

*The*  
**PLANET,**



*the*  
**PORTAL,**

*and a*  
**PIZZA**



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WENDY MASS AND  
NORA RALEIGH BASKIN

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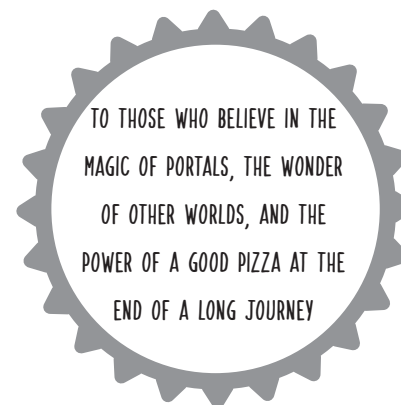
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## CHAPTER ONE

# PIPER

*BOOM!*

From her cozy spot on the front porch swing, nearly twelve-year-old Piper didn't even flinch at the sound. Things rattled, shook, and blew up in her house on a semi-regular basis. Her parents claimed the explosions from their basement lab came with their job as clockmakers. Apparently, the circuit boards for the electronic clocks could be very finicky and sometimes combusted. Even the neighbors that used to come running over in a panic had gotten used to the loud sounds and strange odors.

Gwen and Jason Anderson did not create ordinary clocks: Some took up the full surface of a table, some fit in the palm of a hand, some hung on a wall, others swayed from the ceiling. Made of polished brass or glass or wood,

some kept time with tear-shaped pendulums and counterweights made of marble. There were others with gears and levers that sent tiny translucent balls like synchronized snakes in and out of tubes and down slides as mellow chimes or bells (or no sounds at all) rang out the current time down to the millisecond. Some included the phases of the moon, the days of the week, the level of barometric pressure in the air (helpful for people trying to avoid headaches—or frizzy hair). Piper's favorite was the digital Prime Number Clock. If the time was divisible only by itself and the number one, it showed up on the clock. If not, well, you were out of luck.

But those clocks her parents kept for themselves. The ones they sold looked a lot more like everyone else's (but still cooler and prettier). When she'd asked her parents why they didn't sell all of them, they each blamed the other for getting too attached.

*Boom.*

Okay, that one was about half as loud. Piper took that as a sign they were finishing up and would soon come upstairs to take her to school.

While she waited, she focused her attention on the bird feeder her father had built. Along with the usual sparrows and hummingbirds, the yellow-chested bird with the green stripe down its back that the folks from the

bird-watching club were always coming around to admire had shown up. It was circling the house now, no doubt impatient for someone to fill the empty feeder.

Piper's fingers began drumming on the arm of the swing. She was getting impatient herself, an emotion she did her best to avoid. It felt...squirmy. And generally unpleasant. Normally she thought of time like a river, and she let herself get swept along calmly with the current, from one present to the next. It seemed a waste of energy to dwell on the past when it couldn't be changed, or to fret about a future that wouldn't arrive until the river deposited her there. But if her parents were much later, that would make her late to school, and late came with consequences, which in this case would be that the rest of the kids in Mrs. Hollins's fifth-grade class would have taken all the best candy in the Morning Welcome Bowl, leaving only the butterscotch drops.

She didn't need to check her watch to know that if they didn't leave in the next 263 seconds, she would miss the first school bell. Actually, she didn't even need to wear a watch to know the time down to the millisecond. She often wondered if this ability was because she'd always been surrounded by clocks. Her watch didn't even work. The hour and minute hands were stuck in place, with only the second hand moving a single notch every few years.

She'd asked her dad to fix it (he could fix anything), but he always waved it off, saying it was only for show anyway in case someone asked her the time—then she could pretend to consult it. No one had ever asked.

She glanced again at the front door. Still no parents, which was getting a bit strange. But Piper was no stranger to strange things. In fact, her favorite strange thing was currently lying on the bottom porch step, his tail thumping rhythmically. "C'mere, Roody," she called.

Roody bounded over. "Why are you still home?" he asked. "You should have left two hundred and forty-one seconds ago."

Far more impressive—at least to Piper—than any of the clocks her parents made, was Roody, their robot dog. To the unknowing eye, Roody looked like a very real (and very handsome) dog. Shiny black fur, a cold nose, furry ears that flopped adorably when he ran. Granted, his feet clanked a little on hard surfaces, and if a person looked very closely into his eyes, they might see the inner workings of a long-lens camera, and of course there was the whole talking thing, but since Roody never left their property, it wasn't a problem keeping him a secret. Plus, Piper knew that no one else in the whole world had a robot dog like him, and her parents liked their quiet life (random booms aside) of tinkering and inventing things in the basement.

Ever since Piper could remember, Roody had followed her all over the house (with the exception of the bathroom, where he waited impatiently on the other side of the door because privacy!). Piper used to hold on to his sturdy ears to help keep her balance on wobbly toddler legs, and he was excellent companionship on the long nights her parents toiled in the basement. For reasons her dad shrugged off, he had programmed Roody to protect Piper to the ends of the earth. (Or at least the end of Main Street, which was as far as her parents let her go on her own because they were Overprotective with a capital O.)

She wasn't exactly forbidden from going down to the basement, but with so many tiny clock parts and expensive machinery around, she and Roody just kind of avoided it. But every second she waited, another pack of Smarties wound up in some other kid's pocket.

"I'll go check on them," she told Roody. But when she stood up, a memory flooded back to her. She remembered that she'd been briefly awakened during the night by her parents' excited voices outside her window. They often received late-night deliveries of clock parts, so Piper had simply rolled over and gone back to sleep. But now she wondered if their late night might explain why she was not already halfway to school, turning the corner of Tanglewood and Troy, in her dad's old VW van.

Fortunately, she could easily find out.

“Roody. Please show me any activity on the front lawn last night.” Obediently, Roody turned around and lifted his tail, and the video screen located on his...*ahem*...rear end lit up and hummed to life. Her dad could have built the hologram projector into any body part but chose this one just to make Piper laugh. Which it did. Every time.

Roody tapped into the feed of the front-yard camera, and the footage from last night appeared in the air. Nothing happened for a while, then around midnight a deer tried to reach its nose up to the bird feeder, but that yellow-chested bird with the green stripe pecked at him with its beak and the deer bounded out of view.

Piper watched as the front door suddenly swung so far open it knocked over the painted stones piled on the porch. For as long as Piper could remember, her family had been collecting the flat, palm-size stones from the creek that ran behind town hall, decorating them with paint and feathers and googly eyes, or writing inspirational quotes on them like *There's only one you!* or *Rock on!* or *Never give up on your dreams*. Piper's mom had shown her how to paint some all black, and then when they dried, she used the tip of the paintbrush to make tiny white dots representing the pattern of the constellation currently overhead. So every month, as the earth made its annual journey around

the sun, Piper made a new sky. The rocks themselves weren't so special—the town was actually named Rockdale because the streets were littered with them—but only theirs wound up in people's pockets rather than skimmed across a pond or kicked to a curb.

Piper glanced over her shoulder. The rocks were back in their neat pile. She leaned as close as she dared to Roody's butt to peer at the video projection more closely. Her parents didn't even notice the stones scatter at their feet as they burst through the door. “Do you see anything, Gwen?” her dad asked, his voice full of concern. That in itself was worrisome because it took a lot to get him worked up.

Her mom shook her head, then shivered, even though it wasn't cold out.

“Something's upsetting the barometric balance,” he said firmly. “We have to find it or we won't be able to finish calibrating the clock correctly.”

Piper watched as they gracefully leapt off the porch in their adorable matching striped pajamas, skipping both steps entirely. Her parents were in very good shape for their age. They'd built a small room off their workshop for their daily forty-five-minute workouts. Piper steered clear of it because it smelled like old socks and she feared if she got too close she'd be yanked in to work out with them.

She had no idea what her parents were talking about. She usually didn't, though, so that wasn't new. "Switch view," she instructed Roody. A front view of the house took over the feed. She could see her parents darting across the lawn, first one way, then the other, ducking and sprinting, looking all around them like a very strange version of hide-and-seek.

Piper (and Roody, who was watching with his head twisted around) waited to see what happened next. Even though it was clear the dark street was utterly empty, her parents looked both ways before stepping off the front curb. The footage became grainy at that point. She could still make out their forms but not what they were doing or saying.

Piper frowned. "What happened to the feed? It's all garbled."

Roody shook his head. "I don't know. I haven't seen this happen before."

"Wait, I think it's clearing!" Piper said. The image wavered and then cut back in as her parents returned to the house. Before, their faces had been concerned and confused. Now they looked pale and freaked out. Her father reached for her mom's hand. "We'll figure this out," he promised, his voice wobbling a bit.

"Figure *what* out?" Piper asked. "Did a delivery get stolen or something? Why would they look out here if one of their clocks had a problem?"

Roody had no answer.

"You're right, Jason," Piper's mom was saying. "We've faced a lot worse."

Piper frowned again. What did *that* mean? Sure, her mom had a kind of frantic energy about her most of the time, and her dad had a kind of quiet to him that she equated with him Thinking Deep Thoughts, but generally life was good. They were successful and happy.

*Weren't they?*

The video showed the front door closing, and then the feed went dark. Roody's tail dropped back into place with a click. He tilted his head at her. "Well. That was... stranger than usual."

Piper was still trying to make sense of what she'd seen. Did it mean anything, or was it just a typical-for-them type of night that she usually slept through?

She glanced at the still-closed door and sighed. "I'm *definitely* going to be late to school."

Meanwhile, across the multiverse on another version of Earth...



## CHAPTER TWO

# RAISA

RAISA RAN RIGHT PAST THE PULSEGATE, HOPING SHE WOULDN'T SET OFF any alarms. She had to quickly duck behind a wall when she saw two scientists walking toward her, so deep in conversation they wouldn't have noticed her anyway. As soon as they passed, she sprinted out the large glass doors and across the lawn. Behind her was ASK—Academy for the Study of Kinetics—where her mother worked. In front (she hoped) would be Lev, waiting for her.

Time was of the essence.

Raisa clutched two objects close to her chest and kept running.

He better be there.

He was. Patiently—because Lev was like that—waiting, holding Raisa's bike upright, straddling his own.

"You didn't get the zylon fizz pops?" Lev asked.

"Oh, yeah. No. I mean, I did and then they melted. But I got something way more exciting."

"Than a zylon freeze pop?"

"Okay, you have a point, but way more important..."

Raisa held out her hands, showing Lev a plain brown, ordinary-looking book and an old clunky watch with lots of dials. "The bird didn't come back," she continued. "And the portal is about to close. Any minute. If my mom's project doesn't work, then the whole thing will get shut down and my mom... and Kallie... Well, no one will pay for their research, no one will fund their work anymore... and..."

Lev got off his bike and let both bikes gently drop into the grass. "Whoa, wait. What bird? What are you talking about? And what's that book?"

"Look," Raisa said. "It's not a book. It's the device. It's the device they've been working on for all these years... remember? My mom's big multiverse travel project... You know she talks about it all the time."

"Well...okay...And?"

"And we're running out of time." Raisa took a breath. "Unless you don't want to go with me?"

“Go where?”

It seemed completely self-explanatory to Raisa, but clearly it wasn't for Lev. She blurted out all her plans and all her reasons, from helping her mom and saving the project from being shut down, to *Can you imagine the story we'd tell everyone when we get back*, to just the chance at being a real scientist. A big jump start on their careers.

Lev was quiet. Finally, he said, “You're going to go with or without me, aren't you?” He lifted up his bike and swung his leg over. He didn't wait for an answer. “Well, there's no way you're going without me.” He put his foot on the pedal and pushed off. “Somebody's gotta make sure you don't get into trouble.”

Raisa smiled. She'd never had a doubt. After dropping the book and the watch into her shoulder bag, she pedaled hard and caught up.

Lev pedaled faster. “Where to?” he called back.

“Where else?” Raisa answered.

“Right. The shed.”

Sitting down while activating the portal had made the most sense. Sitting on the ground seemed like a good idea. Crisscrossed, facing each other.

“So this book is really a device?”

Raisa nodded. “And the watch is calibrated to the time differential. So we always know what time it is here.”

“Do we have to do anything?” Lev asked. “Like, do you think a big hole will open up and we'll have to walk through it? Or will the whole shed spin around? Do we need to bring anything with us? How do we know we won't end up in prehistoric times about to be eaten by a brontosaurus?”

“Most dinosaurs are herbivores.”

It was now or never.

“Maybe we should hold hands,” Lev suggested. “You know, in case we get separated.” A flush of red spread across Lev's face, from his neck to his ears.

It was something Raisa had thought about doing a lot—holding Lev's hand—but now wasn't the time to think about that. They were about to make history. “Good idea,” she said.

“For the record”—Lev nodded; he was very serious—“this officially qualifies us as authentic scientists.”

“Are you ready?”

“I am.”

Raisa opened the book. The equation inside seemed pretty simple. As soon as Raisa moved her fingers across the numbers in the right order, she and Lev heard something inside unlock with a snap. There was the sound of air rushing through the book and then all around them. She pressed harder, and the universe did the rest.



## CHAPTER THREE

# RAISA

RAISA TOOK A LOOK AROUND THE SHED. LEV WAS STILL RIGHT BESIDE her. The garden tools leaning against the wall. Lev's bike. There was the workbench with the chip in the top left corner. Three bags of potting soil and one half-empty bag of mulch. The compost bin. Even that huge, smelly burlap bag of manure. Everything just where it should be.

But that humongous stack of round rubber things—had that been here? The dusty window above the doorknob, with a crack on the edge? She didn't remember seeing that, but there was probably no reason she would have noticed that before.

So despite the fact that she and Lev felt lightheaded and woozy, it would seem they had not gone anywhere at all.

"Are you okay?" Lev asked.

"I am. Are you?" Raisa asked. "I mean, I feel a little strange, I guess." She tried to stand, using the chair beside her for balance. The ground felt wobbly, as if it weren't quite solid.

Lev slowly got to his feet beside her. "I do, too. What happened?"

Raisa wasn't sure which she was feeling more. Relief or disappointment? Whichever it was, facts were facts. The book hadn't worked. Here they were, right where they'd started.

"Maybe we just passed out for a second or two," Raisa said. It was definitely a disappointment.

"Could be," Lev agreed. "Maybe when we activated the portal, some kind of energy moved right through us, then right out the other side."

Lev seemed to be pondering that hypothesis. Raisa could practically see the calculations and probabilities bouncing around in his brain. He must not have come up with any plausible interpretation for what had just happened, either, because all he said was "Sorry it didn't work, Raisa. I know you really wanted to help out your mom."

Raisa felt a stinging in her eyes. "I really did."

Lev suddenly put his hand against the wall. "But, jeez, my head still feels like it's floating."



Raisa hadn't considered any other possibility than that her mom's experiment would just work. That they'd gather the proof of an alternate Earth and get home before anyone would know they were gone. Then she'd tell her mom, and nobody would be mad, because how could they be mad when she'd saved the day? Saved the whole project.

"Doesn't look like we have a great story to tell anyone after all." Raisa hung her head.

"Maybe it's better this way," Lev said. "Maybe humans aren't ready for this kind of advancement in science."

"I guess," she said. "Let's get the book and the watch and bring them back to my mom's lab before anyone figures out they're missing."

"Do we have time to run into my house and grab something to eat before we head over to the lab?"

Lev was *always* hungry.

"Fine. Let's hurry, though." Raisa slipped the book carefully into her shoulder bag. Following Lev, she stepped outside.

That was strange.

When they had gone into the shed, the weather had been cloudy with a damp chill in the air. Now it was beautiful, sunny, and warm. An odd apology from the universe.

Odder still was what happened when they took their

first steps onto the lawn. Raisa felt a bounce in her step, almost as if she were lighter. Like, *actually* lighter.

Probably just a little dizzy still. Not worth mentioning. She needed to get the book and the watch back.

Quick pit stop. No lingering.

Lev pulled open the wobbly back screen door and a warm, delicious, sweet smell hit them right away. "Since when does your mom bake cookies?" Raisa asked.

"Since now I guess, and I'm not complaining." He grabbed one from the cooling rack. "Chocolate chip." He stuck his head into the fridge. "Hey, where's the milk?" He poked around. "I know we had two containers this morning. You can't have chocolate chip cookies without milk."

"More is wrong than missing milk," Raisa said. "Look at the stove. And the walls, the walls are a different color."

Lev stared at the stove, then at the wall. "You're right. I don't know what's going on," he said, his mouth full of cookie but no milk to wash it down.

"Tons of stuff looks wrong." Raisa's eyes scanned the whole room.

The rug by the sink. Was that a garbage pail next to the pantry? Had there been an African violet on the windowsill yesterday? They stepped tentatively into the living

room, and *everything* was wrong. The table lamp wasn't on that side. In fact, there hadn't *been* a table lamp there before. A cat silently climbed down from a piano bench and wound its way in and out of Raisa's legs, purring loudly.

Raisa jumped back. "Did you guys get a cat?"

"No," Lev said. "We don't have a cat. *Or* a piano."

The creaking sound of footsteps was coming from the hallway.

"Um, Lev..." Raisa began slowly. "I don't think the house is empty."

Lev spun around.

"Excuse me." There was a woman right behind them, and she was definitely *not* Lev's mom. "Do you two want to tell me what you are doing in my living room?"

Raisa sure wished she had the answer to that question.

Lev opened his mouth, then closed it.

"Is there some reason you aren't in school?" The woman had her hands on her hips. Then her voice softened. "Are you two friends of Brian's?"

This was one of those moments there was no way to predict. Was *yes* the better answer? Or *no*? Given the lack of data, answering a question with a question was probably the best tactic.

"Is this 715 Redwood Drive?" Raisa asked.

"It is," the woman answered. "Brian's at school where he should be." She paused. "Is this some kind of sixth-grade prank? Because if it is, it's really not that funny. And it's kind of dangerous when you think about it. What if I had gotten so startled that I came out here with a baseball bat?"

Raisa forced her mind into focus. "No, no. Sorry," Raisa said, pulling Lev's arm and heading toward the front door. "It's not a prank. I think we thought it was tomorrow. Or today was tomorrow, I mean. Lev and I just got mixed up."

"Oh, right. Yes, that's right," Lev stumbled along while Raisa pulled him. "She and me... and I... I mean, Raisa and I just mixed up today with tomorrow."

The woman seemed satisfied. "Well, I'll tell Brian you two came by. What are your names again?"

Raisa figured the most logical move was to extricate themselves from the situation. "We're really so sorry," Raisa said. "We're just going to get going now."

"Yeah, we're just going to get going now," Lev repeated.

"Next time, ring the bell first. You really startled me."

*She* was startled!

They hurried down the driveway and turned right on the sidewalk. When Raisa looked down, she saw that Lev was

also quite a bit more light-footed than before. There was a springiness to his steps.

“Look,” she said, pointing to the ground. “You feel it, too, don’t you?”

