

CHAPTER 1

Mom has turned me into a house elf.

She said I'm the best house cleaner she's ever had, and that's the only good result from what happened to Dad.

I'm also the cheapest. My monthly allowance is so pitiful, I can't even buy a knock-off designer shirt and jeans at the Salvation Army thrift store.

So there I was, sweeping the hallway floor as per usual, when the Grim Reaper swooped around the corner with a shriek and a sickle to chop off my head.

I dropped the broom and raised my hands to wrench away the plastic blade at my throat.

"Don't scare me like that!" My hands quivered, and a thrill of fear coursed through me. "Halloween was over a month ago, so take off that lame costume." I yanked off his mask.

"You should have seen your face!" My seven-year-old brother doubled up laughing. "I know you like it. You're a scar-aholic." Billy's smile turned up the left corner of his mouth, the same way as Dad's. Seeing that smile made me die a bit more inside.

"You were supposed to be looking for Baba's hidden Ukrainian Christmas eggs."

“I already found the ones you hid.” Billy became serious. “Lara, where’s Daddy?”

“Mom has already told you that he’s away on a business trip.” I stooped to pick up the broom.

“He’s not! On other trips he called every day. And Mommy said on the phone that he’s in a coma.” He paused. “What’s a coma?”

Something that’s drowning me in dead ass grief.

My voice was raspy. “It’s like when Rip Van Winkle goes to sleep for a long time. At bedtime I’ll tell you that story. Sometimes people in a coma can hear you, but they can’t talk.”

“When’s Daddy coming home?”

A lump the size of a basketball clogged my throat. My eyes went teary. “Nobody knows.”

“Why did you all lie to me?”

It wasn’t fair that I had to do Mom’s job of breaking the news to Billy. Would she give me grief over it?

I took a deep breath, and let it out. “Dad’s been in the Bismark hospital for the past two weeks. He was in a car accident and got really hurt. His head has a bad owwee.”

And it was my fault.

Billy gave me a puzzled look. “But he just went for a big sleep?”

I nodded. I bent forward and pulled him close, hugged him, and stroked his back.

“May I go talk to him in the hospital?” Billy asked. “He can still hear me, right?”

“I think so. I hope he can. But he won’t be able to answer.”

“That’s okay, I’ll read The Cat in the Hat to him. He always liked it.”

“Good idea. Now why don’t you help me clean?”

“I hate housework.” He wiggled free, tore off his costume and dropped it on the floor.

“I noticed.” I picked up his clothes. “Take all this stuff to your bedroom.”

But Billy had other plans. With a mischievous smile he slunk into *my bedroom*.

“Hey! Nobody’s allowed in my room. Especially you.”

I couldn’t even grab him with my hands full. He dashed towards my computer.

I think of my bedroom as a sacred place—somewhere I can go to escape the craziness of this world. At my request, Dad had renovated it with oak: the floor, doors, baseboards, bookshelves, and my desk. He painted the walls a tasteful lime green.

“Can I play on your computer?” Billy asked.

“Play on your own,” I said. I hurled the costume into his bedroom and then took long steps after him, broom in hand. As he reached to smudge the screen of my iMac laptop I tapped his arm with the broom handle.

“Ouch! But I can’t get the best game sites on the Internet.”

“The parental controls are there for good reasons. Wipe your sticky fingers.” I threw him a wet wipe. He barely cleaned his hands before he dropped the wipe on the floor.

Nothing in my room is ever out of place. Except for the time when I checked my diary, and the single hair strand I’d used as a bookmark was missing.

Someone had violated my constitutionally protected right to personal privacy. Not Billy—he can’t read well. It was Mom. So I convinced Dad to install a keyed deadbolt on my door. This also stopped Mom’s annoying habit of barging in without knocking.

“Your room is so clean it’s weird,” Billy said.

“And yours is ground zero of a disaster zone.” I retrieved the wet wipe and tossed it in the stainless steel garbage can. Then I swept over Billy’s bare toes.

He scurried outside my bedroom door. “C’mon, Lara, play with me.”

The Kid gave me a look of longing. He had Dad's eyes. I couldn't meet his stare: it reminded me of my aching for Dad. I softened.

"I'd love to play with you, Kid. I mean it. But I've got homework to do, and a ton of chores for Mom. Why don't you look at the Christmas presents?"

Billy whooped and raced down the hall. Our toy poodle puppy "Hip-Hop" nipped at his heels. I locked my bedroom door and followed. Any fourteen-year-old sitter knows not to leave a first-grade hyperactive kid out of sight for more than five minutes.

Our Christmas tree was amazing. We always cut a tree the last week in November from our acreage, which is twenty-one miles outside of Bismark, North Dakota. Billy and I performed this ritual alone with Dad. It was one of our special times with him.

This year Mom had to take Dad's place. I made sure I was in front, dragging the tree by its trunk. So Mom and Billy wouldn't see my tears.

As I caught up to Billy in the living room, I saw him snatch something from the carpeted floor. "What's in your hand?" I asked.

"Nothing." He held his fist tight.

I had to pry his hand open. "A lighter! Never, ever play with Mom's lighter. It's dangerous. Now here are a few of your presents." I handed four presents to him.

