



“Anyone home?”

Jack peered through the open door, down the unfamiliar hallway of his house. There were no paintings, no mirrors, no furniture there. Only neat white walls.

“Mom? Dad?”

The silence made him nervous. They were always waiting when he got home from school, and their cars were still in the driveway. He shouldered his backpack and stepped inside, leaving the summer heat behind. The chill of the air-conditioning raised goose bumps on his bare arms.

“Hello?”

No reply. He poked his head through a doorway into a crisply organized study, where Dad did whatever he did when he was working from home. Something to do with finance or business or stocks and shares. He’d tried to explain it once, but Jack had glazed over.

He wasn’t there now.

Jack retreated and looked through another door, expecting to find the living room. He found a dining room instead, with a long rectangular table and brand-new chairs. For a few moments he thought the house had somehow rearranged itself while he was out, but then he remembered. It was their *last* house that had the living room opposite the study. Or maybe it was the one before that? These rentals all looked the same, especially since his parents never decorated. And they moved around a *lot*.

He crept up the hallway, listening. Maybe they were out back in the yard. Maybe they were taking a nap. Maybe they had headphones on, listening to music.

None of that seemed likely. They both had

uncannily good hearing, they never napped, and as far as he knew, they never listened to music, either.

There was a muffled noise from the kitchen at the end of the hall, where the door stood open.

“Mom?” he said quietly. Now ice was creeping up his spine. That wasn’t the sound of his mom cooking in the kitchen. It was the sound of someone trying not to be heard.

Jack’s heart began to thump in his chest. His eyes were fixed on the doorway. Through it, he could see the kitchen counter and the windows beyond that looked out to the backyard.

He should go into the kitchen, find out what that sound was. He should see if his parents were okay. He should be brave.

Instead he turned on his heel and ran for the front door.

He didn’t make it.

From the dining room doorway, a figure lunged out, holding a small canister in one hand. There was a sharp hiss, and Jack felt a wet mist hit his face. Pepper spray!

He gasped and gagged, eyes stinging, his mouth and



throat on fire. Somehow he managed to get his backpack off his shoulder and swing it wildly at his attacker, though he could hardly see them through the tears. His legs were kicked from under him and he crashed to the floor hard. Terrified, he tried to scramble away, but he was seized and pushed facedown. In seconds, his wrists were tied behind his back, and he was helpless.

He stopped struggling and lay still. His face felt like it had been stung by a hundred bees at once, and his throat burned like he'd downed a jar of mustard.

His attacker rolled him over onto his back and stood over him. Through squinting eyes, Jack made out a tall, lean man in a black tracksuit and sneakers. He had a stern face and a sterner haircut, and a small mustache trimmed with laser precision.

“An attack can come at any moment, Jack,” he said. “You must always be prepared. Always.”

“Yes, Dad,” Jack wheezed. “Can I have a sandwich now?”



Mom sat across the table and showed him chemistry flash cards while he ate his ham on rye.

“Helium?” he guessed as she held up another baffling diagram of letters and lines.

“Sodium bicarbonate,” said Mom. “Otherwise known as baking soda.” She was square-jawed, short-haired, and blonde, and she wore a tracksuit the same as Dad’s. They always wore the same thing. They didn’t believe in fancy clothes.

She lifted up another card.

“Mffghmff,” Jack said.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Mom told him. “You’ll choke. If the airway to your lungs is blocked, the oxygen supply to your brain will be cut off, and you’ll die. Is that what you want?”

Jack shook his head, wide-eyed. He hadn’t really considered the possibility of death by sandwich before. He swallowed very carefully and laid it aside, his appetite gone.

“Now, what’s this?” she said, tapping the card. “Come on, this is an easy one.”

Jack frowned, trying to make sense of the pattern of connected letters. He was sure he’d seen this one before. “Er . . .” he said. “Is it . . . cheesium?”

Mom gave him an *are you serious?* look.

“Cheesium’s not a thing, is it?” Jack said, realizing his mistake.

“No,” she said dryly. “It’s not a thing.”

“Froomium?”

“Now you’re just making up words.”

“I’m not! I’m not!” he said desperately, racking his brain for the answer. “Wait! I got this! I remember now!”

“Yes?” his mom asked, brightening.

“Meltium bidroxide!” he cried triumphantly.

Mom’s face fell slowly. She put the flash card back on the table with a snap. Jack sagged.

“Zero out of ten,” she said. “And even that was an improvement on last time.”

“I still say you can’t deduct points for fidgeting.”

“This isn’t a joke, Jack.”

“Sorry,” he mumbled, ashamed.

She began to gather up the cards. “You know, you’re eleven years old. Nearly twelve. Most boys your age can name at least a hundred chemical compounds.”

“I’m not sure that’s true—”

“And recite the complete works of Shakespeare.”

“Actually, I don’t think they ca—”

“*And* do calculus and complex algebra.”

“I don’t know anyone who can do tha—”

“What happened to you, Jack? Why aren’t you trying?”

The disappointment in her voice gave him a little sad ache in his stomach.

“I *am* trying,” he said. But no matter how hard he tried, he never even got close.

“Finish your sandwich,” she told him, getting up from the table. “You’ll need the energy.”

Jack picked up his ham on rye, eyed it warily, then dared to try a tiny bite. She was right, of course. He needed to keep his strength up. After dinner he would have to run the assault course out back, and when he couldn’t do it fast enough, he would have to do it over and over until Dad gave up. Then there would be target shooting, some survival training in the woods, and lastly a pop quiz on astronomy or physics or something. He would do badly at all of them. When they were over, he would collapse into bed, tired, bruised,



and feeling like a failure. He would sleep, and wake, and it would be a whole new day, same as the day before.

In the brief time between lying down and falling asleep, he would sometimes imagine another life, with other parents who didn't act like drill instructors. A life where they did fun things together, like going out for burgers, or watching TV, or playing board games. A life where they didn't move every year to a different city. A life where he had a family and a place he belonged.

But he didn't have that. He had this. So he finished his sandwich and headed out to the yard, where Dad was already waiting by the assault course, checking his watch and tapping his foot.

