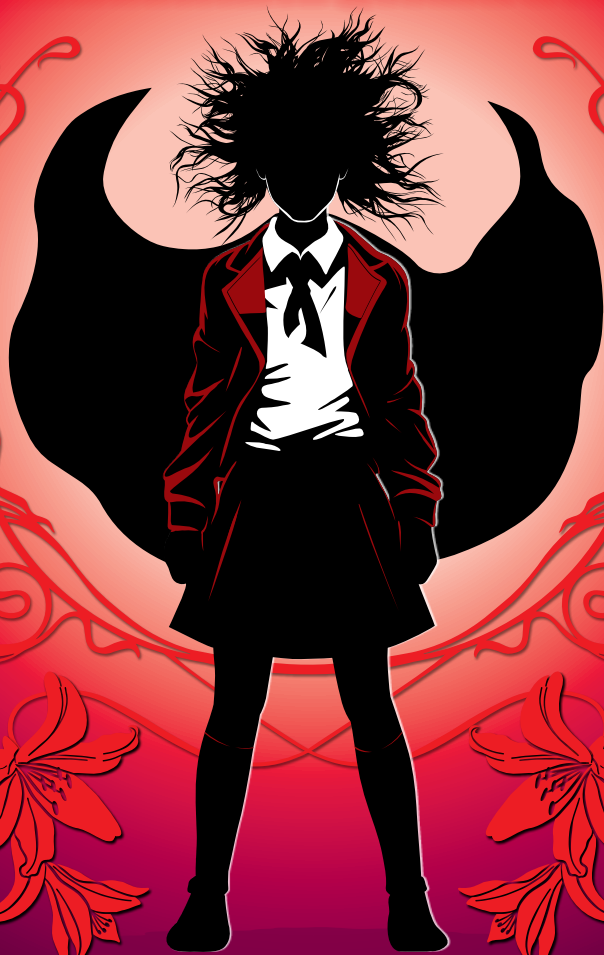


LILI GRAY

AND THE WORLD'S MOST
EMBARRASSING SUPERPOWER



ADA LOEWE

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MOST EMBARRASSING
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By Ada Loewe

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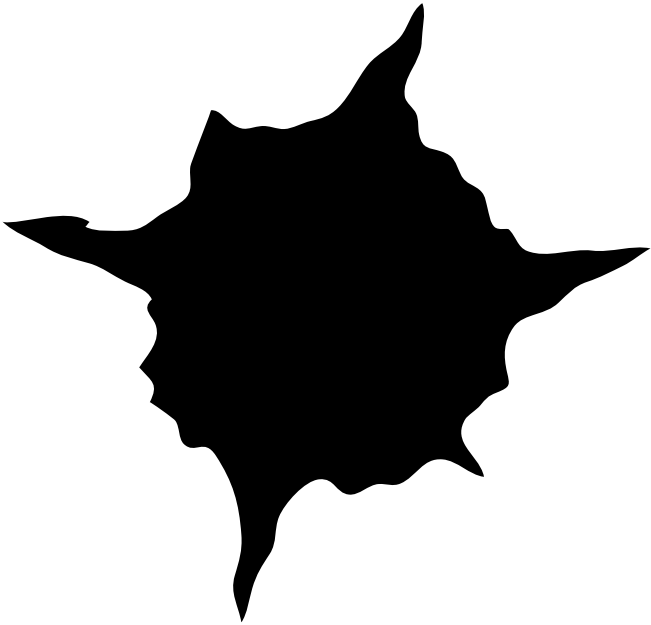
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Edited by Lydia Norton
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*To everyone hiding a part of themselves
for fear of rejection:
that very thing could be your greatest
source of strength and love.*



Chapter 1

CUPCAKE IN A DUMPSTER

TUCKED BETWEEN TRASH BINS in a shadowy alleyway, I look as misplaced as a strawberry cupcake with cream cheese frosting among a heap of slimy garbage.

