

PROLOGUE

Rachel

2014

Rachel?"

I don't answer. I shut my eyes and hold my breath and hope whoever it is will think I'm not here and go home.

Knock knock knock, and then my name again. "Rachel, are you in there?"

I twist myself more deeply into the sheets. The sheets are fancy, linen, part of the wedding haul, and they've gotten silkier with every trip through the washing machine. I pull the pillow over my head, noting that the pillowcase has acquired a not-so-fresh smell. This is possibly related to my not having showered for the last three days, during which I have left the bed only to use the toilet and scoop a handful of water from the bathroom sink into my mouth. On the table next to my bed there's a sleeve of Thin Mint cookies that I retrieved from the freezer, and a bag of Milanos for when I finish the Thin Mints. It's spring, and sunny and mild, but I've pulled my windows shut, drawing the shades so I can't see the members of the mom bri-

2 Jennifer Weiner

gade ostentatiously wheeling their oversized strollers down the street, and the forty-year-old guys with expensive suede sneakers and facial hair as carefully tended as bonsai trees tweeting while they walk, or the tourists snapping selfies in front of the snout-to-tail restaurants where everything's organic and locally sourced. The bedroom is dark; the doors are locked; my daughters are elsewhere. Lying on these soft sheets that smell of our commingled scent, hair and skin and the sex we had two weeks ago, it's almost like not being alive at all.

Knock knock knock . . . and then—fuck me—the sound of a key. I shut my eyes, cringing, a little-girl's game of imagining that if you couldn't see someone, they couldn't see you, either. "Go away," I say.

Instead of going away, my visitor comes and sits on the side of the bed, and touches my shoulder, which must be nothing but a lump underneath the duvet.

"Rachel," says Brenda, the most troubled and troublesome of my clients, whom I'd been scheduled to see on Friday. For a minute I wonder how she got into my house before remembering that I'd given her grandson Marcus a key the year before, so he could water the plants and take in the mail over spring break, a job for which I'd paid him the princely sum of ten bucks. He'd asked me shyly if I could take him to the comic book store to spend it, and we'd walked there together with his hand in mine.

"Sorry I missed you," I mutter. My voice sounds like it's coming from the bottom of a clogged drain. I clear my throat. It hurts. Everything hurts.

"Don't worry," says Brenda. She squeezes my shoulder and gets off the bed, and I can hear her moving around the room. Up go the shades and window, and a breeze raises goose bumps on my bare arms. I work one eye open. She's got a white plastic

laundry basket in her arms, which she's quickly filling with the discarded clothing on the floor. In the corner are a broom and a mop, and a bucket filled with cleaning supplies: Windex and Endust, Murphy's Oil Soap, one of those foam Magic Erasers, which might be useful for the stain on the wall where I threw the vase full of tulips and stem-scummed water.

I close my eyes, and open them again to the sharp-sweet smell of Pine-Sol. I watch like I'm paralyzed as Brenda first sweeps and then dips her mop, squeezes it, and starts to clean my floors.

"Why?" I croak. "You don't have to . . ."

"It isn't for you, it's for me," says Brenda. Her head's down, her brown hair is drawn back in a ponytail, and it turns out she does own a shirt that's not low-cut, pants that aren't skintight, and shoes that do not feature stripper heels or, God help me, a goldfish frozen in five inches of Lucite.

Brenda mops. Brenda dusts. She works the foam eraser until my walls are as smooth and unmarked as they were the day we moved in. Through the open window come the sounds of my neighborhood. "The website said Power Vinyasa, but I barely broke a sweat," I hear, and "Are you getting any signal?" and "Sebastian! Bad dog!"

I smell the city in springtime: hot grease from the artisanal doughnut shop that just opened down the block, fresh grass and mud puddles, a whiff of dog shit, possibly from bad Sebastian. I hear a baby wail, and a mother murmur, and a pack of noisy guys, probably on their way to or from the parkour/CrossFit gym. My neighborhood, I decide, is an embarrassment. I live on the Street of Clichés, the Avenue of the Expected. Worse, I'm a cliché myself: almost forty, the baby weight that I could never shed ringing my middle like a deflated inner tube, gray roots and wrinkles and breasts that look good only when they're

stringently underwired. They could put my picture on Wikipedia: Abandoned Wife, Brooklyn, 2014.

Brenda's hands are gentle as she eases me up and off the bed and into the chair in the corner—a flea-market find, upholstered in a pale yellow print, the chair where I sat when I nursed my girls, when I read my books, when I wrote my reports. As I watch, she deftly strips the sheets off the bed, shakes the pillows free of their creased cases, and gives each one a brisk whack over her knee before settling it back on the bed. Dust fills the room, motes dancing in the beams of light that push through the dirt-filmed windows I'd been planning to have cleaned.

I huddle in my nightgown, shoulders hunched, knees pulled up to my chest. “Why are you doing this?” I ask.

Brenda looks at me kindly. “I am being of service,” she says. She carries her armful of soiled linen out of the bedroom and comes back with a fresh set. When she struggles to get the fitted sheet to stay put, I get up off the chair and help her. Then she goes to the bathroom and turns on the shower. “Come on,” she says, and I pull my nightgown off over my head and stand under the showerhead, with my arms hanging by my sides. I tilt my head to feel the warmth beating down on my cheeks, my chin, my eyelids. Tears mix with the water and wash down the drain. When I was a little girl and I'd come home from the hospital with Steri-Strips covering my stitches, my mom would give me a sponge bath, then sit me on the edge of the tub to wash my hair, pouring warm water over my head, rubbing in the shampoo, then rinsing, then conditioning, and rinsing again. She would touch the thick, braided line of pink scar tissue that ran down the center of my chest, then gently pat it dry. *My beautiful girl*, she would say. *My beautiful, beautiful girl*.