“I do,” Lev said. “I thought maybe I was still dizzy.” He paused a beat, then added, “Gravity. There’s some kind of change in mass and gravity.”

They were both quiet. What had happened was becoming more and more obvious.

“I think we need to stop and assess this situation. Let’s go over the facts.” Lev sounded a bit calmer than he most likely was.

Raisa was pretty sure they both already knew. Someone just needed to say it out loud. She took a deep breath, the excitement threatening to burst right out of her.

“It happened, Lev.”

And then, completely out of character for her, she squealed. “The device worked. It really worked!” She let a deep breath out. “My mother was right. All the work she and Kallie have been doing. For years! We just proved it. We did it. It happened!”

Lev stepped forward, bent his knees, and took a little bounce up. He lifted nearly six inches into the air and slowly drifted back down, like a balloon filled with not quite enough helium. “Then are we...? Did we just...?”

“We did! And we are! We are in an alternate universe.” Raisa lifted onto her tiptoes and slightly off the ground.

“One tiny hop for human beings,” Lev said, laughing.

“And one giant bounce for humankind!”



## CHAPTER FOUR

# PIPER

JUST AS PIPER WAS ABOUT TO GO INSIDE THE HOUSE TO CHECK ON HER parents, her mother rushed out, still in her pajamas. Her usually neatly tied-back hair was standing out in all directions, as though she'd been rubbing her hands through it for hours, which Piper suspected was exactly what she had been doing.

Her mother's eyes darted over to the far curb, and Piper followed her gaze. She saw no indication that anything was amiss.

Piper turned back to her mother and saw that a look of determination had etched itself into her face. Piper knew that look very well. It meant Mom was about to "get to the bottom of something." That's what her parents called it when they hid out in the basement after hours working on

a very stubborn clock. Well, now it was Piper's turn to get to the bottom of something.

"Mom, I saw something on—"

"Pips, are you okay walking to school today?" her mother asked before she could get more words out. "I know it's unusual, but your father and I have a big project we need to work through."

"You mean, walk *alone*?" Piper asked, frankly shocked. This was unprecedented. Many other kids her age walked alone, or in groups, but not her.

Her mom nodded, looking a little pained.

"I don't mind," Piper said quickly, before her mom could change her mind. "You won't miss my robotics competition after school, though, right?" It was the last round before the regional competition, and her team's robot had made it to the finals. It was her job to make sure the robot's nose lit up correctly when it sneezed. Compared to Roody, the robots they built in the club were little more than LEGOs on wheels with some simple circuits. But Piper was proud of theirs, and it gave her a chance to socialize after school since it was hard to invite kids over to your house when you had a talking dog and things that blew up. She'd found that out the hard way years ago. If they won, she'd get to spend more time with her team.

Plus, there'd be pizza afterward from Toozy Patza,

which everyone knew had the best pizza (and weirdest name) in town.

"We wouldn't miss it," Piper's mother assured her, then nudged Roody forward with the tip of her sneaker. Roody let out the tiniest of growls, which her mother ignored. "Roody will make sure you get to school."

Piper could see only one problem with this plan. "But, Mom, no one else has a robot dog. People will notice and ask questions, and you always say it's not nice to show off things that other people don't have."

"Don't worry, honey, Dad's been tweaking Roody's software to make him even more doglike. This will be a good test. No one will give him a second look as long as he doesn't talk. You can do that, right, Roody?"

Roody shrugged. "I can try."

Piper's mom gave him a stern look. "Try hard."

"Okay then!" Piper said, swinging her backpack over her shoulder. "I'm off!" Her mom took her hand and gave her palm a kiss and a tight squeeze. She hadn't done that since Piper was little and still clumsy and worried about tripping in the hallway at school. *I'm with you all day*, she'd said then, and it felt like the kiss on her hand had, in fact, lasted all day.

"I'll be fine, Mom," she said now. "Don't worry." What she wanted to say was *I love you, too*, but she knew if she

did, her mom might change her mind. Her mom only nodded, then glanced again at the street. When Piper turned back around, she started to ask if her mom was sure everything was okay, but the front door was already closing. She felt even more alone out there now than she had before.

"I have calculated the distance and velocity necessary to reach the Rockdale School at precisely eight forty-four AM," Roody announced. "We will need to head southwest at a pace of—"

"Don't worry, Roody," Piper said, pushing back her shoulders. "I got this." She gave his head a reassuring pat, hopped off the porch, and hurried across the still dewy grass. They waited for a few cars to go by, then crossed the street and stood in front of the curb, right where the video feed had gone blurry. Nothing looked out of the ordinary. She glanced back at the house, not surprised to spot her mother's face in the living room window. The curtain whooshed closed.

Hopefully after the competition she'd find out what had really happened last night.

They walked faster, turning down Maple and following the sidewalk that ran alongside most of the main roads in town. She knew she wasn't supposed to talk with Roody, but lots of people talked to their dogs. The only difference was they only had one-way conversations! No one was



## CHAPTER FIVE

# PIPER

around, though, so she whispered, “Do you think anyone will stop to pet you? Now that I look closely, I can tell whatever Dad did to your program to make you look more real made your fur a little softer and curlier. Your eyes are more lifelike, too.”

Roody gave a quick side-to-side glance, then said, “Yeah, well, whatever else he did is making me need to use that fire hydrant!”

“Huh?”

But Roody didn’t elaborate. He bolted over to the red fire hydrant a few yards ahead of them, lifted a leg, and shouted, “Look away, look away!”

Wide-eyed, Piper did as told.

Roody soon returned to her side, his fur bristling. “Your father and I need to have a serious discussion.”

Piper had to bite on her lip to keep from laughing.

THEIR LITTLE DOWNTOWN HAD BEGUN TO FILL WITH GROWN-UPS HURRYING to work. A few people were walking their dogs along the paths that crisscrossed the center of town. Roody instinctively moved closer to Piper’s feet as they almost bumped right into a woman with a ponytail jogging past the coffee shop.

The woman’s small white dog scampered to keep up, attached to the woman’s belt by a thin leash. The woman nodded at them, then glanced at Roody and slowed to a stop. Roody and her dog had begun sniffing each other. Piper held her breath. Would Roody actually smell like a real dog?

The woman bent down and lifted her own dog into her arms, breaking up their playdate. “What kind of dog is that?”

"He's...um, he's a—" Piper stammered. "Like a mix. He's new. New-ish. I mean, he doesn't get out much."

"Well, all dogs should be on a leash," she said to Piper, her tone friendly but firm. Then she added, "And where are his collar and tags? You wouldn't want him to get lost and have no way to find him."

Piper could just see Roody about to launch into a lecture on his state-of-the-art global positioning system and how being lost would simply be impossible. She shot him a you'd-better-not-talk look.

"I'll make sure to take his leash next time," she promised. She should have thought of that before, but everything was so new. Did he even *have* a leash?

The woman gave Roody a closer look. "Well, he seems like a fine dog even if he does walk a bit oddly. His joints may be a little stiff. You can put a warm compress on his knees. Make sure he gets all his shots and a good deworming." Then she gave them a single nod and jogged away, still holding her dog close. Roody's ears stood up in alarm. He leaned close and whispered, "You're not going to—"

"Deworm you, whatever that is? No, you're good."

Roody sagged with relief.

"Look at you, though, making new doggy friends." They stuck close together as they hurried down the sidewalk toward the school.

"Well, your father will be pleased. The human and her dog put me in the same category as an ordinary *Canis lupus familiaris* and— Wait, hang on!" He lifted his chin, sniffing the air. Piper looked around but didn't see—or smell—anything unusual.

"Be right back!" Roody said. Then he took off.

Before Piper could do more than open her mouth to protest, he'd become a blur of dark fur bounding directly toward the stores on South Main Street, the exact *opposite* direction of where they needed to go!



## CHAPTER SIX

# RAISA

THREE BLOCKS FROM NOT-LEV'S HOUSE, AND RAISA, DESPITE THE ADDED weight of the rocks, still didn't feel like she was walking normally. "I think I need another one."

"Of course," Lev said. "You weigh less than me. You need more mass to compensate for the change in gravity here." He bent down and wrested another rock from the dirt, a little bigger than the one he had just given Raisa. "Try this."

"Thanks." Raisa dropped the rock into her pocket, and it seemed to do the trick. She felt more solidly on the ground and could walk more or less normally.

"The gravity is substantially weaker here," Lev said. "More than I first realized."

"We need to keep track of all our findings from this point on," Raisa said. "Did you bring a Nano-VR Recorder?"

"Me?"

Raisa opened her shoulder bag and peeked inside. "Oh no. Me neither. I guess this wasn't exactly a well-planned excursion. But if we don't have any proof, no one will even believe us."

"Yup." Lev turned over his wrist. "You said time moves slower here, right? So if your mom's calculations are correct—"

"Which they are," Raisa interrupted.

"Which they are," Lev repeated. "Then maybe we can just gather some physical evidence. I don't know, something that's so different here, no one will be able to deny we've traveled to an alternate universe. Anyway, we can spend as much time as we want here"—Lev looked down at the watch—"and be back before anyone even notices we are gone. Not even a second has gone by back home."

"Yup..." Raisa thought for a beat. "It's like a ripple at the center of a puddle would be days from reaching the edge."

"An inch worm crawling on the ground would be standing still for years!"

"Yup."

"Okay then, in the name of science, let's start collecting data." Raisa held up her hand, pointing the way forward.

As they walked, they noted all the things that were exactly the same as they had been the day before, and the



day before that. Raisa and Lev had ridden their bikes from town to Lev's and back again so many times they knew every pothole, and every tree, and every fence along the route. So much here was exactly the same. An alternate world. Different but the same.

Same stump they passed by just yesterday. Same giant crack in the sidewalk that Raisa and Lev had dubbed the Canyon. Same empty lot with the chain-link fence.

But there were small differences—aside from the gravity thing, of course—for which there seemed to be no good explanation. As if a minor change, a random decision point, or maybe a major one in this universe, had created some random consequences.

Hadn't there been a stone wall right here?

And that blue house on the left, with the double chimney and the brick walkway.

"Isn't that house supposed to be red?" Raisa stopped, taking a closer look. "Or maybe I'm remembering it wrong."

"Was that stop sign there before?" Lev asked.

And when they turned the corner onto South Main, neither Raisa nor Lev could say for sure if that fire hydrant had been there before, but they didn't think it had been. It was like waking up in the morning when the last moment of a dream lingers, and when you try to remember, it slips just out of reach, then vanishes.

Downtown Rockdale: The same stores, restaurants, shops, and Peter's Food Emporium lay straight ahead. "This is so cool," Raisa said. "Let's get closer."

"Wait." Lev stopped her. "We need to be really careful that we don't bump into our alternate selves. The other us-es in this universe."

Lev was so right!

"But since your house was not your house, there probably isn't another you here. At least not in that house," Raisa said. "Though one can never be too careful."

"Keep your head down *and* your eyes peeled," Lev said. There were grown-ups pushing strollers. People walking their dogs. The public library. The bookstore. There was their favorite pizza parlor.

Raisa was already imagining what she would tell her mother and how excited and happy her mother was going to be.

"So do you think..." Lev started to say. "I mean, we never did get anything to eat at 'not-my' house... Would getting a pizza at Toozy Patza be in the interest of science?"

"Absolutely."



## CHAPTER SEVEN

# PIPER

PIPER SPARED ONLY A SECOND TO GLANCE BACK TOWARD THE SCHOOL IN the distance, where she could just spot the yellow school buses pulling away after depositing their last students. Then she took off after Roody, backpack bouncing awkwardly as she ran. “Roody!” she shouted. “Come back here right now!”

Roody finally came to a stop directly in front of Mr. Lombardo—longtime owner of Toozy Patza—who was halfway out of his door with a tray of food wobbling in each hand. Mr. Lombardo frowned at the dog standing between him and the table in front of the restaurant with a FREE SAMPLE sign taped to it. Piper caught up, trying to ignore the cramp in her side.

Mr. Lombardo looked surprised. “Hello, Ms. Anderson, does this dog belong to you?”

Piper never thought of Roody as *belonging* to them. He was simply a member of the family. But she went along with it and nodded, reaching for Roody, who only had eyes for whatever Mr. Lombardo had on those trays. “Roody!” she snapped, finally getting his attention. First, other dogs. Now, food? “I’m sorry, Mr. Lombardo, he’s not usually like this.”

Which was certainly true.

Mr. Lombardo rested the trays on the folding table that had been set up outside his shop. A glance down the street showed Piper that many of the shops were in the process of setting up tables on the sidewalk. They did that a few times a year on days when the weather was especially nice. “It’s all right,” he said kindly. “Hard to fault a dog for wanting one of our famous pepperoni puffs.”

Roody opened his mouth wide and wagged his tail.

“May I?” Mr. Lombardo asked, holding out a pepperoni puff.

“Nooooo!” Piper shouted. “I mean, no thank you, Mr. Lombardo.” He dropped the puff back on the tray in surprise. No one likely turned down a puff, human or canine.

Piper bent down and patted her leg. “Come here,” she instructed, as if he were, well, a dog, which made Roody’s fur bristle. He obeyed, though, and she whispered, “What were you thinking? Just because you can smell...doesn’t mean you can *eat*.”



## CHAPTER EIGHT

# RAISA

When Piper turned to go, Mr. Lombardo stopped her. “Can you guard the pepperoni puffs for me while I refill the trays? Squirrels can be squirrely, as they say, and I’d like to save some for our human customers.”

The last roll of Smarties in the Welcome Bowl would surely be gone now. If they left this very second, she may still get a mini Tootsie Roll. “I really can’t, I’m so late for—”

But for the second time so far that morning, a door closed in her face while she was still talking.

IT HAD BEEN JUST THAT MORNING, BEFORE SCHOOL, THAT RAISA WAS hiding next to the biopolymer cooler in her mom’s lab, holding two never-melt zylon freeze pops.

No one had tried to stop Raisa when she snuck into the building where her mom worked. No one had given her a second glance. Scientists were like that. Their heads in the clouds, or the quantum realm, or the betasphere. Besides, she had come to visit her mom at work dozens of times before. Nothing unusual about today other than that she was supposed to be on her way to school. But Raisa had promised Lev she’d grab a couple of the new zylon freeze pops.

When she heard voices, she ducked beside the biopolymer refrigerator. It was her mom and Kallie, her mom’s

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lab partner. *Yikes.* She'd left her schoolbag right there on the floor. Raisa was sure she was going to be caught, but neither her mom nor Kallie noticed it. She tried not to breathe. The zylon pops were already starting to melt.

*Isn't the point of these things that they don't melt?*

Clearly not.

Sticky goo was dripping down Raisa's wrist, but when she lifted her hand to lick it off, she nearly dropped the other one.

*Okay, yeah. That's not going to work.*

Raisa didn't move or make a sound as pools of purple dripped onto the floor.

"For all we know, the bird is dead." It was Kallie's voice.

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

All Raisa could see were her mother's feet, standing in front of the computer console as she typed away. "Exactly," she said. "We don't know. Another possibility is that when we sent Niels through the portal, it altered his homing capabilities and that's why he hasn't returned."

"Or he's dead, Pauline."

Raisa knew her mom and Kallie had been working on their multiverse travel project for the last fifteen years. She watched her mother plop down onto her desk chair. Raisa scooted back even closer to the wall next to the biopolymer refrigerator.

"Yet," her mother began, "another possibility is that Niels is on his way back right at this very moment." Under the table, her mother's legs were bouncing up and down, like they were motorized. "His species can live longer than a sea turtle. He may still be coming back."

Kallie stood up and started pacing back and forth, her sneakers making squeaking noises. "It could be the level of fusion energy we attached to his leg. We don't know what happened, how much was expended on its initial thrust, how much remains. Maybe it needs to be recharged before returning?"

"How could we not have considered that?" Raisa's mom said.

"I'm sure there's a lot we don't know. All we can do is hope Niels is over there living his best life."

"But there's still time."

"Very little." Kallie's voice, resigned and tired. "You calculated it down to a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of a second. Math never lies. Every 0.00410958904109589th of a second, one hour will have passed in the alternate universe. Nearly two hundred years have gone by for him. If he hasn't come back by now... well, then—"

"We just need to wait a little longer."

"Pauline, it's been two hours."

"Maybe my calculations were a tiny bit off."

"Your math is right. It always is." Kallie let out a long sigh.

Raisa's mom jumped up so quickly her chair rolled backward. Her voice rose. "We'll lose all our funding if this fails."

"We don't have a choice."

"You're right, but I also know it's safe. It's simple nuclear physics. A bird can't adjust the energy output. We should have gone ourselves. Why didn't we just go ourselves?" Then she answered her own question. "I know, I know...that would be foolish. Raisa and Micah didn't sign up for this."

At the sound of her dad's name, Raisa's mind slid back to the dinner table the night before. As with most of her parents' conversations—filled with discussion about Dyson spheres, and dark matter, and neutrinos—Raisa hadn't been paying much attention. But now it all seemed to make sense.

Mom: *I don't know what we'll do if it doesn't work tomorrow. Kallie and I never thought it would require this much time and money. Our funding ran out a long time ago.*

Dad: *It's going to work.*

Mom: *You don't know that, Micah. I've already dipped into our savings more than I should have. [long pause] And all the time I've spent away from you and Raisa.*

Dad: *I have a good feeling about tomorrow, Pauline. You and Kallie will prove that traveling the multiverse is real. They will name a space station after you two!*

Mom: *Well, I wouldn't go that far.*

Dad: *Remember, failure is not the opposite of success.*

Mom: *Well, but maybe sometimes—*

Raisa heard her mother slump back into her chair just as she had last night, but this time she understood the importance of it all. There wouldn't be another chance. It was now or never, or twenty-five years from now, which might as well be never.

Raisa's mom and Kallie were both quiet. Nothing filled the room but the hum of the biopolymer cooler and Raisa's own thoughts. Didn't all scientific advancements come with risk? The first rocket to leave the earth's atmosphere. The first experience with plutonium. The first vaccine. The first person to land on the moon. Quantum teleportation. Human cell nano tech. Vibronic displacement. What about the first landing on Gliese 12 b? All were dangerous.

"Well, there goes our Nobel Prize." Raisa could hear the sadness in her mother's voice, even while she tried to make a joke.

Kallie laughed half-heartedly. "So what should we do

with the watch?" she asked. "It's got to be good for something else."

"I guess we can figure that out later."

A clank on the table.

"And the book?"

A thud as the book was dropped.

"Just leave it all there, Pauline. We can come back later and clean up. Let's go get something to eat. It's been a long morning."

"I just want to finish something up," Raisa's mother said. "I'll catch up with you in a minute."

Raisa peeked out from the side of the cooler. Her mom was at her desk, staring off into space—which Raisa knew meant she was deep in thought—before she returned to whatever she was doing. Raisa ducked back and waited. Finally, she heard her mother's footsteps, followed by the door opening and shutting, and when Raisa came out from hiding, she saw the book and the watch for the first time, just lying right there for the taking.



