THE ILLUMINATED CHILDREN

by Laura Tut

Preview — Prologue and Chapters 1–5

Read the beginning of the book. The full novel is available in paperback and Kindle.

Prologue

“They’ll need to go,” he ordered. He sat on a regal throne.

“But… aren’t they the heart of the operation?” she asked. Her hair was blond, and her eyes were sky-blue.

“Exactly why you need to send them away,” he explained. He adjusted the crown on his head.

“Wasn’t the plan to keep them here?” a man asked, standing beside the woman.

“Plans have changed,” the person on the throne said again.

“Won’t it be suspicious?” She paced around, worried.

“But you two can plant memories in their minds, yes?” he asked.

“Well, yes, but I would like to do that as little as necessary. Also, the oldest one will already be seven years old when the last one is born. That’s plenty old enough to know what’s happening,” the man replied.

“Do it one by one. Put in the memories for the adults, and for each child, thoroughly delete the past memories.”

The couple winced at the thought. But they would be the Illuminated children, so surely it had to be worth it.

“We’ll do it.” The man spoke for them both.

“But—” the woman began. The man pressed his finger against her lips.

“It makes sense. It has to happen.” The woman opened her mouth, ready to argue, but closed it. She shut her eyes, as if she was already bearing the pain of never seeing her children.

When she looked up again, the man had removed his finger. She looked like she wanted to argue again, but then she saw it. She wasn’t the only one bearing the pain.

Tears glimmered in the man’s eyes, but he blinked them back. He was being strong for her.

So she needed to, too.

“The first one will be here soon,” the woman informed, pointing to her bulging belly.

He relaxed. “Go have some rest.”

About fifteen years later…

A married couple had six kids. Or at least they thought so.

“Henry, take out the trash!” a stern voice called. Henry’s father.

“Can’t Pearl do it, for once?” Henry shouted back, even though he already knew the answer.

“You’re fifteen, that’s old enough to take out the trash. Pearl is only seven.” Henry muttered a curse under his breath. He went downstairs, and tied up the trash bags.

Emma happily watered the plants. She always watered the plants, even grass. But the plants grew strangely. And they didn’t do it around anyone else. It wasn’t because of the plants.

It was because of her.

Was something wrong with her?

Despite these worries, Emma continued to care for the plants. But…

Olivia had gotten an A+ on the test, but they didn’t approve. Said she should have gotten every question correct. She shouldn’t have missed those two extra credit questions. I’ll do better next time, she vowed.

Oliver was worried. Olivia was staying up late nights, studying. Every waking hour, she was studying. Even during lunchtime and break. She needed to rest, seriously. But she seemed to care more about her test grades than she did about herself.

Matt was having the last of his basketball season. This game decided everything. Ryan had the ball, and was advancing towards the hoop. It would be the winning shot. Five more seconds. You can do it, Ryan, he thought. People were chanting his name. But two people from the other team were blocking him, and a third one joined. Ryan looked at Matt, straight in the eyes. The ball flew, and landed in his hands. He ran, and made the winning shot.

“I knew you could do it.”

Pearl didn’t want to be favored. Her parents showed it so shamelessly. Olivia’s grades were criticized, while hers were congratulated. It wasn’t fun, seeing their faces falling. But she couldn’t do anything but stand by.

“When will they really know?” the man asked.

“Soon,” the master replied.

“How soon?”

“Once it activates. We need to keep them oblivious for as long as possible.”

Soon, indeed.

The Illuminated children were coming.

Chapter 1 — Henry

The old school bell rang. The loud sound never got old. It meant that school was over. Though the rest of the day is never much better, I thought.

I stuffed my notebooks inside my backpack, and stepped outside the classroom. Loud chatter filled the hallway, and I squeezed and pushed my way out of the crowd. The textbooks in my backpack weighed me down, and my skinny shoulders strained to hold it all up.

Finally, I got out of the school building. My eyes darted around, as if something was going to jump out at me any moment. My eyes had dark bags underneath them from nights without sleep, studying for the next test.

I spotted the shortcut back home, looked around to see if anyone was watching, and walked into the old, dusty alleyway. Smoke billowed around me, and trash littered the ground.

Our house wasn't far away from my school; it was walking distance. But it was tiring, having to walk all the way back home every single day. I almost wished the school was farther away. Far enough so that I didn't have to walk to school. Finally, I got home. I kicked off my sneakers and headed inside.

My mother didn't even take so much as a second glance as I passed through the kitchen. Pearl was playing in the living room, and Emma was tending to the plants in the backyard.

I walked up the stairs to the second floor. With so many kids in the house, they put signs on each room. Olivia & Oliver. Pearl. Then, I went up to the third floor. My parents' rooms. Then came even more signs. Emma. Matt.

