

CHAPTER 1



Nicholas, now means *now*!” Mom yells from the foot of the stairs. With the house empty, her voice bounces toward me like a ball, careening off the walls and straight through my aching head.

“Give him another minute, Lu.” Dad’s voice is quieter, but the sound of it still hurts. I know they think I was up all night doing something I wasn’t supposed to be doing like playing video games and eating Cheez Whiz from the can, but I was actually up all night doing nothing at all. I was staring at the wall, then staring at the ceiling, then staring at the fly that got stuck on the tail end of the packing tape that came loose from the box holding my tools and three dismantled CB radios.

“We’re paying the movers by the hour, Jay. Either he comes now or the new tenants are going to have to adopt him.”

“Time to go, Narf,” Dad says as I trudge downstairs, and I smile because Dad’s trying. In her own way, I think Mom’s trying, too.

“Yikes,” Dad says after Mom kisses me a little too hard on the head and walks out the door.

“What?”

“That smile is fooling no one. It looks creepy,” he says. I stop, and now we can both relax.

“I know this is bad,” he says, rubbing the back of his head. “Devastatingly bad.”

“It’s just a few states over,” I say, repeating what Mom has said every day for the past three months.

“That’s light-years away,” says Dad, and thank the Giant Space Alien Overlords that someone is finally telling the truth.

“Yeah, my legions of friends begged me not to go. They made me promise I’d write,” I say, and the smile slips from Dad’s face because he knows I’m faking it again.

“This just wasn’t your city,” he says. “Raven Brooks, though, Raven Brooks will be your city.”

He closes the door to the house that never really felt like my house, just like the last one didn’t and the one before that.

“Goodbye, Red House,” Mom says as she eyes it in the rearview mirror, following the moving truck a little too closely down the long driveway. She gets teary-eyed, and Dad gives her shoulder a little squeeze.

“Raven Brooks will be our city,” he says again, this time so Mom can hear it, and she looks about as convinced as I feel. We drive 715 miles in near silence, swallowing the lie that Raven Brooks really isn’t that far from Charleston, just



like we swallowed the lie that the blue house in Ontario was any different from the brown house in Oakland or the yellow house in Redding or the beige house in Coeur d'Alene. The lies get a little bigger with each move—with each realization that towns don't need newspaper editors if they don't have newspapers to edit anymore, but landlords still need rent money no matter what.

So what was one more move, one more town, one more new school and new house that wouldn't really be our house anyway? I only had to get used to it for a little while. This time, maybe I wouldn't even unpack.





CHAPTER 2

The new house is turquoise.

“I’d call it more of a . . . blue-green,” Mom says, tilting her head like maybe that would change the color.

“Teal,” Dad offers. “It used to be a very popular color for exteriors.”

Dad knows nothing about exteriors, or colors for that matter. That’s the thing about newspaper editors, though. They can sound like experts on just about anything.

“Wasn’t it white in the pictures?” Mom asks.


The moving truck rumbles up the otherwise quiet street called—I swear to the Aliens—Friendly Court, then the driver leans out the window.

“This one yours? The turquoise one?”

Mom drops her head. “I give up.”

Dad nods to the driver. “The turquoise one.”

The truck reverses and backs into the driveway, and just like that, we’re Jay, Luanne, and Nicky Roth, of 909 Friendly Court, Raven Brooks. This fall I’ll be an eighth grader at Raven Brooks Middle School, where I’ll excel in science and English and struggle in math and Spanish. I’ll



be that short kid in the Beatles T-shirt, whom everyone mistakenly calls “Nate,” with the brown hair that sticks up on the left side no matter how much water I use to flatten it. I’ll eat Jell-O pudding packs every day and clear the lunch table because there’s no reason why I shouldn’t, and I’ll spend the rest of the lunch period taking things apart and putting them back together.

“It’s a nice street,” Dad says of the mostly pristine lawns and neatly shuttered windows. The paint is a little faded, the cars are a little old, but we’ve lived on worse blocks, and I even see a cat or two crouched in flower beds across the street. Cats feel like a good sign.

“It’s quiet,” Mom says, and it’s hard to tell if that’s praise or worry in her voice.

“There’s a llama farm,” I say, and my parents look at me. “I saw a sign,” I explain, and then we’re quiet again.

“Well,” Dad says after a while, “I think I’ve earned a Ho Ho.”

Mom’s always complaining that Dad never lost his childhood sweet tooth, but there’s a grown-up method to his sugar madness. Once you figure out the pattern, it’s pretty easy to tell how Dad’s feeling. Ho Hos mean he’s exhausted. Ding Dongs are the treat of choice for when he’s happy. Pounding down Suzy Q’s? It’s time to celebrate! But the real telltale cakes are the yellow ones. Zingers can

Dad's Feelings, as told by **TREATS**

<u>Treat</u>	<u>Emotion</u>
ho hos 	= Exhausted
zingers 	= Sad
twinkies 	= Thoughtful
ding dongs 	= Happy
sozy g's 	= Celebrating

* sometimes treats will be combined to satisfy different emotions.

mean only one thing—Dad's sad. Twinkies are for when he's pondering life's big questions—big Alien-Overlord-in-the-Sky questions.