## CHAPTER NINE

# PIPER

BY NOW EVEN THE LAST MINI TOOTSIE WOULD BE GONE SO PIPER FIGURED she may as well check out the books on the table in front of New to You Books and Comics next door. "Keep your eyes on the puffs until Mr. Lombardo returns," she instructed Roody. "Do NOT eat any."

Roody grumbled but took up his post.

The sign on the table read: *FREE BOOKS—THEY'RE A LITTLE MORE "WELL-LOVED" THAN USUAL*, written in Aunt Pearl's unmistakable cursive. She wasn't Piper's real aunt, but she'd become such a good family friend that they'd taken to calling her that. Piper's parents were no doubt her best customers—technology and history for her dad, science and romance for her mom.

Aunt Pearl was the only person who regularly visited

the house, even though she only made it as far as the front porch. Piper's parents would listen for hours to stories about the colorful characters who worked in the used book business while they all rocked in the white wicker rockers and sipped lemonade. Piper would lie on her belly on the lawn nearby and read whatever new-to-her book Aunt Pearl had brought for her.

A closer look showed Post-it notes on top of the piles with different subject headings written on them. History, blank journals, nature, art, cooking, biography, and so on. Piper had been on a science fiction kick recently, but there didn't seem to be any on the table. Aunt Pearl liked to say that if you don't choose a book, a book chooses you. So Piper closed her eyes, held her hand over the table, and let it hover at random. She could swear she actually did feel a hum of energy, but that was just silly. She opened her eyes to find her hand above one of the blank journals. Not exactly a reading type of book, but Aunt Pearl had been in this business a long time, so who was Piper to question her methods?

She glanced next door. The Toozy Patza door remained closed. Seriously, how long did it take to bring out more puffs?

She turned back to the table. The journal had a hard brown cover, with no pattern or title. One corner had

some kind of circular dent in it, like someone had pressed a quarter on it for too long. She could see why Aunt Pearl had marked it free.

When she picked it up, a tiny shock went up her arm like when she turned on a light switch after walking on carpet. Piper blinked in surprise. "Did you see that, Roody? Like a spark of static electricity?"

Roody tilted his head. "Maybe? But I'm also really distracted by the smell of the puffs. So not really."

Piper put her free hand to her head even though she didn't feel dizzy, exactly. She took a deep breath. Her inner clock had picked up again, and it was ticking fast. She was about to go tell Mr. Lombardo she really couldn't wait any longer when a girl's voice called out from the road. "Is that you, Piper? Are you late for school, too? Do you want a ride?"

Piper whirled around at the sound of her name, her hip bumping the edge of the table. She reached out to steady the now wobbling piles of books, and the journal slid out of her hand. It tumbled through the air, flapping open before landing on the ground with a soft thud. To her surprise, neat handwriting filled the front along with detailed diagrams, lists, and charts. Aunt Pearl had mentioned collectors who sought out old diaries and notebooks—this must be one of those!



“Uh, Piper?” the girl’s voice called again.

Piper quickly turned away from the books to see Sofia, a classmate and friend on her robotics team, leaning out of the passenger window of her mom’s car. Roody growled protectively from where he stood guard at the next table.

Thankfully, Mr. Lombardo finally came back out, his arms full with two more trays. “Go, go,” he said, gesturing toward the street with his chin.

Piper was about to duck under the table to retrieve her book when Sofia called out again in a pained voice, “Butterscotch, Piper, *butterscotch!*”

“Sorry, coming!” Piper called out, grabbing her backpack. She whispered out of the corner of her mouth to Roody, “Meet me on the playground at recess. Stay out of sight, *don’t* talk, and don’t try to eat any food!” She hurried to the road and flung the car door open without looking back.

By the time Piper and Sofia slipped into the classroom and took the last two butterscotch drops (ugh), all of the other students had their noses buried in their reading material. Mrs. Hollins gave them DEAR (drop everything and read) time twice a day—first thing in the morning and right after recess. If anyone forgot to bring a book, Mrs. Hollins kept a whole selection in the back of the room. It wasn’t just books, though. They could read magazines,

comics, even repair manuals if that’s what they enjoyed. Mrs. Hollins told the class on the first day of school never to be ashamed of what they liked to read, so none of them were. Piper could see that Mrs. Hollins herself had finished the pirate romance novel she’d been reading earlier that week and had moved on to *Underwater Treasure Hunting for Beginners*.

Piper slid into her seat across from Sofia. She leaned over to whisper, “Thanks again for the ride.”

“No problem,” Sofia whispered back. “But you owe me a pack of Smarties.”

Piper smiled. Maybe being late wasn’t so bad. The last time she’d hung out with Sofia outside of school hadn’t ended well. She’d invited her over to play in the backyard a few years ago, but her parents happened to get a delivery of clock parts from a van with tinted windows. They’d started running around, shouting things excitedly to each other, and Piper could tell that Sofia was getting a little uncomfortable. She kept shifting her weight from side to side and then she called her mom to pick her up early. Piper wanted to explain that this was just a normal day for them, but she didn’t know how. Before she could change her mind, she leaned across the aisle again and whispered, “I’m not sure if you remember, but I’m sorry about—”



"Excuse me, girls, do you or do you not have something to read?" The top of Mrs. Hollins's head appeared above her book.

"We do," Sofia called out.

"Well then, get to it." Her head lowered again.

Piper's apology would have to wait a little longer. She popped in the butterscotch and opened her library book on the constellations. She'd barely read two sentences when Mrs. Hollins announced it was time to move on to their science lesson. Ugh. Missing DEAR time was almost as bad as getting stuck with the butterscotch. Although she had to admit the taste was actually growing on her.

For a robot programmed to serve and protect, Roody wasn't very good at following directions in the great outdoors.

"Stop it," Piper hissed out her classroom window only an hour later as Roody's head popped up to her level, then disappeared again. "Get OFF of that! It's for gym class!"

Roody did not get off the trampoline stationed on the playground below Piper's classroom window because he was having too much fun. Piper glanced behind her and was relieved to see that no one was paying any attention to her and her wasn't-supposed-to-exist robot dog companion. The rest of her classmates were pressing large

seashells to their ears for a sound waves experiment. Some kids claimed they could hear the ocean through the shell. She had missed most of the lesson due to the distraction of Roody's floppy ears and wagging tail appearing in the window every 2.2 seconds.

Piper inched closer to the window. "Roody! Real dogs don't do somersaults on trampolines! You have to go away before someone else sees you!"

He didn't go away. "Don't you want to hear about"—*bounce*—"what happened at the street fair"—*bounce*—"after you"—*bounce*—"abandoned me there?"

Piper rolled her eyes at *abandoned*. "I see your newfound freedom"—*bounce*—"hasn't made you any less"—*bounce*—"dramatic. We'll talk at recess!"

She yanked down the blinds and grabbed a conch shell. She could hear a hollow thrumming when she held it to her ear. Was that how the ocean sounded? They only lived a few hours away from the beach, but her parents worked so hard they almost never left town. She was pretty sure she was only hearing sound waves bouncing around the inside of the shell, but she allowed herself to be lulled by the whooshing waves. The dreamy sensation let her thoughts float back to the book that had sparked in her hand earlier. In her haste she'd left it on the ground, and that was no way to treat a book. Her father would

have been disappointed in her, which was something she actively tried not to make happen with either parent.

She sighed and set down the shell. The journal would probably be taken by the time she'd be able to go by there again. She hoped at least it went to someone who'd appreciate it.



## CHAPTER TEN

# RAISA

THE SMELL WAS WONDERFUL: CHEESE, GARLIC, OREGANO, EVEN THE warm scent of the open fire brick oven. Raisa slid onto the bench across from Lev, shifted her bag with the book inside, and sighed.

"So here's what I'm thinking." Lev leaned closer. "If for some reason our alternate selves come in here, we just duck down."

"I was thinking the same thing."

"You're facing the door. You keep a lookout," Lev said.

"Got it. You know," Raisa began, "this might be our very first, *real* scientific discovery."

A huge grin spread over Lev's face. "Wow, you're right. In a way, it wasn't so impulsive. We've been planning for this for a long time."

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He lowered his voice when the waitress came to their table, holding two menus in her hand.

"Thank you, but we don't need those," Raisa said. "We already know what we want. We come here all the time."

"Funny, I've never seen you." The waitress glanced at them but luckily didn't appear particularly interested.

Lev was making faces as if Raisa should know what he meant, but she quickly figured it out. This was not their Toozy Patza! She was glad her mother wasn't here to see her make such an obvious slipup. It must have been the smell of the food or the grumble in her stomach.

Raisa and Lev looked at each other. "Oh, well, maybe it was when you weren't working," Raisa said quickly. "Uh, can we get a small Taste of Italy please?" She hoped it was still an option here. Maybe she should have taken the menu after all.

"Sure thing," the waitress said.

Raisa nodded.

So all good.

"Uh, actually can you make that one *large* pie?" Lev jumped in.

The waitress shifted her weight from her left to her right. "Are you sure this time?"

They both said they were.

"And to drink?"

"Water is fine," Raisa answered.

"Tap or bottled?"

Neither Raisa nor Lev knew what that meant, but tap seemed pretty odd. Would they have to tap it to drink water, or to hit it, or shake it? Best play it safe. She knew what a bottle was.

"Bottled?" Raisa answered.

"Sure you're sure this time?" the waitress asked, but she was smiling.

"Yes, we're sure," Lev said.

The waitress repeated the order, then hurried off. When they were alone again, Lev leaned across the table.

"Maybe we don't have doubles of us in this universe, because the waitress didn't recognize us. And I bet we'd be regulars here like we are at home. Maybe that's a good sign we won't bump into ourselves."

"Maybe we don't even live in Rockdale." Even though she knew this wasn't really her home, she felt oddly comfortable here. "Still," she said. "We need to maintain a low profile. Low-key. Under the radar. We can't call attention to ourselves."

"Agreed," Lev said. "And wherever we go, we just need to make sure we can get back to the shed. We need to activate the book and return from the exact same place."

When the waitress came back, she set the pizza down on the table and gave them each a bottle of water. "Here you go."

“Plastic?” Lev said, a little louder than he probably should have.

“You asked for bottled, didn’t you?” She was clearly becoming confused. Raisa kicked Lev under the table. Then the waitress put a thin piece of rectangular paper down on the table.

“I’ll just leave this here,” she said. “No rush. Take your time.” She headed back to the kitchen.

“Not a very sustainable universe. They use plastic here,” Lev noted. He already had half a slice of pizza in his mouth. “What is it?”

Raisa picked the paper up, frowning the way she did when she was reading something carefully, trying to decipher it. “I think it’s our order. One large Taste of Italy pizza, two waters. Then a bunch of numbers and something that says *tax*.”

Lev slid a second slice off the metal stand and right into his mouth, bypassing his plate altogether. “I wonder what tax is,” he said.

“I have no idea.”

Raisa laid the paper back down on the table, realizing she had better catch up to Lev before the pizza was gone. She grabbed a slice and gobbled it down. “Does this pizza taste a little different to you?”

Lev shrugged. “Still delicious.”

They both took another, and not more than six minutes later they had eaten it all.

“I needed that,” Lev said. “Maybe traveling to an alternate universe makes you hungry.”

“You are *always* hungry, Lev.” Raisa scooted out of the booth. “But now that we’re all fueled up, let’s get to the business of collecting data.”

“Well, so far at least the pizza is almost as good here.”

Lev followed Raisa to the door. They both paused and looked up for the biometric authenticator, which didn’t seem to be there.

Raisa shrugged. “Maybe food is free here.”

“Cool,” Lev said. He reached out his arm to push the door open for her. “We need to look for more things that are, beyond a doubt, different in our universe from this one.”

It didn’t take long, at all, for that to happen.

“Excuse me.” The waitress stopped them. “I think you forgot something.”

“We did?” Raisa asked.

The waitress was holding the thin piece of paper in her hand, waving it.

Were they supposed to take it with them? Maybe. Best just do it. “Oh, right. Thank you.” Raisa took the paper.

Lev held the door wide open and they turned to leave.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN

# PIPER

Until the waitress tugged him back. "You need to take care of your bill, remember? This isn't your mother's house."

You could say that again.

"It's a *restaurant*." The waitress didn't sound so friendly anymore.

"Bill?" Lev asked. "Oh, you mean *pay*?"

*Good try*, Raisa thought. Acting clueless could be a good tactic, as it had been with Brian's mom in Not-Lev's house, but not, apparently, in this particular case.

What was a bill anyway?

Was it the way they paid for things in this universe?

"Hey, Sal, get over here," the waitress called out. "I've got a couple of runners."

A large man, whose name must have been Sal, came out from behind the counter.

"Hey, kids. I don't want to make any trouble for you but..." Sal moved to block the doorway.

"So much for keeping a low profile." Raisa searched frantically for another exit. There was a door that looked like it went straight through the kitchen and out the back exit. Lev saw it at the same time.

"Ditch the rocks," he said.

And they ran.

"GOOD HIDING SPOT!" PIPER SAID AS SHE SQUEEZED INTO THE PINK plastic castle that the first graders played in during their own recess period. No fifth grader would ever go near it, so they'd be safe from her classmates. Thankfully it was a little roomier on the inside than it looked.

"Don't give me too much credit," Roody said. "I thought it was a doghouse."

"So what did you want to tell me about the street fair? You know, while you were training for the Robot Dog Olympics on the trampoline?"

"Hey, I'd totally win. But more importantly..." He held up a paw. "I know you haven't spent much time around real dogs, but does this look like the type of appendage

that could easily pick up a fallen book and return it to a table the same way, say, that *you* could have?"

"Hmm, I guess not. But you're only real-*ish*, soooo... maybe?"

"Nope. While I have good manners and know that littering is wrong, I sadly lack opposable thumbs. While I was trying to figure out how to pick up the book you dropped, a lady and her kid came to check out the table, so I hid behind a tree. I didn't want them to take me home and put me in dog food commercials."

Piper tried not to laugh because Roody looked very serious. "We'll get you a collar before anyone tries to take you away and make you a star." If he couldn't move the book, maybe no one else had spotted it yet! "So, um, did the woman and her kid happen to take any books?"

"Yes, they did."

Her heart sped up as she waited for his next words.

"The boy took a book on model trains," Roody said, "and his mother took one on changing careers in midlife."

"So the journal is still under the table then?"

Roody shook his head and Piper's shoulders sagged. "Someone else found it?"

He shook his head again and pointed a paw into a dark corner of the little castle. "It was not easy carrying that thing all the way here in my mouth, I'll tell you that much."

A jolt of pleasure ran through her. "You could have just told me that up front! But thank you. You're the best." This time nothing unusual happened when she picked up the book. There were tooth imprints near the spine and some leftover slobber, but otherwise it was in good condition.

The warning bell rang before she could open it. Investigating the contents would have to wait until after school. Maybe it would be the start of her own collection. "Thanks for knowing I wanted this, Roody."

He shrugged. "Just doing my job." But she could tell by his tail wag that he was pleased.

"I've gotta go," she said as she shimmied out the castle window. "I'll meet you back here to walk home."

She'd only gotten a few feet toward the school when she heard *beep-beep-beep* coming from inside the castle. She turned back and poked her head in the window. "What was that sound?"

Roody was sitting upright, his head grazing the plastic roof. "It's my property perimeter detector. Something's going on at your house!"



## CHAPTER TWELVE

# RAISA

LEV AND RAISA HAD MET FOR THE FIRST TIME IN LUNCH DETENTION IN third grade.

It wasn't really detention, but that's what all the kids called it. Its official name was Chill-In. (As opposed to chill out?) Whatever it was, it was held in an empty dome room during—what else—recess, with a high school kid monitor who was supposed to be monitoring but had left and not returned. There was only one other kid in the room. Raisa had never seen him before, so she figured he must be the new boy she'd heard had just moved to town. His face and his concentration were buried deep in a book; his long legs stuck out, his knees banging the underside of his desk.

Imagine, first week of school and already in detention. Impressive.

"I'm Raisa," she said. She was still so mad that she'd been given detention...oh, right Chill-In, but she was more curious why this new kid was here, too.

"Lev." He didn't look up from his book, but Raisa wasn't about to give up.

"I shouldn't be here," she said. "All I did was tell the teacher she was wrong. It's clear as day. Look." She tapped her kinetic tablet, sending a 3D image of her test into the air.

Lev leaned forward, took a quick peruse, and announced, "That's so stupid."

"I know, right?" Raisa gestured to the graphic where every question was marked correct except one. "I tried explaining it to her over and over and over."

"What happened?"

"Well, it was the fourth time I tried to prove my point that got me sent here," Raisa said. "I probably should have quit while I was behind."

"If the probability of a kitten being born male or female is fifty percent," Lev continued reading the holographic image. "Which it is," he added.

"Keep reading."

"And a cat has two kittens and at least one is male, what are the chances that the other kitten is male? Well, that's an easy one," he said.

"What's your answer?" Raisa asked him.

"One-third. What else could it be?"

"That's what I said!" Raisa nearly jumped up from her seat. "She kept telling me it was one-fourth."

Lev studied the illuminated test more closely. "You know what I think happened," he said.

"That I'm right and the math teacher is wrong?"

"No . . . well, yes. It's how she presented the question."

Lev pointed in the air. "When she wrote that *at least* one is male, she eliminated the chance that both kittens are female. So that leaves the combinations of boy/boy, boy/girl, and girl/boy."

"Right! And see, that *is* how she wrote it. She wrote *at least*." Raisa was getting agitated all over again just thinking about it. "Look, I even made her a chart."

"I know, but if she had written it as 'What are the chances that they are *both* male,' then the answer would be one out of four."

Raisa closed her eyes to consider what Lev was saying.

"So you mean, it was just the wording. Using the words *at least* gives you one answer, and using the words *are both* has a different answer?"

"Would seem so."

Raisa tapped her screen and the image disappeared.

"But I don't think it's worth arguing about," Lev said.

"Well, too late for that." Raisa slipped her math exam back into her math folder. "So why are you here?" she asked.

"For arguing with my science teacher."

Which Raisa thought was pretty funny, but she laughed probably a little more than was necessary. She said quickly, "Well, if we keep arguing with our teachers, what are the odds we are both here again tomorrow?"

Lev paused, then answered, "Too many variables."

"Well, then just another thought," Raisa offered. "We could eat lunch at the same table tomorrow."

Which was what they did, every school day, for the next three years, dreaming about all the scientific discoveries they would make that no one would be able to dispute.





## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

# PIPER

PIPER WAS TORN BETWEEN STAYING WITH ROODY IN THE PINK CASTLE and getting back to class on time, but her curiosity won. Maybe she'd find out more about what happened the night before. "Can you tap into the camera feed from here?"

