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I didn't even know you were lost and needed to be found. Until we saw the note—under one of the scratch-and-sniff pizza magnets on the fridge. One of those yellow sticky notes you keep in your shirt pocket, the ones you leave me riddle clues on when we play hide and seek up at Gram's. Only this was one messed-up clue.



After we first read it, Mom put the note back, tried to laugh, pretend it was some kind of joke. Only her mouth was laughing; her eyes looked more like crying. All shiny and red around the rims. Like some white mouse.

"Isn't out west kinda far away?" I asked. "If we're in the middle. Sort of."

She twisted a long brown curl around her pointer finger and stared out the tiny kitchen window at the

brick wall next door. "Guess that depends on how far out west Dad went."

"And he should be sorry. He didn't even say when he'd be home. I always have to."

"Alfie will call." She pushed my hair behind my ears, then dropped her hands onto my shoulders. "Try to be patient, Jake."

I am trying. But being patient is hard when you're twelve. And three and a half months is a very long time. Where are you?



Coach Gomez pushes in the last tack, but I can already see that my name's not on the list. Turning away from the bulletin board, he pats me on the head, like I'm six or something. "Sorry, Jake. You almost made it. Maybe in the fall, after you've had a growth spurt."

Why not just drive that tack straight into my eyeball? My face bursts into flames and my eyes start leaking, like I just took a penalty shot in the nose. I blink fast, read the list again, then take off running. Almost made it—that's like saying you almost won the lottery. Who gives a dog turd?

A hard yank on my ponytail jerks me to a stop. What kind of idiot does that?

The best friend kind of idiot. Echo's all bent over, hands on her knees, puffing and panting. "Didn't you hear me?"

I turn away, wipe my eyes on my sleeve. "Tryin' to give me whiplash? Bug off!"

"Well, excuse me"

Grabbing hold of my backpack by both straps, I

slam it into a fire hydrant. Twice. "Didn't make the stupid team."

"Soccer?"

"No. Tiddlywinks. Freakin' suck-up Connor Kowalski—runs like Gram chasing her chickens. Only he made it."

Echo gives me a one-eyebrow lift, then turns her ball hat around backwards. "That's unfortunate. Stinks even."

"Like dog crap."

"Don't you mean feces? Hang on a sec." She sits down on a big stump to tie her shoe.

"Those new?"

"Sort of. They were my mom's, from when she was eleven. Vintage Adidas, circa 1985."

"Seriously?" Why would anybody save those old beat-up things for, like, thirty years? Must be a hippie technophobe thing.

"I love 'em." She finishes one perfect bow, doubles it, then moves on to the other one. "Maybe it's because of your ponytail. Maybe the coach has gender issues."

"Who knows? Kept telling me how good I was doing at tryouts." I kick the stump. Hard. "Probably felt sorry for me 'cause I'm a midget. Why don't people say what they *really* mean? The truth." A chunk of bark flies off; I pick it up and boot it back into the schoolyard.

"Like who? Besides the coach, I mean."

"My dad. Decides he's lost, goes off to find himself. What does that even mean?"

"Ahoy, Mateys! Cle-e-e-ear the decks!"

"What the...?" We jump off the sidewalk into the dead leaf crud in the gutter, and just miss getting

rammed by a rusty shopping cart full of bottles and cans being pushed by an old guy wearing a pirate hat and an eye patch.

"Long John Silver steamin' through!" About fifty toy boats dangle off the sides of his cart, and a bulgy-eyed bulldog is all mashed back into one corner.

"Is it just me—or are crazy psycho freaks taking over the whole entire city?"

Echo stops walking, shoves her hands into her back pockets, then squeezes her lips together, which makes her look like the Cookie Monster, without the blue, furry parts. "People don't *choose* to be mentally ill. Same as people don't *choose* to get cancer or be short. It just happens—probably he had some great tragedy in his life. Something catastrophic that we don't have a sweet clue about."

"Whatever—not my fault. What am I, a mind reader?"

"Same as I don't have a clue about why your dad took off. There's some stuff kids aren't supposed to know about adults. It's for our own good."

Mom says Echo's an old soul, whatever that means. One weird thing about Echo is that she talks like her mom, who's some kind of counsellor.

"But I *like* knowing what's going on. Wish I could read minds."

"Ever hear the expression, *mind your own business*?"

"Yeah, but that's for nosy people, not me. Saw this show the other day, about this new software they're working on for mindreading. It's un-freakin'-believable."

Echo pats her mouth and yawns. "Unbelievably boring."

"No, listen. Seriously. They're gonna be able to steal thoughts right out of people's brains. Read their brain-waves, then write them on a screen."

