climbing on the Canadian Shield. It's his pride and joy.

I'm honestly just making conversation. Sometimes I try to talk to Declan like we're two normal humans. That shows how delusional I am.

"There's more than one rock in the world, Reek!" Declan snaps angrily. "This one's mine." *Reek* is his nickname for me, which is unfair, since he's the one who's a big stinker.

That's when it dawns on me: Declan's geode and Mr. DeVine's are the same geode. I should have known. Declan is a master of the five-finger discount. His room—our room—is piled high with stuff that other people are still looking for. Liam and Carolyn know what he's like, but Willis and Jenna have no clue. Why do the parents of the worst kids always think they're angels?

I can't resist. "Why, because you picked it up and walked out of the library?"

It happens in a split second. With wrist action alone, Declan chucks Mr. DeVine's geode at my head. I feel the wind as it zooms past my ear, missing me by about an eighth of an

inch. It hits the far wall with a *crack* and splits in two.

“What’s that racket?” Willis demands from downstairs.

“Sorry!” I call back, even though I was the target. We charity cases are always quick to apologize. The urge is uncontrollable, a survival instinct. Or maybe for me it’s because, no matter how innocent I am, deep down I know I’m guilty of something much worse.

To Declan, I say, “Now you can’t even bring it back, because it’s broken.”

With a snort, he rolls over, and the geode and I are officially gone from his mind. Classic Declan. He didn’t even want Mr. DeVine’s pride and joy from the Canadian Shield. He took it because it was there.

In our room, the war is already over. That’s a rare good thing about Declan: He can come down from a rage just as fast as he goes up into one.

He’s also the kind of person who falls asleep the instant his head hits the pillow. That’s what you get from having a clear conscience—ha ha. Maybe I’m just jealous, because I lie awake half the night, sifting through old memories. You do a lot of remembering when memories are all you’ve got.

I think about Portia’s party a ton. It was decently fun, although nothing could ever have been as good as I was expecting it to be. Mostly, I just loved being there with the cool people. Nowadays, I replay it in my mind, searching for the stray cough or the fever-flushed face that supplied the virus I brought home to Mom. Or maybe it was Portia herself. She

got sick before I did. I'll probably never know, and it wouldn't make any difference if I did. Mom will still be gone.

But I can't help myself. As I get a little drowsier, the memories march on. Mom serving me breakfast—I've always hated oatmeal. The two of us shopping for school clothes, me trying to drag her away from the sale rack. Working in the garden, sprinkling fertilizer around the tomato plants—

I sit bolt upright in confusion. Tomato plants? What tomato plants?

We lived in an apartment. There was no vegetable garden. How can I be remembering something that never happened?

Could this have been at a friend's house, where I helped out with some gardening? A school field trip to a farm somewhere?

No, I've never fertilized plants before. I'd bet anything on that. I don't even know what fertilizer is supposed to look like. This stuff could be kitty litter, for all I can tell the difference.

And yet I *do* know. It's part of the memory. Also that these tomatoes are called Roma and they're grown mostly for spaghetti sauce. I think harder, focusing on the recollection, waiting for the "oh yeah" moment that will explain where all this comes from. There are other plants next to tomatoes—green beans, as a matter of fact. They're not as healthy as they should be. Again, I have no idea why *that* thought would come from me.

Across the room, Declan shifts on his pillow with a loud, juicy snore. The garden memory fades.

I lie back down. All that must have come from somewhere, but I'm too tired to figure it out now. And really, who cares?

When your whole life has fallen apart, the last thing you want to stress over is Roma tomatoes.