He shook his head. "I tried," Roody said. "But the cameras have been turned off." Seeing her disappointment, he said, "Fine. I'll dig through my code to see if I can hack in." He closed his eyes and twitched his head a bit while she waited anxiously. Finally, he turned around so his rear was pointed out the castle's window. He raised his tail, grunted a little, then looked over his shoulder at Piper expectantly. "Well?"

"Well what?"

"Do you see anything?"

"Um, just your butt."

His ears flopped, followed by his tail. "No video feed?"

She shook her head.

"Hang on, let me try one more thing." He lifted his tail again, and Piper took a step back. She heard a few clicks and a very muffled whirring sound. Roody lowered his head and shook his hind legs, and a faint image appeared in the air.

"You're doing it, Roody!"

"It's not...easy," he said, his head buried in his paws.

"Have to...concentrate. Make it...fast."

Piper gave a quick glance behind her, but most of the fifth graders were already back inside. Then she got as close to the image as possible and squinted at it. Her parents stood on the porch, a large duffel bag at their feet. They spoke animatedly to each other, but the feed had no audio. Piper looked closer at the bag. The only time they'd used it was when they went camping nearby a few years ago. "Are they going somewhere without me?"

The final bell rang, and dozens of first graders streamed out of the cafeteria doors. A handful broke off and were heading right for the castle.

"Uh-oh," Piper said to Roody. "You better find another hiding spot for the next half hour unless you want a lot of sticky hands getting all tangled up in your fur. Keep an eye on that feed if you can."

This time she'd only missed the first few minutes of their post-recess DEAR time. Mrs. Hollins was so engrossed in her book that she didn't even look up when Piper slipped into her seat. Sofia raised her eyebrows with a little smile. Piper smiled back. She still needed to give that apology. Rather than risking Mrs. Hollins's attention by talking again, she pulled the journal from her sweatshirt pocket and eagerly opened it to the first page.

$$H^2 = \left(\frac{\dot{a}}{a}\right)^2 = \frac{8\pi G}{3}\rho - \frac{kc^2}{a^2} + \frac{\Lambda c^2}{3}$$

Hmm! Piper leaned in, a little shiver of excitement running down her spine. She loved math and was good at it. Okay, better than good—she could picture imaginary points in space and see how they connected into shapes and dimensions, even if she didn't have the words to explain it. Her dad had taught her that math was like the secret code to unlocking the universe. Just as the hands on a clock merely *represented* the passage of time, math wasn't really about the numbers themselves. It was about what those numbers *stood for*—the underlying structure of the universe. She'd even won a real apple pie in third grade for memorizing over two hundred digits of pi in a school-wide contest. Reciting them helped lull her to sleep at night.

But this...this was a whole new kind of math. The equations in the fifth-grade textbook just had  $x$ 's and  $y$ 's for the missing numbers. She reached out to touch the page, as though that would help her understand better.

As soon as her fingers grazed the first symbol, she felt a gentle little tug from her chest. The logical part of her brain told her to yank her finger back, but since this was only the fifth strange thing to have happened that day so far, she didn't listen. Instead, she began tracing her finger slowly along the letters and numbers. The odd tugging increased as she went along, until she finished the last part of the equation.

Then things got *really* weird.

The room began to...change. All the posters on the walls, her classmates' clothes, the class's pet skunk. Piper stared as the color seeped out of them until everything and everyone looked like a black-and-white cartoon. (Although, honestly, the skunk was already black and white.)

Then in a *whoosh* she was pressed backward, like when riding one of those superfast carnival rides that pins you to your seat. At least this time she didn't feel like the contents of her stomach would wind up on the floor, like the four deep-fried Oreos she'd eaten at the town carnival before going on the Gravitron. Some lessons are learned the hard way.

Tiny silver sparks danced around her as darkness descended in a swoosh, like a curtain being lowered too

quickly at the end of a play. Piper grabbed hold of the side of her desk with one hand, while the other stayed flat on the open book. She could still hear her classmates turning their pages, chewing their candy, whispering to their friends, but she was definitely not still in her classroom. There was no way to know if they could see that she'd disappeared. She wanted to call out, but that felt impossible.

The sparks gradually turned into bright points of light like stars, and patterns were starting to form geometric shapes that looked like constellations, but not ones she'd ever seen from her backyard.

Piper decided that while this had been an interesting diversion, she'd really prefer it to stop. She used one hand to pry the other off the book. In less than a second, the light flooded back in. She could see her very ordinary, not at all outer-spacey surroundings in all the correct colors of the rainbow. She blinked a few times and tried breathing in deep to slow her racing heart. She peered down at her book again, careful to keep her shaking hands far away from the page this time. What had just happened? Where had she gone?

Sofia leaned across the aisle. "You've been staring at that book for like the last five minutes as if you'd never seen one before and now I'm totally curious. Can I see?"

"Had I...Was I..." Piper was at a loss for the right words.

Sofia held out her hand for the book.

Could a real friendship start by one person sending another into outer space? Lest Roody accuse her of being rude again, she decided to take the risk and held up the book, careful not to let Sofia get too close. She flipped to the first page and tilted the book toward Sofia. "It's just weird math stuff," Piper said. "All I recognize is the pi sign."

Sofia looked intently at the page with the same confused expression Piper figured was on her own face when she first saw it. Sofia wasn't a fan of math.

"That's what you were staring at?" Sofia asked.

Just then Mrs. Hollins announced it was time for their next activity—FunTimeMath, their weekly math game where the winner got to pick a prize from Mrs. Hollins's bottom drawer.

Sofia groaned. Everyone moved their desks into a circle. Even though it was almost impossible for Piper to concentrate, she still easily won the game.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# PIPER

WHEN THE FINAL BELL RANG, PIPER DIDN'T DAWDLE. SHE GRABBED HER backpack from her cubby and ran outside. She needed to tell Roody about the book. She stuck her head in the castle window, but before she could get the words out, he said, "Look! I've edited the new footage to show you the highlights."

"I really need to tell—"

But he'd already turned around so his rear was facing her. She quickly backed up to avoid a tail in her face. He'd also worked on strengthening the signal as the image was much clearer now—still no audio, though. There were her parents, in mid-conversation, standing on the lawn near the curb. They both took a step forward, and then, *WHAM*. They fell backward onto the lawn. Piper gasped

and reached out for the side of the castle to steady herself. "Are they okay? What's going on? Is this about last night?" She was used to her parents' odd antics, but this was next level even for them.

With fierce determination on their faces, her parents sprang up and ran forward, only to be thrown backward again. "Wha...what?!" Piper sputtered. "Did they just run into an *invisible wall*?!" But that was impossible! Her father now picked up a large rock, looked both ways to check for cars, and threw the rock across the street. Piper watched as the rock sailed smoothly through the air and landed on the opposite sidewalk. Her parents then made a full circle around the property, each going in a different direction with one hand dragging along what most definitely was an invisible surface. When they met again in front of the house, both of them had their hands tilted at an angle. "It's not a wall!" Piper exclaimed. "It's a bubble!"

Roody nodded. "That is my assessment as well."

Now her parents huddled close together, looking up at the sky, then down to the ground, shoulders slumped. Piper didn't think she'd ever seen them like that. Their motto had always been, "Never give up, never surrender."

"After that it just gets sad," Roody said as he turned off the screen.

Piper paced back and forth like she'd seen her mom

do in the lab when she was trying to work out a problem. "They must've discovered this invisible wall or bubble or force field last night. Is it some kind of bizarre weather pattern? Or something they did in the lab by mistake, like some kind of weird chemical reaction? I bet that was it!"

"I don't know," Roody said. "There's nothing like this in my database. But I'm fairly certain that since I'm programmed to protect you, portions of last night's video were blocked automatically. Even from me."

She stopped. She should have expected something like that. "Yeah, that makes sense. But why can I see the bubble now? Well, not see it, but see it blocking them."

"I believe it is because I tapped into the feed indirectly, so the system isn't filtering the content."

Piper started pacing again. Did that mean she couldn't tell her parents what she'd seen without letting them know she was spying on them? Her parents were overprotective, sure, but they never spied on her.

And what about the book? If they knew what happened when she touched it, they'd want to bring her to the doctor. She'd already spent enough time there when she was a little kid who tripped over her own two feet a lot. She didn't remember those days too well, but she did remember that the doctor's office made her parents very nervous, so she was in no hurry to put them through that

again when they were obviously dealing with something right now. Plus, they couldn't even bring her to the doctor if they couldn't go past their front lawn!

If she told Roody, his need to protect her would mean he'd likely have to report it to her parents. She didn't know enough about programming to override his code. But she had to tell someone and he was all she had. So she blurted out part of the story. "The journal is full of all this math stuff, but I don't know what it means."

Roody tilted his head. "Your book has math stuff in it? I thought it was blank."

She shook her head and felt around in her backpack for the book. "Where is it? I know it's in here."

But her hand came out empty.



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# RAISA

WITHOUT THE ROCKS TO HOLD THEM DOWN, RAISA AND LEV PRACTICALLY glided over the ground, until they had gone so far that not only Sal and the pizza restaurant were behind them, but most of downtown Rockdale. They stopped when they reached the stone entrance to Rockdale Park and finally plopped down behind a giant oak.

And neither one of them was even out of breath.

"It was like riding a skateboard." Lev searched around in the grass for more rocks. They needed to load up again. Whoever thought finding rocks would be so important.

"Those are too small," Raisa said.

"Well, better than nothing." Lev gathered as many as he could, giving half to Raisa. "What we need are heavier rocks, not bigger ones." He stood, stuffing the rocks into

the pocket of his pants. "You know, I was just thinking, when we get back with all this information, after our parents kill us for doing something so dangerous, we will be famous."

"They might name a star after us." Raisa lay back in the grass, folding her arms behind her head. "Or a planet."

She stared up at the sky. Same blue, same white fluffy clouds that gave the impression they could see the earth moving.

"Well, we've learned a lot already," Lev said. He turned his wrist over to check his watch again. "Okay, let's say one more hour to collect more data and then we get back to the shed with the book."

"One more hour. Good idea." Raisa patted her shoulder bag, which her mother's book was safely tucked inside. Strike that. The shoulder bag which her mother's book was *supposed* to be safely tucked inside.

*This can't be.*

Raisa sat straight up.

*It just can't be.*

"What?" Lev asked. "What's wrong? Why are you making a face like that?"

Raisa didn't utter a single sound, until, that is, she did—the tiniest peep. Like a baby bird. A baby bird in distress.

She started slowly. "Lev, I don't have it."

“Have what?”

Ever so softly, she repeated, “Lev, I don’t have it.”

“Your mother’s book? You don’t have it?” he asked.

Raisa nodded her head.

After a long beat, Lev said, “Can we get back home without the book?”

Raisa shook her head slowly back and forth. “It’s not just the coordinates in the equations but the energy stored inside that gets us through the portal.” She was too stunned to even cry but close enough to crying to not be able to think straight.

“It must have fallen out when we were running.”

Raisa felt like she could feel time speeding up already.

“Raisa, it’s okay. It can’t be far,” Lev said. “We need to go back and retrace our steps.” He did a one-eighty, then turned back forty degrees before stopping to point. “That way. We turned left into the park. Before that, we went right at that oak tree. So...this way.”



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

# PIPER

PIPER DUMPED OUT THE CONTENTS OF HER BAG ONTO THE GRASS BESIDE the pink playhouse. Her empty lunch sack, a folder with her homework assignment, and a key chain with a well-worn Rubik’s Cube fell onto the grass. The book still refused to appear. Piper’s heart started to thump faster. Why did she lose everything! Usually it only happened at home. Her parents said she’d lose her head if it wasn’t securely attached.

“We’ll stop back at the street sale on our way home,” Roody suggested. “There were plenty of blank books; you could just take another one.” His eyes widened as he had another thought. “Do you think Mr. Lombardo put out more pepperoni puffs?”

She shook her head and his eyes drooped.

“No, I mean, I don’t know about the pepperoni puffs,” she said quickly, stuffing her items back into her bag. “But this book is...special. I need it back.”

“Well, where did you last see it?” Roody asked. She’d heard him ask this a hundred times. Maybe a thousand. Usually he was able to find the lost item for her on another floor of the house, or inside a drawer where she had no recollection of putting it. Only rarely did the object never surface again.

“I put it in my bag,” she insisted. “Or...at least I remember it on my desk.” But then she remembered they’d moved the desks into a circle for the math game. Had she stuck it in her cubby? “I’ll be right back.”

One glance at her cubby in her now-empty classroom told her the book hadn’t slipped off the shelf as she’d hoped. She hurried over to her desk and searched all around it. She ran back to check out other people’s cubbies, which was definitely frowned upon, but she did her best not to disturb anything. But no book. Not even any library books.

There could only be one explanation: Sofia! She’d been interested in the book. She would have kept asking to borrow it if Mrs. Hollins hadn’t announced it was time

for the game. Maybe Sofia had taken it...by mistake? Or on purpose? And she was probably halfway home with it by now and— Oh no! Sofia wasn’t halfway home! Sofia was at the robotics competition where *Piper* was supposed to be!





## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

# PIPER

PIPER TURNED ON HER HEEL AND RAN, ARRIVING IN THE GYM OUT OF breath and with a cramp in her side. Maybe she ought to exercise with her parents after all!

The four teams were already at their stations, their robots sitting at the ready inside their mazes. A few students considering joining next year were sitting on the bleachers, along with the parents who'd been invited to watch their children compete. Piper's mom and dad were not in sight. Her heart clenched, but she knew that nothing less than a mysterious force field would have kept them away.

"We were afraid you forgot," said Mrs. Iyer, striding toward her on Piper long legs.

"Sorry, Coach!" Piper said. "I was looking for something I lost." She took the name tag the robotics coach held out to her and slapped it on her chest.

"Well, you're here now." Mrs. Iyer ushered her over to her team. "The judging round is about to begin. Time to move and groove."

Piper joined the three others on her team—Austin, Kimmie, and Sofia—who were busy taping up one of their controllers so the batteries wouldn't fall out like they often did. Each team's robot ran through the list of required exercises—going through the maze without knocking over the plastic bricks, lifting a square block and placing it on top of another, basics like that. Then Piper wowed them with the sneeze/blinking nose combo. The judges (also known as the principal and the school nurse) went to the corner to tally the scores while the teams dismantled their mazes.

As soon as they were finished, Piper pulled Sofia aside. "Hey...um, so that book I was reading in class? Maybe you thought it was just one of the classroom books from the back shelf, but it wasn't."

Sofia squinted at her, looking genuinely confused. "What do you mean?"

"My new book, new to me, I mean, the brown one, is missing and I think maybe you took it." It came out louder

and more accusatory than Piper meant it to. The events of the day were pressing down on her, making her feel heavy and confused.

"No, I didn't," Sofia said, her voice rising, too. Then more softly, she said, "But I can help you look for it."

Mrs. Iyer hurried over. "Are you girls all finished cleaning up?"

"Piper lost a book," Sofia said. "Not a library book or one of Mrs. Hollins's, but one she brought from home."

Piper waited for Sofia to say *And she's blaming me for taking it*, but Sofia didn't. Piper didn't correct her that the book hadn't been brought from home, since it would just make this awkward conversation last even longer.

Mrs. Iyer turned to Piper. "Where did you last see it?"

"It was either on my desk or the shelf in my cubby. It's been kind of a freaky afternoon. I thought maybe...um... I thought someone took it."

"Hmm," Mrs. Iyer said. "Is it possible someone thought it was a library book and returned it to the library?"

Now that Piper thought of it, her two library books hadn't been in her backpack either or on the cubby shelf when she'd just checked. Unable to meet Sofia's eyes, she asked, "Can I go check for it in the library?"

"Of course," Mrs. Iyer said, distracted now by the

teenage delivery boy coming in from the parking lot with a stack of pizza boxes wobbling in his arms. "But wait until the judges announce the scores." She hurried over to help the boy before their pizza wound up on the gym floor.

Piper scarfed down a slice while the judges were calculating, but she barely tasted it. She glanced at Sofia and could see red splotches on both her cheeks. Piper wished she could rewind the last five minutes. She was so in her head when reaching for another slice that she didn't notice Sofia was reaching for it, too, and by the time Piper had taken a bite it was too late to offer it, and now the box their team had been given was empty. She was REALLY TERRIBLE at this whole friend thing!

The judges announced they had to review the videos because the scores were so close. Piper groaned. She almost didn't care if they won anymore. She just wanted her book.

"The winner," Principal Vinick finally declared, "is Team Rudolph by half a point. They will be representing Rockdale at regionals next month. Congratulations to all our talented contestants."

Piper allowed herself a moment of shared pleasure with her team as the room burst into applause. One by one she and her teammates collected their certificates and

shook the principal's hand. Sofia stood nearby with her parents, who were beaming and admiring the award. As much as she wanted to get rid of the pit in her stomach, Piper couldn't make herself go up to apologize. So she pushed it down further and hurried from the gym.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

# PIPER

SCHOLASTIC

THE LIBRARY WAS THE MOST COLORFUL ROOM IN THE WHOLE SCHOOL.

The librarian, Mr. Topher, had painted the walls with scenes from classic children's books. Behind the circulation desk, four kids were stepping into a wardrobe. Next to the biographies, a boy with a lightning bolt on his forehead waved a wand. The painting behind the computer station was Piper's favorite, a big spider's web that spelled out *Some pig*. She'd always had a fascination with spiderwebs. The intersecting lines and repeating patterns were so similar to how she saw math. And now that she thought about it, they were also similar to the points of light she'd seen at her desk earlier.

Mr. Topher led her to the row of baskets along the counter where the aides sorted the books. "I haven't started

shelving them yet, so if it got scooped up by mistake, it'd still be here."

Piper quickly eliminated the baskets stuffed with picture books for the younger grades and started on the others. When she lifted out one of the library books she herself had borrowed, she knew she was on the right track. "Found it!" she called out, holding it up like a prize. A wave of relief rolled through her whole body.

Mr. Topher smiled. "That must be a special journal." Before Piper could stop him, he reached for the book and laid it down on the counter.

"Um, I..." she started, but what could she say? *Don't touch that, or you may wind up... somewhere?*

With the practiced hand of someone who had flipped open thousands of books, Mr. Topher flipped this one open—and immediately started turning the pages. "What do you plan to write in it?" he asked.

Piper barely heard the question. She was too relieved that the librarian hadn't lifted off into space.

"Maybe you'll fill it with drawings or use it to make up some new math equations." Mr. Topher lowered his voice even though they were the only two in the library. "I shouldn't be telling you this," he whispered, "but... I saw a list in the teacher's lounge that said you scored the highest on last month's standardized math test! You're truly gifted, Piper!"

"The highest?" Piper repeated, her cheeks growing warm. "Out of the whole fifth grade?"

"The highest in the history of all the fifth grades."

Mr. Topher turned his attention back to the book. "Maybe you'll use it to write stories or to record your thoughts and experiences, like a real journal. I'll start you off with some inspiration, if you like." He didn't wait for an answer. He plucked a blue marker from the mug on the counter and turned to the first page.