"Honestly? That would be horrible." She makes a yuck face. "Well, except for nonverbal people. Guess it would be a relief for them."

"And for judges." I start taking giant steps and talking faster. "Criminals couldn't lie in court because the Magic Mind Reader would show the truth."

Echo jogs along beside me. She's got super skinny baby giraffe legs. "Let's be honest. Mind reading's an invasion of privacy, majorly. Imagine having the whole world knowing what you're thinking. That'd just be creepy."

"I always tell the truth."

"Well, yeah. But that's not the same as saying everything you're thinking right out loud."

"Maybe they'll come up with a mind reading program that'll work online," I say. "Keep people from making stuff up, living a fake life on the worldwide web."

"For sure it must be way easier to lie when you're not looking right at the person." Echo leans in, sticks her face in front of mine, then crosses her brown eyes. "Little ol' technophobe me doesn't have to worry about that, being offline and all."

I snort and push her away. "But mind reading would be wicked. I'd know everything, *and* I'd be rich!"

"Who would pay you to read minds? Some magician? A fortune teller?"

"The military." I flip up my hood, pull my T-shirt up over the bottom half of my face and hunch over.

"Super Spy Jake MacKinnon. Stopping terrorists in their tracks since 2018."

"Right. Good luck with that. Our first league game's next week. At least you can still play on the rec team with us dreadfully uncool people—soccer rejects. And now I gotta go practice." She mimes playing the violin.

"Hey! How sweet would that be? If I could read minds, I'd know where people were gonna put the ball *before* they took a shot."

"Why don't you just wish for a fairy godmother, or a genie? Dream on, Aladdin."



"Hi, babe. How was your day?" Mom dries her hands on the dishtowel and goes to hug me, but I open the fridge door to block her.

"Okay. Five weeks until school's done for the summer. Anything good to eat?"

"Apples. Cheese and saltines. Maybe a couple slices of bologna."

"The moldy green bologna that's been in there for like two months?"

She ignores me and goes back to doing the dishes. "Spaghetti for supper." Big smile, like that's exciting news. "Thursday's payday."

I grunt.

"I'm off tonight, if you want to stop by the pound after. They're open for viewings until seven, I think."

"Maybe. My birthday was like six weeks ago and I still didn't get anyth..."

She slams the cupboard door, chopping off my sentence. "Listen, mister man. It's not exactly my fault

the dogs are all too yappy...or distant relatives of the woolly mam..."

"Didn't make the team."

Before I can escape, she grabs me, presses her cheek up against mine and squeezes the breath right out of me. "Aw, Jake. I'm sorry."

"I'm better than half the guys that did." I pull away and take a bite of apple. Hack a hunk off my tongue at the same time. We stare at each other with matching shiny green eyes.

I turn away first. "I'm not crying. I just bit my tongue."

"At least you'll be one of the better players on the rec team. And you'll probably make it next year."

"Huh. Maybe."

"Don't give up. Remember the little engine? *I think I can, I think I can...*"

I give her an eye roll and turn away.



The pound's only two blocks from our apartment, so we walk over after supper. I hang behind Mom. It's all drizzly, so she's got on this crazy yellow rain hat from the Goodwill, an orange plastic Garfield poncho, her Army Surplus backpack, and Dad's big green rubber boots. Plus, she's humming and sorta dancing around the puddles, probably because she had coffee with supper. She's always sucking it back now, trying to keep herself awake.

We manage to make it through the park without any of the homeless guys asking if she needs a place to crash. But they were definitely checking her out. If Dad was here, he'd say: "Don't make eye

contact—you never know when one of them might snap, Jekyll out on you.”

“We should’ve got that collie last week,” I tell the Garfield on Mom’s back. “It was genius.”

“Too much hair!” Mom holds the barred glass door open for me. “*And* it didn’t seem that interested in us.”

“Only because we never bring any food. Dogs are worse bums than those guys in the park.”

She puts one finger to her lips. “Empathy, Jake. Nobody chooses to live on the street.”

“Got a couple new ones in,” the shelter guy, Bill, shouts over top of the barking. “And a few long-term inmates from another shelter. They’re having some playtime. Go ahead and get right in the pen with them, if you want.”

I go for this beagle, straight off. Only it keeps on licking the hand of some screechy, scrawny girl who seems to think his name is Cutie Pie.

This scruffy beat-up looking hound dog with bloodshot eyes is the only one that wants anything to do with me. Looks like he hasn’t slept in weeks. Like Mom, since Dad ditched us. Weirdest thing? The hound dog has one blue eye (and pink) and the other one’s brown (and red). Freaky. Like he’s wearing coloured contacts and one dropped out.