Not that I'm the wilting violet type! But being a pint-sized ten-year-old with a mop of blond hair that refuses to be tamed doesn't exactly make people tremble in their boots. So, 'cupcake' it is – and I'm not too thrilled about it.

I look around.

This alley, with its splash of graphic novel drama and a dash of shady allure, looks just right for a superhero to fly in for some superhero stuff.

I crawl out from between the bins and stand up straight, jumping into my best superhero pose, one fist in the air.

If I got to pick a superpower, what would it be? Something slick, obviously. Because that's the essence of superpowers – they're meant to be slick, right?

If I had a superpower, I'd want to soar high in the sky. But not just that. I'd also want the strength to smash through brick walls like they were cotton candy, and the force to knock out a crowd of villains with just a flick of my finger. That would be slick, right?

I brush off the alley dirt from my blue coat and hesitate for a moment. I really hate this part. Sighing, I unbutton my coat, shedding my 'normal girl' disguise to reveal a firecracker-red suit underneath – a red skirt, shirt, stockings, and cape – the whole shebang. I smooth out my skirt and take a deep breath to calm my nerves.

Big mistake.

The overpowering stench of rotting garbage hits me, its acidic tang making me gag. I struggle to regain my superhero posture. "Fake it till you make it," as my friend Ale always says.

But here's the thing about this whole mess I'm currently in: Me, standing ankle deep in stinking slime, wearing the most stupid outfit ever... Well, this is practically paradise compared to the revolting spectacle that's about to unfold.

Around the corner, there's a ruckus - blue and red lights, fire engines, and a chorus of hysterical shrieks. It

sounds like the whole world has lost its marbles just a jump away from me.

I hurry to dig out a mask from my backpack and give it the side-eye. Why do superheroes always keep their faces hidden? If I had a superpower, I'd never be caught dead behind a mask. And with that thought I reluctantly slip it over my face and hope no one will recognize me. Ever. I steal a glance at my reflection in a murky puddle. I look ridiculous.

The wailing of sirens and panicked cries reaches a crescendo, the air thick with an undeniable whiff of fear and smoke of something burning. Something big.

You know, there might be one situation where I'd wear a mask. If my superpower was mortifyingly, jaw-droppingly, horrendously embarrassing.

There's no such thing as an embarrassing superpower you say?

I step out of the alley into a little plaza, my dazzling red suit on full display. The onlookers and even the firefighters freeze mid-action to stare at me, their jaws dropped and eyes wide at the sight of a little girl in a red costume stepping out of the filthy alley... no going back now.

I look up and see what all the fuss is about; a massive fire has trapped a woman on a blazing rooftop. The firefighters are struggling to reach her, their ladder is not long enough and the entrance to the building is already engulfed with flames.

I bend down a little, preparing myself. And then... I fart. Yes, you heard right. I unleash a mighty fart and shoot into the sky like a rocket.

I fly up the building and after a quick second I touch down on the flaming rooftop. The heat is prickling, but I am where I need to be – in front of Mrs. Grimshaw who is stuck here on the roof.

Mrs. Grimshaw, my teacher and the self-declared guardian of all things manners, stares at me, her face a perfect blend of shock and horror. Which would be normal in a situation like this, but I have the feeling her reaction is more directed towards my performance than the deadly trap she's in.

“Lili, is that...? Did you just...?” she stammers.

My mask is clearly not the world-class disguise I hoped it was.

“Hello, Mrs. Grimshaw,” I reply, attempting to sound as casual as possible.

Seemingly not concerned about the ticking time bomb situation, Mrs. Grimshaw starts scolding me. “Lili, what did I tell you about breaking wind in public? It's not ladylike.”

Is she kidding me? We're on a burning rooftop, for crying out loud!

“It's a bit too hot for comfort,” I say, trying to steer her attention back to the tiny detail that we need to get

off this blazing inferno. “Could you hold onto me so we can get down?”

Mrs. Grimshaw pauses, considering her options. Frantically she scans the wall of fire surrounding us, looking for another way out.

