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Zee never shoulda come back. Not like this.

Limp blue balloons and crinkled streamers are tangled around the mailbox at the end of Zee's driveway. I adjust my sweaty baseball cap and sigh. Not even the decorations are excited about his welcome home party.

A fat gray cloud settles directly above the house. Shadows play across the tattered roof shingles, and trails of dirt, like black tears, streak the windows. I shiver as beads of sweat roll down the sides of my hot face.

"Justin," a voice screeches.

I spin around. My friend Nia skips down the sidewalk carrying a small wrapped box.

“Hey.” She skids to a halt. Her long braids flap out behind her like a superhero cape in the wind. She extends her fist and smiles so big her dimples bite into her chipmunk cheeks.

“Hey.” I bump her knuckles with mine. I haven’t seen her since we met up for the Fourth of July fireworks last week. They’re legal in Chattanooga, so the sky was lit up most of the night.

“I love that shirt,” she says.

I study my wrinkled *Star Wars* T-shirt. Most of the design has faded. Only the outline of Darth Vader’s helmet and the words “I am” remain.

“Let me fill in the blank. I am . . . happy to see you,” she says with a giggle.

I roll my eyes and point to the box she’s holding. “What’s that?”

“A welcome home present for Zee. New paintbrushes.” She bites the corner of her lower lip. “It’s from both of us. I figured you’d be thinking about other things.”

Yeah, my “other things” list is so long I trip over it when I walk. I shift from foot to foot. “Uh, thanks.”

She stares at something over my shoulder. “That’s the second one I’ve seen since I left my house.”

I turn. A police car cruises down the street. There’s been a lot more patrols lately.

“C’mon.” She tugs me up the driveway.

I drag my feet. “We’re early. Maybe—”

“Four hundred and four days,” says Nia.

“What?”

“Zee disappeared four hundred and four days ago. It’s been one year, one month, and nine days since we’ve seen him. That’s a *long* time.”

It’s still fresh. I didn’t think things could get any worse after Zee went missing, but seven days after that I was proven wrong.

I trip over my feet as Nia pulls me up the creaking porch steps. The front door flies open. Mrs. Murphy, Zee’s mom, stands in the doorway smiling like she won the Tennessee Mega Lottery. She didn’t.

“Y’all came. I wasn’t sure . . . Zechariah is gonna be so happy,” says Mrs. Murphy.

Zee’s real name is Zechariah Murphy; his mom named him after some prophet in the Bible. We call him Zee ’cause it’s easier and sounds cooler—no offense to the Bible guy.

“How are you, sweetie? Your family okay?” The questions sprint out of Mrs. Murphy’s mouth like they’re in a fifty-yard dash.

Nia nods. “Yep. We’re all good. We just got back from our family reunion.”

“Was it fun?” Mrs. Murphy asks, running her hand over Nia’s long braids.

“Yeah, I got to see my grandma,” Nia says with a heavy sigh. “She didn’t remember me at first. My mom told me forgetting stuff can happen when you get old.”

"That's true," says Mrs. Murphy.

"Well, I don't like it," says Nia. "I wish people didn't have to grow old. My grandma can't even move around that much, but we still had some fun. We played our favorite game, Did You Know?"

"I'm glad you were able to spend some time with her," says Mrs. Murphy.

"Yeah," Nia says quietly, then she smiles. It's not as bright as usual. "Did you know about ninety-six percent of families create cool T-shirts for their family reunions?"

Mrs. Murphy shakes her head. "I didn't know that." Her dark hair swings back and forth, revealing chunks of new gray strands. "Did your family make shirts?"

Nia snorts. "Nope. We're part of the lame four percent." She holds up the present. "We brought Zee something. It's not a T-shirt."

"You didn't have to do that, but I'm sure he'll love whatever it is." Mrs. Murphy pats Nia's cheek. "And thank you for the care package. It meant a lot."

Care package? Great. I feel lower than gum on the bottom of a shoe. Since Zee was released from the hospital two weeks ago, I've only stopped by once, to tie a "Welcome Home" balloon on the mailbox. I didn't even go inside to see him. "WORST FRIEND EVER" should be tattooed on my forehead in all caps. It's just . . . I didn't want to see him so messed up. Still don't.

Mrs. Murphy turns to me. “Hi, baby.” She tugs me close.

Air swooshes out of my lungs. A mom hug.

One week after Zee disappeared, my mom died. That means it’s been 397 days since I’ve heard her voice, seen her smile, felt her arms around me.

I sink into Mrs. Murphy’s round, soft body. She smells like flowers and chocolate. For a moment I can pretend she’s mine, then a tidal wave of sadness crashes over me.