Piper's eyes widened. Was Mr. Topher going to WRITE IN THE BOOK? She had to stop him. "Um, that's okay, but thanks, I plan to work on the math equation so—"

But Mr. Topher had already started writing DIRECTLY ON TOP OF THE EQUATION! All Piper could do was watch in shock.

"Here you go," Mr. Topher said, handing it back.

Piper looked at the inscription. In between (and on top of!) the numbers and symbols, it now read, *The blank page, like the horizon, is full of possibilities*. Couldn't he just have written it at the top of the page in the empty margin?

"Um, thank you?" Piper told him, stuffing the book into her backpack before it could be further defaced. She quickly headed for the door.

"You're welcome," Mr. Topher called out as she left the

library. "And congratulations on the robotics win. Who knows, maybe one day you'll make a robot with a mind of its own."

Mr. Topher would have been surprised to know that one of those was currently waiting outside for her, chasing his tail. Piper pushed open the closest exit door and hurried out to the parking lot where Roody was turning in circles. As soon as he saw her, he stopped. "I know, I know," he muttered. "I'm never gonna catch that thing." Then, "Hey, you found the book. Well done!"

"You won't believe what Mr. Topher the librarian did. He wrote inside it! Right on top of important stuff! He thought it was a blank book."

"It is a blank book," Roody said.

Piper shook her head. "Remember I told you it's not blank? I mean, it was at one point, but now it's full of math problems and charts and graphs and stuff."

"If you say so," he said, frowning. "But now we need to get home. There's been a lot of activity in the last hour."

He took off at a fast trot and Piper had to run to keep up. "Is everything okay with my parents?"

Roody ducked behind an evergreen tree and lifted his tail. "See for yourself."

The footage came up almost instantly. It took a few

seconds for Piper to make sense of what she was seeing.

"Is that our house?" she asked.

Roody nodded.

The yard was strewn with all sorts of things that didn't belong there: a mop with a broken handle, a ten-foot ladder, a long extension cord that had been dragged out and across the grass, and several scrub brushes worn down to their nubs.

"Spring cleaning?" Piper asked.

"Doubtful," Roody said.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

# RAISA

"THERE IT IS!" LEV HELD UP HIS HAND TO RAISA. "HIGH FIVE."

"Whew," Raisa said, but that didn't even come close to the relief she felt. Imagine. Just imagine if they lost that book. But no, it was right there, lying on the sidewalk across the street. "See, no biggie."

They were just about to step off the curb when an old man on the other side of the street bent down, scooped the book up off the sidewalk, laid it on top of the tall pile of books he was carrying, and continued heading toward the Rockdale Public Library.

"Wait!" Lev shouted, but the man didn't seem to hear.

One car went by. Then a smelly truck (fossil fuel, really?). Another car. Finally, Raisa and Lev could cross the street after him.

Raisa called out. "Excuse me, sir. That's my book."

*This can't be happening. No, seriously it really can't.*

But they were too late. They watched as the man slid the last of the books he had been holding into the return slot in the wall of the library.

"Sir!" Raisa shouted. "Sir, that's our book." They caught up to him.

"Are you talking to me?" The old man turned around.

"That was our book," Raisa said. "The one you picked up just a second ago. That was ours."

"Your book?" The man looked confused. "The one I found on the sidewalk? Oh, I'm sorry, I thought I had dropped it. That was your book?"

"It's still our book," Lev said.

"And we need to get it back."

"I'm sure it won't be a problem. The librarians here are very nice," the man told them. "Just come back when the library opens again. I think it opens by ten on Wednesdays."

"Tomorrow?" Lev asked.

There's an odd sensation when you're not sure if something really bad has happened, or whether it's not that big a deal. Then you come to the conclusion that you were right the first time. That something bad, in fact really bad, is happening. That realization landed like a stone in Raisa's stomach.

"What's it called again?" Lev asked. "When there's no apparent solution to a problem."

"A null solution space." Raisa's voice was flat.

They were sitting on the very top step of very long stairs leading up to the library. The heat of the day began to dissipate, the sky turning a blue gray as it neared late afternoon, and the large wooden doors behind them were locked up tight. They had checked all around the building, every door. They had taken the rocks out of their pockets and leapt high enough to see in every window on the ground floor. No one was inside.

"We need somewhere to hide for the next seventeen hours," Lev said.

"And sleep!" Raisa added.

"Yeah, that too. Somewhere we won't risk bumping into our other selves, if we have any here, or anyone who knows them until we can get into the library and get our book back."

"We can't go to your house," Raisa said. "Unless we want to go back and make friends with Brian."

"And we can't risk going to yours," Lev said. "In case there's a you living there."

"You're right." Raisa nodded. "We need somewhere we know how to get to, and we know how to get *into*."

"And presumably is here in this universe."

"Right again." Raisa rested her chin in her hands, her elbows on her knees. "Do you think the ASK lab is here? I mean, the tech here is behind ours, but they must still have scientists. And if there *is* an ASK lab, maybe there's an alternate version of my mom and Kallie. Even if they're not working on multiverse travel, I bet they'd believe us."

Lev nodded. He stood up. "But ASK is six kilometers from here."

"So?" Raisa stood up beside him. "We ride our bikes out there all the time."

Lev pointed out the obvious, that they didn't have bikes, but Raisa had an answer for that, too. "You know the bike shop on Main Street?" she asked. "Assuming there is one."

"Yeah?"

"Well, I'm pretty sure they leave the bikes they are done working on behind the shop until the owner comes to get them."

"Yeah? And?"

"And we borrow a couple," Raisa said.

Lev scrunched up this face. "*Borrow?*"

"Well, it's not like we can go there and explain our situation."

"Okay, fine," Lev agreed. "I suppose it's our only choice, unless we want to sleep in the park tonight, which personally I do not."

"So okay then?"

"Okay then," Lev said. "Just borrow, right?"

"Right."



## CHAPTER TWENTY

# RAISA

THERE WERE FOUR OF THEM. TWO WERE ROAD BIKES. ONE WAS A MOUNTAIN bike. One, a trick bike. The coast looked pretty clear from Raisa and Lev's vantage point, crouching behind the dumpster. No one was back there, and there weren't tools or bike parts lying around as if anything was being repaired.

"I call the BMX," Lev whispered. "It might be low tech, but it will be fun."

"For someone who didn't even want to do this..." Raisa began to stand. "Okay, let's get this over with."

Lev was still crouched behind the dumpster. "Wait, I hear something." He peeked around the side. Raisa did the same, positioning her head just above his. The metal back door of the bike shop creaked loudly as it swung open and a woman stepped out.

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She wore green coveralls with tools dangling from each loop. She clutched a socket wrench in her hand. She was tall, on the thin side, with dark hair tucked into a messy ponytail, an angular face, arched eyebrows, freckled skin. Without another thought, rather without *any* thought, Raisa stepped out from behind the dumpster.

*"Mom?"*



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

# PIPER

PIPER AND ROODY RETURNED HOME TO FIND HER PARENTS DIGGING A hole about ten feet away from the edge of the porch. A chill ran down her spine. Had the strange bubble closed in that much farther? Why could she and Roody walk through it? She wanted to tell them that she really wished they'd been at the tournament. She wanted to tell them that she'd found a book that did...*something*? She wanted to ask what they were doing, but she wanted them to be the ones to tell her.

That didn't look like it would happen, as they didn't even notice they had company. She never thought she'd miss having overprotective parents. Roody gave a little growl, and they finally looked up.

"Oh, hello, honey, you're back from school early," her

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dad remarked, casually placing his sweatshirt over the hole as though she wouldn't notice it.

"Actually, I'm late," Piper corrected. "My team won first place in the tournament. We go to regionals in a few weeks."

"Isn't that wonderful," her mother said, wiping a dirt-covered glove across her forehead and leaving a long smudge.

Piper continued. "Roody needs a leash. And the librarian told me I got the highest math score in the history of the school."

Her dad ruffled her hair. "That's okay, sweetie, you'll get 'em next time."

Piper sighed. She knew she couldn't take it personally. When her parents were engrossed in a project, the sky could rain stuffed animals and they wouldn't notice. Last year the basement smoke alarm started blaring, and when Piper ran down there, she found them in a heated debate about whether Planck length and Planck time were actually the smallest units of space and time, or simply representations of where humanity's knowledge ended. Meanwhile, a giant ball of hot wax was quickly burning a hole straight through their table.

"Anything I can do to help?" Piper asked them, pointedly eyeing the torn-up grass.

"Nope!" they answered a little too cheerfully.

"Just doing some gardening!" her mom added.

"Uh-huh," Piper said. They were clearly trying to protect her from their secret. She started to protest but stopped. After all, she was doing the same thing with her own secret.

"Okay, Pips," Dad said with a wave. "See you later, bye."

Piper guessed that was her cue to leave, so she left Roody behind to keep an eye on things and went inside. The framed family photos on the hallway wall were askew, which always happened after the house shook. The morning's lab explosion felt a lot longer ago than eight hours. She straightened each photo as she moved toward the kitchen. The three of them pumpkin picking at Whispering Willow Farm, swimming at the town pool, paddleboating at Alpine Lake, riding the Ferris wheel at the summer carnival. Grandma had joined them for that one before jetting off again to some distant land. As the founder of her own business, she was in high demand to give presentations.

Piper stood in front of the basement door and realized how seldom she went down there. She was tempted to sneak down, just to make sure the morning's explosion hadn't damaged any of her favorite clocks.

But she had more pressing matters to attend to.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

# PIPER

PIPER DUG THROUGH THE WINTER STORAGE CLOSET AND FINALLY FOUND what she was looking for—a pair of thick winter gloves. She then settled into the beanbag chair in her bedroom with the math journal open on her lap. Just as she hoped, the gloves formed a barrier between her fingers and the page, and nothing unusual happened when she touched it.

Roody strolled in. “So your parents are trying to dig a tunnel under the invisible wall bubble thingy. Not getting too far. Gotta give them props for trying, though.” He nudged her thick glove with his nose. “Are you cold or is the book hot?”

She desperately wanted to tell him what was happening. But she couldn’t promise the whole traveling-while-staying-still thing was safe, and that would be enough reason for him to tell her parents.

“I’m just...being very careful not to smudge anything,” she finally said.

He peered over at the pages. “There’s nothing to smudge. I mean, except for what the librarian wrote.”

The whole your-book-is-blank thing was getting exasperating. She held the open book up to his face, careful not to let his nose graze the page. “You don’t see that math equation and all the charts?”

Roody backed away. “Um, you’re freaking me out. Are you seeing things? Is the stress of everything getting to you? Shall we take a meditation break?”

At least he didn’t threaten to tell her parents. “There’s nothing wrong with *me*,” she insisted. “Maybe when Dad upgraded you and added all those other programs like the smelling, and the tail chasing...and the, um, *stuff* with the hydrant...he took away your ability to read so you’d be more like a real dog.”

Roody tilted his head, considering her theory. Then he said, “Nope. I can see the quote clear as day.”

“Hmm, good point. Well, maybe your software has a bug and sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t.”

Roody didn’t look at all convinced, but he lay down next to her and watched. Gloves securely in place, Piper began turning the pages slowly and carefully, in awe of how full the book was, and how organized. It didn’t look

like her own school notebooks at all. A few pages contained detailed drawings of devices labeled with strange technical names like *chronometer* and *quantum wave accelerator* and *multi-band moderator switch* and *temporal dilation field*. Math formulas that didn't look like anything she'd seen before ran down the margins of most pages, and a large drawing of the periodic table was round instead of square and contained a whole extra row of elements!

The two pages in the very center of the book were covered in one long series of numbers and letters, like a code, that didn't seem to have any mathematical pattern that she could distinguish. She instinctively ran her hand over them, and for eight-tenths of a second, the page glowed a faint green. It was enough to illuminate the space around her, but it blinked out too fast to focus on it. Whatever the code meant, it must be very powerful to get through the thick glove!

She held the book under Roody's nose. "Did you see that?"

But he just reminded her the book was blank.

*Sigh.*

She set the book down on the floor, her eye catching the corner of something pink peeking out from between the last page and the back cover. She slipped off her gloves and slid out a light pink note card wedged into the binding.

*My darling daughter,*

*Our project is not as ready as we'd hoped and we're closing the book on it, no pun intended (or maybe it is!). I've worked so hard for it, traded so much time for it, and you've been so understanding so I wanted to tell you before anyone else. Perhaps one day when you're grown up, things will be different, and we could even work together if that's the direction your life takes you. Either way, I couldn't be prouder of the young lady you're becoming.*

*All of my love always,*

*Mom*

Piper read the note over again before tucking it back in the binding where she'd found it. She wondered how long ago it had been written and if "darling daughter" had ever gotten the letter or if the mom never sent it. Did the project have to do with the journal? Or had someone just stuck it in the book for safekeeping? Aunt Pearl had a whole collection of stuff people had left in old books. She'd likely never find out what the note card meant. Just one more mystery in a day full of them!

After abandoning their "gardening project," her own parents had retreated to their lab and hadn't resurfaced.

Worry rolled around in her stomach, so to keep busy, she spent the evening studying the book. Once she started to see the equations on the backs of her eyelids, she knew it was time to stop. She discovered a bowl of mac 'n' cheese on the kitchen table with a paper towel over the top to keep it warm. At least they'd remembered she was there.

She whispered good night as she passed the closed basement door.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

# RAISA

SUN CYCLE WORKS WAS QUICKLY LOCKED UP AND THE WOBBLY TIN OPEN sign in the window immediately turned to SORRY WE ARE CLOSED. The three of them sat down at a little folding table in the back of the store trying to figure out what had just happened and what to do next.

Call it alternative mother's intuition, but Raisa's mom who was also *not* Raisa's mom believed them. She listened carefully and then asked, "Can you explain this to me one more time to make sure I'm not missing anything?"

Though it was hard enough for Raisa and Lev to understand it themselves, apparently on this Earth Raisa's mom was not a scientist, was not married, and did not have a daughter named Raisa. They told her the story one more time: the lab, the book, the shed, Not-Lev's house,

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Not-Lev's mother, the gravity problem, being chased from Toozy Patza. Raisa hit all the important plot points.

Lev had to rely on the math. "Okay, it's like this—for every hour that passes here, only 0.00410958904109589th of a second will have passed on our Earth." He picked up the story when they got to the part about the man on the sidewalk, the library return slot, bouncing around to look inside, giving up, then coming here to steal two bikes.

"Borrow," Raisa interrupted him.

"Borrow," Lev said.

He looked back and forth at Raisa looking at her mom—that-was-not-her-mom and her not-mom looking back at her. The two of them stared at each other for a long time, until finally Pauline spoke. "It's like looking at a picture of someone I've never seen before, but also feeling like I've seen you every single day of my life."

"I feel the same. Other than that my mom's hair is longer," Raisa said. "It's so strange."

"I can only imagine," Raisa's alternate mom said.

"But it also kind of... I don't know... feels okay?"

"Same. By the way, *Raisa*. That's such a pretty name."

"You always thought so," Raisa said.

"You have the same name as Raisa's mom," Lev said.

"But you're not a scientist?"

"If her name is Pauline, then I guess I do."

"Do you have a friend named Dr. Kwan?" Raisa asked.

"I mean, Kallie Kwan?"

Pauline shook her head.

"Maybe from way back when? From middle school? She's my mom's best friend. And now they work together."

"I'm sorry," Pauline said.

"And there's no organization called ASK in this town?" Lev asked.

"Called what?"

Raisa answered Pauline's question. "Academy for the Study of Kinetics."

"Not that I've ever heard of," Pauline answered. She turned to Raisa. "ASK, that's where your mother works?"

"Yes," Raisa said. "And Kallie, too. And they were about to lose their whole multiverse travel project if they couldn't prove their theory was correct."

"So let me guess." Pauline smiled. Wow, she looked even more like Raisa's mom when she smiled. "You two decided to go through yourselves."

Raisa nodded. "There was only a little time left to see if it worked, and my mom and Kallie had given up.... I mean, I get why they did...."

"When you get back, you can explain everything to

her. Now, can I get you two something to eat? I don't have much here, but I can order something from the deli right next door. They have the best turkey sandwiches."

"That's so nice of you," Raisa said. "But no thank you."

"We just ate," Lev added.

"Oh, that's right. You told me that," Pauline said. "I'm sorry. It's a lot to take in. Yes, Toozy Patza. Best pizza around. Love their pepperoni puffs."

"Well, I don't think we'll ever be able to go back there," Lev said wistfully.

Pauline said, "At least your own Toozy Patza will be there when you get back. I guess they don't use paper money where you come from?"

"Money?" Lev cocked his head. "Is that what a bill was for?"

It took Pauline a bit to explain dollars and cents, wallets and purses. "Is everything free where you come from?" she asked.

Raisa and Lev then tried to explain biometric authenticators and retinal scanning.

A few things were falling into place—not easily, but they were falling. First of all, if Raisa's mom in this universe owned a bicycle repair shop, and hadn't married,

and didn't have a daughter named Raisa, there was no worry that there was another version of herself running around.

But was there an alternative of Raisa's dad? Another Micah Adler out there?

And was he married to someone else?

That was just too much to think about right now.

"Pauline...?" Lev asked. "Do you think we could find out if there's another me somewhere in this universe? Do you have a computer?"

"Of course," Pauline pointed. "We can look right now." She sat down at her desk and tapped around on the keyboard for a while. She looked to Lev. "What did you say your last name was?"

"I didn't," Lev answered. "It's Abrams."

"Here," she said. "Abrams. They live in Weston. About two hours away. And look, here's an entry for that name."

Pauline was clicking away. It took longer than forever.

"Here's an article about a student athletes' award banquet," she said. "Oh, and a photo. Hold on, let me make it bigger."

When the photo finally—finally—*finally*—loaded, there was no doubt. There was Lev standing between his mom and dad. Same name, same parents, same body, same



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

# RAISA

face. Lev in a jersey and shorts, standing in a gym holding up a large trophy.

Raisa leaned in closer to the screen. “You play basketball?”

“Apparently I do.” Lev danced around the room a bit. “And just imagine how amazingly awesome I’d be on that team, given how different the gravity is here. Talk about dunking.”

Pauline laughed.

It was maybe, or exactly, her laugh that was so much the same as Raisa’s mom. The same but different. Different but comforting.

“Let’s get safe and settled in, at least for tonight,” Pauline said.

Lev stood still. “So now we just wait, right?”

Raisa sighed. “For the library to open.”

“Well, you’ll be waiting with me,” Pauline said. “I’ll make sure you are at the library first thing in the morning. I’ll make sure you find your mom’s book. I’m not taking no for an answer.”

AS THEY WERE LEAVING SUN CYCLE WORKS ON THEIR WAY TO PAULINE’S house, Lev asked Pauline why the bicycles had spokes in their wheels. Pauline looked confused.