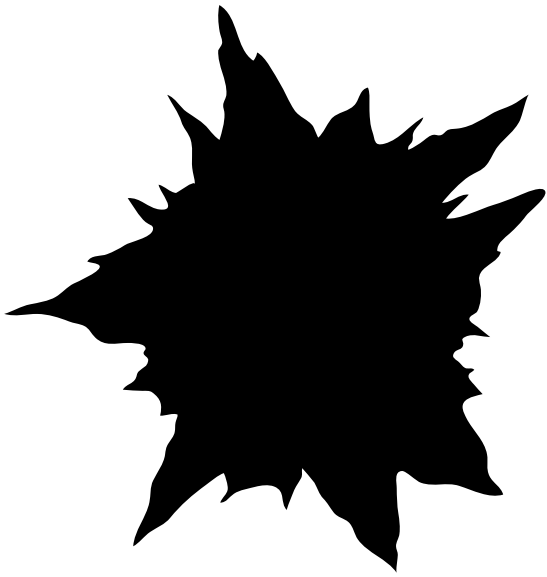
Sometimes, I get the feeling that people would rather face certain death than be saved by me. I mean, imagine saying to your friends, “Hey, guess what? I was saved by Fart Girl!” That’s not exactly a tale that would make the superhero hall of fame.

Down on the street, the firefighters signal for us to hurry. Flames shoot closer, highlighting the urgency of our situation.

“Lili, I don’t want you to think I’m condoning this kind of behavior,” Mrs. Grimshaw lectures, still ignoring the impending danger. “Manners is what sets us apart from the wild. It’s what keeps our society...”

I endure her lecture, waiting for the moment we can finally make our escape. Yep, this is my life now – a superhero. With the world’s most embarrassing superpower. Ever!

But let me backtrack for a second to a time before I knew I had a superpower and tell you how I got myself into this mess. Prepare yourself for a zesty blend of family secrets, my own false judgment, a dash of friendship, and a generous sprinkle of sheer dumb luck.



Chapter 2

DIPLOMACY, WHO?

ONE WEEK EARLIER...

I find myself wrapped in the inky darkness of a school locker. It's not exactly a five-star hotel, but it's my fortress of solitude. The interior of the locker is surprisingly snug, kitted out with a cushion and a book holder. I even manage to do my homework in here.

You see, before I stumbled upon this peculiar ability of mine, I used to navigate life with the finesse of a diplomat. It takes humility and looking the other way a lot because diplomacy is not about who's right or wrong, it's all about sidestepping conflicts and making it through the day with minimal friction. Because let's be real, school can be a tough place. Even more so when you're tiny and prone to blushing whenever someone looks your way.

I just start to relax in my little hideout when my attention slips just for a second and I lose the grip on the locker door. It swings open but I hastily pull it close again just in time. Outside I can hear my nemeses Burt and Becky, the schoolyard's resident terror twins. They are on their usual prowl, scanning the hallway for me.

"Bummer," Burt grumbles, his voice oozing disappointment.

"Yeah, we'll get her tomorrow," Becky chimes in, her tone equally dejected.

"It's not a good morning without a ketchup session," Burt sounds truly sullen.

An uninformed bystander might even feel bad for them, but I know from personal experience what their 'ketchup session' entails; Burt's sausage fingers squeezing my cheeks until they turn from red to bluish. Then kids laughing at me, while the teachers and any other grown up just think how cute my red face looks.

I swallow my anger and, once again, choose diplomacy over screaming and kicking. I stay in my sanctuary, waiting for my chance to sneak out of school unnoticed to spend the day anywhere really, just not here.

When their voices recede, I cautiously poke my head out of the locker. The coast is clear. I squeeze out only to find Alejandro, aka Ale, grinning at me. He leans nonchalantly against the wall opposite my locker, his science

journal in hand. So much for my sneaking skills.

I sort my crumpled shirt and trousers. And yeah, I might have exaggerated the level of comfort this space offers.

“Why did they say you’re skipping school?” Ale inquires, his curiosity always on 10.

