



“More hot chocolate?” my mom asked from the top of the stairs.

My friends giggled. We’d probably already had enough sugar to fuel a small country, but it was cold outside and it felt like it could snow at any minute, even though it was only the beginning of October. *More hot chocolate* was a no-brainer.

“Yes, please!” I called out.

My friend Tara giggled again and hid her face behind her hands; she was just admitting which classmate she had a crush on, and my mom’s timing couldn’t have been worse. Mom *definitely* heard what

we were talking about, but, thankfully, she didn't say anything. She just turned and went back into the kitchen to make our third pot of hot chocolate.

"I don't know," Lauren continued once the door shut. "Avery's kind of funny-looking."

"I don't care!" Tara blurted out. "What do you think, Maria?"

I didn't answer right away. Not because I didn't think Avery was cute. But because I hadn't really thought of Avery—or anyone—that way in a long time.

Clearly, Tara could tell where my mind was headed, because she quickly changed the subject.

"I know!" she said. "We should play a game!"

"Yeah, great idea," Lauren said. "Do you have any board games?" she asked me.

I nodded. "They're upstairs. I'll go grab them."

Tara and Lauren and I had been friends since third grade. We met playing soccer, and when it was clear none of us were very good at it, we became fast friends—mostly because we could laugh at how bad we were. Two years later, they were still the best

friends I had. We'd done everything together, from water parks to sleepovers to matching Halloween costumes.

Tara was always the daring one. Passing silly notes under the teacher's nose in class. Making prank calls from the school. One time, she even hid a tiny mouse in our teacher's desk drawer. The teacher never found it, though—the mouse must have escaped.

Tara probably would have gotten us in trouble many times if not for Lauren's quick thinking. Lauren wasn't the bravest, but she was definitely the smartest of our group, and she could make teachers or parents believe anything. Most of the time, she was convincing people that Tara was innocent of something Tara most definitely did. It was never anything *bad*, really. But sometimes Tara's view of *fun* was a little too intense.

Tara and Lauren were the closest people to me in the world . . . although that still wasn't nearly as close as I'd been to Isabella. At one time, all four of us had been besties. Now it was just Tara and Lauren and me.

I tried not to dwell on this as I made my way out of the basement fort and up the stairs to the kitchen.

I'd converted the entire room of our finished basement into an awesome fort: Sheets hung between chairs and from the ceiling to make a roof, and LED lights were strung about for stars, and I plugged in some cinnamon air fresheners so it smelled like baking and not like damp mold, which it sometimes did if Mom didn't keep the dehumidifier running. Tara and Lauren had helped make it homier, adding in scarves and twinkle lights and tapestries scrounged up from their own houses. Initially, we had just built it for a night of telling ghost stories, but it was so comfortable that we didn't take it down the next day. Or the next. My mom always said we needed to take it down, but then . . .

Then Isabella passed away, and my parents knew deep down that the fort made me feel connected to her. They hadn't asked me to take it down since.

Just the thought was a spear to my heart, and I stumbled on a step and nearly fell.

“You okay?” Tara asked from below.

“Yeah,” I replied. But the truth was, no, I wasn’t okay. I wasn’t okay at all. That’s why my friends were here. They were supposed to help me forget that I wasn’t okay. Because forgetting felt like the only way to feel better. School had been going for a month. That should have been enough to keep my mind off things, to help me *move forward*, just like my new guidance counselor always said.

But even though Isabella had been gone for months, I still couldn’t stop thinking about her. Everything I saw or did reminded me of her. Even hanging out with my friends was different. Emptier. It used to be all four of us telling stories or playing sports or going on adventures. Isabella’s absence was almost its own presence, a huge empty space none of us could fill, no matter how loud we talked or how often we laughed.

It was clear I wasn’t the only one who still felt her absence. Ever since Isabella had died, my

parents were like completely different people. Or at least Mom was. Dad was barely there at all.

My mom hummed away at the stove, stirring a big pot of milk and shaking in cocoa powder.

“What are you doing up here, pumpkin?” she asked. “I was going to bring the cocoa down for you.”