My sheets are silky and cool as pond water, but I don't lie

down. I prop myself up against the headboard and rasp out the question that I've heard hundreds of times from dozens of clients. "What do I do now?"

Brenda gives a rueful smile. "You start again," she tells me. "Just like the rest of us."

PART I

Half a Heart

Rachel

1985

I was born with a broken heart. This was a line that got me a lot of sympathy from preschool through sixth grade, when I decided that a congenital heart condition was not what I wanted to be known for, and stopped talking about it at school. My condition was called tricuspid atresia, which meant that on the right side, the valve between the upper and lower chambers of my heart wasn't formed correctly. Blood that should have flowed smoothly from my heart to my lungs moved instead in a sluggish trickle—a lazy schoolkid who'd overslept and couldn't be bothered to run for the bus. Not a good thing if you want to, as the doctors say, survive.

I'd been diagnosed thirty-six hours after my birth, when I'd done the docs the favor of turning a lovely shade of plum. At the local hospital, they didn't know exactly what was wrong, only that they couldn't fix it, so they airlifted me to Miami Children's Hospital, where I received something called a Blalock-Taussig shunt to give the blood an unobstructed path.

Once I'd recovered, my terrified parents took me home,

along with an oxygen tank and instructions about what to do if I turned blue or started gasping. For the first year of my life, I slept in a portable crib pushed up next to my mother's side of the bed, with her hand on my chest. Photographs show a tiny, wrinkled raisin of an infant floating in her onesies, with none of the succulent, squeezable plumpness of normal babies. "Failure to thrive" was what they wrote on my charts, and my mother took it like a straight-A student receiving her first failing grade, like she'd been the one who'd been unable to successfully nurture me, instead of me being the one who hadn't grown. Before I was born, she'd been a librarian—just part-time after my brother had come, but it was work she loved. After I was diagnosed, she quit and devoted herself to my care.

"We used to put olive oil in your baby food," she told me—this was when I was a teenager and had embarked on the first of many lose-five-pounds-in-a-weekend schemes, that one involving grapefruits and cucumbers. She would melt butter in my rice cereal, slather it on bread and crackers, feed me milk shakes where other kids just got milk. Still, it was years before I crept into the very lowest height/weight percentiles for children my age, years before I graduated to my own bedroom, where, all through my childhood and into my teens, I would wake up at least once a week with my mother's hand on my chest and her face twisted in fear that would melt into relief when she was sure that I was still breathing, that my heart was still beating, that I was still alive.

"We thought we would lose you," she told me, over and over. I couldn't blame her. Besides all the surgeries and the risks they involved, when I was six I'd had pleurisy, a lung infection that made my oxygen saturation levels drop dangerously low. My parents brought me to my cardiologist, who sent me straight to the hospital, where the surgeons performed an emergency

procedure that night to close off veins that had gotten too big, in a misguided effort to help my body deal with the faulty valve. I'd gone home the next day, even though my mom said she'd begged the doctors to keep me longer, that she didn't think she'd be able to stand it if she found me turning purple again. By my seventh birthday, I'd been hospitalized six times—once after the pleurisy, once with pneumonia, four more times for cardiac catheterizations so the doctors could check the shunt.

When I was eight, I went back to Miami Children's for open-heart surgery, a hemi-Fontan procedure that would replace the original shunt and would keep me in the hospital for a month. My mother had been terrified about the operation, of having my chest cracked open again, my poor battered heart exposed to the world. Every Friday for three months before the big day, she would drag me to synagogue and, when the rabbi asked if anyone needed a *mischeberach*, a special prayer for healing, she'd march me up to the bimah, the altar in front of the Torah, so he could put his hands on my shoulders and pray. I didn't tell my mom that I was secretly almost looking forward to the surgery. Once I'd had it, maybe she would stop worrying so much, and I could spend my Friday nights watching TV.

The only thing I remembered from the operation was Dr. Bob, the anesthesiologist, telling me to count backward from ten. "Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . ." I said . . . and then I woke up in the recovery room with my mom next to the bed, crying. For the first few days I was on a ventilator. My mom would hold my hand, refusing to let go, eating the sandwiches and apples she'd packed for her lunch one-handed, talking to me constantly. My father would come after work, bringing a stuffed animal every time—a fuzzy yellow duck, a teddy bear, a pink bunny with silky, fur-lined ears. He would tuck each new toy into the crook of my arm and deposit a kiss on my forehead.

“She’s a fighter,” he would tell my mom, handing her tissues, patting her back. Then he’d sit in the corner, reading magazines, while my mom would comb my hair and fuss with my gown and cry when she thought I was sleeping. “My number-one mom,” I would say, and she’d give me a brave, tremulous smile. I spent days, and a few sleepless nights, trying to figure out the right words, something I could say that would comfort her and would also be true. *I promise I won’t die* was the obvious choice . . . but I wasn’t sure I could promise that, and I didn’t think she’d like knowing that I thought death was even a possibility. I stuck with “Number-one mom,” which was what it said on the mug I’d painted for her birthday.

At eight o’clock they’d finally leave. My mom would kiss me, her freckled face pale and her curly brown hair, which was usually blown out straight and meticulously styled, pulled back in a careless ponytail. My dad would steer her out the door, one heavy hand between her shoulder blades, rubbing in little circles. Sometimes I’d see her rest her head on his shoulder. Sometimes I’d hear him whisper “I love you” in her ear.