But not mine. No, "Emma needs her own space," they said. She needed her own room, that wasn't with Matt. And of course, she took my room.

And where did I sleep? I headed to a dark corner, and up the dusty, wooden ladder. My room was the attic. They pretended it was the "fourth floor". They used to store old things there. I'm just another thing that's stuffed there, forgotten.

There wasn't even a real bed. Just a mattress and some blankets. No lights, either. Just a lantern hanging in the center, flickering like a weak flame. The only thing they did was clean it out, and add some new floorboards.

I tried to make the best of it. I had wiped down the floor and ceiling, and removed the spiderwebs hanging from every corner. I had even gotten a cardboard box to squish on top of my bed, so I had a hard surface to write my homework on.

But no matter what I did, it still looked like a dreary attic, with only a cardboard box and bed to signify that someone lived here. What else could I do with such a tiny space? My mattress could barely fit in it.

Why do I even care? I wondered. I didn't know.

I winced as I pulled off my hoodie, folding it into a makeshift pillow. I pulled my hair back and draped it behind my ear.

I had a small red radio. It was palm-sized, and had all the types of music I could imagine. There was calming music and some that made me want to fall asleep immediately. Small black headphones were attached to it.

I didn't remember who or when I had gotten it, but it had always been there. I couldn't imagine my parents giving me something like that, so it had probably been a birthday gift. It was always shiny and clean, so it must've been pretty expensive. Never remembered having a birthday party, though, let alone receiving this present.

My headphones fit nicely over my ears, and I clicked Rock & Pop. I turned the volume all the way up. The music drowned out everything.

My worries.

My fears.

The sound of tears hitting the mattress.

I let the tears flow down my cheeks. I screamed into my hoodie, but not nearly as loud as I wanted it to be. Even in the attic, all alone, I couldn't let my parents hear. Finally, I blinked back the tears and the ones on my cheeks dried, and I took off my headphones.

I saw something in the shadows of my mattress, and I crawled toward it. A tiny kitten. Its eyes looked like pure silver. It was tiny, small enough to fit in my palm. My hand drifted over to it. It'll run away. It's a cat. I knew it, but I still hoped it would come. It was silly, but I still thought, Don't hate me like everyone else.

By some pure luck, it crawled over and sat on my hand. I lifted it up, and stroked its fur. It felt silky soft, and was light as a feather. Its fur was black as night, so her eyes looked like two shining full moons. I could practically imagine stars flecked around her fur.

"Henry!" my father called. "Go outside! Don't stay cooped up in your room all day."

You can hardly call an attic a room, I thought bitterly. I knew I shouldn't have, but I cupped the tiny cat in my hands, and it crawled into the pocket in my sweatpants.

I kicked a rock down the musty street, and finally took the kitten out of my pocket. She needed to breathe some fresh air, and my pocket wasn't exactly ideal. I could see dust and lint on her fur. It immediately slipped from my fingers and leaped away.

"No, no, no, no," I hissed, chasing after it. I followed it into a forest, and finally, it stopped. I held her up, and she stared at me with those innocent, silver eyes. "Where even are we?" I asked to no one in particular.

I huffed a relieved sigh when I saw the window of my room. The cat seemed to be looking at something in the woods, and I followed its gaze.

There was a little treehouse, with a wooden ladder hanging from it. It looked dusty, as if it had belonged to someone who had moved away.

My legs moved by themselves, carrying me up and into the treehouse. There was a little blanket fort inside it, and fairy lights. I plugged it in, and the room lit up. There were paper and pencils, and a tiny wooden desk.

It was close to the house, so I could see from here to there. But it was probably hard to see from the house to the treehouse. There were a couple trees blocking their view, and the treehouse would blend in with the forest.

I stared at the cat. Black cats were bad luck, weren't they? Maybe this one's good luck.

And besides, if it was bad luck, I already had enough of that, didn't I?

Chapter 2 — Emma

My escape was the woods. The forest felt like home to me. The trees felt cozy, and I knew the routes, even if I hadn't been there before. It was as if their roots were reaching out to me.

Before, I thought it was just because I liked gardening. But it wasn't just random. My stomach tightened when I thought of it, and the strawberry I was chewing on turned sour. That wasn't a coincidence.

The flowers wilting when I was mad wasn't a coincidence.

The plants growing rapidly when I was happy wasn't a coincidence.

The plants catching illnesses when I was sick wasn't a coincidence.

None of it was.

I still winced whenever it happened. When I walked through a forest, flowers would bloom around me. I tried to embrace it, but whenever I tried, I just got scared.