Billy cooed over his wrapped presents, shook them and stacked them with an innocence I wished I still had. It's hard not to adore a kid who still believes in Santa.

I cherished the moments with my brother when he was happy. I ruffled his hair. "Keep the presents the way I ordered them. Stack the bigger presents on the bottom. I don't want them disorganized."

I know I'm different from other people, although I'm not sure why. I have to keep my things absolutely tidy and clean to avoid becoming panicky. I'm totally frustrated because there's no one I can talk to about it. Sometimes I feel so completely alone.

I returned to the kitchen and shoved the lighter into a drawer.

"Can we snoop for more presents?" Billy asked.

"There aren't any more unwrapped presents. We found them long ago. I know what's inside almost every present. Except for those from Dad and Santa."

I wandered back to the Christmas tree and picked up a gift. "Dad's present feels like a book." I puckered my lips. "I've got an idea. Let's open just one present now, and keep it a secret. But we'll have to open the packages carefully and save the wrapping."

Billy gasped. Nobody was allowed to open any presents before Christmas. "Really? You're *so* cool." He grabbed a present and ripped away the wrapping, revealing an action figure. "It's Ironman!" Billy began to play with it on the floor.

"I told you not to tear the wrapping. Now I'll have to find the same wrapping paper and rewrap it before Mom gets home."

I undid the tape on my own present with meticulous care, so that the tape wouldn't tear the paper. "Sweet. A book about secret codes. Just what I asked for." I folded the wrapping paper and placed it to the side.

I think I like secret codes so much because it's a way I can take something jumbled and messy and bring order to the chaos. Making things orderly calms my nerves.

I wished I could read it right away, but I had to supervise Billy. I slipped the book into my school backpack. I decided to read the book at school. Afterwards, I'd rewrap my present and put it back under the tree before Christmas. Mom would never know.

But what if Mom peeked in my backpack when she got home, and found Dad's present?

"Don't leave the Christmas tree," I said to Billy. "I have to go to my room."

I lugged my backpack from the kitchen to my bedroom, jammed Dad's present into a black plastic expanding folder, and snapped the folder flap shut with its stretching tie-downs. I tucked the folder into my backpack between two hefty texts.

I shoved my backpack into my bedroom closet, picked up the latest issue of my favorite fashion magazine, locked my door again, and returned to the kitchen.

Billy was slinking from the kitchen to the Christmas tree.

"Where did you go? I told you to stay by the tree."

Billy held up a banana. "I'm hungry."

"From now on do exactly what I say. I'm watching you."

I slid three T.V. dinners into the oven and set the table. The kitchen overlooked the living room, so I glanced back at Billy every few minutes as I loaded the dishwasher. I cranked up my iPod and stared with envy at the gorgeous blond on the magazine cover. She had a belly bling, a nose ring, five rings in each ear, and streaked hair.

Mom won't let me have any of those things. I've already asked—seven times.

I looked at my threadbare knock-offs and wished I had clothes as cool as the magazine's models. Maybe if I had the real designer clothes I'd be more popular at school. If only I had blue eyes instead of brown, and blond hair instead of black. I'm hopelessly skinny and the tallest girl in my grade. The Despicables—those annoying jerks in my class—call me "the giraffe."

I sighed. When Mom left two hours before to meet a client, she told me to clean the floors, cook dinner, wash the dishes, answer her business calls, and baby-sit Billy—like every day since the car accident two weeks ago.

But I don't mind. I have an urge to take care of our home, which is the only stable thing in my life right now. So I enjoy the chores. Besides, I'm secretly glad to clean our house to my own higher standards. Mom never did clean the pee stains behind the toilets.

When she walked out the door hours ago she said, "Don't forget to wipe the dust and grime from inside the light fixtures, like I asked you two days ago." That stung. She accused me, the Queen of Clean, of not doing my job properly.

Mom's buried herself in her new work as a realtor. She's been trying to pay off our debts. Dad was self-employed as a building inspector, inspecting properties for homebuyers and banks. He'd just taken out a loan to buy a new Dodge Ram truck. But he never took out disability insurance.

Big mistake.

With Dad in the hospital and not working, our family income has dropped below survival mode. I'd overheard Mom over the phone telling our grandmother Baba that she borrowed \$100,000 just to pay for accumulating hospital bills our insurance won't cover, as well as our living expenses. But Mom feared this money would run out before Dad could go back to work. As a newbie realtor, she's spent more money than she's made.

I vowed to somehow find the money to keep our family afloat. But how could I do that? I've never even had a job. And I could never earn that much dough.

My cell phone buzzed. I stopped browsing the fashion magazine, pulled the phone from my pocket, and read the text message from my best friend Angie. She texted that her Mom and Dad just had a horrific argument. It almost came to blows. How awful. At least that's never happened in our family. I began to text a reply to Angie.

Billy screamed.

I jerked my head around. Flames licked the bottoms of his pants, and fanned upward as he dropped Mom's lighter and raced towards the hall.

For a second I froze, and fear surged through me. My gut instinct was to run for my life. Then my first aid training kicked in.