I shrug, a cocktail of embarrassment and frustration coursing through me. “I don’t know.”

“I know,” Ale continues. “It’s so dull, right?”

I smirk, Ale can be so out of touch with the real world it’s frustrating. “Well, it may be dull for you, but trust me, it’s anything but for me.”

Ale furrows his brows, genuinely puzzled. “Then why do you skip?”

I roll my eyes, gathering my belongings and slamming my locker shut.

“Because they always pick on me,” I explain, my tone laced with annoyance. “Don’t you get that?”

Ale looks thoughtful for a moment, mulling over my words. Then, he playfully nudges my shoulder. “Because they think it’s hilarious when you blush?” an innocent grin playing on his lips.

I swatted his shoulder in response. “That’s not funny,” I retort.

With my bag securely slung over my shoulder, I make a beeline for the exit, Ale follows at my heels, and I let

him. I really envy him, he always feels invited to tag along, always feels he belongs anywhere he wants to be. I feel just the opposite, always in the way.

We're about to make our grand escape and turn the last corner, just as Mrs. Grimshaw comes striding down the hallway. She's followed closely by a dark figure lugging a large, ominous box.

In a flurry, Ale and I retreat. We run back where we came from and duck into the classroom, hoping to evade an hour-long lecture about the importance of discipline. Funny how all of Mrs. Grimshaw's lectures give you the feeling you're personally responsible for destroying society, even if your only crime was an untied shoelace.

So much for evading Burt's and Becky's pranks by playing hooky today.

Chapter 3

UNPLANNED SHOW AND TELL

THE CLASSROOM IS A SEA OF KIDS perched at their desks, everyone still bundled up in their coats. It's an excursion day, my least favorite thing. Going out into the world with our class makes me an even easier target for Burt and Becky, whose pranks are usually nastier outside than those within the school's walls. I tried to dodge all that today by simply not showing up. For next time, I need a better strategy. And for today... I just hope to survive.

Mrs. Grimshaw and the mysterious dark figure enter the room. He's tall and dressed in a black suit. His presence is so ominous, it feels like the light gets sucked out of the room.

"Good morning, class," Mrs. Grimshaw greets us, her voice bubbling with joy. "Good morning, Mrs. Grimshaw,"

we all reply in unison.

Then I take a more observant look at Mrs. Grimshaw and my mood lifts. We might not go on an excursion today after all. The telltale sign is the absence of Mrs. Grimshaw's signature peach raincoat. Rain or shine, Mrs. Grimshaw would never embark on an outdoor activity without it.

My classmates caught on, and the first moans run through the room. Mrs. Grimshaw addresses the disappointment etched on everyone's faces. "Unfortunately, we won't be able to visit the BeansBeans factory today. There's some construction going on, so we can't enter the grounds."

"But" Mrs. Grimshaw continues, attempting to salvage the day, "Mr. Hoover has kindly offered to do a little show and tell here in the classroom instead."

The students reluctantly remove their coats.

With a loud thud, the light-sucking man plonks a large box on Mrs. Grimshaw's desk. His eyes are half covered under dark bushy brows, but I notice a pained expression that looks more fitting for the dentist than a room full of children. He obviously hates kids. I mean, we're forced to be here at school, but the old people are here because they choose to. So why is he really here? A mystery to be solved. Maybe this day isn't going to be so bad after all.

Meanwhile, unknown to me then, Burt and Becky exchange a brown paper bag. Hidden inside the bag is a

gargantuan tomato with a hefty firecracker in its pulpy core. Their prank planned for excursion day will now be executed in class.

As I hang up my coat, Burt sneaks close to my chair and places the 'tomato-bomb' underneath it. A long wick extends out of the back close to his own chair, ready for him to light it at any moment.

When everyone is back in their seats, Mr. Hoover unveils the object on the desk – it's a miniature model of the bean factory, complete with tiny vans and miniature people. The classroom gets quiet. Everyone tries to get a good look at the factory model; they are in awe, marveling at all the little details. And I admit, even I was intrigued by this doll house for grownups.