Lev explained that if she removed the entire internal hub and spokes from the wheels of her bicycles and crafted a welded external system, the ride would be so much smoother. The bike would be lighter, too, and more fun to ride.

Pauline seemed excited by that idea. “I can definitely see how that would work. Here, get in.” She opened the back door of her car.

Raisa thought about the spokeless wheels and about everything they had told Pauline. She wondered if that would change anything in this universe that it wasn’t supposed to.



But then again, who knew? After all, maybe in this universe Pauline was the one who invented spokeless wheels.

“And here we are.” Pauline made a left turn off South Main, and a few kilometers later, she turned down a narrow dirt road, then into a gravel driveway that led to a small but invitingly lovely house, a warm yellow, with white shutters and window boxes in every window filled with flowers.

“Welcome to my humble abode,” Pauline said. “I designed it myself.”

“You’re harnessing solar energy,” Lev noted. He was looking up at the roof as they walked toward the house. “You’re the only one I’ve seen in this whole town.”

“A lot of people made fun of me, but I will get the last laugh. Those solar panels have already paid for themselves. And I don’t need to use oil or gas for heating.”

Oil? Gas?

Lev and Raisa looked at each other. This Earth didn’t have a renewable sourced global energy grid?

“Your house is beautiful,” Raisa said. “And you have a vegetable garden, just like my mom.”

“So in your world, this is not where you live?” Pauline opened the front door.

“No,” Raisa said, walking inside. “But we have a couch just like that. And that same dining room table!”

Raisa couldn’t help but glance around the room, noting all the things that were the same—even quirky little things, like the color of the rug, her mother’s favorite color, purple. Against the far wall, a whole row of tall houseplants stood under a window, a metal watering can right beside them. Just like her mom’s. A collection of seashells. Raisa’s mom loved seashells!

And things that were totally different: A guitar resting in its stand. A chessboard on the coffee table. Raisa had never seen her mom play chess. It was a lot to take in. It must have shown on her face.

“Why don’t you two relax on the couch while I go whip up some dinner,” Pauline offered.

Best idea Raisa had heard all day.

After a perfect meal of spinach quiche, steamed broccoli, and fresh garden salad, they went outside onto the porch. Pauline had a million questions about their world.

Lev and Raisa answered every one as best they could. What was the multiverse? How did they know they’d landed here exactly at the same parallel time? If they had miscalculated, could they have been lost in the Ice Age?

Raisa shuddered at the thought. A vegetarian brontosaurus was one thing, but she was not a fan of the cold.

"Math never lies. Her mom had it all figured out." Lev leaned back and patted his belly. "Delicious."

"Thank you for dinner," Raisa said. "Do you like to cook? My mom—"

But Pauline didn't seem to be listening. "I wanted to be a scientist, too. An engineer," she said softly, more to herself than anyone.

"Why didn't you?" Lev asked.

That probably wasn't polite, but Raisa was glad Lev never noticed things like that, because she wanted to know, too.

"High school," Pauline started. "AP Chemistry. Mr. Sirko. I don't remember what exactly I had done. Blew up a beaker or something. Maybe it was just a bad grade on one test, but whatever it was, Mr. Sirko told me I wasn't cut out for science. He said some people have an aptitude and some just don't."

"And you believed him?" Raisa felt her eyes stinging. She tried to imagine her mother not being a scientist. She couldn't.

"I don't know," Pauline went on. "I guess I did. The following year I took AP World Geography instead of physics. Just the way the cookie crumbles, right?" Pauline abruptly jumped out of her chair. "Speaking of which... dessert, anyone?"

\* \* \*

Raisa drifted into sleep that night thinking that no matter what choices a person had made in their life, what opportunities or obstacles they encountered, there was something immutable that made a person who they were. And there was a warm comfort in that.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

# RAISA

EVERY LITTLE KID, AT ONE TIME OR ANOTHER, CAN'T FIND THEIR MOM OR dad in some big space, like a supersize supermarket or a shopping mall, and panics. For Raisa, when she was seven, it was the planetarium in the domed darkness and with only the sound of the cosmos swirling around her.

At first, she didn't panic.

The night sky, the stars, the solar system, the galaxies, and all the universe, displayed above her head were comforting and familiar.

Her mother had been studying the fabric of space and time for as long as Raisa could remember. Raisa had visited the ASK lab many times, where her mother gathered and recorded the pulsing sounds of gravitational

waves, compression and rarefaction of space. She'd even been able to mathematically generate a model of a black hole.

When she came back from the bathroom, Raisa sat back down in the seat next to her mom and took her hand. Except it wasn't Raisa's seat, and the woman sitting next to her was not Raisa's mom. This became entirely evident when she jerked her hand away and said, "What are you doing, little girl?"

Raisa jumped up. She raced back up the amphitheater aisle, stood at the top, and tried to concentrate. Which way had she turned on her way to the bathroom? Left? Or right? Had she walked three rows over or four? She just needed to remember, retrace her steps, find where her mother was sitting.

But it was so dark, and the tiny lights running along the side of each aisle barely illuminated anything. That's when Raisa began to panic. The backs of all those heads looked like nothing more than rounded shadows. What about her mom's head? Was there anything she could use to identify her?

Straight hair?

No, not her.

Her mom's was curly and long.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

# PIPER

What else?

There was nothing else.

Nothing else to do but cry.

“Sweetie, it’s me. It’s okay.”

Raisa heard her mom’s voice and felt her mother’s arm wrap around her.

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USUALLY PIPER’S MOM WOKE HER UP WITH A KISS ON THE FOREHEAD, but today her only wake-up call was the buzzing of the alarm. For a second she was confused and a bit hurt, then the events of yesterday came flooding back. She felt around under her pillow and was relieved that the book hadn’t traveled somewhere while she slept.

Mrs. Hollins had told the class to wear something today that they didn’t mind getting paint on, so she pulled on the pair of blue overalls her grandmother had bought her to wear on rock-painting days. She then slid the book back under the pillow, brushed her teeth, and hurried downstairs. On the kitchen table was a note in her mom’s messy handwriting.

*Pips, we're so sorry we've been so busy. We'll  
make it up to you. Roody's leash is on the front  
counter. Have a great day at school! Good luck at  
the robotics competition.  
XD Mom & Dad*

Oh man. Off by a whole day. Her mom's note wasn't as nice as the one on the pink note card, but at least she'd written one. And remembered Roody.

Since most kids had already exhausted the reading material in the back of the room and the library books had been collected, Mrs. Hollins handed out paper and art supplies during their normal DEAR time. She walked around the room, saying encouraging things like "Oh, that's lovely" and "You're very creative." When she got to Piper's desk, she paused longer than the others. "What's that you've drawn? It looks like some kind of very complicated math problem."

Piper looked down at her sheet, surprised to see she'd used the markers to reproduce one of the series of symbols she'd seen in the book. She hadn't even been aware she was doing it. She'd been daydreaming about the next constellation she wanted to draw on her stones. "I...I'm not really sure what it is, to be honest."

$$\Delta S \geq 0 \quad T' = T / \sqrt{1 - (v^2/c^2)}$$



Mrs. Hollins patted her on the shoulder before moving on. "Well, if anyone can solve that equation, it would be you."

Piper took another look at what she'd drawn, almost afraid to touch it. With a glance to the left and right, she tentatively let her fingertip graze the first symbol. When nothing happened, she ran her finger across the rest. Nothing. She wasn't sure if she was relieved or disappointed. She folded up the piece of paper and tucked it in the pocket of her overalls.

Then she went to the window to whisper-shout at her disobedient dog, who had now learned how to do backflips.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

# RAISA

FOR THE LONGEST TIME NEITHER RAISA, NOR LEV, NOR PAULINE SAID A word. They just stared into the bottom of an empty plastic library bin.

"From yesterday?" the librarian interrupted the awkward silence. "Well, let me think.... Ms. Lucille was here then. If you'd like, I can ask her if she knows where those returns might have gone."

Raisa didn't let herself register what this meant. She could only nod her head in disbelief.

"If you could....," Pauline spoke up. "We'd very much appreciate that."

"I'll be right back." The librarian hurried off, with the three of them following right behind her.

"See, I told you," Raisa whispered to Lev. "No need to panic."

"I'm not," Lev whispered back. "Are you?"

"No."

The librarian made her way across the carpet, until she realized that Lev, Raisa, and Pauline were trailing close behind her. She stopped and turned around. "I'll be right back. I promise. Ms. Lucille is very organized. She always makes sure every book is exactly where it's supposed to be." She turned to Pauline, then to Raisa, and back to Pauline as if assessing the familial similarities. "Maybe you'd like to take your daughter and her friend to look around in the children's room?" she suggested.

"Oh, she's not my—" Pauline stopped. "Right. But no, we're good. We'll just wait right here. We're kind of in a hurry."

"I promise I'll be right back. You kids must really like to read." The librarian smiled and headed off toward the office.

Without any other people in the library this early, voices echoed softly in the open space with cavernous ceilings. It truly was a beautiful old building.

"This is exactly what our library looks like." Raisa clapped her hands.

"There are still real books in your universe?" Pauline

asked. "I might have thought you'd have something more high tech."

"For some things we do," Lev answered. "Like textbooks in school."

"But oh, no, books are some of our most precious belongings. There is nothing like holding a real—"

Before Raisa could finish, the librarian returned with a younger woman in tow.

"This is Ms. Lucille," she said. "You're in good hands. I've got to attend the circulation desk now." She gave a little wave. "Good luck, kids."

Ms. Lucille looked friendly enough; hopefully that translated to helpful. "I hear you kids are looking for a book that you mistakenly dropped into the return slot yesterday afternoon?" Ms. Lucille said.

Raisa and Lev nodded.

"Can you tell me the title?" she asked.

Raisa opened her mouth to speak, then realized that she couldn't very well explain that it wasn't, technically, a book at all. It was actually one of the most technologically advanced devices ever made and it didn't actually have a title. She closed her mouth.

"Well, what does the book look like?" Ms. Lucille asked when no one else had an answer. "What's on the cover?"

"Nothing," Raisa said. "It's just a regular-size book. It's brown."

"So what's inside, then?" she asked. "Let's start there."

What could they say to that? Numbers, equations, and formulas for traveling the multiverse? Yeah, no.

Raisa answered, "I'm sorry. I don't know that, either."

Ms. Lucille was starting to look confused. "Was it stamped with Rockdale Public Library on the binding?" she asked.

"No," Lev said. "Definitely not."

They were running out of ideas and it was all starting to look a bit suspicious.

"Would it be okay if the kids and I just took a look in the lost and found, perhaps?" Pauline, who had been quiet up to that point, stepped in.

"Of course," Ms. Lucille said. "But now that I'm thinking about it, I did put some books into the donation box yesterday afternoon. I might have put your book in there."

*Don't panic yet*, Raisa told herself. "The *what* box?" she asked.

"The donation box. Books we don't need or want anymore. It's possible I mistook your book for one of those," Ms. Lucille explained. "You could check there."

See, still no need to panic.

"Thank you very much," Pauline said.

The library was starting to come alive. A mom and her

two kids were playing in the children's section, more people were wandering around the stacks, and one man was waiting, impatiently from the looks of it, at the reference desk.

"Great," Pauline said. "If you can just lead the way, we'll grab our book and stop taking up so much of your time."

"No trouble. No trouble at all.... No, wait, actually if it's Wednesday"—Ms. Lucille put her hand to her chin, thinking—"they would have been picked up last night. Usually around eight, after the cleaning staff puts them outside the rear door."

"What does that mean?" Pauline asked. "Where are those books now?"

"Lester would have them now," Ms. Lucille told them. "Unless he's traded them away already. No one loves a good book deal more than Lester."

Okay, now.

Now was a good time to panic.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

# RAISA

PAULINE ASSURED RAISA AND LEV THAT SHE KNEW EXACTLY WHERE Lester's house was.

"Don't worry, guys. We'll be there in five minutes," Pauline told them. "I've been there a ton of times before."

"You know him?" Lev asked.

"Everybody in town does," Pauline said. "He used to be the first selectman and now he's sort of our de facto mayor."

Pauline kept her eyes focused on the road, both her hands tightly gripping the steering wheel, and she sounded way more confident than Raisa thought she really was.

Lev remained calm, as always relying on logic, evidence, and data points. He worked his calculations aloud. "What time is it now?" Lev looked at his watch. "Ten forty-six AM. Ms. Lucille said the books would have been



picked up around eight p.m. Adding in the distance from the library to this man's house...that's only fourteen hours and twenty-six minutes ago, most of which were during the night. Given the late hour he would have gotten home, there's a fairly good chance he hasn't even opened the box yet."

All Raisa could manage to say was "I'm sure you're right." When what she meant was *I hope you're right*.

"And remember," Pauline said, since she had caught up on the time differential between the two universes very quickly. "It's not even been a full second that you've been gone. Worst case is that you stay with me a bit longer."

Well, so there was *something* to be grateful for. She could only imagine how freaked out her mom would be if she were actually gone this long.

"Wait, that was it." Pauline spotted the house. Even with their seat belts on, both Lev and Raisa lifted up slightly from their seats, then dropped back down when the car came to a full stop parked along the sidewalk.

Raisa had her hand on the door handle, but before she could get out, Pauline came racing around from the other side of the car. "Hold on. Let me go first. Lester is kind of...eccentric."

Other than the fact that it was painted bright purple with yellow shutters, the house looked pretty much like

every other one on the block. Low ranch style, or older colonials, all with neat lawns, trimmed hedges, and flower beds in bloom. Everything looked normal.

Normal, that is, until Pauline knocked several times, and Lester opened his front door.

"Pauline!" he said.

The first thing Raisa noticed was his hair, messy and gray, pointing in all directions like a dandelion about to lose its fuzz. An even fuzzier gray mustache almost entirely obscured his mouth. He had wrinkly skin and crinkly, kind eyes. *Funny*, Raisa thought, *he looks just like Albert Einstein*. But she could tell by the way that Lev was staring at the man—studying him, his eyeballs rapidly flicking back and forth, up and down—that Lev was worried this actually *was* Albert Einstein.

Raisa turned to Lev and covered her mouth to whisper, "It can't be....*Right?*" Lev responded only by widening his eyes and studying the man closer. Raisa knew exactly what Lev was thinking because she was thinking it.

Was this Albert Einstein?

Or rather he *wasn't* Albert Einstein, the scientist, but Albert Einstein, the book collector who lived in a purple house! Whose name—because of one of those random choices in life—was *Lester*?

If this was actually him, think of all the things this

universe would never have. And not just the obvious things! So many inventions came from his genius.

But how could it be Einstein? Even in this universe, he'd be—Raisa quickly did the math in her head—he couldn't possibly be that old. But time did work differently here. That they already knew. So, could it, maybe, possibly be...him?

"Pauline!" the very tall man with the big hair said. "What can I do for you? What are you doing here so early? What time is it? I don't have a bike at Sun Cycle, do I?" He took a breath. "Let me get you some coffee."

Then, as if he had just noticed: "And who are these two young people you have with you?"

"Hi, Lester. No, no bike at the shop. It's not that early. These are my...my...These are my Lev and Raisa. And yes," Pauline said. "There is something you can do for me. For us."

"Come in. Come in." Lester stepped to the side and gestured for them to enter. If the outside of the house looked *mostly* normal, the inside was anything but. Lucille had told them Lester was a book collector, so Raisa expected there would be plenty of books, but this was way more than plenty. After a quick calculation of books per shelves, piles on the floor, number of stacks on every table, and piles on the chairs, Raisa figured there were at least 575 to 600

books in this room alone. A queasy feeling rose up in her belly, imagining—no, fearing—that her book might be somewhere within this discord. Even if it was actually Einstein, there was no time to waste.

"Sir, Mr. Lester, sir," Raisa began. "The box of donated books you picked up yesterday from the library. Are they here by any chance?"

"Ah, is that why you've come, young people?" Lester brushed a tuft of his hair from his face, but mostly got his fingers stuck. "Are you interested in joining our Books-for-Books Book Club?" he asked.

"Your what?" Raisa asked.

But of course, Lev being Lev, Raisa knew he just couldn't let his curiosity go without an answer. He needed to know if Lester might actually be Albert Einstein on this Earth, but with a different name.

"Are you familiar with the equation  $E = mc^2$ ?" Lev asked.

Lester let out such a loud burst of laughter that one of the more precariously perched books wobbled and fell to the floor. "I get that all the time," he said. "Especially when I do this..." Lester lifted his eyebrows way up, and stuck out his tongue.

"Don't worry." Pauline turned to Lev. "We do have a real Albert Einstein here and it's not Lester."

If he was puzzled, Lester didn't let on. He was far more intent on showing his guests around his museum of a house. Aside from all the books—that on second thought Raisa now added up to more like 650—there was a collection of PEZ dispensers lined up in front of the books, and miniature chairs arranged in a neat row. There were china teacups and saucers of all sorts. Ten or so baseballs, protected inside plastic cases. Lester stepped over to the world globe set into a tall wooden stand and gave it a vigorous spin, letting a whoosh of dust fly into the air. Raisa took a step backward.

Boxes of jigsaw puzzles sat on the floor, stacked seven feet tall. Three guitars. Two ukuleles. An entire drum kit. And, oh no! Dead animals poised on wooden stands. A wolf! A cat! A bald eagle!

Lester must have read her mind. He walked over to one of the life-size animals. "These are not real," he said. "My husband makes them. Look more closely. You'll see they're wire, clay, watercolor, some gesso, and papier-mâché. He's a genius. A true artist and an absolute animal lover."

Raisa stepped closer. It was amazing. Everything here was amazing. It was easy to forget why they had come, but not for long.

"The books," Pauline reminded Lester. "Do you have the books you picked up from the library yesterday?"

"Especially one with nothing on the cover," Lev jumped in.

"One with lots of numbers and figures and symbols inside. Math kind of stuff," Raisa added.

"Yes, yes. I'm sorry. The books," Lester said. "I almost forgot why you came. Well, to answer your question, I do not. It was the bimonthly meeting of the Books-for-Books Book Club. I mentioned that, right? And it was, I must tell you, an especially wild night of trading. I was able to bargain everything in that box for nearly twice as much. So I am afraid I no longer have any of them in my possession."

This couldn't be happening.

But it was.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

# PIPER

BY THE TIME PIPER AND ROODY RETURNED FROM SCHOOL, HER PARENTS had showered and dressed. She smelled her mother's famous spaghetti and spicy meatballs before she saw the bowl on the table. When Piper had checked on the camera feed at recess, Roody had nothing to show her. Either they hadn't left the house all day, or they *couldn't* leave the house, which was a scary thought.

"Isn't it a little early for dinner?" she asked them. Not that she was complaining.

Both parents rubbed their red eyes. "I couldn't even tell you what day it is," her mom admitted. "So I'm pretending it's dinnertime."

"Works for me!" she said, sitting down in her usual spot. Roody took his place under the table. It felt really

nice to be sitting together like everything was normal, which it totally wasn't. But the spaghetti tasted extra good.