By the second week, I was still in bed, still on a feeding tube and a cannula, with drains sticking out of my chest. “Lookin’ good!” said my hospital friend Alice, popping into my room even though I didn’t think she was supposed to be leaving hers. When I’d arrived there’d been a big sign reading MASKS AND HAND-WASHING MANDATORY on her door, and I’d heard the nurses scold her for wandering. Alice was twelve and in sixth grade, but she was so small that we were basically the same size. Alice had had leukemia as a baby, and it had affected her growth. She would always be short, even as a grown-up—“That is, if I make it that long,” she would say. For a while, the doctors thought she was cured. She’d made it past the five-year mark without a recurrence. Then, when she was ten, she’d started get-

ting sick again. Still, she'd been out in the world long enough to tell me about the roller rink, where my parents never let me go, and about PG-rated movies, and what kind of homework you got in sixth grade. She had kissed two boys playing *Seven Minutes in Heaven* at a friend's birthday party, and she'd seen *Flashdance*, to which my parents had said, "Absolutely not." They hadn't even wanted to buy me the soundtrack. I'd had to get Nana to buy it for my birthday.

By the third week, the doctors said that I was healing beautifully, and that I was well enough to eat real food. My mother's tears slowed to a trickle. Instead of tucking her hair back into a scrunchie, she'd coax it into ringlets and then do my hair, too. She'd stopped wearing T-shirts and jeans and was back in her usual uniform, crisply ironed cotton blouses and linen pants with narrow leather belts, and I got to swap the hospital gowns that opened in the back for pajamas. We'd play Boggle or checkers, with the games set up on the hinged table that rolled in place above my bed, and she'd let me try on her makeup when she went outside to speak quietly to the nurses and the doctors.

My father would still stop by at night, bringing me things that I could do, not just hold—hundred-piece puzzles, a Walkman with new tapes—Wham! and Madonna, Whitney Houston and Billy Ocean. When my parents weren't there, I would take my new gifts to Alice's room. After I'd scrubbed my hands and slipped on a surgical mask, we could sit on her bed and listen to music, stretching the headphones wide so that she could hear the music in her left ear and I could listen with my right.

"Take that stupid thing off," she'd say, pointing at my mask. "Like that's going to help anything." Alice was terminal. "That means I'm going to die," she'd told me the first day I'd gotten out of bed, when we were in the playroom, together on a couch.

It was September in Florida, sunny and warm, and we could see palm trees outside the windows and hear the drone of the mower as a man in a khaki uniform steered it across the lawn. A five-year-old who'd come for a kidney transplant ran around pretending he was a fireman. A little girl with a bald head sat reading *The Cat in the Hat* with her mom. "They don't ever say it in front of me. But I know."

I wanted to know if she was scared, but I didn't want to insult her. "Does it hurt?" I asked instead.

She pointed at the bag of clear fluids dripping into the IV attached to her arm. "They give me dope."

I nodded. After this most recent surgery, I'd had a button that I could press whenever it hurt.

Alice looked down, adjusting her scarf, so that I couldn't see her face when she said, "I think maybe, by the end, it's going to hurt a lot." Then she raised her head, tossing one of the long, trailing ends of the scarf over her shoulder.

"Elegant?"

"Very." Alice always wore bandanas or fancy fringed scarves in beautiful patterns, turquoise and hot pink and gold. Once, I'd been walking past her room and she'd been cross-legged on her bed with her scarf beside her, and I'd seen her head bare. She had only a thin coating of pale blond fuzz where her hair had been, and there were pink scars crisscrossing her scalp. The night after the playroom I'd had a terrible nightmare, a dream where Alice turned into a cat and came and sat on my chest. Cat-Alice clamped my nose shut with her paws, and when I opened my mouth, she breathed into me, blowing her sickness down my throat so that she'd be healthy again and I'd be the one who had cancer. "It's going to hurt a lot," Cat-Alice hissed, and I woke up sweaty, my heart beating hard enough to scare me.

“Will Alice get better?” I asked Sandra, my favorite of all the nurses. Sandra was sure-handed and gentle when she had to give me a needle or start a line, and she’d always say “Lunch is served, madam!” when she dropped off my tray, lifting the plastic lids off the food like it was something great even when I was just on clear liquids and Jell-O. When the bed next to me was empty, she’d fill it with my swiftly expanding collection of stuffed animals, arranging them in funny displays, the bunny with its long ears spread out against a pillow, the monkey hanging from an IV pole by its tail.

Sandra turned her head from side to side, like she was shaking water out of her ears. “We aren’t supposed to talk about other patients.” Then she smiled, to show that she hadn’t meant to hurt my feelings. She had a pretty accent—her parents had come from Cuba, so she’d learned to speak Spanish before English. Her hair was dark and shiny, her eyes were merry and brown, and she wore a sweet, flowery perfume. I’d take deep breaths whenever she was close, and try to hold the scent in my nose to overpower the smell of the hospital, floor cleaners and chicken soup and pee.

“I hope she’ll get better. She’s my friend.” Sandra didn’t answer, but I saw her lips tighten and heard her ponytail whisk against her back as she turned her head away. That, I was learning, was how grown-ups told the truth, not with words, but with what they did. The next night after dinner, I was walking up and down the hall, the only exercise that I could do, and I saw a woman in a skirt and high heels, not scrubs and clogs, talking quietly to Alice’s parents outside of her room. I didn’t see the name on her tag, but I saw the words HOSPICE CARE. *They spelled hospital wrong*, I thought. Alice’s mom was pale and silent, but her father was crying, big, heaving sobs that made his shoulders shake while he covered his face with his

hands. I walked away fast, pulling my IV pole behind me. I was used to mothers crying—at least, I was used to my mom doing it—but it was unsettling to see a father like that. My father was big, broad-chested, and strong. I couldn't imagine him crying, and I didn't know what I'd do if he ever did.

