

MY  
BEST FRIEND  
AND OTHER  
ILLUSIONS

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## Chapter 10

Heather Radko was sitting at the piano bench playing an astonishingly ugly song. Her eyes were squeezed shut and her entire body rocked back and forth.

Mom was nodding vigorously at Heather, a forced smile on her face.

“I have a friend here,” I mimed to Mom through the French doors.

Her eyebrows bunched in surprise. Since Holly moved away I hadn’t brought anyone to our apartment. But when Mom saw Ruby tiptoe past the piano room her expression turned sour: *You brought home a boy?*

“We have a project,” I muttered as I scurried into the kitchen to scavenge for some food.

I pulled a box of crackers from the pantry, then

pawed through the fridge and found a half-eaten tub of hummus and a bag of baby carrots. I crept across the living room to Miles's bedroom where I found Ruby standing on the desk.

Ruby threw his arms up when he saw me. "Charlie, I *love* it here! It's fantastic!" He vibrated with energy like he was stuffed with toddlers. I dropped to the bed and Ruby's eyes lit on the food in my hands. "Mmmmm, that looks good. What's for dinner?"

"Um, fish sticks I think?" I said. Had I invited him for dinner too?

His eyes widened in wonder. "Fish sticks? Really?" He jumped off the desk and landed on the floor with a loud thud. "Can I really have fish sticks?"

The piano playing stopped. Miles shushed Ruby while I patted the bed next to me. He sat down and cracked open the hummus container.

"I just *love* fish sticks," Ruby said. "Do you love them, Charlie?"

"I did when I was younger," I said. "But I guess they're okay."

"You want to know something?" He shook his head. "They're *amazing*."

"We're talking about fish sticks, right?" Miles murmured. Ruby grabbed a handful of carrots and stuffed them into his mouth. "I love Gramps's room."

My eyes met Miles's and exchanged a question: *How did Ruby know?*

Ruby smacked his lips as he chomped on the

carrots. Miles nodded to me and I followed him out of the room.

“He’s a bit weird,” Miles whispered.

“I know. He’s like a little kid.”

“With big vocal cords,” Miles said as he shot a glance at the piano room.

I scratched my head. “I guess we should move him farther from Mom—”

“Like, *now*.”

“We can put him in my room.”

Miles frowned. The difference between Miles’s farther and my farther was around half a mile. But Ruby seemed to have no idea where he lived or where he went to school. How could I just abandon him and throw him on the street if he had nowhere to go? What if it was Miles who was lost and confused and nobody helped him?

“*Fine*,” he said, like it wasn’t fine.

When we stepped back into Miles’s room Ruby was sitting on the desk, his legs swinging under him. Miles scooped up the snacks and I guided Ruby into my bedroom, quietly closing the door behind us.

Ruby surveyed my room with a look of awe stamped on his face. “I *love* it here.”

“We’ll stay for a bit.”

“We can?” Ruby surveyed the room then climbed onto my desk. He leaned into my old doll collection that was crammed into a glass shelf near the ceiling and covered with a film of dust.

He picked up the ceramic doll with the emerald gown and gold tiara. The one that no one had ever been allowed to touch.

An expression of wonder spread across his face. “Look,” he said in a quiet voice.

I froze.

“It’s the Queen of Bulgaria,” he said.

No one knew. Not even Holly. I wasn’t even sure why, but that doll was the most precious one of all of them. It had somehow become our family’s secret safe word in case a stranger ever approached us. Queen of Bulgaria was code for trust.

He carefully placed it back on the shelf. “And look,” he was practically whispering as his finger followed the line of dolls next to it. “It’s Elizabeth, Cornelia, Miss Pixy, Betty-Jo, and Chloe.”

No one knew all their names. I hadn’t played with them since I was six years old.

“How did you—”

“Charlie?” Ruby stood up straight and swivelled around to me. He’d broken his own spell. “Now *where* is that Easy-Bake oven? Still in the closet?”

*How did he know?*

“Yeah,” I said. “But I haven’t used it for years.”

He dropped to the floor. “Can I look for it?”

“I guess.”

His face lit up as he crawled to the closet and threw back the door. He rummaged through piles of shoes and outgrown clothes. “Oh my gosh, it’s here! I love

our strawberry cakes! Can we bake one?” His excitement kept boosting the volume of his voice.

“You really have to be quiet,” Miles said. “Mom’s teaching.”

I gaped at this strapping gymnast rooting madly through my closet. He was the opposite of Miles — a young child dwelling inside the body of a thirteen-year-old boy.

“So can we bake a strawberry cake? Wait a minute. Strawberries? Where are the strawberry shortcake sheets?” He scrambled back to my bed and flipped over the quilt.

“They’re in the linen closet,” Miles said. “And how do you know all this stuff about Charlie’s room, anyway? Frankly, you’re a bit creepy.”

Ruby suddenly noticed the worn stuffed dog. “Well helloooo, Lloyd Lopez!”

A puzzled expression crossed Miles’s face. “Lloyd Lopez?”

But I was even more baffled than him. “I hadn’t even remembered that dog’s name.”

“Um, Ruby?” I said. “Have you been here before?”

“Charlie, you’re *funny!*” He tossed the stuffed dog into the air.

“Why is that funny?”

Ruby crossed his arms and grinned at me. “Charlie. You’re being *so* silly!”

“No, really,” Miles said. “Where do you actually live?”

“Here!” Ruby said.

Miles and I exchanged a glance. What was going on with this boy?

“You have a school, right?” Miles said. “Where do you go?”

Ruby shrugged. “I don’t know.”

None of this made sense. Ruby apparently had no home and no personal memory, but an unexplainable expertise in . . . me. I watched him wander around my room, admiring my long-discarded toys, and something stirred in the empty space inside me like a snow globe swirling with snippets of a forgotten childhood.

“Who *are* you?” I said.

His face crinkled in confusion. “What do you mean? Of course you know me. I’m Rudy.”

“*Rudy*?” I blinked. “Not Ruby?”

“Charlie,” he said, rolling his eyes. “You are *so* funny. It’s me. *Rudy*.”

I shook my head. A chill pulsed up my spine. Ruby — no *Rudy* — dropped to the floor.

“Remember this?” he said. “*Rudy Jellen, no not Ellen, like a melon, Rudy Jellen.*”

I felt a dry heaving work its way up my throat.

That was my song. I made it up when I was practically a toddler: *Rudy Jellen, no not Ellen, like a melon, Rudy Jellen.*

It felt like the room was spinning around me.

“Charlie, you okay?” Miles put his arm around my shoulder.



I knew Rudy Jellen. This couldn't be real, *because these things can't happen.*

I crept back on the bed to the wall, trying to get as far away from him as possible.

I knew Rudy Jellen all right. He'd been my friend when I was younger.

My *imaginary* friend.