I wanted to run away, but no matter how far I went, the strangeness of it all would follow. I knew it wasn't right. Powers didn't exist beyond superheroes in comics and movies.

And according to my research, it meant what I had always thought.

Something's wrong with me.

When I first found out, a few years ago, I neglected it. I told myself it was just a hallucination. But there was no mistaking it.

Once, a rose scratched my mother when I was mad at her. What if that happened… At a grander scale? I got scared, and the leaves curled up, which only made me panic even more.

The sun was already setting, so I quickly ran home.

"What took you so long?" my father asked.

"My foot got stuck on a root," I lied. A beautiful rose grew thorns, and I winced.

Back in my own room, I locked the door, relieved. For the past few years, I had managed to keep my… power a secret. Or rather, for my whole life. When I was in the same room as Matt, I could've sworn he saw those leaves shrivel up and die.

So I asked if I could move to my own room, and a few months later, I did. Henry's room, I thought. A vine tightened when I saw a ladder leading to the attic. Whenever I walked past it, I was always tempted to go up and apologize. But I stopped just as soon as I started—afraid at the answer, and so I never did.

I lay on my bed, trying to stay away from the many plants and shrubs in my room. One of the roots grew rapidly, and fear got the better of me. I scrambled away from it, but then bumped into the window. Trying to calm myself, I looked outside.

The sunset was calming, but not for long. In our backyard, the ground split. It wasn't much, but I could clearly see the crack in the ground.

"No, no, no, nope."

I already had some freaky plant powers; I did not need to be controlling the Earth, too. But as I panicked, a handful of dirt spewed out of one of the pots.

"Not this too!" I jumped off the bed and quickly collected the soil back into the pot.

But it was too much. A tiny acorn started growing, and growing, and—

“Nope. Stop right now!” I said, as if it could hear me. Of course, it stopped growing immediately. I put it back on one of my shelves. I can talk to plants now, I thought. Why not?

I bundled up in my blankets, trying to keep as much distance in between me and the plants as possible. At night, I dreamed about trees, and their roots reached out to grab me. I woke up, sweating and panting.

But the dream couldn’t stop me from tending to the many plants in my room. I had a bookshelf, but it didn’t have books inside. Instead, there were rows of gardening tools and wild plants everywhere. I had even replaced my window curtains with thick, long vines.

The sun was just beginning to rise, but I jumped out of bed and walked downstairs. I was in a great mood, because none of the plants had reacted to my feelings. Yet, I told myself.

I took out the trash, and washed the dishes. I even made myself some breakfast. After I was finished, I cleaned up the table and headed to the living room. After all that work, I deserve some downtime. I took out a computer and started playing some video games. Twenty minutes, I promised. Then I’ll study.

Just as I started playing, my father walked in, and frowned.

“Go do your homework,” he scolded.

“But—”

“No. Stop playing video games.”

I already took out the trash, washed the dishes, made my own breakfast, and cleaned up the table! I slammed the top of the computer down, and stormed back into my room. Why do they only notice my faults?

When I got back, I slammed the door, and locked it, too. My pencil flew across the paper, and I didn’t pay much attention. A flower crippled up, but I just sighed.

I can’t even feel anything without hurting the plants. And maybe hurting someone.

I remembered the crack in the ground, and I shivered. Look what I could do, on purpose or not.

Powers weren’t even supposed to be real. This wasn’t supposed to even happen. And it didn’t even happen suddenly, either. I didn’t get zapped or shocked or anything. Unless I always had it… I shook the thought away, refusing to believe it.

My mind ran back to one crack in my memory. I always remembered nearly everything I did, even when I was really young. But I couldn’t grasp those first few months. Maybe it was just my age, but I remembered everything after that.

So it only left me with more questions:

Was Henry angry when I took his room?

Would he hold a grudge against me?

Was I a horrible sister?

Was Henry hating me this second?

Would I ever apologize?

Why did I have powers?

Why was there an empty space in my memory?

Was something off here?

Or was it just me?

Chapter 3 — Olivia

I flipped through my science book, sketching notes in my color-coded notetaker. It had everything I needed for the test. But when I looked back, all I saw was messy scribbles. Rewrite it, I pushed. This set isn't neat enough.

My immaculate schedule couldn't fail me. Homework, extra practice, flashcards, reviewing old chapters, and test study. If it wasn't clean enough, I could always redo it.

The clock read 9:52 P.M., and I realized that bedtime had already gone by. One more question, I told myself. One more. Without meaning to, I worked on a few more questions. And flashcards. And rewrote some of it. And reviewed it. I looked again, and it said 11:46 P.M. Just a little more…

"You should sleep." I turned around to see Oliver, and he looked concerned.