"Drop and roll!" I yelled. I jammed the cell phone back in my pocket, and tore off my wool sweater as I sprinted towards him. When I tackled him his fiery pants seared my skin. Pain stabbed through my arms as I batted out the flames with my sweater. My hands were protected by the sweater and didn't get burned.

Flames leaped up the curtains. The smoke alarm blared over Billy's hollering.

I nearly fainted at the sight of his legs. They looked like charcoal sticks. I grabbed my brother by his armpits and dragged him towards the front door. He flailed his arms.

"Don't squirm, I'm trying to help," I said.

I glanced back. Flames swept across the carpet, and engulfed the Christmas tree and the sofa. The smell of burning plastic stung my nose. Billowing smoke scorched the ceiling. The hot dust I breathed in clouded my thinking. Dazed, I teetered by the entry.

O my God, where's my puppy? She wasn't in sight.

"Hip-Hop!" I bellowed. No response. Should I look for her?

The picture window cracked with a sound like thunder, and the combustion from the fire sucked the air in from outside. Not good. The fire burned even fiercer. We had to get out of there, fast. There was no time to search for Hip-Hop.

My guts churned. I couldn't save my puppy.

I needed a free hand to open the front door, so I let go of Billy's right armpit. He wriggled free, fell, and cried out.

“I’m sorry!” I said. “I’ll help you up.”

I lifted my brother, dragged him to safety, and piled snow over his burned legs.

At that moment the inferno backdrafted, having consumed the incoming oxygen from the cracked window and open door. A ball of fire exploded through the door, coming within two yards from us. I screamed and yanked Billy further away.

I tapped in 9-1-1 on my cell phone and shouted our address over Billy’s shrieking. Then I called Mom.

As I cradled Billy and shivered in the cold, one thought repeated in my mind.

Was my brother burned so much that he’d die?

CHAPTER 2

Billy cried non-stop, and I wished I could make his pain go away. I stroked his head and said, “Hey, do you hear the ambulance? It’s coming to help.”

The neighbors arrived first, then the ambulance and fire trucks. Strobe lights vanished in the smoky haze that was aglow with an eerie light from the bonfire of our home. Beyond was the vast inky void of the starlit sky above the open prairie.

Inside the ambulance, the paramedic shone a light down our throats. “Inhalation injury is minor for both patients,” he said to the ambulance driver who helped him.

The paramedic gave us shots of morphine, connected tubes of intravenous saline to the crooks of our elbows, and covered our burns with sterile bandages. The morphine must have kicked in right away, because Billy stopped crying. But his face was still pale.

He reached across his stretcher, held out his fist to me, and said, “Thanks, Lara.”

We knocked knuckles. My throat tightened, and I fought back tears. I couldn’t allow myself to cry in front of him. I had to be strong to help our family pull through this.

“No prob, kiddo,” I said.

“I’m scared,” Billy said. “Will you stay with me?”

“I’m here for you. Always. I’ll be with you when you go to sleep, and I’ll be there when you wake up.”

Billy clenched his grip onto my outstretched hand.

The paramedic said to us, “You’ll have to stop talking. I’m going to place oxygen masks over your faces.”

Until this moment I’d reacted to the crisis with adrenaline and raw nerves. In the sudden calm I felt completely exhausted, and the enormity of the disaster overcame me. Someone in either heaven or the other place must really hate me, I thought. This fire was just one more catastrophe to add to the others in my life.

A headache pounded. Fear and anger and denial and shame, all jumbled together, swept over me like a hundred-foot tsunami. I was sure I’d leak tears, even though I’m determined never to cry in front of others.

I touched my cheeks, and they were dry.

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When we pulled up to the familiar emergency entry to Medcenter One Hospital, it hit me. *OMG, Dad’s staying here, in the intensive care unit. I have to see him again, when I feel better.*

They wheeled Billy away, and placed me in a semi-private room.

Being hurt sucks, but at least your parents show genuine concern for you. I was grateful for Mom’s hugs, after she arrived at the hospital. I hadn’t eaten for eight hours, but I wasn’t hungry. The stench from my burned arms ruined my normally voracious appetite.

A doctor arrived at my bedside. He was an intern, and looked barely older than me. He still had a peach-fuzz beard.

“Will Billy live?” Mom asked. Her lower lip trembled.

“Sit down here,” the kid doctor said, and motioned Mom to a chair, “Let’s talk. You must be feeling frightened and worried about Billy.” His face showed compassion—tilted eyebrows, earnest eyes, and a gentle mouth line.

Mom just stood and nodded. Her eyes were watery.

“I understand,” the doctor said. “You’ll be relieved to know that because Billy is young, he has better than a ninety percent chance of complete recovery.”

“You mean Billy has a ten percent chance of dying?” Mom went all life crisis. “God help us.” She collapsed into the chair and closed her eyes. She gripped the armrests so hard her knuckles went white. My mother has serious parentnoia.

I heaved a sigh of relief. My brother was going to live.

The doctor placed a hand on top of Mom’s. “Mrs. Hunter, we’re doing everything we can. We’ve taken every precaution to prevent infection, which is the greatest risk for burn patients. Remember that children have a remarkable capacity for healing.”

He said to me, “You’re hurting too. You have second-degree burns to five percent of your total body surface area. But your burns will heal in seven to ten days.”