"So tell us about the tournament," her dad said while shoveling spaghetti into his mouth. It may have been the first real question either of them had asked her in two days. "We were so sorry to have missed it. Rudolph's nose worked and all?"

"Blinked perfectly," she confirmed. "The next round is about an hour away from Rockdale. Mrs. Iyer said our team will take a school bus there. I'll need a permission slip."

Her parents both stopped eating with nearly identical frowns. "We'll...think about it," her mom finally said, which didn't really come as a surprise.

Piper desperately wanted to ask what they had done that caused the force field, but since the topic of traveling hung in the air, she went for that instead. "Why haven't we ever gone anywhere?" she asked. "I'm not even talking around the world, like Grandma, but not even outside of Rockdale more than a few times?"

Piper held her breath as her parents exchanged more uneasy looks across the table. She worried that whatever one of them said next, it would be a cop-out. Some excuse like *Mom's afraid of highways*, or *Work keeps us too busy*, or even, *Of course we've traveled, you were just too young to remember it*.

But her mother simply replied, "It's complicated."

"Complicated?" Piper repeated.

"What Mom means," her dad began, "is that we can't really explain it."

"You mean you can't explain it, or you can't explain it to *me*."

Her dad looked a little guilty as he said, "A little bit from column A, and a little bit from column B," which was his usual response when something didn't have a clear answer. "Believe me," he added, "we don't like keeping anything from you. You'll just have to trust us as your parents. It's our job to protect you."

Piper wondered how many things over the years they—or Roody—had protected her from without her even knowing. Dozens? Hundreds? Before she could stop herself, she blurted out, "Is the reason we don't leave town the same reason some kind of force field is keeping you from leaving the house?"

Forks clattered to the table. "You know about that?" her mother asked, her voice pitched higher than usual.

Piper nodded. "And I know you're trying all different ways to knock it down and tunnel underneath it and nothing's working."

Her dad rubbed his face, which suddenly looked very worn-out and tired, like the worry and sleepless nights had

caught up with him all at once. He looked at his wife, and she gave a reluctant nod.

"Yes," he admitted, "the two things are indirectly related, we think anyway. Before the barrier, or force field as you call it, we could leave town, but we chose not to, for reasons that one day I promise you'll know. The barrier around the house is shrinking each day. We'd been hoping the...anomaly...as we've come to think of it, would lift as suddenly as it arrived, and that you'd be none the wiser. As you apparently know, though, we've tried many things. It seems that nothing we do will affect it." He rested his hand on top of Piper's. "I'm so sorry, honey. This must be very frightening for you."

Piper knew she'd be more freaked out about it if she didn't have her own mystery that week. "It's scary," she said, "and I'm not sure how making clocks could lead to force fields, but I guess I figured you'd take care of it, like you always do."

"It's proving...very difficult," her mom said. "We're not even sure it was anything we did."

Her dad leaned forward and asked, "How did you find out about it in the first place? Can you see it? The force field, I mean?" He looked hopeful.

She shook her head and glanced down at Roody, who had come out from under the table when Dad had

started his explanation. "I heard you on the lawn the first night," she said. "And then Roody played the videos for me from the outdoor security cameras. He's been keeping me up-to-date."

"Hmm," Dad said, casting a side-eye down at Roody. "Perhaps I programmed him too well. I may have to tweak that a bit."

"While you're at it," Roody said, sitting up straight, "I have a long list of grievances I would like to present."

"Write 'em down," Piper's dad said, digging back into dinner. "I'll get right on that."

Piper and her mom laughed longer than normal, but it felt good. But then the air grew serious again. "If you guys can't figure out how to make the force field go away," Piper asked, "why are you, like, kind of acting normal now?"

Her mom curled her hand around Piper's. "We just decided to be grateful that we're all here together."

Piper's throat felt a little tight. She squeezed her mom's hand back.

A low whine sounded from beneath the table.

Mom rolled her eyes playfully. "That includes you, of course, Roody," she said, bending down to pat his head.

For the next six hours, the four of them watched one of their favorite movies together (*Honey, I Shrunk the Kids*) and played their favorite games (Exploding Kittens and

Ticket to Ride). They ate popcorn and ice pops and leftover meatballs. They snuggled under cozy couch blankets. No one spoke much, as there was too much to say.

Piper tried as hard as she could to ignore the increasingly nervous glances her parents exchanged over her head. When she couldn't keep her eyes open anymore, her dad carried her to her room like he used to when she was little. Her mom tucked her into bed, and her forehead kiss lingered longer than usual.

It had been a really nice night.



## CHAPTER THIRTY

# PIPER

PIPER WOKE UP SATURDAY MORNING WITH THE SUN AND FELT AROUND under her pillow for the journal. Her hand came up empty. “Seriously?!” she said out loud, turning over and sitting up to get a better look. Sure enough, nothing there. She pulled the blanket and sheet all the way off in case it had slid around, but nope. The book had, once again, gone missing.

Roody sighed. “Where was the last place you—”

“Don’t say it,” she warned.

He held up a paw. “Sorry. Habit.”

He sniffed around the room while she threw on the crumpled overalls from the previous day that were still on her floor. His nose led him over to her dresser. He slid a paw underneath it, nodded with satisfaction, and pointed.

Piper knelt down and scooped up the book along with one glove, wiped off the dust, and gave Roody a pat on the head. “Thanks, pal. But where’s the other one?”

“That’s unclear,” Roody said, yawning.

Someday Piper would have to do a deeper dive into why her stuff went missing all the time, but right now she had an idea. Since it was so early and her parents were no doubt still sleeping, Roody couldn’t go in and tell on her. That would give her time to try to convince him not to.

“Roody, I’m going to touch the pages of the book directly. Can you let me know if anything looks different to you? Like, if *I* look different? In school Sofia said it looked like I was just staring at the page when to me it felt...a little different than that.” Thinking about Sofia made her stomach flip. They hadn’t spoken in school yesterday, although they had shared a purple marker during art, and that was something at least.

“Fine,” Roody said with an eye roll. “I’ll watch you touch the blank book while a whole lotta nothing happens.”

Piper sat down on the rug and placed the book in her lap. “Well, I guess we’ll just see.” She began flipping the pages carefully by the edges until she reached the middle page with the numbers and letters and equations that had lit up under the gloves. She figured if anything was going to happen again, that section would be a good bet.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

# RAISA

"Here goes," she said, holding her finger over a string of symbols on the left side that looked particularly interesting. Her finger shook slightly.

"I'm going to do it now," she told him, her finger inching closer to the page.

"Uh-huh," Roody said.

She moved her finger a smidge closer, then paused to uncross and recross her legs. "Almost there."

"Can't wait," Roody said.

One deep breath in, and out. Then she let her finger fall onto the page. The letters and symbols began to glow, much brighter than they had before. Roody gave a surprised bark.

And then she was GONE.

IF IT WAS A SCIENCE-TYPE BOOK, LESTER HAD TOLD THEM, THEN FOR certain Joe had picked it up. Joe had a fondness for all things numerical and geometric, algebraic and trigonometric, so if the book they were looking for was like that, then Joe was probably the one who had bid on it.

Lester couldn't swear to it, but if it was very important, then that would be the best place to start.

Important? If he only knew.

Lester stood at the door and waved, calling out that he wished he could be of more help, but by the time he said that, Lev and Raisa were already back in the car. Pauline slipped into the driver's seat. "This time it's going to be there." She started the car. "All buckled? Next stop, Age of Reason."



A tiny bell tinkled above their heads and a hidden speaker played a recording of Obi-Wan Kenobi—*May the force be with you*—when they opened the door to the store.

Lev whispered to Raisa, “Well, at least now we know they have *Star Wars* here.”

Raisa tried to take it all in at once, but that was impossible. It was a scientist’s dream store. Gyroscopes and a nano robot kit. 3D wooden puzzles with gears. A marble maze game with a circuit board. Directly overhead was a kinetic sculpture hanging from the ceiling that seemed to be modeled on the Fibonacci sequence. There were telescopes, microscopes, binoculars, cameras, centrifuges, balances, and scales. But so far, no books.

“Is there anyone here?” Raisa peered around the shelves and shelves of LEGO sets.

“Hello?” Pauline made a trek through the store, calling out, “Does anyone work here?”

A very tiny woman came out from a tiny door against the back wall. “Forgive me,” she said. Her voice was also tiny, if a voice could be tiny. “I often forget that I’ve opened the store for business and that customers might be here. Are you looking for something specific? Although you are perfectly welcome to just poke around. People love to do that.”

She nodded to Lev and Raisa. “Especially kids.”

“Well, actually we are,” Pauline answered. “We are looking for Joe.”

Lev put down the magnetic cubes he had been rolling around in his hand. Raisa slid a rectangular block of Lucite etched with the periodic chart back onto the shelf. She was tempted to point out that it was the wrong shape and missing four elements, but she didn’t. “It’s pretty important,” she said instead.

“I’m Jo,” the woman said. “How can I help?”

Certainly it was the increasing anxiety, but Raisa and Lev started talking quickly and at the same time.

“Whoa, whoa.” Jo gestured with her hands as if putting out a small fire. “One at a time. You’re looking for a book?”

“They are,” Pauline said.

“We are.” Raisa tried, but it was hard to calm down. “About the size of just a regular book. It’s filled with notes, and equations, and calculations, and formulas for...”

Lev jumped in, “There’s nothing on the cover. Just plain brown.”

“It sounds very interesting, but if I had taken a book like the one you are describing,” she said, “I’d certainly remember it.”

There was only one other possible place their book could be, Jo told them. “New to You Books and Comics.

Do you know it? On South Main? Every book that doesn't end up somewhere else shows up there at one time or another."

"Thank you, for trying." Pauline reached out her hand.

"Good luck to you," Jo said, accepting the handshake.

"I hope you find what you are looking for."

To say that at this moment Raisa was second-guessing her rather reckless decision to go through the portal without telling anyone, without knowing whether it was safe or not, without even considering what might happen if for any reason they couldn't get back, would be a gross understatement.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

# RAISA

THERE WAS A HAND-PAINTED SIGN OVER THE DOOR: NEW TO YOU BOOKS AND COMICS. This place was their last lead. Their last chance. Pauline dropped them off. Not that a bike shop had emergencies very often, but Pauline had promised Ralph Hamilton she would deliver the tricked-out tricycle he had ordered for his grandson's birthday by the end of the day. "I have a good feeling about this place," she told Raisa and Lev when she dropped them off. "Your book is going to be here." She waved from the car. "I'll be right back, then we can get ice cream to celebrate."

At the counter, a teenager with blue hair rested her hand on her chin. "Hmmm, I know for sure that my boss was there last night. She told me she made some great

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trades,” the girl said thoughtfully. “So let me think where she might have—”

“It’s got nothing on the cover,” Lev broke in.

Raisa joined him. “Nobody would really ever want it,” she said. “It’s just got notes and math stuff in it.”

“Of course, if we have it here, it’s yours.” The blue-haired teenager looked around the store. “We did have a few people in here just this morning. But if it’s from last night’s haul, it wouldn’t have been put out yet.”

That sounded promising. Raisa scanned the room. The shelves were stuffed with books. They were everywhere, stacked in piles on the floor and on tables. There were more books in bins, vintage comics wrapped in cellophane, a rack of postcards. And a candy stand.

“My boss usually puts the books on her desk, but it broke the other day. I’ll check her office to see if she stuck them somewhere else.” The girl stepped out from behind the counter.

Raisa and Lev followed right behind her like magnets. She ducked into a small office while they hovered in the doorway.

“Found them!” she called out to them, reappearing with a large cardboard box in her arms. “That was easy! They were on there after all, so she must have fixed it.”

Raisa didn’t care where the box had been sitting, only

that she was now looking at the letters *L-E-S-T-E-R* in purple marker written on the side.

“Yes! That must be it.” Raisa had to stop herself from grabbing the whole lot and dumping it out.

The girl plopped the box down on the floor. “Good. And you’re welcome to look,” she said. “Hope you find it.”

As soon as she walked away, Raisa started going through the books.

“Whoa,” Lev said. “Hold on. Let’s be systematic.”

There were already seven books on the floor and Raisa was reaching in for more. Now three at a time. “This *is* my system,” she said.

Lev sighed.

Nine books. Twelve. Fifteen. Eighteen. Twenty-four. And the box was empty. Lev and Raisa stared at the pile. Maybe she had missed it? Maybe it was stuck to the side. Raisa put her arm inside the box and felt around. Nothing. Lev and Raisa looked at each other, and without exchanging a word, they went back through all the books on the floor, one by one. Systematically.

“It’s not here, Raisa,” Lev said after their third go round.

“It’s not, is it?” She fell back onto her bottom, too disappointed to even cry.

Lev shook his head. “It’s not.”

"Any luck?" The blue-haired girl stepped over. "Well, judging from the looks on your faces... Look, Pearl will be in again tomorrow. You can come back and check then."

Raisa finished putting all the books back in the box and stood up. "Okay. Thanks," she said. "We can do that."

"Better yet, give me your number and I'll let you know if anything comes in that sounds like that."

"That's very nice of you," Lev said. "But what number?"

"You know, your phone number? Or maybe a cell?"

This conversation was getting stranger and stranger. But Raisa sure didn't want a repeat from the pizza place.

"A cell?" she asked carefully.

"Yeah, you know," the girl said. "A cell phone. Or a house number maybe? Anywhere I can call you."

"Oh, cell. You use cellular communication." Lev figured it out first. He turned to Raisa. "We need to go to the bike shop." He turned back to the girl. "Would it be all right if we come back in a little while and we can give you our satellite identification then?"

"Sure whatever. But listen," the girl said. "Even if Pearl doesn't have it, we get the same books in here all the time. They kind of recycle, you know? So you can just keep coming back."

\* \* \*

When Pauline pulled her car up the curb outside New to You Books and Comics, she didn't need to ask. Both Raisa and Lev had their heads down. Neither said a word.

"C'mon, get in. Let's go home and sort this all out," she said. "It's going to be okay, guys. Promise."

For the first time, Raisa let herself admit that maybe it wouldn't be.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

# PIPER

THERE HAD BEEN NO BACKWARD ZOOMING THIS TIME—PIPER WAS IN HER room, then she wasn't. The best way she could describe where she was would be to say that if someone were standing outside of the universe, looking in on it, this is what they would see: a swirling kaleidoscope of colors, shapes, and intersecting lines amid the deepest blackness, the symbols and numbers from the book appearing almost superimposed on the background as they winked in and out around her. A deep humming permeated everything, and she could swear she smelled her dad grilling on the barbecue and another, sweeter smell...raspberries? The air around her felt like it was pulsing at different speeds, time moving in fits and starts. Where WAS she?

"Piper!"

"PIPER!"

Roody was shouting at her. She heard him now and felt his furry paw pushing her hand off the book. Her vision grew dimmer, like the slow fading of a dream, until she could see her room again. But her room looked... different. The intersecting lines that had crisscrossed everything were still all around her, cutting through her bed, the walls, the roof. She suddenly knew with certainty that she was seeing math; the underlying structure of the universe was unfolding in front of her into a multidimensional field. Coordinates of time and space connected everything to everything else. She could see how the spot where she'd left the book under her pillow connected to a line of energy that led under her dresser. Without understanding the how of it, she knew that's why her belongings moved around. Somehow, *she* was connected to this structure, too.

"PIPER!!!"

She snapped back to herself to find Roody's face so close to hers she could hear the soft hum of his electric motor and the turning of his gears usually entirely muffled by his thick fur. The lines faded away. She rubbed her eyes.

"Are you all right?" Roody asked, all signs of teasing gone.

She put her hands on the floor to steady herself. "I'm

a little dizzy. That was . . . totally intense. Did you see those lines? Did I disappear?"

He shook his head. "You just . . . stopped. I don't know how else to describe it. No breath, no pulse, just frozen. And all these symbols and numbers appeared across the page under your hand." He looked down at the book and gave a little growl. "But they're gone now. It's blank again." He looked back up at her. "But it's not blank for you, is it? It never was?"

She shook her head.

Roody looked down at the floor. "I'm sorry for doubting you."

She patted him on the paw. "It's okay. I'd have doubted me, too." Piper closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths. "I feel better now," she said when she opened them. "I saw the strangest—" she started to say, but looked over at the door in time to see Roody's tail leave the room. "Hey!" she said, scrambling to her feet. "Where are you going?"

"To tell your parents what's going on," he called over his shoulder.

"Wait! Let them sleep!"

But he didn't wait. She'd underestimated the power of his programming! He first ducked into the TV room, which she reached a few seconds later. Her parents' blankets were there, but only popcorn crumbs remained on the

couches. Her stomach clenched as she followed Roody to their bedroom, hoping to cut him off. But their room was empty. They must have gone down to the lab. Maybe they hadn't given up after all.

Roody ran down the stairs much faster than she could keep up. He raced through the kitchen (no note on the table) and down the hall, looking left and right for her parents, then continued toward the basement.

She hurried after him, and they reached the bottom of the basement stairs together. The large room was dark except for the occasional glowing clock hand or flashing display. That was weird. Thoughts of getting in trouble for not telling them sooner faded as the fear of not knowing where they'd gone took over.

"Mom? Dad?" she called into the dark room. No answer. Roody jumped up and dragged his paws along the row of light switches at the bottom of the stairs. Light flooded the large space. She blinked.

Her parents' latest clock, which they called a chronosphere, lay prominently on the main worktable; the smooth surface of its spherical display featured etchings of constellations and galaxies that she knew had taken her dad weeks to carve. Powered by a complex series of rotating gears visible from all sides of the clock, the design was intended to mirror the patterns of the planets around

the sun. She knew the chronosphere was supposed to be shipped halfway across the country next week to be installed outside a museum's planetarium. Her parents were so proud of this clock, but it didn't look anywhere near done. And they never missed a deadline. Until now.

That made her heart sink even deeper.

"I'll check the yard," Roody said, darting back up the stairs.

"Hello?" she called out, stepping farther into the room. The last time she was down here—a few weeks ago? months?—her mom's desk had been neat and orderly, but now it was cluttered with an old teacup and empty glass beakers stuck haphazardly into metal stands. She stepped closer to the desk. A turkey sandwich! A half-eaten one at that, and the leftover condiments. From the browned and crumbly edges, it must have been sitting there at least a full day, maybe two. They'd definitely been busy doing something down here the last few days, and it wasn't building the Chronosphere.

The door to their exercise room was slightly open, so she ducked her head in. The only object moving was the rotating fan, which was supposed to keep the room "fresh" but only spread the dirty-sock-and-sweat smell around more. She backed out quickly.

Roody called down the stairs, "They're not in the yard."