"How long have you been here?" I demanded.

"Since you started." He didn't look reluctant, or even hesitant.

"You should get some sleep," I sighed.

"So should you," he argued.

"I need to study." I turned back to my science book, but Oliver put his hand on my shoulder.

“You need to take care of yourself, too.” His forehead scrunched up.

“Who’s the older sister here, me or you?”

“No changing the subject. You’re not at your best when you’re sleepy,” he added. That did the trick. I obediently got in my bed, and sleep came easily.

The test was tomorrow, and I couldn’t be more anxious.

“You got this,” Oliver said. “You’ve studied all night.”

But what if it wasn’t enough? I fretted. The day came and went, and it was time for the test. I knew all the answers easily, except for one. I scribbled down an answer, and quickly turned it in. My teacher graded it and handed it over, and I didn’t look at the score. What if I failed?

As I was heading home, I looked at the paper. When I saw the score, I almost cried out loud.

One hundred and four out of one hundred.

I flipped through the packet. How could I have gotten six questions wrong? With extra credit, I could have gotten one hundred and ten. I could only imagine what it would be like once I got home.

“Wow, Pearl, you got an eighty-seven? That’s your best score so far!” my father applauded. My mother left to congratulate her some more, and my father grabbed the test out of my hand.

“You got six questions wrong?” my father tutted, and I hung my head. “I expected better.”

After the shame washed away, in its place was anger. How come Pearl got praised for an eighty-seven, while my hundred and four wasn’t enough?

One question meant I should’ve been paying attention.

Two meant I hadn’t studied enough.

Three meant I was behind.

But six questions wrong?

I needed to study. I needed to study because then…

Then what?

I was at the top of the class. I had finished the workbook for the unit.

I needed to study because…

Then they wouldn’t ignore me.

I got an eighty-nine on the quiz! I ran back to show my father. I was in second grade, and my teacher said it was really good!

“You should do better.”

“You didn’t even get above ninety.”

Then they went to congratulate Pearl for saying “ma-ma” and “da-da”.

Maybe… if I studied more, then they would see me and at least approve.

“I got a ninety-four!”

“Not even above ninety-five?”

“Please, show us some better work.”

Pearl was learning the alphabet, and they gave her a yogurt cup as a reward.

“I got ninety-eight!”

“You’re in third grade, you should be acing the tests.”

“Not a hundred?”

Pearl was learning her first words, and they gave her a muffin.

“I aced the test!”

“Finally.”

“What about the extra credit?”

“But there isn’t—” They were already walking away.

Then, I knew.

Only Pearl’s work would ever count.

And no matter how much I improved…

Even if it was perfect…

It would never be enough.

“Olivia?” Oliver stood by my side, and I realized that I had been shredding my precious notes. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lied.

“Then why are you ripping your notes up?”

“It—” I began.

“And don’t tell me it wasn’t neat enough.” He picked up a piece of paper, and he handed it to me. “This is better than print.”

“I forgot to add something?” I tried, but Oliver gave me an incredulous look. “Fine. I just… remembered something.”

“What?” he asked.

“It—It’s silly.”

“Tell me.” I gave up arguing and told him the whole story, and he sighed. “I keep telling you. You don’t need their approval. Plus, you’re acing the tests.”

“You’re right,” I admitted. But I was already planning a study schedule for tonight. “I’m okay, though.”

“No, you’re not.”

Somehow, I both loved and hated that he noticed. He was the only one who did notice. But… relying on someone meant I really was failing. It meant I had to work harder. I wasn’t supposed to depend on anyone.

When Oliver left, I stared at my test paper. I took out a red pen, and marked all my mistakes. I only had one eraser, a pencil, and the red pen next to me. No green pen. Because correct answers didn’t need to be celebrated. They were expected.

I made extra flashcards for an old chapter. I thought they might help, but the next test was completely unrelated to the old chapter. Make up for the wasted time, I told myself. So I took out the newest chapter, read it, took notes, and answered questions that weren’t even in the study sheet.

I showed my father an old homework sheet that I got back today. Maybe he won’t criticize it this time.

“Good,” he began. He was finally complimenting me? Is this a dream? “But…” My heart plummeted.

I sighed and went back into my room, drilling my mind to adjust to the grueling hours of studying. Because if I studied then maybe…

Just maybe…

I wouldn’t be criticized.

Chapter 4 — Oliver

I always saw something that other people didn't. It was… hard to explain. You could say that I was perspicacious.

Well, take that boy over there. His hunched shoulders mean that he doesn't want anyone to see him. Same goes for that book his nose is in. You might assume he's reading, but he never flips any pages.

