

Chapter 1

Jacob

(1991)

Lying down on the beach, looking up at the stars and the moon's my favorite thing to do. Astoria, Oregon has to be the best place to live on earth for stargazing. I've tried a million times to count all the stars, but it's impossible. They go on forever. They're fireworks that have lost their ability to fly, frozen during launch...defying gravity. Aagh, it happened again! I can't figure out why I think about Mom every time things are going fine. If she was still around, things would be perfect. Dad would not be so sad, and we would celebrate the holidays just like we used to. *If there's a God up there, why'd you have to take my mom? I need her and so do Dad and Meghan.* I feel tears falling down my cheeks so I quickly wipe them away, thinking the faster I dry them, the quicker the sadness will leave as well. Suddenly, I hear the sound of footsteps running towards me.

"Jacob, Jacob, Daddy said you need to come inside because we have school tomorrow!" exclaims Meghan.

"Yeah, well, if I have to come inside, you better be ready to race me, 'Megpie'!"

"Okay."

"Ready, Megpie...One! Two...Three!"

I take off running fast, then hold back to allow Meghan to win, just like I always do.

We both crash through the front door, laughing and breathing heavily. The hardwood floors in the hallway make our steps sound like thunder as we approach Dad's study.

“Daddy, Daddy, I beat Jacob again!” Meghan exclaims, while giggling loudly.

Dad’s sitting in his study as usual, his nose buried in his work at his oversized wooden desk, not looking up at either of us.

“Did you really?” asks Dad, before continuing, “Jacob, will you and Meghan please eat your dinner and get ready for bed? It’s getting late.”

“Yes, Sir,” I respond.

I walk into the kitchen with Meghan, look up at the skylights and remember Mom. We would all sit at the large wooden table in the center and have breakfast each morning as a family. Mom would cook a huge meal and we’d eat together. I miss those days. Mom loved this home because of all the light.

“I see we’re having lasagna again. No big deal since Dad does make pretty good lasagna,” I say to Meghan.

I stand in the kitchen, scooping up dinner for Meghan and myself, wondering when the three of us last sat down together and ate as a family. We always ate together when Mom was around, but Dad now spends most of his time locked up in his study, working at his accounting job and missing her.

“Eat up quickly, Meghan so you can take your bath and get to bed. It’s getting late. I’m going to clean up then I’ll walk with you upstairs.”

I know that Meghan doesn’t want to walk upstairs by herself because it’s dark and the lights aren’t turned on. She’s always been scared of the dark, but her fear seemed to get worse after Mom died.

“Okay, Jacob,” Meghan responds.

“Alright. All done. You ready to go upstairs to take your bath?”

“Yes, I am!”

“Alright, come on let’s go.”

“Only if you hold my hand,” Meghan says.

“Alright, come on and give me your hand.”

Meghan and I leave the kitchen, walk into the hallway and upstairs. I turn on the lights in the hallway and bathroom, then begin to run water in the big clawfoot tub. Mom always loved that tub and the black and white tiled floor. I remember taking baths here as a kid and splashing water everywhere. I leave the room and turn on the lamps in Meghan’s room. Meghan follows me into her room, gathers her pajamas and walks back into the bathroom.

“Hey, I’m gonna finish my homework. Let me know when you’re done,” I say to Meghan before closing the bathroom door.

“Okay, Jacob.”

I walk into my room and turn on the lamp next to my bed, then look around and think about how Mom used to come in and sit on my window seat and talk to me when I was young. Everything in my room is pretty much the same as it was before Mom died just three years ago. I still have my wooden dresser and mirror, my wooden desk and matching chair with the blue cushion, my blue and white carpet, the red and white striped wallpaper that Mom hung in my room when I was a little kid and my trundle bed. I pull out my science homework from my backpack and sit at my desk to work on

it. It takes me about fifteen minutes to finish. While placing it in my backpack, I hear the bathroom door open.

“Are you done in the bathroom, Meghan?”

“Yeah, I’m going to bed! Are you going to tuck me in?”

“Yup, I’ll be there in a flash.”

“Okay!”

I zip up my backpack and place it by my bedroom door, then head to Meghan’s room. Once I enter her room, I kneel down next to her bed. I look around Meghan’s room and think about Mom again. Meghan’s room has white walls, a wallpaper border with ballerinas, white curtains with pom-poms, a bookcase loaded with novels, a pink bedspread and pillows everywhere. Mom loved soft things, just like Meghan. I remember all four of us having pillow fights in this room.