By the fourth week, I was feeling almost completely better, but Alice was sleeping almost all of the time, and the novelty of hospital life was beginning to wear off. My mom would come every morning, bustling around, rearranging my blankets and books and stuffed animals and the get-well cards that she'd taped to the wall. She'd sit on my bed with me and watch *The Price Is Right*. We'd call out our bets for the Showcase Show-down, keeping track of who won. When dinner arrived at five-thirty, she'd watch me, monitoring every spoonful of soup and cracker that I ate, and if the food wasn't something I liked, she was ready with a tote bag full of jam-and-butter sandwiches, out-of-season cherries, and Fritos ("Don't tell Dad," she'd whisper, passing me the bag). On Friday nights she'd make my brother, Jonah, come with her, and when they left they'd go to Shabbat services, this time to pray for me to get well. In khakis and a button-down, with a yarmulke in his pocket and clean fingernails that I knew my mom had inspected, Jonah would stand in the doorway, mouthing the words *spoiled brat* when my mom wasn't looking. I didn't mind. At least he still treated me like a normal little sister.

After dinner was more TV, and then story time. I had a big book of *Grimm's Fairy Tales*—not the Disney versions but the original stories, where Cinderella's wicked stepsisters cut off their heels and toes to cram their feet into the glass slipper and the illustrations showed the blood. "Are you sure this won't give you bad dreams?" my mother would ask. I shook my head, not mentioning the dream I'd had about Alice, not asking her

any of the questions I had. It would upset her to have to think about a kid dying, even if it was someone else's kid.

Finally, the echoing loudspeakers would deliver the news that visiting hours were over. My mother would stand up and stretch, throwing her arms over her head, twisting from side to side so that her back made popping noises. She'd retuck her shirt, pull out a mirrored compact to put on more lipstick, then bare her teeth in the mirror to make sure they were clean. "Be a good girl," she would say before she'd leave, her heels clicking briskly, the scent of Giorgio trailing behind her.

I'd start out in Alice's room. After dinner was a good time for her. "Sarah baked cookies," she'd say, pointing at the tin her mom had left, or "Mike brought library books." She called her parents by their first names, which I thought was daring and very adult. She would teach me cat's cradles or we'd play with the Ouija board that Alice had somehow convinced Sarah and Mike to bring her. "Will I ever get married?" she'd asked it, and I'd pushed the planchette, practically shoving it into the YES corner, while Alice shook her head and said, "You're not supposed to do that!"

Shift change was at eight o'clock. If Alice was up to it, she and I would sit quietly on the couch by the intake desk, watching as the nurses hurried to finish their paperwork before they'd pick up their lunch bags and purses and, sometimes, use the staff bathroom to change out of their scrubs, shedding their nurse-skins, turning back into regular ladies. Once, we saw Sandra emerge in a tight black dress and high heels. She'd put on red lipstick and makeup that made her dark eyes look like deep pools. "Hot date tonight?" another nurse had said, and Sandra gave a small, pleased smile as she tucked a flat gold purse under her arm and walked toward the elevator.

With all of the confusion—day nurses leaving, night nurses

starting their shifts, different doctors arriving to visit their patients—it was the easiest thing to slip into the elevator and stand close enough to one of the nurses that people would assume she was taking me to another floor, but also near another adult so that the nurses would think I was with a parent. Alice couldn't go, so I was her emissary, the spy she sent out into the world. "Come back and tell me a story," Alice would say, and most nights, that's what I would do. I'd go down to the first floor, find a child-sized wheelchair, clip my IV pole to the hook in back, and wheel myself up and down the halls, slow and steady, like the doctors told me, sometimes peeking into open doors to get a look at the scenes they revealed—an old man sleeping, the wires and IV lines attached to his body making it look like he was being attacked by an octopus; two women whispering at the foot of a bed; two interns taking advantage of an unoccupied room to kiss.

One Wednesday night I stopped by Alice's room, but the door was shut. I heard voices and wondered if her parents were still in there, even though visiting hours were over. A new sign was taped where the one about hand-washing and mask-wearing had been: DNR, said the letters; DO NOT . . . and then there was a long word I couldn't figure out, with a lot of smaller print beneath it. I didn't see Sandra, so I stopped the first nurse who came down the hall, a skinny woman with short gray hair and a wrinkly face.

"Excuse me, what's that say?" I asked, tapping the big word. Her wrinkles got deeper.

"Why are you out here wandering around? It's bedtime." In the harsh overhead light, I could see three silvery hairs glinting from her chin. That was a detail Alice would have loved.

The nurse pointed down the hall. "Bedtime. You don't want to make things harder for the doctors, do you?"

“No, but I just want to know . . .”

She bent down. I spotted another hair, right in the middle of her cheek. I wondered if she didn't have mirrors in her house, or anyone to tell her that she needed some tweezers. “Sweetie, there are very sick kids here, and if the doctors or nurses need to get to their room in a hurry, you don't want to be in their way.”

By then I had been in hospitals long enough to know when you could get what you wanted and when it was hopeless. “Good night,” I said, smiling sweetly. Back in my room, I decided to go downstairs and see if I could find something interesting to tell Alice about once her parents were gone. I selected a package of chocolate-covered Hostess Donettes from the latest gift basket my mom had sent for the nurses. I wrapped my treats in napkins and bundled up the pink-and-purple afghan my nana had made me. Armed with provisions, the blanket, and my newest stuffed animal, a little teddy bear, I stuck my head out of my door, looked up and down the hallway to make sure that it was empty, then took the elevator down to the emergency room.

I found a wheelchair by the entrance and waited until the receptionist was busy on the phone before wheeling myself into a corner of the waiting room. A TV was playing *Dallas*, and it looked like a slow night. A teenage boy was staring down at his right hand, which was wrapped in gauze, and a lady who looked like his mom sat next to him, reading *Good Housekeeping*. In the next row of chairs, an old man in a short-sleeved button-down shirt and a battered brown hat was breathing heavily. Occasionally he'd suck in his breath and clutch his belly, gasping, “God-DAMN, don't that hurt!” His wife, bundled up in a cardigan and shivering in the air-conditioning, kept repeating, “Monty, I'm sure it's just heartburn.” On the other side of the room, a young mother and father sat with a little girl. “Why did

you think putting Barbie's shoe in your nose was a good idea?" I heard the father ask.