Or easier ones, like the little girl on the other side of the street. Her fists are clenched, like she wants to punch someone. Her mouth is opening and closing, but no words are coming out. She has something to say, but she's not saying it. But there are people that are harder to read, too.

Like my sister, Olivia.

Her feelings were esoteric. Blinking rapidly meant she was blinking back tears. A twitching pencil meant she was annoyed. Erasing through her paper meant she was tuning out. Staring at her graded test meant all that she saw was mistakes.

But sometimes I tried to read her more deeply, too. Like… People have layers upon layers of feelings. People that were more open had fewer layers. People that shielded or hid things had more layers.

Olivia had tons of layers.

I used a little mental mind map to easily find out what was happening. Not everybody had as many layers. Sometimes I didn't need to use all of them, and sometimes her feelings spiraled off the map. But most of the time she stayed on track.

The first one was called the Speech Layer. It was what she told everybody. She wasn't doing well enough, and she needed more time to study.

Then was what I called the Observation Layer. It was what you could tell by being around her for a while. She was studying too much, overworking herself.

After that was the Study Layer. It was when you were around her practically all day, every day. She was only noticing her mistakes, and not acknowledging her amazing scores at all.

The fourth layer was the Thought Layer. It was when I tried to imagine what she was thinking by looking a little deeper. You could tell she was trying to impress our parents, and how forlorn she looked when they praised Pearl.

After I collected all the information, I would move on to the Theory Layer. It was when I flipped through all my observations, and gave a little more thought and noticed the similarities between different movements and categorized them.

Finally, the last layer was the Confirmation Layer. It was when I actually talked to her and verified all my information. I also could gather some new facts, like how crushed she felt when the only thing our parents gave her was criticism.

I brushed my teeth in the mirror, and my eyes practically lit up. If I could read Olivia… Could I read the other people in the family, too? Start with some, I told myself. Fine. With eight people in the family, I could do half. Henry, Emma, Olivia, and Pearl for some contrast.

I couldn't deny that I wondered what everyone else was thinking. How had I never thought of this before? I tossed and turned for half an hour before I fell asleep.

The next day, I woke up. It was a weekend, so it was perfect to observe everyone. Henry was heading off to who-knows-where, and Emma was already in the backyard, with a piece of bread in hand. I narrowed in on Pearl, who was happily chewing on her pancake.

How can I do Speech Layer? While I was pondering it, a perfect opportunity came by.

"Aren't you proud of that amazing leap from seventy-three to eighty-seven?" my mother asked. "Olivia never improved that much at a time."

My fists clenched when Olivia avoided everyone's gaze and stared at the ground. Focus, I thought, but my grip only loosened enough for my knuckles not to whiten.

"…I guess." She had hesitated just half a second before answering, but that moment was a big giveaway. No, not yet. First, see what she lets everybody see.

I focused on her body. She was talented at hiding things. Whatever she was hiding, the only show was that hesitation. But my eyes narrowed, and I saw the guilt in her eyes. Hmm…

Wild theories built inside my head, but I needed to follow the plan before assuming anything. I could risk skipping Study Layer, because it would be too obvious to follow Pearl everywhere. So I moved on to Thought Layer. So, if she's guilty, about what? It didn't seem like she had anything to be guilty about, unless she was hiding something—

Oh.

It hit me like a bullet, and the wound hurt. Think about it. I didn't know much about anyone else, but I could tell well enough by Olivia. Her grades never counted, but Pearl's did.

The whole time, I had thought Pearl didn't notice. But she did, and she cared. But that doesn't explain why she didn't do anything. Even though I hadn't said anything out loud, the thought left a sour taste in my mouth.

It was time for the Theory Layer. Pearl was probably guilty because everyone else worked so hard, while she was praised for doing something small. Maybe even Henry or Emma or

Matt felt that way, too.

I couldn't do the Confirmation Layer, but the facts clicked together perfectly. I decided to leave it at that, because I couldn't exactly talk to Pearl about that without it being unusual.

I spotted Henry, and decided to do him next. But without a good distraction for the Speech Layer, I would have to do it myself.

"Henry, how come you didn't eat anything at breakfast?" I asked. I tried my best to keep the quavers in my voice away, but one escaped at the end.

"I wasn't hungry." He walked away, just a little faster than normal. I hadn't missed the way he looked away right after he answered. Something was… off.

The Observation Layer actually proved to be more helpful than usual. His shirt sagged around him, and his arms were skinny.

On his hands, there was… I squinted, trying to see the tiny mark. It looked like a paper cut… But a little too long and too deep for a normal one. Almost like something scratched him.