A small smile forms on Mr. Hoover's face at the attention his model gets. "I was your age when my father built the BeansBeans factory right here in our little town," Mr. Hoover's voice is filled with nostalgia. "Today, I'm the proud owner, continuing the legacy of my family."

Naturally, Becky can't help herself from interrupting. "You don't run the factory, my father does. He's one of the directors and you're not even allowed on the grounds," she smirks.

Hoover's smile vanishes and his face contorts with anger, his teeth grinding against each other. "You don't know what you're talking about, child," he snaps.

But Becky isn't fazed. "You're a liar," she boldly states.

Mr. Hoover fixes his dark gaze on Becky, causing her to yelp in fear like a punished dog. It seems like my first hunch was right, Mr. Hoover really doesn't like kids at all!

Mrs. Grimshaw quickly steps in to scold Becky for her rude behavior. "Mind your manners when talking to a guest, Becky."

Trying to diffuse the tension, Mrs. Grimshaw looks around. "You can now ask Mr. Hoover questions," Mrs. Grimshaw announces. Then her eyes stop on me. "Lili, why don't you ask Mr. Hoover a question about his factory?" She knows, of course, that I'm notorious for avoiding conflicts and hopes for something lame to calm down Mr. Hoover.

All eyes turn to me and I blurt out the first thing that comes to my mind. "Do you all fart a lot there?"

Laughter erupts from all around the classroom, but Mrs. Grimshaw doesn't find it amusing. "That is not a proper question, Lili," she scolds.

My face turns red, causing the class to laugh even more. I can feel their stares as the embarrassment washes over me.

Ale comes to my defense. "Of course it's a proper question," he interjects confidently. "Beans contain oligo-saccharide. When the beans ferment in our lower intestinal tract, it creates a buildup of gas. The gas isn't absorbed into the intestine, so the body expels it. Hence flatulence."

The word 'flatulence' causes another uproar in the classroom. "Stop it, Alejandro," but Mrs. Grimshaw's voice drowns in the tumult. "Everyone, be quiet!" Mrs. Grimshaw shouts helplessly.

At this moment of utter chaos there are two important things going unnoticed. And this story might have turned out very differently if I had paid more attention here. But to be fair, I was just happy that nobody was looking at me anymore, or so I thought.

First, while everyone is busy making fart sounds and crying with laughter, Burt and Becky light the wick, watching it slowly burn closer and closer to the tomato-bomb under my chair.

The second thing going unnoticed is Mr. Hoover, staring back and forth between me and the photo of his family he is showing us, or trying to show us. In the photo are his parents standing in front of the newly built BeansBeans factory, a 12-year-old Hoover with his 10-year-old sister. His sister is tiny and has an unruly mop of blond hair – she is the spitting image of me!

When I start paying attention, it's already too late...

I glance around and notice Burt hiding his face behind a book. This is such an unusual sight that I turn around and see he's staring at something. Feeling a surge of panic, I follow Burt's gaze. And that's when I see the spark of the wick underneath me, reaching a paper bag

hidden under my chair. In a moment of sheer terror, I let out an epic fart, so powerful it lifts me out of my seat.

Pandemonium ensues. I race towards the door, desperate to escape the humiliation. But Burt blocks my path with a smug smirk on his face.

“Sorry, fart girl,” he taunts.

Without thinking, I punch Burt in the face, causing blood to stream from his nose. I burst through the door and into the freedom of the hallway.

Ale, ever the observant one, spots the tomato-bomb that got extinguished by my blow and a curious big hole in my chair. His eyebrows rise with interest, and he quickly covers it with his science journal before anyone can notice.

I sprint down the hallway, hoping to get away as far as possible from the worst day of my life.

Chapter 4

THE UNFAIRNESS OF LIFE

I WALK HOME. NO, I STOMP HOME. I imagine my steps as mighty as Godzilla's, causing little earthquakes with every foot that lands on the ground. The farther away I get from the school the more determined I get. By the time I reach my house, I promise myself I'll never return to school. Ever! I Godzilla-stomp into our home, ready to make my big announcement.