“Gonna get some board games,” I replied.

She smiled warmly. This was the first time I’d had friends over since school started, and I knew she was glad to see me actually being social. But even though she was smiling, it didn’t really touch her eyes. I don’t think I’d seen her truly smile since Isabella passed. Now Mom was constantly cleaning or organizing or cooking. Trying to fill up the silence left by my sister.

“Games sound fun,” she said. “Just try not to stay up too late, okay?”

“We won’t,” I replied. Though I knew we would. Especially if we were about to drink even more hot chocolate.

She dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Now, how spicy should we make the cocoa?”

My mom made the *best* hot chocolate. She mixed in cayenne pepper and honey and real dark chocolate and cream, so it was smooth and silky and spicy.

Isabella never liked it spicy, but I did.

I always let Isabella pick.

“Spicy,” I said. I forced myself to smile.

*You have to forget and move on,* I thought, even though that felt like the hardest possible thing to do. Everyone said I should move on, like it was easy, like changing your clothes. But it felt like no matter how hard I tried, everything reminded me of my sister. Forgetting her seemed impossible, and besides, I loved her too much to want to forget in the first place.

“All right, then,” Mom said. “You grab your games, and I’ll bring these down when I’m done. I might even have some cookies hiding in the cupboard, if you’re lucky . . .”

My smile turned real, and I went over and hugged her waist.

“I love you,” I said.

She reached down and gave me a squeeze with one arm, her other stirring the cocoa slowly. “I love you, too,” she said. “Now go have fun with your friends!”

I nodded and bounded up to my room.

The upstairs was dark, and even with the night-lights, it gave me chills. My room was at the end of the hall, past my mom and dad’s—I could hear Dad in his office, watching TV. He rarely came out anymore, and when he did, he looked older than I’d ever seen him. Older even than my grandfather. I think it was part of the reason my mom kept so busy—she was trying to drown out the silence left by my dad as well. Before Isabella died, Mom and Dad would blast music and laugh at the top of their lungs or dance randomly in the living room. They were, to quote Tara, *disgustingly, cutely in love*.

It only made Dad’s sudden isolation more jarring.

Even though I knew he was up there with me, the hall felt empty. Ominous. Shadows seemed to seep from around my door. I hesitated. Because

right next to it, the door just slightly ajar, was Isabella's room.

I hadn't gone in there since she passed away. But I thought Mom and Dad always kept it closed? Maybe Mom had gone in to clean and didn't click it shut, and a draft had opened it?

It had to be my imagination, but as I hurried past Isabella's room, I swore I felt a cool breeze trickling down my forearms and the back of my neck. And it smelled like . . .

No, it was just my imagination.

Just a draft carrying the perfume of Isabella from her room into the hall. That had to be it. Had to.

I quickly flipped the switch on in my room and looked about. It was perfectly clean, just as I liked it. The bed made, corners tucked in tight. All my stuffed animals lined up along the pillows. My dolls in a neat row, from tallest to shortest, along the window. I went over to my closet, to the perfectly ordered clothes hanging from the rack, all arranged by color so it was a perfect rainbow when I opened the door. I loved rainbows. They made me happy.

I grabbed a step stool and took down the board games from the top shelf of my closet.

Something slipped off the top box and landed in the clothes hamper with a thump I felt in my chest.

I climbed down and set the boxes to the side. Then, with shaking hands, I went over and grabbed the upside-down photo from the hamper.

I turned it to face me—

Isabella smiled back.

Well, me and Isabella. Both of us standing in front of a fountain, our arms around each other's waist. Isabella, my twin sister, with her short black hair and dark brown skin and deep brown eyes. We each held a stuffed animal that our parents had gifted us that morning: her, a brown teddy bear, and me, a white rabbit. We even wore matching dresses, mine in white and hers in light pink.

We couldn't have been happier. Her smile was as bright as sunshine, just like mine.

Little did we know that a month after the photo was taken, I would never see her smile again.

“I’m sorry,” I whispered to the photograph.