I was still groggy from the painkillers. I couldn’t think of a reply, so I said nothing.

Mom asked, “How long will it take for Billy to heal?”

“His third-degree burns won’t heal on their own. Billy will need skin grafts, over a two-year period. But there are excellent rehabilitation staff ready to help him.”

The intern said I had to stay in the hospital for two days. What a pain. Sick people’s germs in hospitals can give you a disease if you haven’t got one already. I mentally noted not to touch any object unless I had a tissue between it and my hand.

The intern continued, “We’ve started Billy on fluid resuscitation and intravenous morphine. We’ll need to take him by air ambulance within the hour to the nearest burn unit, which is at McKennan Hospital in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. You haven’t got much time to see Billy before he leaves.”

The hospital staff had moved Billy into a disinfected private room. They made us put on yellow plastic gowns, nose masks, and latex gloves. We wore puffy paper caps over our hair. His room reeked of bleach and surgical soap. I admit I’d craved having our house this clean, but I wouldn’t want the smell that’d come with it, thank you very much.

“Don’t touch him or wake him,” the nurse said. “I’ve already given Billy a tetanus booster.” She replaced his bloody bandages with clean gauze dressings.

Liquids ran through intravenous drip tubes from bottles to the veins in his arms. Lights lit the monitors attached to his body. One monitor showed his temperature, which had dropped two degrees below normal. Another machine beeped to show his heartbeat.

Billy’s legs were swollen, burned black with flaming red edges, and oozed blood. I choked up. Because of a moment’s inattention from me, his legs were horribly scarred.

I kept repeating to myself that it wasn’t my fault. But it didn’t ease my guilt. If only I’d been watching my brother instead of texting Angie on my cell phone.

“What are you doing to Billy’s legs?” Mom asked.

“I’m coating his burns with Flamazine ointment,” the nurse said. “It prevents infection.”

I gently brushed Billy’s matted hair away from his forehead. He opened his eyes and stared blankly. Oops. I wasn’t supposed to touch him. “Mommy, where’s Mommy?” he asked.

“We’re right here,” I said.

“Not *you*, I want Mommy.”

His words stunned me. My own brother didn't want me. I stumbled backwards.

"Here I am, darling," Mom said. She stepped forward, but the nurse held her back.

Mom whimpered, and pain etched her face. She said to Billy, "You're okay, dear."

Talk about a barf moment. Reality check—no one in our family was okay.

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Mom and I watched the attendants haul Billy on a stretcher into an air ambulance. After they'd gone, Mom said she'd drive to our home and see how badly our house was burned, and to ask the firefighters to retrieve some of our clothes—if there were any left.

"Can I go visit Dad for a moment?" I asked Mom.

"Not tonight," she said. "You need to eat and rest. You can see him tomorrow."

I mechanically ate the bland hospital meal. I'd dozed off when Mom returned and woke me. "I asked the firefighters to look for your backpack." She set it by the bed stand.

"Are you for real?" I said in a sleepy voice.

"Absolutely," she said. "You can't miss any schoolwork. You're to study three hours a day while in the hospital. I'll ask your teachers to give me any new assignments. The firefighters also retrieved some of our clothes, which I'll have dry-cleaned tomorrow to remove the smell of smoke. Unfortunately the computers have all melted."

At that moment I cared about only one thing. "Is my puppy alive?"

"Yes. The firefighters found her under my bed. Everything burned except for the three bedrooms." Her voice wavered. "Our home is a black skeleton."

Hip-hop was saved! That was one bright moment in an otherwise horrid day.

What I didn't expect was how Mom would tear our whole family apart.

CHAPTER 3

The deepest pain comes from loving someone you cannot like.

I wish my mother could be likeable. I've concluded that I must care for her, since my spare moments have been consumed by racking my brain about what I should have said differently during our last argument. But this never prepares me for the next one.

The following day Mom marched into my private hospital room without knocking.

"We need to talk," she said, and yanked my iPod's earphones from my ears.

"Can you not do that?" I said. "I'm capable of taking out my earbuds myself."

"Put down your book and listen to me." She drummed her fingers on folded arms.

I was lying on top of the covers reading Edgar Allan Poe's "The Gold Bug." I was right at the fascinating part, where Poe's main character explains how he cracked the cryptogram that led him to Captain Kidd's buried treasure. Our school assignment was to write a paper about one of Poe's short stories, so naturally I chose this one.

"Shass," I said. I flipped the open book upside down. Shass is my swearword of the month, which I use to annoy people whenever they bug me. I mix letters from different swear

words, like a kind of slang. It makes it more difficult for people to decipher that I'm swearing at them. I donned my aviator sunglasses, which hid my eyes from the prying stare of my mother.

Mom glared at me. She looked stunning in her fuchsia pantsuit, with her opal necklace and matching earrings. Her shimmering ebony hair brushed her shoulders.

"I won't be in Bismark over Christmas," Mom said. "I'll stay at a hotel in Sioux Falls." She tucked three newly purchased lottery tickets into her purse.

"So I'm coming too?" I asked. "I want to be near Billy." Mom's perfume, like her presence, was overpowering. I wanted to hide my head under the covers.