My dad, named Daed, D-A-E-D, short for Daedalus (I know! Ridiculous runs in the family!), is flopped in his favorite armchair, eyes closed and serene as a snoozing sloth. He massages the feet of his very, very pregnant wife, Bella – my evil stepmom. Think having an evil stepmom is just a fairy tale cliché? Well, maybe some clichés exist for a reason.

Bella is engrossed in a mountain of patient records, oblivious to the impending doom her soon-to-be-born baby will bring to my family. I was fine with just Dad and me, but it seems like life just gets worse from the day you were born.

“Good news, Dad,” I announce, giving Bella the cold shoulder, “they won’t call me ‘Tomato’ anymore”.

Dad cracks an eye open, a hint of confusion playing on his face. “Oh, I didn’t know. Sorry they did that, cupcake.”

I barge on, not giving him any chances to slip back into dreamland. “Because they’ll call me Fart Girl from now on.”

This is the first time that Bella peels her eyes from her medical mumbo-jumbo, her face etched with what I assume is disgust. But she recovers quickly and fakes some empathy. “You had gas at school? Oh Lili, it happens.”

I scoff and roll my eyes. “I bet IT never ever happens to you.”

Bella narrows her eyes at me, and I know she’s about to scold me for being so rude, so I make a quick escape up the stairs, leaving them in my dust. My plan is to bury myself in my closet and scrub my brain clean of the whole ‘Fart Girl’ incident. Where’s a memory eraser when you need one?

But then the doorbell rings, throwing a wrench in my

retreat plan. Mrs. Grimshaw's silhouette is visible through the window.

"Oh no," Dad says in a hushed voice, "it's Mrs. Grimshaw. You handle her." He shoves Bella in the direction of the door.

"Daed," Bella protests, "you are not eight anymore. Your former teacher is nothing to be afraid of."

But Bella also hesitates to open the door because no one is immune to the guilty conscience Mrs. Grimshaw's lectures can imprint on you. Bella straightens a little for battle, even though her posture is always perfect. She swings the door open, and there on our lawn stand not only Mrs. Grimshaw but also Officer Polombo. Perfect. Just my luck.

I hide on the top of the stairs, my ears growing three sizes to eavesdrop on their chat.

Mrs. Grimshaw doesn't beat around the bush but dives right in, "Mrs. Gray, do you deem 'passing gas' as acceptable social behavior?" Mrs. Grimshaw grills Bella.

Bella stammers out a defense. "Well, not ideal, but..."

Mrs. Grimshaw barrels on. "Would you allow yourself to 'pass gas' in your professional environment?"

Bella shakes her head, her defense already crumpling. "No, but..."

"Ha!" Mrs. Grimshaw snips, interrupting Bella again. "You see, even though you're working at a prison with soci-

ety's rule-breakers, you still find it important to uphold the sanctity of manners."

Bella wilts, but just as all hope seems lost, my dad swoops in, trying to play the knight in shining armor.

"Lili farted, where's the harm? It happens to the best of us." he grins, cheekily, Officer Polombo snickers at his side.

Mrs. Grimshaw chastises him, sternly addressing him by his full name: "Daedalus! Watch your language. Did I mention that just after the incident, Lili attacked Officer Polombo's son? She hit Burt and almost broke his nose."

Bella looks rightfully shocked, "Mr. Polombo, is Burt alright?"

"He's fine, Mrs. Bella," Officer Polombo says, a twinkle in his eye. "He had it coming, if I do say so myself. His true grievance is the bruised ego from being bested by a girl."

Mrs. Grimshaw looks appalled. She swivels back to Bella, wearing a look of pure disapproval.

"Mr. and Mrs. Gray, I expect my students to conduct themselves appropriately, and I expect parents to be role models. Is that understood?" Mrs. Grimshaw commands, her voice as sharp as a hawk's talon.