“She likes you,” Bill says. “Her name’s Sandy.”

“She?” I stand up and push her nose away from my privates. “Doesn’t act like a girl!” Sandy gets right up on her back legs, climbs her heavy paws up onto my shoulders, then pokes her hot slobbery tongue into my ear. It tickles. “Yuck!” I shudder and shove her

away. "She stinks."

"Yeah, that happens." Bill sighs and gestures around the warehouse, with its peeling paint, rusty cages and chewed-up doorframes. "Not like we're running a fancy pet spa or anything."

"I don't know...she's a little bigger than we were looking for." Mom crouches down and makes googly eyes at the tiny yappy dogs hopping around her boots like wind-up dust bunnies.

After the Cutie Pie girl leaves, I bend down and whistle for the beagle. He trots right over, then snarls at me, lifts his leg and waters my shoes, my new-to-me skate shoes. Good thing Mom made me waterproof them.

Bill laughs and gives me a handful of paper towels. "Bailey's a little nervous...not completely trained, yet. It's a beagle thing."

Sandy sits down, all polite-like, staring up at Mom, her tail whipping across the floor. There's a long nasty string of drool hanging off her blubbery bottom lip, but it looks like she's smiling.

"She seriously needs a facelift," I say. "There's enough skin there for two dogs. She's got wrinkles on her wrinkles."

Sandy woofs and turns to frown at me. Who knew dogs could frown?

"She's an old girl. Probably at least ten," Bill says. "Found her curled up on the doorstep one morning, all ribs and loose skin. Been in the adoption system for two months already. We can't afford to keep feeding her forever, sweet as she is. If somebody doesn't take

her this week, well..."

I look up. Well, what?

"Oh, my." Mom puts both hands over her mouth, then stands up. "How much does she eat?"

"Not that much. Three cups a day. Maybe four. The cheap stuff, too. She's not fussy, not like some of the puny mutts we get in here. It's just that we're overstocked on adult dogs right now. Everybody wants puppies."

When the fire whistle across the street blows, Sandy points her snout up at the ceiling and howls right along with it. It's hilarious—for about three seconds. Then every other dog in the place joins in. I plug my ears.

"Great acoustics, eh? She'd make a super watch-dog," Bill shouts. "If that's what you're looking for."

Mom folds her hands under her chin and looks down at Sandy, without blinking. But she's smiling, like when she holds Gregory, our neighbour's baby.

"At least she's not yappy," I say.

"It's your dog, Jake," Mom says, finally. "Your birthday. Your father always had hounds growing up. What do you think?"

Dad turned into "your father" when he took off. Maybe Mom figures a dog will fill the big empty "Dad" spot in the apartment.

Sandy stops howling, then woofs and shoves her big head up in under my armpit. I stare at her messed-up eyes. Her long, floppy ears feel like this old velvet rabbit I used to drag around. Bun-Bun. I left him in the library one day when I was five, but he was

gone when we went back to look for him.

I squint at Sandy, then crouch down, blink about ten times and rub my eyes. Did she just give me a wink? And a smile?

I look away, then back. She does it again! I look at Mom to see if she noticed, but she's busy digging in her backpack, trying to find her ancient cell that's ringing like a bike bell.

"So, what happens if we don't take her?" I ask.

"Euthanasia." Bill closes his eyes and holds his hands together like a pillow under his cheek. "We'll have to put her to sleep."

Sandy groans and lays one of her front paws and her head on my shoulder.

I stand up. "Really? How?"

"It's not painful. The vet uses a needle to give the dogs Pentobarbital. Only takes a few seconds to send them off to their Great Reward."

Reward? Sounds like murder to me. "Okay. We'll take her." Sandy jumps up on me again, slams me back against the wall, licking my face like I'm a popsicle.

"Back off, dog breath." I wipe my face on the sleeve of my hoodie. "You're coming with us. But you gotta chill with the kissy-face stuff. Seriously."

Mom drops her cell back into her bag, then digs out her pink Hello Kitty wallet. "Gotta run. Somebody called in sick, and they're short a waitress. It's just for a couple of hours until the two-for-one Tuesday rush is over." She turns to Bill. "How much do we owe you?"

"Sixty dollars should do it," he says. "Cheaper than some 'cause we didn't have to get her spayed. She

already ate, so she's good to go."

We thank him, hook on the borrowed leash we brought and head outside. The rain's gone, and the sun's trying to come out. It's hard to tell with all that skin bagging off her face, but I'm pretty sure Sandy's smiling the whole way home. Me too.