I nibbled a Donette, hoping for some excitement. The night before, there'd been a car crash, and I'd seen gurneys speeding through the room, ambulance technicians running alongside them, shouting codes, calling for units of blood, just like I'd seen on TV, except one of the ambulance guys was old and fat and everything was over in ten seconds.

Finally, the doors hissed open, and a boy about my age came in, with a woman in a skirt and a blue blazer trailing behind him. The boy was tall, with skin a few shades darker than mine and thick, curly hair that hung down almost to his collar and looked like it needed a trim. His face was pinched with pain, and he had his right arm folded against his chest, with his left arm holding it there. He and the woman went to the desk, and I overheard her say "Eight years old" to the receptionist before she said "Good luck" to the boy and then walked out the door. The receptionist pointed to an empty row of chairs and said, "Take a seat."

I looked at the boy. He had skinny legs and a dimple in his chin, full lips, and eyes that tilted up at the corners.

I wheeled my chair up beside him. "Hey," I said.

For a minute, he didn't answer. His eyes were wide and shocked, and he had bitten his lower lip so hard that I could see dots of blood. One of his legs was bouncing up and down, like he was nervous or he had to pee. Finally, he looked at me from the corner of his eyes.

"What?"

"What happened?"

"Hurt my arm," he muttered, and glanced down like he was checking to make sure the arm was still there. He had the longest eyelashes I'd ever seen on a boy, thick and curled up at the tips.

“How?”

He paused, staring unhappily into his lap.

“I fell,” he finally said.

“Fell where?”

“Off a balcony.”

“You fell off a balcony?” I winced, imagining it. “How many floors?”

“Just one,” he said. He was talking so quietly that it was hard to hear him. “I was balancing on the railing.”

“Why?”

“Circus tricks.” He got to his feet, sucking in his breath as his arm jiggled, and crossed the room to talk to the receptionist. He asked her something. She shook her head. He backed away from the desk, looking around the room before choosing the seat farthest away from me and sitting there, slumped, with his head drooping down and his foot bouncing.

I gave a mental shrug and returned my attention to the Ewing family, hoping for something that would make a better story than a kid with a broken arm who didn’t even want to talk to me. A minute later, the receptionist called across the room. “Andrew?”

The boy raised his head.

“Can you think of any other place your mom might be? We haven’t been able to reach her at the hotel.”

Andrew shook his head, and went back to staring at the floor while I stared at him. It was hard for me to believe that a kid my age could be in a hospital all alone.

I wheeled across the room to where he was sitting. Andrew eyed me tiredly, but he didn’t tell me to leave. Instead, he said, “How come you’re here?”

“I have a congenital heart deformity, and I had a special tube put in so the blood goes where it’s supposed to.”

“Why are you in a wheelchair? Can’t you walk?” he asked.

“Well, I can,” I admitted, lowering my voice. “But I get bored, and if I use a wheelchair people just think I’m supposed to be here. Did you come here in an ambulance?” I hoped he had, and that he’d tell me about it. The only time I’d ridden in one I’d been six, and I couldn’t really remember my trip. But Andrew shook his head and didn’t say anything else. I tried to figure out what else to ask him, some question he wouldn’t be able to answer with a nod or a “no.”

“Where are your parents?” I asked.

“It’s only my mom and I don’t know where she is.” His voice cracked on the last word, and then he started talking fast, the words tumbling out of his mouth like a spill of stones. “She was the lucky caller on Q102, and we got to come here, and go to a movie premiere and meet the stars. She said she was going down to a party by the pool for just one drink, and that I should stay in my bed and she’d be back by nine, and then it was nine and she wasn’t back and I climbed up to see if I could see her and I slipped . . .” His voice broke again, and he turned his face away, looking furious, scrubbing at his eyes with his good hand, first one and then the other, so hard that it had to sting. “Go away,” he said, and it sounded like he was still crying. “Just leave me alone.”

Instead of leaving I looked out the window, but all I could see was the dark. No ambulances with their lights flashing, no people coming in all bloody, like the man I’d seen two nights ago who had cut his hand when he was slicing a bagel. Alice had giggled a lot when I’d told her that one, probably because, we’d decided, *bagel* was just a funny-sounding word.

“I’m Rachel Blum,” I said. “It’s spelled B-L-U-M, but it’s *bloom* like flowers, not *blum* like *plum*.” When he didn’t smile or even look at me, I said, “I’m eight, too.”

"I'm almost nine. I'll be nine in two weeks," he said.

"Where are you from?"

"Philadelphia," he said . . . and then, after a minute, "The lady told me I'll probably need an X-ray."

"X-rays don't hurt," I said.

"I know that," he said, and looked away again. I could see goose bumps on his arms, underneath the short sleeves of his shirt.

"Do you want to borrow my blanket? My nana made it herself. She knits." Before he could tell me no, I pulled my blanket off my lap, looked around, then sneaked out of my chair to spread it on his lap.

"Thanks."

"Are you hungry?" I handed him one of the little doughnuts, and he took a bite—just to be polite, I thought. I was running out of things to talk about or ask about, so I picked up my bear.

"Hello, Andrew!" I said, in the silly voice I had used for all my stuffed animals when I was a little kid, five or six, and I liked to pretend that they could talk. Sometimes if there were little kids in the playroom I would do it for them, make the stuffed bears and owls and rabbits pretend to meet each other, or go to the first day of school, or get in fights.

He didn't smile, but he did ask, "What's his name?"

I had decided that the bear was a girl and named her Penelope, but didn't want to say so. "He doesn't have a name yet."

Andrew turned the bear over, inspecting its tag. "It says Darwin."

"Yeah, but you don't have to call him that. You can change it. You can keep him if you want to."

"Really?"

"I have a bazillion stuffed animals. My dad brings one every

day. I think they sell them in the gift store. All the dads bring them. My mom says it's because it's convenient."