He probably just got a splinter or something, I reasoned. But I couldn't shake the feeling that it was something more.

The Study Layer was next, but it was a little risky to randomly come into the attic. I waited and waited, but he never came out until…

I sniffed the air, and realized that my mother was making lunch. Lunch would be a perfect distraction to observe Henry.

"Should I go tell Henry to come?" I asked. Everyone else was already gathering around the table.

"Sure," my mother replied, placing two empty plates in front of Pearl and Emma.

I hurried up two sets of stairs, and climbed the first rung of the dusty ladder.

"Henry," I called. "Lunch is ready!" He looked flustered as he came out, and I wondered what was happening.

I hurried back down the stairs, and sat down. In front of me was a slice of pizza and a cup of water. I ate half the pizza, and pretended I was chewing when I was really watching Henry. He took a couple bites out of the crust, and looked about to leave, but I stopped him just in time.

"Aren't you hungry?" I asked. "After all, you didn't eat anything during breakfast. You didn't drink anything, either."

He reluctantly sat down, and ate some more of the pizza. I took the time to observe how his legs were tensing, ready to walk back to his room. He never seemed like he liked going to his room, so why was he so anxious to go back, now?

He ate the rest of his pizza, and hurried back up the stairs. I quickly went back to my own room, and thought about some theories. He's hiding something. That much was obvious.

But… I thought I saw something when he left. My parents would sometimes tell us to come back, to finish our meal. But they didn't even give him a second glance. What was that I saw? A flicker of emotion… like anger and pain, like… hurt.

Was Henry hurt? Was it because our parents ignored him? I always thought he was okay with it. Our parents probably thought he was old enough.

Again, the Confirmation Layer would be too risky. But I had gathered a lot of information, and there was a very high chance that I was correct.

Next, I went to see Emma.

"Have you been taking care of the plants?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied quickly. Maybe even a little too quickly.

"Can I see?" She hesitated, then agreed. I followed her to the backyard.

She showed me one of the thick vines, but she tensed up when it blew toward her. Strange. There wasn't any wind, either…

Then, the leaves on the vine curled inward. Did that mean it was dying?

"Is that normal?" I asked.

"Yes," she replied. Her fingers tensed, and a crack appeared on the ground. "That's probably a mole," she answered, before I even asked anything.

I was skipping ahead majorly, but I think I had enough information.

People had secrets. The secrets revealed feelings. And they hid the feelings.

Emma had a secret. But she hid it before anything happened.

I thought observing my siblings might have given me more answers.

But it only led to more questions.

Chapter 5 — Matt

Sweat poured down on my forehead and all over my hair. My feet pounded against the ground. I saw the goal. Three more seconds. Everything was gone, for a moment. All I saw was the ball, the goal, and myself. The piercing heat burned. Time slowed down. I swung my leg back, and kicked.

“GOAL!” the referee shouted. They tied the ribbons around my neck, and the medal hung on my chest.

I ran home, and wiped the sweat off with my sleeve. I kicked off my soccer cleats and walked inside, my head held tall. Emma was watering the plants, but she turned to look when I passed by. So did Olivia and Oliver.

My mother and father didn’t even take a second glance. Like I didn’t just win the final round of the school soccer games. It’s just because I do it every year, I thought. But… They hadn’t done anything last year. Or the year before that. Or the one before that. Or the first time.

I went back into my room, and hung the medal on a hook. Dusty trophies were everywhere. Medals for soccer. Trophies for basketball. Championship rings for football. My countless sportswear and uniforms.

I tried to fight back the wave of hurt that was coming. I tried to blink back the tears that were rapidly forming. But I felt a wet drop land on my foot. Then again. And again. My bedsheets had a wet splotch on them, and I grabbed a tissue.

But the hurt turned into pain. And the pain hardened into anger. And the anger grew and became rage. I punched my pillow, ignoring the tears streaming down my face.

But the tears dried and the rage numbed. So they didn’t look. I bit my lip. So what? I don’t care what they think! But deep down, I knew I was deceiving myself.

I dug deep under my blanket and hugged my pillow, trying not to think about my parents. I didn’t await a parade in my honor. I didn’t need a cake or a card. I didn’t even expect a compliment. Or a “congratulations”. All I wanted was for them to… notice.

I fell asleep, and the next day, I sprang up and ran downstairs. I chomped down my breakfast and grabbed an extra piece of bread. I grabbed my backpack, slung it over my shoulders, and walked out the door. I slipped into my sneakers, got my bike outside the garage, and biked to school.

Everyone walked to school, because Henry’s high school, Emma, Olivia, and Oliver’s middle school were near. My school was farther. Pearl went there too, but my father always drove her there on his way to work. Because lucky me, Pearl was “too young to be going to school on her own”, and I was old enough.