Three hundred and ninety-seven days. I know Nia didn’t mean to do it, but now I have a count stuck in my head. I’ve heard people say that losing someone doesn’t hurt as much after a while. They’re wrong. The pain is still there, but it’s not constant. I have sneak attacks. You feel okay for an hour or a day, then BAM! You experience the heartbreak all over.

I wiggle free of Mrs. Murphy.

Her piercing gaze roams over my face. I pretend not to notice the puffiness under her tired eyes. “How ya doing?” she asks.

I slide my hat back over my short locs. “I’m good.”

With a weak smile, she straightens her loose dress. “I wanted to thank you again for taking out my trash and cutting the grass while Zechariah was, uh, gone all that time. You were dealing with—”

“I had to mow other lawns anyway, and I didn’t mind helping out,” I say. “Zee would have done the same for me.”

Mrs. Murphy squeezes my shoulder. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to be there for you when your mom—”

“It’s fine.” My chest tightens. I stuff my trembling hand into the right back pocket of my jeans and clutch a knobby puzzle piece. After several deep breathes the pain in my chest eases.

“I . . . I told Zee about your mom,” she says softly.

I bite the inside of my cheek. “How did he . . . Was he okay?” Another person he loved was gone. Zee’s dad died in a car accident when he was four.

Mrs. Murphy blinks hard, and I hope she doesn’t start crying. I couldn’t handle that. “It’s been hard for him. Everything’s hard right now.”

I nod. He would have wanted to say goodbye, be there for her funeral. That’s another reason why his disappearance was so strange. He’d never miss it on purpose.

“When Zee was gone I always had this feeling he was close, but I . . .” She swallows hard.

“Yeah.” I get it. Sometimes it was like Zee was right beside me. Like I sensed his presence, but I think it was because I missed him so much.

“You never gave up,” she says. “You said he’d come back and you were right.” Mrs. Murphy gestures for us to enter.

I step inside the house. My feet hit shattered picture frames propped up near the doorway. A dirty sheet covers the hardwood floor, and two paint cans sit by the couch. Leaning against a chair, there’s a large canvas forest painting with a slash mark down the middle.

My eyes travel over the walls. Dark smudges and deep scratches are visible underneath the new layer of white paint. I shudder as a chill tiptoes up and down my spine.

“Sorry about the mess. I haven’t had time to straighten up,” Mrs. Murphy says. “I’ve been busy.”

Mrs. Murphy has always kept a clean house. This isn’t like needing to dust or vacuum. The living room isn’t dirty. It’s damaged.

“You, uh, redecorating?” Nia glances around.

“Zee . . . He’s adjusting to being home again,” Mrs. Murphy says as she smooths out invisible wrinkles in her dress.

There are scratches all down her arms. She catches me staring and slides her hands in her pockets.

I lower my gaze. What happened to her? Would Zee . . . No. He’d never hurt his mom. Not on purpose.

Nia side-eyes me. “Is everything okay, Mrs. Murphy?”

“Yes, of course. I—”

A loud buzzer sound causes us all to jump.

“That’s just the stove. The cake is ready,” says Mrs. Murphy.

I dry my sweaty hands on my jeans. My heart is racing and I’m not sure why.

“I knew I smelled sweetness.” Nia smiles, but it’s too bright. Not real.

“Chocolate Coca-Cola cake,” Mrs. Murphy says, closing the front door behind us.

“Soda *in* a cake? That’s brilliant,” says Nia. “And I’m madly

in love with chocolate. It's my favorite food group. Top of the pyramid."

"I'll make sure you get an extra big piece to take home. And, Justin, I'll pack up a slice for Victoria," says Mrs. Murphy.

"Thanks." My sister loves Coca-Cola cake. My mom used to make it all the time.

"Why don't y'all head out back?" Mrs. Murphy directs us toward the kitchen back door.

I hesitate, glancing over my shoulder at the mess in the living room. "Are you sure everything is alright?"

Her eyes shift quickly from me as she chews on her bottom lip. "This party will be good for Zee. He needs to be around his friends. He's a little nervous to see everyone."

Nia and I exchange a startled look. Is Mrs. Murphy saying Zee made this mess? What is going on?

"It's fine. I promise," Mrs. Murphy says with extra cheer. "Everyone will have a great time."

She stares, her eyes pleading for us to agree. I have so many questions rattling around in my head, but I don't feel like I can ask them.

"We can't wait to see Zee. We'll have fun," Nia says.

I nod, but I'm worried. Something is not right.

"Lyric's already here." Mrs. Murphy urges us toward the back door. "He wants to provide the musical entertainment."

Nia groans. I laugh weakly. This could be interesting.