Bella nods, her voice barely above a whisper. "Yes, but..."

Too late. Mrs. Grimshaw had passed her judgment. "Lili is suspended until next week. And I must inform all the parents about her beastly manners."

I slump down on the stairs, the weight of my sentence sinking in. An official declaration of my accident at school to the parents means this will never be forgotten. It will go into the school's protocols and be there for anyone to read until the end of time.

I should announce right here that I don't intend on going back to school ever, but right now I'm too shocked to even move.

Dad clears his throat, preparing to speak. "Mrs. Grimshaw, I have to go on a trip for..."

But before he can finish, Mrs. Grimshaw folds her arms over her chest, silencing him with her stern gaze.

Bella steps forward, making another attempt to reason with Mrs. Grimshaw. "Please, Mrs. Grimshaw. Daed... Mr. Gray, will be on a business trip for a few days, and I can't cancel my patient appointments at such short notice."

Mrs. Grimshaw remains stoic. "Let's hope you learn to handle your patients and a stepdaughter. Goodbye." With those final words, she walks away, leaving a pile of crushed egos in her wake.

Officer Polombo reaches for Bella's hand and kisses it in a rather dramatic fashion. Daed shoots him a sharp look, clearly unhappy with the officer's display of affection.

As Mrs. Grimshaw and Officer Polombo drive off in the police car, I half notice another car parked across the street. The driver is hidden in shadows, and I feel a sense

of unease, as if something is sucking the light out of this bright summer day. Again.

I lean out for a closer look, but then Dad closes the door and blocks my view of the mysterious driver outside. “That went well,” Bella says sarcastically.

“I can see how all those years as a psychologist allowed you to mastermind this conversation, Dr. Gray,” Dad teases her, smirking.

Bella sighs, pulling Dad closer. “So, you watched my plane crash and didn’t come to my rescue, Daedalus?”

Dad’s smile fades, replaced by a somber expression. “I’m sorry, my love. It’s Mrs. Grimshaw,” Dad continued. “She commands my guilty conscience. She’s my kryptonite.”

Chapter 5

A FAMILY SECRET IN PLAIN SIGHT

THIS DAY SEEMS TO FIND A WAY TO GET WORSE EVERY MINUTE, so I decide not to leave my room in the foreseeable future. I grab a few books and find solace in my small yet cozy closet. The walls are covered with family photos of dad, my mother – my real mother, that is – and a younger version of myself. The pictures are from two years ago, when my mom was still alive.

I sit cross-legged on the floor and flip through handwritten pages of my mom’s journal. ‘Violet Gray’ is scrawled across the cover.

A knock interrupts my very needed and well-deserved, I might add, alone time. Bella’s voice sounds from beyond the closet door.

“Lili, Ale is downstairs to see you.”

I let out a sigh. “I don’t want to see anybody.”

Bella chuckles. “Yes, Ale told me you would say that. In fact, he was eighty-five percent certain you would say that. Twelve percent for you saying you’ll see him later, and three percent for you actually coming down.”

I couldn’t help but smile at Ale’s prediction, but I wasn’t ready to speak to anyone.

Bella continues, “He gave me this for you.” She slides a picture under the door. “He said he has to talk to you about that. What’s with that hole?” Bella asked, her voice filled with curiosity.

I glance at the picture. It depicts my school chair, but with a massive hole in the seat. “It’s a... a school project,” I lie. But a flush of excitement runs through me. I know I have seen something like this before.

I wait for Bella to leave, my heart pounding. When I hear the door to my room close, I flip through my mother’s journal until I find what I’m looking for.

There are pages filled with technical drawings and descriptions of holes, holes of all sizes, all measured and described in my mother’s neat handwriting. Her drawings look just like the hole in my school chair.

Two big questions form in my head: Why did my mom study these holes? And, did I cause this hole in my chair somehow?

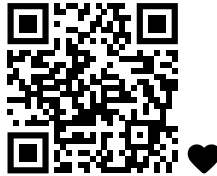
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