Pearl didn’t do anything. She wasn’t amazing at some subjects, like Olivia was. But of course, since she was the youngest, our parents would always favor her. I knew I was being bitter, but it really wasn’t fair. I decided that they weren’t worth my time, and decided not to think about it.

I clipped on my bike helmet, and biked to school, pedaling faster and faster. I always tried to push myself to the limit. Biking wasn’t my favorite sport, but it also strengthened my legs for soccer. When I got there, I used a bike lock and secured it around a bike rack.

The day was so boring. Writing was literally typing some words on a computer. History was even worse. The whole thing was just a boring lecture about dead people. Please, ever heard of “the past is the past”? And Math. I need one word to solve it. Calculators.

The day dragged on. I squinted at the clock, wondering if it was really slowing down. Break and lunchtime went by much too fast. But at the last subject, I was finally free from the claustrophobic classroom. It was finally time for P.E.

Glad to be away from the suffocating classroom, I breathed in the fresh air.

“Today, we are playing dodgeball!” I sighed, seeing the substitute teacher. Whenever there was a substitute, we always did dodgeball. I went to one side of the field. The teacher laid out dodgeballs on the separating line.

“Ready, set, go!” The teacher blew on the whistle, and everyone ran to get a dodgeball. Some nerds on the other side made pitiful attempts to hit me, but it was too easy. Others were actually decent. But I nailed most of them with some well-aimed throws, and they stormed out of the boundaries. I saw Elijah, a big muscular student.

“You’re going down,” he shouted. I snorted. “Scrawny boy!”

I got angry at that, and threw the ball as hard as I could. But he dodged it easily, and threw another at me. It nearly grazed my arm. Don’t let feelings get the best of you.

I shook my head, and grabbed a dodgeball. By this time, it was me against him. Everyone else was watching anxiously and intently. I threw it up and down, and aimed. The red ball zoomed across, and it hit Elijah right in the thigh.

The coach raised his hand on our side, signifying that the game was over, and that we won. My teammates rushed over to congratulate me.

The bell rang, and I ran back to the classroom. I pushed the gate to the bike racks, and grabbed my bike. I clipped it around my jaw, and pedaled away.

Finally, I saw the familiar building I was looking for. I clipped my bike onto the bike rack, and hung my helmet on the handle. I walked inside, smelling the chemical scent. It was loud

and crowded in the fall, but right now I was one of the only people there.

“Name?” someone asked, not looking up from the front desk.

“Matt,” I replied. “Room 309?” I asked. She looked up, and her face softened.

“He’s not much better.”

My breath caught in my throat when I saw him. Tubes were attached to his arms and legs. Needles and other medicinal materials surrounded him, and nearby, a doctor sat at a desk.

He had a blood sample, and he put it in a jar. After that, he slid the jar into a slot, inside a complicated piece of machinery. It had a wire that connected to a computer. There were all sorts of medical equipment, connecting to the tubes and other machinery. It measured his heartbeat, his temperature, and all other sorts of data. The screen flashed red once, and turned black with red words: Unknown Disease. The doctor sighed and turned around.

“No luck?” I asked.

“No,” he sighed. “I don’t understand. We’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“What if it’s a new disease, or something you don’t know about?” I asked.

“That’s the only possible answer, but…” the doctor trailed off.

“But what?”

“We can’t find any cure. Or anything that might slow it down. Or anything useful at all. No information at all, either. All we can do is give him sedatives and painkillers.” He peeked through a microscope and frowned. “It…”

“What?” I asked.

“It’s not showing any signs of disease, sickness, or anything unhealthy at all,” he replied.

“Does that mean he’s okay?” I clung on to that unrealistic hope.

“No,” the doctor sighed. “Look at him. He can’t even stand up by himself.” He looked at me gravely. “Matt… Ryan’s going to die.”

He didn’t need to remind me. I tried to ignore that word, and focus on Ryan. Unfortunately, that wasn’t much better.

His lips were tinted blue, and his skin was ghostly pale. He was skinny, and there was an untouched meal next to him. His eyes fluttered open, and he coughed. The doctor rushed over, and did a couple tests.

“I’ll give you some alone time,” he said, closing his computer. Then, he walked away to another room, with more machinery. My legs carried me over to his cot. Then, my legs

wobbled and I fell to my knees, unable to bear the horrible sight.

“Ryan,” I rasped. I clung to the word like a lifeline.

“I’m not going to be here for much longer,” he admitted. I thought he meant he was going to leave the hospital, but then I realized what he meant.