Andrew looked at his lap. "My dad is dead."

I had no idea what to say to that. We sat together silently for a few minutes as *Dallas* gave way to the eleven o'clock news and the man in the hat punctuated the report of an unsolved murder in Little Havana with his groans.

The boy looked at my incision. You could just see the very top of it underneath the collar of my pajama top. "Does it hurt?" he asked.

"It did, a lot, at the beginning." Every time I'd coughed, every time I'd moved, the pain had rolled through me, like something big with lots of sharp teeth was trying to bite through my chest. I was trying hard not to think about how bad it had been, and, if I needed another operation, how bad it would be again. "It's okay now," I told him. "The worst part is that my parents worry. My mom cries when she thinks I'm sleeping. She thinks I'm going to die. My dad just brings me presents and barely even talks to me at all." I touched my scar, feeling the edges of the tape with my fingertips, the bumps of the stitches underneath. "Everyone in my school thinks I'm weird. I have to stay home a lot, or else I'm in the hospital, and when I come back the teachers make a big deal, and everyone stares at me like I'm . . ."

I wasn't sure the boy was listening, but he said, "Like you're what?"

"Like I'm broken. Like I'm a busted toy, or a bike with flat tires. Nobody wants to play with me at recess. At lunch, we eat at our tables, so I don't sit by myself, but at recess they all play Four Square or Princesses and Ninjas, or Red Rover, and no one ever wants me in their game." I didn't tell him the worst part, which was that sometimes I thought that I was broken, too,

and that maybe I'd never get better. I'd just keep coming to the hospital and coming to the hospital and finally they wouldn't be able to fix me anymore and I would die.

"Reindeer games," said Andrew. He looked at the bear. "Maybe he should be Rudolph." Then he looked at me. "I don't really have friends, either," he said. He straightened his shoulders, wincing as his arm shifted. "My dad was black and my mom's white, so the black kids think I'm stuck up and the white kids only play with other white kids."

I didn't know what to say to that, either. There were only two black kids in my entire school, and neither one was in my class. I thought about telling him that he didn't look like he was black, but then I thought that maybe that would be rude. "My mom says to make a friend, you need to be a friend." When my mother had told me that line it had sounded very wise, but when I said the same words they just sounded silly. Certainly it hadn't helped me much. I'd tried to be a friend, but so far it hadn't worked.

"My mom says we keep ourselves to ourselves," said Andrew. "She says it's us against the world."

He pulled my nana's blanket up higher, struggling to do it with just one hand.

"What movie did you get to see?"

He named the film, which had *Blood* in its title and was, I knew, rated R. His leg started to jiggle again, bouncing faster and faster. "The best was when my mom took me to the beach," he said. "I'd never gone swimming in the ocean before."

The beach was just a block away from my house. I'd been to the ocean more times than I could count, but I'd never been swimming. All I could ever do was walk on the sand and dip my feet in the foam, with my mother trailing behind me in a wide-brimmed hat, watching everything I did. Her gaze would

bounce back and forth, from my feet to the water, as if a wave might surge up and snatch me away. She'd told me about the undertow, the invisible current that would suck swimmers to their doom . . . but even before I'd learned about the undertow, I was afraid of the ocean, the endlessness of it, how it stretched farther than you could see and was deeper than you could imagine. I preferred swimming pools, and all the houses in our neighborhood had them in the backyard, rectangles or ovals of clear, chlorinated blue. No seaweed, no waves, no chance of getting towed out to Cuba, no strange things lurking down in the depths.

“Did you like it?”

Andy nodded. He had beautifully shaped lips, full and pink, as if an artist had taken a lot of time to draw them and color them in. I thought he was cuter than Bryan Adams, the singer who Alice said was the cutest boy in the world. “It was so great. The water was really cold at first, and there was seaweed. I didn't like that.” I nodded in sympathy. “But I figured out how to bodysurf, and then I went out past the waves, and I flipped on my back, and I just floated.” He was almost smiling, and I could picture him, his lean body in the water, his hair billowing out around him, face turned up toward the sun. “It was like being on a roller coaster. I wish I could have stayed forever, but my mom got a sunburn and we had to go back.” He gave a great, shuddering sigh and curled more deeply into the blanket.

“She'll be here soon,” I promised. Then, to distract him, I asked, “Do you want to hear a story?”

He shrugged, then said, “You can tell me one, if you want to.”

“A baby one or a scary one?” I asked. I looked down at my pajamas, which were pink and had Winnie-the-Pooh on them, and wished that I'd put my bathrobe on.

“Scary,” he said.

I thought for a minute, flipping through my mental inventory before I made my voice as deep and spooky as I could. “Once upon a time there was a woodcutter and his wife and their two children. They lived in a simple cottage in the deepest, darkest part of the forest, where the sun shone for only one hour every day. And even though the woodcutter worked from morning until night, he could not earn enough money to buy food for his family, and they slowly began to starve.”

“Hansel and Gretel,” Andy said . . . but he didn’t tell me to stop. As I described the woodcutter’s wife growing so thin that her wedding ring slipped right off her finger, he leaned closer to me, and when I got to the part about how the family had only one potato and one carrot to last them for the entire day, he said, “Wait.”

“What?”

“Why couldn’t they go hunting and shoot a bird or a rabbit?” he asked.

I thought about it. “The birds and the rabbits were all starving, too, so they left to go to where there was more food,” I said in my normal voice. Then I deepened it again. “There was a great famine in the land. A plague of locusts,” I added, remembering part of the Passover story we’d learned in Hebrew school.

“What are locusts?”

“Like crickets, but they eat everything.”

Andy nodded, satisfied. I continued the story, about how the woodcutter and his wife became so desperate that they decided to leave the children in the woods, thinking, as I spoke, that my story might have been the wrong choice. Abandoned children in the forest sounded an awful lot like an abandoned boy in the emergency room. But it was too late to go back.