"To be frank," she said, "given your attitude lately, I just can't cope with being stuck alone with you in a hotel room for a month. Our relationship isn't the greatest right now."

Her honesty moved me—so much that I wanted to move right out of her life. Her insult surprised me. She'd hugged me only the day before. Why was my mother so inconsistent? So tactless? Maybe the stress she'd been under caused her to snap.

I've often wondered if Mom deliberately thinks of ways to make me mad. Every time we argue we grate on each other, until my heart feels like shredded cheese. I'm always resolving not to let her annoy me. I try to notice her good qualities, and not dwell upon her faults. But it doesn't work. My shortcomings overwhelm me.

I know I'm ungrateful. I should be thankful for having a mother who works hard to take care of our family. I'm frustrated with myself for becoming so upset with her.

Now I couldn't keep my promise to Billy to stay by him. My bet was that Mom no longer trusted me around Billy. I left my anger on simmer and studied a hangnail. It irritated me, like my mother, and I wanted to clip it. I knew it would bleed if I bit it.

“So, Helga.” I called her by the name she despises. It was once her first name, but she switched it with her middle name “Rose.” I dug my clippers out of my purse. “How soon are you leaving? I have to make my own plans, you know.” I clipped the hangnail.

Mom gave me the stink-eye. “Call me only by my first name ‘Rose.’ And I’ve already made plans for you. Put down those g.d. clippers and give me your full attention.”

I hate it when Mom swears at me, even if she just uses the first letter of each word. I didn’t like her attitude, and come to think of it, she probably didn’t like mine. My face flushed, like it always does when my anger surges. It makes it hard to hide my feelings. I tucked my clippers in my purse. “So I get to stay at Angie’s house.”

“That’s not possible. I asked and her mother said no. They have family problems right now. Besides, I’ve never liked Angie’s father. He gives me bad vibrations.”

I’ve been burdened with my Mom’s “vibes” for as long as I can remember. Then I recalled Angie texting that her father nearly punched her mom. He’d always been nice to me, but maybe he had a dark side I’d never noticed before.

She opened a cigarette pack. “I won’t smoke in here, I just need to hold one.”

“Please, light up, I’m always in need of carcinogens,” I said. “So where in purgatory are you sending me?”

“You’re going to your grandmother’s in Canada. Hip-hop will go to a kennel.”

This was the most earth-shatteringly unfair news ever.

“You’re dumping me at Baba’s?” I yelled. Not to sound melodramatic which I’m not.

I leaped off the bed and flung my glasses on the covers. “This really sucks out loud. I mean—I love Baba dearly, but not the horrid clutter in her house. You always hem me in. Give me a tidbit of freedom.”

She stepped forward, within inches of me. “I need to protect you. You’re too young to have the independence of an adult.” With each word she tapped my chest with her unlit cigarette. With the last tap the cigarette broke.

“How would you know?” I stepped backward to get some space between us. “You’ve never given me any real liberty. I ought to run away. You’re an absolute ogre.”

“Lara Hunter, how dare you speak to me like that! You’re grounded, and—”

“Grounded where? We don’t even have a home.”

This whole verbal battle seemed so petty. Yet every time Mom said something cruel to me, I fired back an equally nasty reply. My mouth is my own worst enemy.

The speaker system blared, “Attention, Code Blue, room 413, cardiac team respond.” Nurses rushed by. A patient was fighting for life.

So our family was breaking up. Mom and Billy would be in Sioux Falls, Dad in Bismark, and I’d be in Edmonton, Alberta. The life of my family was near cardiac arrest.

“You’re impossible,” Mom said finally. “If only your dad’s parents were alive, they could help. I’ve tried everyone, but no one else can take you now.”

“You haven’t asked any other relatives from Baba’s side of our family. You won’t talk to me about them. You won’t even let me meet them. What’s the big dark secret? Why are you hiding them from me?”

Mom bit her lower lip, but said nothing.

“I’m beginning to think that there’s seriously no way I’m not adopted. That’s why you won’t tell me about my family.”

“Believe me, you are not adopted. Even though you act like you are.”

I gagged. “Excuse me? You only tell me what you want. You’re a control freak.”

Mom nearly blew a capillary. Her face turned the same color as if she'd had horrible sunburn. "Well we wouldn't be in this fix if you'd been watching Billy better!"

Now that was harsh. Way harsh.

"Well forgive me for living!" My voice broke. "I know I'm to blame, I let my eye off him and it's my fault he'll be scarred for life! Thanks for rubbing in the guilt."

"Oh—God, I didn't mean to say that," Mom said. "I'm sorry—"

"Don't cover up your word vomit with a nonpology. You had a part in it too. You left your stupid lighter lying around."

I flew into the bathroom and locked the door. I covered my mouth with my hands so Mom couldn't hear me crying.

Many years from now, when my mother's face is wrinkled like a dried-up prune and she complains that I don't visit her in the nursing home, I shall cite this conversation word for word.

Actually, I didn't feel nearly as bad as I'd expected—just the sensation of ripped-out intestines. Surely, I thought, my life couldn't possibly get any worse.

I was wrong.

CHAPTER 4

My only hope was that a wolf would arrive at my grandmother's house before we did. Or any other criminal with mildly murderous objectives.