“So, Megpie, what do you want to do this weekend?”

“I want to look for shells on the beach!” Meghan responds excitedly.

“Well, I think that can be arranged.”

As I look at Meghan, I begin to think about how it’s so unfair that an eight-year old should have to live without her mom. It’s tough enough for me at fifteen, but eight is totally different. Meghan and I look so similar to mom with her gray eyes, long eyelashes, dark hair and deep olive complexion, a melting pot of her Mediterranean and Egyptian ancestry. We don’t seem to resemble Dad at all except for his height and long legs. Being nearly six feet tall at fifteen can sometimes be a drag for me, but I’m not complaining ‘cause my height’s definitely a plus when it comes to sports. Dad’s six feet four inches tall with light brown hair and much paler skin.

“Jacob, would you tell me a memory about Mom, so I won’t forget her?”

“Um...let’s see.” I stand up and walk over to the window in Meghan’s room to look out at the stars. For some reason, looking up at the stars always helps me think about Mom. I walk back over to Meghan’s bed and kneel down again to look at her.

“Mom loved to build bonfires on the beach. We’d all sit around the fire and roast hot dogs and S’mores while Mom and Dad told us ghost stories.”

“I like that story. I’m gonna dream about it tonight,” Meghan responds.

“Good Night, Megpie. Sweet dreams until tomorrow.”

I lean over to kiss Meghan on her forehead, just like Mom used to do. Hopefully, it will help her remember.

“Good Night, Jacob. I love you!”

“Love you too, Megpie.”

Mom used to tuck us in and tell us she loved us the same way each night. I need to make sure I do that every night, so Meghan always feels loved.

I take a quick shower and get in the bed, still thinking about the way things were when Mom was alive and how these past few years have been so tough for all of us, especially for Dad.

“Good night, Dad!”

“Good night, Jacob!”

I’m sure Meghan has fallen asleep. She falls asleep so quickly and never wakes us during the night. I’m glad she doesn’t have nightmares like she used to in the past, shortly after Mom died.

Meghan would wake up crying and startled during the night. Dad or I would rush into her room to

check on her. Her face would be red and wet from all the tears. We'd ask her about her dream and she'd tell us she saw Mom walking through the park but when she called her, Mom would keep walking faster and eventually Meghan wouldn't be able to see her. After about a week of nightmares, Dad decided to sign Meghan up for therapy sessions. The therapist, Dr. Robinson, asked Dad and me to also attend a few appointments. After about four or five meetings, the nightmares stopped. I'm glad 'cause they bothered me as much as Meghan. After Mom died, I felt like Meghan's protector and even though I wish I could, there's no way I could protect her from nightmares.

The next day at school, I sit in World History class, looking at the clock, counting down the minutes until lunchtime. Mr. Crowley's especially boring today. I can't help but stare at his new haircut. It resembles Mr. Spock from *Star Trek*, but with blond spikes. *What in the hell is Mr. Crowley thinking?* His attire looks the same as usual, a collared plaid shirt and a brown corduroy jacket. His lapels are so wrinkled, they look like they're about to fly away.

Mr. Crowley has the most monotone voice. I keep thinking, *ugh...will this ever end? I can't take this boring class any longer!*

He walks towards the center of the classroom to address the class. The room is full of windows on one side, a long chalkboard on the other and posters of events in history hanging all around the other two walls.

"Today, we'll begin our review of World War I. In which year did World War I begin?"

Susan Burk raises her hand ferociously, as usual, but Mr. Crowley completely ignores her. Unfortunately, he calls on my friend, Chris Hansworth instead, who's of course looking out the window, with his mind drifting someplace outside the classroom.

Chris is about five feet, ten inches tall, with black hair and medium brown skin. He's smart, but has an awful habit of scrunching up his face and looking nervous and shocked any time he's asked a question by an adult, especially a teacher. His face wrinkles and his eyes bulge out like small ping pong balls, then his mouth turns downwards into a frown. The worst part is that because he's so anxious, his answer ends up sounding like a question. I've told him repeatedly, "Dude, you gotta work on your poker face," but I don't believe Chris even knows what that means!

Chris, Josh and I have been friends since sixth grade, right before my mom died and now all three of us attend Mr. Crowley's World History class together. Josh is closer to my height and has blond hair. He's a self-proclaimed 'ladies' man', only the ladies don't seem to agree with this title. He spends most of his time licking his wounds from some girl telling him off when he tries to flirt. However, I must say, Josh does have a lot of confidence. He seems to bounce back quickly from his negative encounters with girls. I'm actually pretty impressed by him sometimes.