“Okay, so, the children were all alone in the woods, except, luckily, Hansel had some bread crumbs in his pocket.”

“You know what I always wondered?” Andy said. “If they were starving, why didn’t they eat the bread crumbs?”

I’d never thought of that. It occurred to me that Andy might actually know what it was like to be hungry, really hungry, not just-off-the-school-bus, lunch-was-three-hours-ago-and-I’m-ready-for-a-snack hungry.

“The crumbs were so hard that they would have broken his teeth if he’d even tried to eat them. Also, they were moldy. They were green as emeralds with mold!”

The corners of his eyes crinkled when he smiled. “But then if the crumbs were green, they wouldn’t be able to see them if they left them on the forest floor.”

I groaned and said, “You’re kidding me!” the way my dad did on car trips when Jonah asked to stop for a bathroom break ten minutes after we’d gotten on the highway.

“Maybe the forest floor was covered with dead pine needles, which were brown, so the emerald-green bread crumbs showed up.”

“Ah.” When the sliding doors whooshed open, Andy and I both turned to look, but it was only a gray-haired woman who hurried over to the couple with the little girl and started talking rapidly in Spanish. I caught the word *Barbie* a few times.

“So then what?” Andy asked.

I described Hansel and Gretel’s journey back through the forest. How they slept out alone in the dark woods, with all kinds of scary growls and screeches echoing through the night, with only pine needles for beds and leaves for blankets. I told how they caught a single tiny fish and cooked it over a fire they started by banging a rock against a piece of flint that they found in the river.

“Scott Lindsey?” called a nurse. The teenager got up and sauntered through the swinging doors on giant basketball shoes that made his feet look too big for his legs, with his mom, still holding her magazine, behind him. The moaning man watched him go and said, “Shee-it,” and his wife looked at me and Andy and said, “’Scuse his language.”

Andy and I looked at each other and started to giggle. “Shee-it,” Andy whispered, doing a perfect imitation of the man, and then I said, “’Scuse his language,” and we both laughed even harder, and he said, “Keep going.”

“Hansel and Gretel wandered deeper into the forest, trying to find their little cottage . . . but instead they found a hideous witch. She had curly black hair like wires, and a big red wart on her chin.” In my retelling, the witch looked like Miss Bonitatibus, my music teacher, who would say, “How honored we are that you could join us,” every time I came back to class after being home sick.

“The witch said, ‘Come! I will show you a sight such as you have never seen!’ And she led them through the forest, to a house made entirely . . . out . . . of . . . candy.” I described the walls made of gingerbread, a fireplace filled with peppermint logs, and a roof tiled with Necco Wafers, pale pink and mint green and melon orange.

“Were there any doughnuts on the house?” Andy asked, lifting up the remainder of the one I’d given him.

“The doorknobs were doughnuts, and the floors were milk chocolate, and—”

At that moment, a woman hurried through the emergency-room doors. She stopped and scanned the crowd, her head turning from side to side until she spotted Andy. Her skin, sunburned a painful-looking pink, was much lighter than her son’s. She had a tangle of taffy-blond hair and wore high black

boots, blue jeans, and a low-cut black top. Black rubber bangles covered one arm from wrist to elbow (“They look cheap,” my mother had sniffed when I’d asked her to buy me some), and as she walked over to us, I smelled the nose-wrinkling, sweet-sharp scent of liquor. She looked nothing like my mom or like the other mothers I knew. The moms in my world did not have wild mops of hair, or long fingernails with glittering polish, or four earrings in their ears. I wondered how my mom would look, out of her crisp cotton skirts or linen pants and twinset, and in high heels and a shirt cut low enough to show the tops of her bosoms.

“What happened?” she asked, bending down so that she was looking right into Andy’s eyes.

Andy mumbled to her what he’d told me—that he’d waited up for her but she hadn’t come, so he’d gotten onto the balcony to try to see down to the pool, and he’d fallen. She touched his shoulder once, briefly. Her colored lids descended, and she stood for a minute with her eyes shut. “Okay,” she finally sighed. “Who found you?”

“Lady from the hotel,” Andy said.

His mother sighed, then straightened to her tallest—in her heels, she seemed very tall—and said, loud enough for the whole room to hear, “Hello? Is anyone here going to help us?”

“Sorry,” said Andy. I heard, but his mom didn’t.

The elevator doors slid open, and Sandra walked into the waiting room. Her ponytail was crooked, with strands of hair slipping out of the elastic, and she looked as tired as I’d ever seen her. As soon as she spotted me, she hurried over, just as Andy’s mom was saying to no one in particular, “I bet this is all out of network.” She said some of her words in a funny way, *all* stretching into *aww*, and she kept turning her head from left to right, looking, I thought, for someone to yell at.

“Rachel, you need to get upstairs,” said Sandra.

Andrew’s mom ran her eyes over me briefly—my babyish pajamas, the wheelchair, the IV pole, and the ID bracelet on my wrist. She looked at the moaning man and his wife, the family with the little girl. Everyone was staring at her, but she didn’t seem to notice as she turned to Sandra.

“How long has my son been waiting? Why isn’t anyone taking care of him? Where’s the doctor?” Her accent stretched and shifted vowels, and her voice kept getting louder, and it seemed like with every question she was getting bigger, taller, swelling with rage. “How could you just leave a little boy sitting here?”

The wife of the moaning man turned around. “Where have you been?” she asked, but her voice was quiet, and Andy’s mom either didn’t hear her or pretended that she didn’t. The receptionist came out from behind her desk. “Ma’am. We cannot treat your son, or any minor, without a parent’s permission. No one was able to find you. No one at the hotel knew where you were . . .”

“Oh, so this is my fault?” Andy’s mother stepped toward the receptionist until they were almost toe to toe. “My son gets hurt, and you leave him sitting here for hours, and it’s my fault?”