No such luck. I was desperate to find a survival strategy to cope with three whole weeks of living in the disorder, mess, and chaos that was inside Baba's house.

It was only after my argument with Mom that I remembered Dad's Christmas present in my backpack. I'd forgotten about it in the emotional aftermath of the fire.

When Mom left my hospital room, I flipped through my new book about cryptology. Dad helped me two years ago with my science fair project about cryptology. Ever since then we've passed coded messages to each other for fun.

Stapled to a page I found a folded sheet of paper. I unfolded the paper.

Upon it was writing in a secret code!

GHDUHVW ODUD,

LYH WDXJKW BRX DERXW FRGHV IRU D UHDVQ. EDED VSRNH DERXW
 VHFUHW FRGHV WKDW MHDG WR D ORVW WUHDVXRH LQ KHU KRXXH. BRXU
 PRWKHU WKLQNV EDED LV ORVLQJ KHU PLQG, DQG KDV VHFUHWOB ERRNGH
 EDED LNWR D QXUVLQJ KRPH WKLW MDQXDUB. VR ZKHQ ZH YLVLW EDED
 DIWHU FKULVPDV, EULQJ BRXU FUBSWRORJB NLW. GDG

Cryptology! How I love it! The code was easy to break. The last word, “GDG” could only mean “DAD.” So I figured that G translated as D, and D translated as A. I was also pretty sure that the word in the salutation up top, “ODUD,” meant “LARA.” So I wrote out the two alphabets with the letters I knew:

Cipher alphabet: D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B C

Plain alphabet: A _ _ D _ _ _ _ _ L _ _ _ _ _ R _ _ _ _ _

I saw at once that with this code the cipher alphabet (the encoded alphabet) was simply shifted three places to the right of the plain alphabet (the alphabet Dad used to write the message):

Cipher alphabet: D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z A B C

Plain alphabet: a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

This code is a variation of the “Caesar shift cipher,” so named because it was first used by the Roman emperor Julius Caesar around the year 70 B.C.

I rewrote the message:

DEAREST LARA,

I'VE TAUGHT YOU ABOUT CODES FOR A REASON. BABA SPOKE ABOUT SECRET CODES THAT LEAD TO A LOST TREASURE IN HER HOUSE. YOUR MOTHER THINKS BABA IS LOSING HER MIND, AND HAS SECRETLY BOOKED BABA INTO A NURSING HOME THIS JANUARY. SO WHEN WE VISIT BABA AFTER CHRISTMAS, BRING YOUR CRYPTOLOGY KIT. DAD

Dad had helped me make a cryptology kit that I carried to school, so I could write hidden messages to my best friend Angie. I've taught her about secret codes too. I always carried my cryptology kit in my school backpack, so it was saved from the fire.

But the message from my father, obviously written before the car accident, raised more questions than it answered. Had Baba really gone wacko since we'd seen her last year? She was a bit off even then. Was there really a hidden treasure, and if so, who hid it? Where would I find the secret codes?

My stay at Baba's would be more interesting than I thought. But if Mom put Baba's house up for sale and forced her to move to a nursing home the first week of January, I'd have less than a month to find the treasure.

I don't like working under a deadline.

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Before leaving for Baba's, I asked Mom if I could visit my father alone.

Nothing had changed. A feeding tube ran into his nose and down towards his stomach. A respirator pushed air into Dad's lungs, then it released and let his chest fall.

Dad looked so peaceful in his coma, asleep yet alive. It was almost as if someone special kissed him he'd awaken.

The car accident happened during a heavy snowfall. Dad was teaching me the finer points of driving. I'd just gotten my learner's permit for driving. So if I hadn't been there the accident would never have happened.

I'm still emotionally comatose over it. Even though the doctors said Dad's condition keeps improving, and that his intracranial pressure has stabilized. But with every passing day there's less of a chance that he'll ever awaken.

Maybe he'd stay in a coma for years, until they pulled the plug and let him die. I felt so helpless. If only I could save him. But there was nothing I could do.

I'd written a short letter for him to read when he came out of his coma, to let him know I was searching for the treasure—and to tell him something even more important.

The nurses said Dad's brain might not be working properly when he awakes. And I didn't want anyone reading how I really felt about my father. So I made the cipher simple: I wrote the apparent message with the letters turned upside down and reversed, but the hidden message to Dad with the letters right-side-up and underlined.

The alphabet I used looked like what one would read in a mirror:

z ŷ x w v n t s r b d o u m l k j i h g f e p c q a

I wrote:

I egassm tuoy dnuof evah dna kob eht ni dekoob I

syawla noy fo knihl ll I estnoc O. deksa noy tahw od ll I.

I'm p noos noy of kat ot e poh I .yrevovr rekcinq tuoy fo gnirar m I.

Whenever Dad and I said good-bye, we always said, “to pieces.” We left out the “I love you” part at the beginning. From the time I became a teenager I’ve never been able to say “I love you.” But in the hidden message, I said those very words. I slipped the letter under Dad’s pillow, and kissed his forehead.

He didn’t wake up.

I never believed in that Snow White drivel anyway.

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Baba’s head appeared at the window in her door as our airport taxi drove up in front of her house, in the McCauley neighborhood northeast of downtown Edmonton, in Alberta, Canada.