“No, no, no, no. There has to be something,” I cried. I fumbled around the shelves, looking for something that might help. “Painkillers,” I mumbled. “sedatives, cough drops.” But nothing that would help.

“Stop,” Ryan ordered. I froze in my tracks, and looked over. “If I really won’t live much longer, then I want to be with you when I die.”

“Don’t say that!” I shouted. “You’re not going to die!”

“You’re deceiving yourself.” It felt like I was crumbling apart.

“No,” I whispered.

“You know it too. You just have to accept it,” he whispered. No. I couldn’t lose him. Because…

It all came back to me, in a flurry of memories.

“You’re the only one who really knows me.”

“Really?” Ryan asked incredulously. He was probably the picture-perfect athletic student. He had ice-blue eyes and reddish-brown hair. Like me, he was strong and sporty. Unlike me, it really showed. His biceps were muscly, and he was much taller than me, but I was as strong as he was.

“Really,” I confirmed. “I can’t really talk about anything to my parents, and I’m not that close to my siblings.”

“Is it fun to have siblings?” Ryan wondered.

“No. Not at all. They pamper Pearl so much, she’s a spoiled kid. And when I win the championship, they don’t even take a second glance!” I said angrily.

Ryan sighed. “Same. Except even without a little sibling to distract them, they don’t even care at all.”

“Do you ever feel like if you just run far enough, you’ll run away from your troubles?” I asked. “Never mind. It’s silly.”

Ryan put a hand on my shoulder. “Hey. It’s not silly. To be honest, sometimes I feel like that, too.”

“Thanks.”

I turned over to look at Ryan, but something blocked my view. It was like a wisp of shadow had come over, and it was as dark as night.

“Ryan?” I shouted. “Ryan? Can you hear me?”

“Over here!” It was barely a whisper, but I heard it.

Big, strong gusts of wind blew my way, but I pushed toward the direction of the voice. Finally, the wind settled down and the darkness evaporated.

His lips were blue-gray, and his eyes were unfocused. “What happened?” he croaked. Before I could reply, his eyes closed and his limbs went limp. I need help! I thought. Focus, I reminded myself. I looked around, to see if anyone was there. You’re wasting time! I needed to get Ryan to the hospital, and quick.

This is what your training was for. I lifted Ryan up and hefted him over my back. The hospital was just one block away, but Ryan was heavy. People stared, but I just kept running, until I saw the hospital. I ran to the front desk, and the hospital receptionist directed me to go to room 309.

The doctor took care of him, but he said I had to go. With one last look at Ryan, I walked back home. You’ll be out soon, I silently promised him.

But I couldn’t keep that promise.

The wave of memories came back, haunting me and chilling me to my bones. Looking back, I compared the old, strong Ryan to this weak, skinny Ryan.

His eyes used to be clear blue and full of life. Now, they were tinted gray and deadly calm. His hair used to be thick and cut short. Now, it was growing long. He used to be muscly and strong. Now he was skinny and weak.

I could barely see any of the old Ryan in him. But there was one thing that made him instantly recognizable. It wasn’t his eyes or hair or arms.

It was a wide grin, from ear to ear.

Who smiled when they were dying? Only Ryan would do that. But try as I might, I couldn’t believe that Ryan was dying.

But he really was.

And I couldn’t bear it.

“No.” He couldn’t be dying.

“Thanks.” His grin grew even wider. “For being my friend.”

“You’re not going to die,” I said forcefully. Maybe if I said it enough, it would come true. “Yes, I am. You can believe it or not, but it’s still going to happen.”

“No!” I cried, but Ryan closed his eyes. His heartbeat was already fading; I could barely feel it.

I felt something wet and moist run down my cheek. I reached up, and felt a tear. Dozens more came, and I couldn’t blink them away. One fat tear dropped on Ryan’s face. I grabbed a tissue and brushed them away. They stopped coming, and I stared at Ryan.

Was he

…Dead?

I rubbed my eyes, unable to believe it. The color was returning to his face. His lips were a normal, healthy shade of pink. His eyelids fluttered open.

“Matt?” he croaked.

The doctor rushed in, and checked his computer. “No symptoms, nothing wrong. How is this possible?”

Ryan unsteadily rose up from his position, now sitting up straight. The doctor checked him over, and removed the tubes from his arms and legs. Then, Ryan stood up and put his feet into his slippers.

“How did that happen?” the doctor asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” Ryan replied. “I’m okay now.”

“I can’t say you’re sick, so you’re free to go. But,” he added. “You have to come back for a checkup next week.”

I helped Ryan walk back, and he said goodbye. I was worried, but only one thing mattered.

Ryan was alive and well.

But…

How had he healed so miraculously?