As his mom spoke, with her hands on her hips and her breasts jiggling, Andy pressed himself into his chair, making himself as small as he could. I reached for his hand and he held mine, squeezing tight before letting go when a doctor, a short man in a white coat with the sleeves pushed up, entered the room. Dark stubble dotted his chin, and his tie had been yanked to one side. “What seems to be the problem?”

“The problem,” Andy’s mother announced, “is that my son has been sitting here for hours, and not one of you so-called professionals has done anything to help him.”

“Mother of the year here,” the moaning man’s wife said.

This time, Andy's mom couldn't pretend she hadn't heard. Her head snapped around and her pink face got even pinker.

"Excuse me, but did anyone ask for your opinion?"

"Where were you?" the woman asked again. "That poor child's been sitting here for over an hour." She shook her head, looking disgusted.

"Ladies," said Sandra, and the doctor offered Andy's mother his hand and bent low when she took it, almost like he was bowing.

"I'm Dr. Diallou." He was round, almost penguin-shaped, with dark skin and a puff of hair over each of his ears. His voice was melodious, like he was singing instead of talking. "May I have the pleasure of your name, madam?"

"Lori Landis." *Lori* sounded like *Lawrey*. I wondered if everyone in Philadelphia talked like that all the time, or only when they were angry. Dr. Diallou put one hand on her forearm and the other, very gently, on Andy's shoulder. "Let's get a look at this handsome young man."

"Finally!" Andy's mom said, cutting her eyes at the woman who'd confronted her. "Finally, someone sees reason!" Tall in her heels, she pushed Andy after the doctor and through the swinging doors. He still had the stuffed bear tucked under one arm.

For a minute, my ears rang with the sound of her voice. My blanket was on the empty chair next to where Andy had been sitting. I reached over and picked it up. Sandra looked down like she'd forgotten I was there. Her face had softened; her usual spark and snap were gone, and her voice was low as she said, "Time for bed."

"I want to stay," I said. "I want to make sure he's all right."

"He's got his mom now." Which was hardly any kind of consolation, and the expression on Sandra's face suggested that she knew it, too.

“I want to stay,” I repeated. “I didn’t get to tell him the end of ‘Hansel and Gretel.’”

“I’ll tell him,” Sandra said. “I’ll tell him that Hansel and Gretel killed the witch, and moved into the house made of candy, and they both lived happily ever after.”

That wasn’t the ending I remembered. “Don’t they go back to their parents?” I asked.

Sandra shook her head. “I think he’d like it better my way.”

Upstairs, Alice’s door was still closed. Sandra walked me past it and into my room, where I adjusted my cannula under my nose and climbed into a bed made with Care Bears sheets, surrounded by my toys, my books, the lamp with the pink lampshade from my bedroom at home. My get-well-soon cards were lined up on the table, next to my Walkman, my Simon game, my tapes, and my books.

I closed my eyes, listening to the beeping of the heart monitor, the hiss of the oxygen compressor, the low murmur of people in the hallway, the PA system echoing as someone paged Dr. Blair. Normally, those sounds soothed me. That night, though, sleep took a long time to come. I thought about Andy, five floors down, having his broken arm set. I wondered if his mother knew my mom’s trick, of having me squeeze her hand as hard as I could whenever I got a needle, passing my pain along to her.

In the middle of the night, I woke up in the dark to a horrible howling sound. For a minute, I thought that I was Gretel, lost in the forest, with animals all around me and no mother or father to keep me safe. The sound went on and on, and I heard footsteps and voices, and then, finally, the noise stopped, like someone had ejected a tape from a player.

I woke up early the next morning, planning on telling Alice all about what had happened in the night. It would be, I decided, my best story yet. I'd describe everything—the nurse with the hairy chin and the girl with the Barbie shoe in her nose and the man who'd been cursing, and about Andy and how he was all alone. Our parents almost never left us alone. Alice would like that part.

When I got to her room, though, the new sign had been taken down, and nothing had been put up in its place. I pushed the door open. The room was empty. The bed was bare, with not even a sheet. Alice's Duran Duran poster wasn't on the wall, and her pink plastic bucket that held her toothbrush and her face towel and washcloths wasn't on the table. The stack of books and puzzles had been removed. Everything except the Ouija board was gone.

I crossed the room and picked it up. A sticky note was attached to the box. *For Rachel*, it read, in handwriting I didn't recognize. Someone had come in and mopped the floor, and the disinfectant smell was strong enough to sting my eyes, but I didn't leave. I sat in the chair with the Ouija board box in my lap. She hadn't said goodbye to me. She hadn't told me enough about what it was like, when you knew you weren't going to get better. She hadn't told me if it had hurt.

"Alice?" I whispered. Maybe her spirit was still nearby. Maybe she was even watching me. But no answer came, and when I closed my eyes and then opened them again, everything in the room was exactly the same.

On the day that I finally got to go home, my mom came early to pack up my things, deliver more treats, and tell the nurses goodbye until next time. She was hurrying around, making sure

she'd retrieved my shampoo and conditioner from the shower, when Sandra knocked at the door with a letter in her hand. My name, *Miss Rachel Blum*, was printed on the front of a square pink envelope, in carefully formed letters that were almost too small to read. *Bloom like flowers, not blum like plum*, I thought. Inside was a single sheet of paper, and more of that cramped handwriting, as if my correspondent was being charged for each drop of ink.

Dear Rachel. Thank you for keeping me company the night I broke my arm. And also for Rudolph. I will never forget you. Your friend, Andrew Landis. Beneath his signature was a drawing of a boy with brown hair and something black—my bear, I guessed—under his arm. The other arm was wrapped in white. The cast, I figured. Next to him was a drawing of a girl with curly hair and a big pink smile and, when I looked carefully, a tiny, hash-marked scar on her chest. Around the boy and the girl was a red crayoned heart.