“Baba’s house is likely the most expensive on her block,” Mom said as we strolled close.

“Tell someone who cares.” I was still pissed with Mom. She’d made me sign a flipping contract to study and do homework three hours a day while I was at Baba’s.

In fact I did care about Baba’s hundred-year-old two-storey house. It has always given me feelings of both fascination and dread. It’s like a tiny medieval manor—that’s cool. But the dreadful part was *inside* her house.

Two brick chimneys jutted like turrets above the cedar-shingled roof towards the stormy clouds. Bare vines of ivy formed a spider-like network of branches that stretched across the red brick walls of the house. Both the arches above the windows and the sills below were sandstone, as was a top layer above the rubblestone foundation.

The untended yard was overgrown with untrimmed trees and bushes. They reminded me of the unkempt brambles around Sleeping Beauty’s castle.

The thicket threatened to hide the tacky figurines of elves and reindeer and even Santa’s sleigh, all draped with Christmas lights that gave a warm glow of color to the dreary landscape.

Baba never takes down her outside Christmas ornaments and lights. Every year a few more light bulbs burn out. She seldom replaces them.

The brass doorknocker was a fearsome gargoyle statuette. The entire house had an aura of dark Gothic. I held my breath and knocked.

Baba threw back her oak front door and rattled the screen door open.

“Welcome, welcome, come in!” she said in her bubbly accented voice as she motioned us to come inside her home. She gave me a bear hug.

Her kiss was on the slobbery side. It was great to see her again, despite the calamity I was about to witness inside her home. “Hey Baba, what’s kicking?” I asked.

Mom gave Baba the slightest hug possible.

“Wait here,” Baba said. “I wanna show you something.” She disappeared. Baba’s mother was Ukrainian, so Baba speaks that language perfectly. She isn’t as fluent in English. Her accent is strong and some of her sentences are broken.

The foyer was cramped. A life-size bronze statue of the Greek god Dionysus, draped with hats, nudged a coat tree that held at least fifteen coats. Six-foot tropical plants were jammed near huge bags of birdseed and cat litter, a mop, a bookcase spilling over with books, and a shotgun.

“Is that gun loaded?” I asked Baba when she returned with a birdcage containing two birds. “Or is it just a conversation piece?”

“Don't poop your panties, dearie. I have some problems with prowlers.”

If there is one thing I detest, it is being addressed as “dearie.”

Mom began her daily hissy fit. She cracked open the breech of the gun. “Look, the gun is loaded! How could you be so careless?” She removed the shells and placed them on the

bookshelf. “The gun and shells should be locked up. I’m of a mind to just walk out of here with my daughter.”

Baba answered, “Ya, ya, tell me another one.” Baba thrust the birdcage forward. “You like my turtledoves? When I saw them at the animal shelter, I had to have them.”

“Don’t you have enough acquisitions, Mother?” Mom set my suitcase on the floor. She brushed cat hairs off the lower edges of her pantsuit. The hairs had just been deposited by some of Baba’s five purring cats that slid between our legs.

I find it amusing that cats are naturally attracted to those who hate them most.

“How’s Billy doing?” Baba’s worry lines appeared.

“His condition is stable,” my mother answered. “They keep him on morphine. The doctors say he’ll be in the hospital for at least a month.”

“That poor boy. Keep me posted daily.”

She’d called us three times yesterday. I wouldn’t want her phone bill.

I took off my winter boots. My mother didn’t bother. Obviously she thought that because of the clutter her muddy footprints wouldn’t matter.

Baba led us through a maze of stuff. And I mean literally a maze. On either side of narrow passages, dozens of cardboard boxes were stacked together as high as my head. The boxes overflowed with collector dolls, stuffed animals, and knickknacks.

I peeked in the living room as we made our way to the kitchen. Her belongings were piled against the brick feature wall on the north side and the plaster walls on the other adjoining sides. They were stacked so high that plump garbage bags grazed the ceiling. Beside threadbare armchairs slept humongous piles of newspapers and magazines.

Being crowded by clutter—as I was in Baba’s house—always makes me panicky. I’d had this same fear the last time I was in her house, but I’d kept it hidden.

I felt a sense of impending doom. My head spun and my heart pounded.

Baba babbled on. “You smell what’s cooking? Perogies. I cook with plenty of sauerkraut and potatoes and mushrooms. Good for the digestion. Come to the kitchen. I make you tea.” The kitchen chairs were piled with articles. “I clear you a spot.”

“I can’t stay,” Mom said. “My plane back to the States leaves in two hours. I’ll just stand.” She stood at attention, her limbs tense. “My taxi’s waiting.”

Baba cleared a chair, and picked up a shoebox with strings hanging from it. Stuck to the box was a handwritten label that said, “Pieces of string too short to save.”

I overheated. Sweat trickled from my underarms. My fingers trembled uncontrollably. I yanked off my coat. A three-hour migraine headache was coming on.

“Mother, look at all this dust.” Mom ran a finger over the top of a picture frame. “Why don’t you hire a maid? With your arthritis, you can’t climb to dust up high.”

Baba grumbled under her breath as she fussed with her kettle, cups, and saucers.