Chris looks as if he's seen a ghost when Mr. Crowley calls his name. He's already beginning to frown up and slip down into his seat. Mr. Crowley can smell fear and Chris' facial expressions must smell like rotten eggs to Mr. Crowley by now. I just shake my head and close my eyes, anticipating Mr. Crowley making an example out of my scared buddy.

"Mr. Hansworth, do you know the answer to the question?" Mr. Crowley asks with a stern sounding voice.

“I’m sorry Mr. Crowley, would you please repeat it?” Chris responds nervously, while frowning.

Josh and I quickly glance at each other, knowing that Mr. Crowley’s about to torture Chris. Mr. Crowley sighs very loudly, presses his lips together as if Chris is a complete numbskull, folds his arms and stares, his eyes piercing Chris’ very soul.

“Mr. Hansworth, if you’d pay attention instead of staring out at God knows where, you’d have heard the question.”

All of a sudden, the entire class bursts out in laughter. This results in Chris’ eyes growing about fifty percent larger in size and his frown turning into something that looks more like a little kid about to break out in a crying fit.

After a long pause, Mr. Crowley continues, “Very well. I will repeat it.”

Mr. Crowley turns and walks back towards the front of the classroom before turning around to face the class, then he proceeds to repeat the question.

“In which year did World War I begin?”

“Um...1914?” Chris replies.

“Mr. Hansworth, is that a question or an answer?”

Chris looks like he’s about to puke and just sits in his seat, frozen. Mr. Crowley must think Chris is about to projectile vomit because he decides to ease up a bit.

“Mr. Hansworth, I’m glad to see you’ve read chapter twelve, even though your mind appears to be someplace else. I certainly hope you’re not still staring out into the heavens two years from now when I will most likely have you in my government class.”

Snickering can be heard throughout the classroom.

Chris simply looks at Mr. Crowley with an uncomfortable smile and slides down further in his seat. Then the bell rings, just in time.

Chris, Josh and I walk as quickly as possible to the cafeteria, wanting to be one of the first ones in line and especially the first ones to find a seat. The cafeteria's always crowded and the last kids to arrive have to sit in the overflow room with Mrs. Brown, who makes us watch some ridiculous little kids' movies and 'shushes' anyone who talks. Why we have to remain quiet during lunch, I'll never understand.

The lunch offerings are the usual suspects, mashed potatoes, broccoli, a roll and something that resembles meatloaf. Chris, Josh and I take one look at it and yell simultaneously, "Eww!" We all decide to be vegetarians that day. Ms. Edna, the lunch lady, looks at us with her hair net partially over her forehead, shakes her head and begins to speak.

"Picky, picky, picky. When I was in school..."

Before she can finish, we quickly run to the cashier line to pay for our food, snickering the entire time. Ms. Edna stares us down, her X-ray vision following us, knowing we're ignoring her. This makes us laugh even harder as we try to find a table.

The cafeteria's huge and bright with a sea of white tables and light-colored wooden chairs. Club and sports posters are hung on the walls all around the room. After we sit down, I know Chris will have something to say about Mr. Crowley.

"Man! Why does Mr. Crowley always have to pick on me?" asks Chris, looking frustrated.

“Cause you make it too easy for him by staring out the window all the time and looking like a puppy who ate its owner’s shoe whenever he calls on you,” says Josh.

“Dude, I told you to work on your poker face. If you keep looking like you’ve seen a ghost every time he calls on you, he’s gonna keep picking on you,” I add.

“Man, I try, but I can’t help but stare out the window in his class ‘cause he has the most monotone voice I’ve ever heard!” remarks Chris, while dragging out the word ‘heard.’

I start to chuckle as I think about the song Chris, Josh and I made up after we found out Mr. Crowley’s first name is Edgar. They smile and quickly catch on. Josh and I begin to beat the top of the table like a drum. Chris joins in on our table-top drums. We sing the song to the tune of Prince’s “Controversy”, replacing “Controversy” with “Edgar Crowley.” We begin to sing in unison.

“Sitting in his class puts you into a trance...dum dum dum dum...Edgar Crowley.”

We laugh so hard, we can’t even finish the song - Tears roll down our faces. One day I know Mr. Crowley’s gonna walk into the cafeteria and hear us singing that song, but it’ll be worth it!