Mom shook her head. “This is worse than I thought.”

Baba glowered at her. “Worse than what?”

“You’ve collected more stuff than a year ago,” Mom said. “You’d be much happier, Mother, if you moved into a retirement home. We’ve talked about this before. I’ve done some research and found some lovely residences. I’ve arranged for—”

“Cookie, the only way I leave my home is in a six-foot box.”

“Mother, you can’t take care of your house.” Mom raised her voice. “You need to move out. As your daughter I have a duty to make sure someone’s taking care of you.”

“I don’t need your pity.” Baba’s chin quivered. “Your life is a more of a mess than mine. You can’t plough your own furrow straight if you lookin’ at someone else’s.”

“Mother, you need to be in an extended care facility.”

“And who’s going to make me?” Baba stuck her chin out. “Not you.”

“I—never mind. We’ll discuss this later,” Mom said.

Round one of the battle of wills went to Baba.

I tried to calm myself despite my constant yawning and hot flashes. My mouth was dry. This wasn’t so bad, was it? I could cope if I just ignored all this foulness.

I. Will. Not. Be. Uptight.

Who was I kidding? I was already screaming inside.

“Mother, I’m laying out some ground rules for you,” Mom said.

“What rules?” Baba demanded.

“I need to protect Lara from your bad influence. First of all—no swearing. I don’t want Lara learning any more of your swear words.”

“She already knows more than you. Okay, I try not to swear. Maybe she’ll teach me some new swears.”

“Second. No gambling whatsoever. No poker games. And don’t even think about taking Lara to a racetrack. Your betting on racehorses is outrageous.”

“So what will we do together?”

“And thirdly, no drinking.”

“Sure, I give her only good vodka and sake to drink.”

“No alcohol, Mother.”

“You gonna kill the poor girl! I knew a man back in the old country—he had no bad habits. When people with bad habits get sick, they quit those habits, and get better. One day this poor man got sick. He had no bad habits to quit. So he up and died, all from lack of bad habits.”

“I don’t believe a word of it,” Mom said.

“It’s true! Everyone needs a bad habit.”

“And you have too many of them.”

My legs were like rubber. The air seemed thick and suffocating. I began hyperventilating. *No, take deep breaths.* Inhale, 1+2+3, and out, 1+2+3 . . .

My mother unfolded a sheet of paper from her purse. “I’ve listed the conditions for Lara’s stay here. As we’ve now discussed. Just sign at the bottom of this contract.”

Baba snatched the paper out of my mother’s hand, and peered through her bifocal glasses. Her lips formed the words she read. She then stared hard at Mom.

“This—this is good for just one thing, Helga.” Baba ripped the paper in two, then opened the birdcage and lined the bottom of it with the paper. “Only good for bird crap.”

Mom pressed her lips together into a frown, and the veins stood out on her neck. She wagged her finger at Baba. “My first name of choice is ‘Rose.’ Don’t ever call me ‘Helga’ again. And you’d better obey me, Mother, or I’ll—”

“Or what?” Baba said, with her hands on her hips.

“Or I’ll take Lara away so fast it’ll make your head spin. That’s a promise. You can’t just rip up my contract and ignore my rules. There will be dire consequences.”

“Cookie, your hot air could fill a balloon.”

I knew Mom well enough to know this was not another empty threat, even though Baba took it as one. My mother had lost control of the situation for the moment, but she would be relentless in getting the upper hand in the end.

Mom cast a stern glance at me and said, “Remember the regulations we discussed and how you’re to behave. Study three hours daily. Be in bed before ten.”

“Oh abundant joy.” I rolled my eyes. “Color me excited.”

At the door, Mom didn’t hug or kiss Baba. Or me neither. Baba waved downward, as if to say she’d had enough of her. After Mom left Baba snorted. “Kids! They give no respect. Your mother’s got some growing up to do.”

“It’s a bit late for her. Will you obey her rules?”

“You kidding? I hate rules. Who does Helga think we are, children? That woman! She needs an enema.”

Baba drew back the red velvet curtains from the picture window. “Look at this.” Mom was across the street, talking to a neighbor. “There’s Helga plotting with our neighborhood busybody, Vera Snippet.”

My mother pressed something into Vera’s hands. Thrown over Vera’s pink dress was a white fox pelt scarf wrap. I despise the color pink. And any non-native people who wear animal pelts ought to have a strip torn off their own skin.

“Helga became good friends with Vera’s daughter,” Baba said. “But Vera was too snooty for me. Told me off whenever I missed church. And Vera keeps snakes as pets.”

I shivered. “I hate snakes. They’re freaky.”

“I bet you five dollars Helga and Vera are up to no good,” Baba said.

“You think I’d bet with you when I’m sure to lose?”

At that moment I didn't care what my mother was doing. My skin was clammy, and I was about to puke and faint. My headache gnawed on the insides of my brain.

"I have to go outside." I raced for the back door. Baba followed.

I foresaw myself wallowing in a quicksand of panic until her house drove me crazy. In four weeks Mom would have to put me in an institution instead of Baba.

I caught my breath at the back porch. Before I opened the back door, I turned to Baba and said, "Now that we're alone, I have to ask you. Tell me all about your hidden treasure."