"They're not down here, either." Piper willed herself not to panic. Her parents didn't just vanish. "Stay calm," she said out loud. She turned around in one last slow circle. Her eyes landed on the large whiteboard propped up against the wall. They used it to draw sketches for new clocks or to list parts they needed to order. But now only one thing filled the board:

$$\Delta S \geq 0 \quad T' =$$

She reached into the back pocket of her jeans for the equation she'd doodled in class. Her art session seemed much longer ago than just one day, a fact that made the hair on her arms stand up. Time had always moved exactly as it was supposed to. No more, no less. It didn't feel longer for her when she was bored, or shorter when she was having fun like she knew it did for other people. But now everything felt off. She shook her head to clear it. She couldn't think about that now.

She unfolded the equation and held it up beside the board. It matched exactly. Well, the first part. The second part was missing.

What was going on?

"Mom!" she called out one last time as panic gripped her throat. "Dad?"

Only the ticking of the clocks answered.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

# RAISA

IT WAS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE SOMEBODY THEY BUMPED INTO—first at the flea market, then someone else at a tag sale down the street—started getting nosy.

“My goodness, Pauline, your guests have been visiting for quite a while now.”

“Why, she looks just like you! Are you two related?”

The inquiries didn’t die down; they proliferated.

Finally, it was decided that while they continued searching for the book, they needed a cover story. They were sitting outside on the back porch, facing a long stretch of field, a bank of trees just beginning to bud, and the woods beyond that, on rocking chairs that Pauline had made herself. Slowly, it was all beginning to sink in. They might be here in this universe for the long term.

Raisa shuddered at the thought, but at least being here with her alternate mom was comforting. But what about Lev? Somewhere out there was a basketball-playing doppelgänger with his same name. And his same face. And alternate parents he’d never be able to talk to. The fewer people that knew about this, the better.

Lev always could, somehow, know what she was thinking.

“It’s okay, Raisa,” he said. Lev’s gaze drifted out toward the woods. “The truth is, my mom and dad won’t even notice I’m missing for...for—”

She could practically see his brain wheels spinning, numbers running around in his head.

“—for another three hundred years,” Lev said. “We will certainly figure this out by then.” He leaned his head on the back of his chair and closed his eyes. “I mean, I’ll miss them for sure, but—”

Raisa knew Lev just as well. She could tell he wanted to move on from the subject and focus on what they needed to do next. “So what’s our plan of action?”

“Well,” Pauline started. “We could say that you two are the children of my long-lost sister.”

Raisa and Lev looked at each other in horror. They both shook their heads a bit more emphatically than they needed to.



"Okay, okay," Pauline said, holding up her hand. "No siblings. Well, we need something else, then." There was a fairly long stretch of silence after which Pauline said, "Okay. What if Lev is my foster son and Raisa is my niece?" She turned to Raisa. "We do look an awful lot alike."

"I guess that works," Raisa said.

"I'll need to enroll you in school at some point," Pauline said.

"We'll need IDs?" Raisa asked. "Won't we? Birth certificates."

"And better to make up all new names," Pauline said. "Lev seems already to be taken."

Lev sat up. "Could be fun to make up our own. I didn't have much say in the decision the first time."

He was making light of the situation, Raisa knew. Maybe even for her sake. "Just until we figure this out, right?" she said.

"Of course," Pauline assured them both. "Meanwhile, I'll get to work creating some paperwork. The computers here might not be as good as where you come from, but I'm pretty sure I can whip something up, something official looking."

They spent the next few hours batting new names around and working on individual backstories, until late afternoon turned to night and they landed on the perfect

ones. Raisa looked up at the dark, sparkling sky, the moon, even the constellations. Ursa Major. And there was Cassiopeia. Orion's belt. Aries. Gemini.

It was so much the same.

And so much not.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

# PIPER

PIPER PACED UP AND DOWN THE FRONT HALLWAY, THE STILL-RINGING phone pressed against her ear. *Please answer, please answer.* She'd posted Roody on the porch in case the force field had changed direction and was keeping her parents out of the house instead of in. That would be better than believing that the invisible walls had closed in on them. The feeling of wanting to curl up into a ball and weep was new to her. She didn't like it one bit.

Piper's heart leapt as her grandmother's voice sang through the phone, but fell just as quickly when she realized it was only a recording. "Greetings! I'm sorry I missed your call. I'm probably off somewhere awesome. Leave a message and I promise I'll call you back. Unless, you know, I don't feel like it."

Usually her grandmother's voicemail message made Piper laugh, but now the recording was the last thing she wanted to hear. "Grandma, it's me, Piper," she said at the sound of the tone. "Call me. Mom and Dad are... They're missing! Things have been really... strange. Call me!"

She hung up the phone and did another search of the house because she had to keep moving her body. She knew other kids her age stayed home alone sometimes, but she couldn't remember a time when at least one parent hadn't been there. She'd always figured when that day came it would include playing loud music and eating her way through the snack shelf. Not running through the house shouting her parents' names with increasing levels of panic and wiping tears off her face so she wouldn't run into walls. If her grandmother didn't call back soon, what was she supposed to do? It would be hard enough to explain a mysterious force field to her grandmother, and it was impossible to imagine explaining it to the police.

From the upstairs hallway, she shouted, "Mom? Dad?" one last time. The only response was her own voice echoing through the empty house. She slid down to the floor and ran through the digits of pi to calm down until her grandmother called back. She made it to the fifty-third spot before a string with a knot at the end dangling near the ceiling caught her eye. She'd never paid much attention

to the attic, as her parents rarely used it. She'd never even been up there. She studied the rectangular door in the ceiling. What if the bubble had brought them to the highest part of the house and they were right there, above her head, unable to answer for some reason? She was pretty sure the only things up there would be some out-of-season clothes and that garden gnome in a top hat that Grandma had brought back from a business trip. Piper's mom said she felt like it was always staring at her so she'd stashed it away.

Still, it was the only place she hadn't looked.

So she jumped and grabbed for the knot, missing it by a few inches. She bent her knees and sprang up with a little more *oomph* this time and caught the knot with her fingertips. The door creaked open, revealing a folded-up wooden ladder and a few pieces of clothing that had fallen out of the storage bins. She quickly pulled the ladder the rest of the way open and started to climb. "Mom...Dad?"

No answer. She didn't really expect one.

When her head reached the opening, she peered into the dark space anyway. Just the creepy gnome, their winter clothes in messy bins, a pile of empty tote bags, and a few beetles whose best days were behind them. She turned and sat on a step of the ladder.

How was she going to solve this? Mrs. Hollins's voice

came drifting back to her. She'd taught them a little about what she called the scientific method. It started with asking a specific question, and then the next steps were *research* and *investigate*. She needed to start with the most pressing question: *Where did my parents go?*

She and Roody had already researched force fields and learned that, in theory, a force field would be a gravitational, magnetic, or electrical area of energy exerting force on specific particles in space to create a barrier. They couldn't find any examples of them existing on Earth, though, and certainly none that gradually closed in on people. She'd shared this information with her parents last night, and they'd squeezed her arm and said they should have enlisted her help from the start, which felt nice.

As for investigating...she'd already searched the house. But what if the force field had actually disappeared, or they'd been able to find a way to get through it? Maybe they'd been so excited to be free that they were out in town, thinking she was still asleep? As unlikely as it was that they'd have left her without at least writing a note, it gave her more hope than any of the other options she'd considered. Time to investigate further!

Usually on Saturday mornings her dad went into town to get coffee and stopped at Pearl's bookstore to chat. Sometimes her mom went down to the creek to look for

more flat stones to decorate. She felt some of the heaviness lift off her chest, and she recalled a line from a poem her mom used to quote—*Hope is the thing with feathers*. That's what it felt like as it rose inside her. She grabbed the nearest tote bag from the attic floor to carry the book in. Now that she knew about the energy lines, she wasn't taking a chance on leaving it behind again. Who knew how far it could go!

The phone rang as she ran past the kitchen. She doubled back and grabbed it before the second ring. *Please be Mom or Dad or Grandma and not someone trying to sell us a new gutter system.*

"I'm a four-hour drive away," her grandmother announced before Piper had even said hello. "Don't leave the house."

"But I—" Piper began.

"Four hours. I love you. Don't worry, we'll figure this out."

"But—"

But her grandmother had already hung up.

Roody was pacing the porch when Piper got outside. "Grandma's coming in four hours," she told him. "She said I should stay here until she arrives."

Roody looked at her sneakers and bag. "But we're going out?"

She hopped off the porch, skipping the stairs. "I'm going out to look for them. You're staying here in case they turn up. I'll be back before Grandma gets here."

"I really should go with you... I'm programmed to—"

She shook her head. "You're programmed to look out for me. Right now the best way to do that is to stay here in case they show up. I'm going to the bookstore first."

She hurried across the lawn before he could argue further.

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## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

# PIPER

HOPE REALLY MUST HAVE FEATHERS, BECAUSE IT FELT LIKE SHE FLEW all the way to the bookstore.

"Piper!" Aunt Pearl called out happily from behind the pile of books stacked on the counter. "What a nice surprise." She craned her neck to see better. "Is your dad with you?"

And just like that, the pit in her stomach returned. "He's not here? You haven't seen him today?"

Aunt Pearl shook her head. "I put this aside for when he shows up today. You know how he likes to tinker." She tapped a dusty paperback set aside on the counter—*How to Build Your Own Microwave Oven*.

Maybe it did make sense to wait a little. Aunt Pearl came around the counter with her arms piled so high with books only her eyes were showing.

"Do you want any help with those?" Piper asked out of habit, even though her hands had started to shake and she wasn't sure she could hold on to the books.

Thankfully Aunt Pearl just plopped them down on the floor next to two other piles that threatened to topple over. "Consider them shelved! Can I help you find anything while you're here?" She pushed at a box with her toe. "I still have some free books left over from the street fair the other day. Want to take a look? You know my motto, 'If you don't choose a book—'"

"A book chooses you,'" Piper finished the sentence.

Aunt Pearl smiled. "Exactly."

Piper felt the weight of the journal on her hip and realized this was an opportunity to ask more about it. Maybe Aunt Pearl would remember who sold it to her!

"I actually took one the other day on my way to school." She pulled the book out of her bag. "Do you remember this one? Like, anything about where it came from?"

"Oh yes!" Aunt Pearl said as soon as she saw it. "The journal. I'd been using it under the desk to balance the wobbly leg." She gestured behind her. "Finally bought a new desk and didn't need it anymore. Shiny, right?"

Piper glanced at the desk. It looked like the old one. Maybe a little cleaner. How could her clearly very special

book have been used for such an ordinary purpose that many other objects could have fulfilled?

“Oh” was all Piper could manage, swallowing hard. “Did you, um, notice anything unusual about it?”

“I don’t think so, hon. Why do you ask?”

Piper turned the book over in her hand. She couldn’t say what she really wanted to say, so instead she pulled out the pink note card. “I found this stuck inside. That’s unusual, right?”

Aunt Pearl took the card and looked at it with interest. “Ha, I didn’t notice that card before,” she said, skimming the words and handing it back. “Do you want to add it to the collection?”

Aunt Pearl held the card over the basket Piper knew was filled with recipes, shopping lists, receipts, birthday cards, playing cards, pressed flowers, and photographs. Any found money got donated to the town library to buy more books.

Piper couldn’t answer. She just stood there feeling helpless.

“Hey, are you all right, honey?” Pearl asked, stepping closer. “Was it something I said?”

Aunt Pearl now had her arm around Piper and was looking at her with concern. Piper’s eyes were blurry with tears, and her hand shook as she tried to slip the note card back in the book.

“Here, let me help you,” Aunt Pearl said, gently easing the cover open. Her eyes skimmed the page. “That’s a nice quote,” she said. “Very appropriate for a blank book.”

It took all of Piper’s self-control not to shout that the book wasn’t blank! That it was actually full of mysterious symbols and equations that apparently only SHE could see, that sent her to places that she didn’t understand. And that right at that moment, she had no idea if her parents were alive or dead or invisible or ever coming home!

Instead, she swallowed hard and forced herself to nod as she slipped the book back in her bag. “I haven’t seen that bag in a long time,” Aunt Pearl said. “Your mom used to lug it everywhere; I’m surprised it didn’t fall apart. It’s nice that you’re using it now.”

Piper nodded, not really caring about the bag. “When was the last time you saw either of them?” she asked.

Aunt Pearl thought for a second, then smiled. “Your mom jogged by Wednesday evening while I was setting up the table outside. In fact, she helped me carry some boxes out. The weather said clear skies, so I figured it’d be okay to leave them out overnight.”

The ancient-looking black phone on the counter that Aunt Pearl refused to replace began to ring. She gave Piper’s shoulder one more squeeze before weaving her way toward it.

"You tell them both to come visit old Aunt Pearl later, okay?"

Piper nodded, but she only half heard Aunt Pearl get on the phone and start to haggle with one of her book buddies over the value of a first edition hardcover. Wednesday night was when her parents had first encountered the force field. What if other strange things had started happening around town that same night and she just didn't know about them? All the mysteries of the book could just be another item in a list of mysterious things. She hadn't considered this before.

What if there were other books, other force fields, or something completely different but equally weird, and like her, no one was talking about them? As soon as she checked the rest of her parents' possible locations, she'd propose this hypothesis to Roody. If there were other people dealing with mysterious things in town, maybe they could figure out a way to work together or maybe they already knew more than she did! Mrs. Hollins would be very proud at how quickly she was working through the scientific method—she was already on step three: construct a hypothesis!

She burst back out onto the sidewalk and ran right into Mr. Lombardo, who dropped the keys to his shop in surprise. Guess *his* house must be force field free.

"Sorry, Mr. Lombardo!" she said, picking up the keys. Then, since she didn't have anything to lose, she asked, "You aren't suddenly able to turn invisible or move things with your mind, are you?"

He eyed her warily and just held out his hand. She dropped the keys in his palm. "I'll take that as a no."

Two doors down at the coffee shop the workers were just setting out the milk and cream and little stirring things. No Dad. Hers or anyone else's.

She continued down to the creek, the last place she could think to try. Whenever she passed someone, she couldn't help wondering if things were happening to them, too, or if it was just a regular Saturday morning for them. Maybe the man on the bench reading the *Rockdale Weekly* could now make the grass grow with his mind. Or the teenagers throwing the Frisbee were able to speak any language in the whole world even if they'd never heard it before. The Frisbee landed at her feet and she tossed it clumsily to the nearest boy. He responded with a grunt. So apparently not.

It didn't take long to see that her mom wasn't at her favorite spot at the creek. By now one of the boulders that lined the sides of the creek would have had a row of small, flat stones drying on it. She walked a bit farther, until the creek bent out toward some old farmhouses,

before heading toward home. She tried to push down the fear. *Please be there when I get there, please be there, please please please be there.*

Not ready to abandon her theory of other weird things happening in town, a block away from her house, Piper looked for any signs that the young woman jogging toward her was about to sprout wings, take flight, and soar above the treetops, but nope. The woman's sensible walking shoes stayed firmly planted on the ground as she passed by Piper with a polite nod.

In fact, the strangest sight Piper witnessed, by a long shot, was the sleek silver helicopter currently perched on her own front lawn.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

# PIPER

THE GIANT PROPELLER ON TOP OF THE HELICOPTER (!) STARTED TO PICK up speed until the individual blades were one big blur. Piper stared, open-mouthed, as it rose straight up into the air, whipping the surrounding grass and tree branches into a frenzy. The loud *CHOP-CHOP-WHIRRRR* instinctively made her cover her ears while seriously considering that she may be hallucinating. All of her strange imaginings on her route to and from town had clearly scrambled her brain.

But if she was imagining it, then the five different neighbors gawking from their front porches would also be imagining it, and that seemed like a stretch.

Now that her front lawn was clear again, she could see a figure hurrying toward her. Piper's eyes widened even



further, if that was possible. “Grandma?!” she called out as the figure got closer. She recognized the red business suit—her grandmother’s favorite—and the long white wavy hair that her mom was always trying to get her to cut but that Grandma insisted reminded her of her free-spirited youth. It was her, all right. But three whole hours earlier than expected, not that Piper was complaining. Leave it to Grandma to make such a grand entrance!

For a split second Piper feared her grandmother would run right into the invisible force field the same way her parents had that first day, but thankfully she cleared the curb without incident.

The noise gradually lessened as the helicopter circled the house once, then sped up as it headed away from town. Her grandmother’s voice sailed out to her. “Piper, honey! I’m here!”

Piper ran to meet her grandmother’s embrace. She felt so relieved at no longer being alone (no offense to Roody), that she almost wept into her grandmother’s shoulder. (Okay, she did weep.) Roody stood uncharacteristically quiet at Piper’s feet.

“Did you really just fly here in a helicopter?” Piper asked, wiping off the mess she’d left on her grandmother’s suit.

“I was giving a business presentation when I got your

message. When one of the investors heard I needed to get here fast, he flew me in on his private copter.”

She took Piper’s hands in hers as they walked back to the house, away from the prying eyes of the neighbors who were still watching the tail of the helicopter disappear. “Now tell me, Pips, what’s going on?”

Piper opened her mouth, then closed it. Now that her grandmother was in front of her, she didn’t know where to start. With waking up to find her parents gone? With the first time they saw (or rather didn’t see because it was invisible) the force field? Should she start with her theory about something strange going on in town the last few days?

Piper looked down at Roody, who looked back up at her and nodded. “Tell her,” he said.

“Tell me,” Grandma said. “Tell me everything. It’s just you, me, and Roody now.” She bent down and gave him a pat. She always had a soft spot for him. Roody liked her, too, since he could be himself around her. Grandma never judged anything Piper’s parents did. She was just always supportive. She tried once to convince her dad to get a job in robotics, but when he said he wasn’t ready to share Roody with the world, she let it go. She was good like that.

Piper took a deep breath and then let the words tumble out, spilling the entire story. From the shrinking force

field, to the experience with the journal, and everything in between.

She waited for her grandmother to process it, hoping she'd have an obvious solution, maybe something she and Roody had overlooked. When her grandmother spoke, she said only this:

"Where's the book?"



## CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

# PIPER

"THE BOOK?" PIPER REPEATED. "IT'S RIGHT HERE." SHE REACHED INTO her tote to pull it out. "But shouldn't we focus on Mom and Dad first?"

Grandma took the book and held it in her hands, bouncing it a little. "It hardly looks like anything. Nothing you'd glance at twice."

"Um," Piper said, "I guess not. But other than being a little dented in the corner, the inside is in really good condition."

Grandma flipped it open. She slid her glasses down her nose and peered at the first page. "'The blank page, like the horizon, is full of possibilities,'" she read out loud.

Piper knew the line by heart. "My school librarian wrote that in there," she explained.

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Grandma's brows furrowed. "But why would he write directly on top of the journal entries? Why not write at the top where it's empty?"

Piper stared at her. Roody let out a yelp.

"YOU CAN SEE THAT?" Piper shouted so loudly her grandmother actually backed up a step.

Now it was her grandmother's turn to stare. "Why wouldn't I be able to?"

Too surprised, Piper couldn't seem to stop shouting. "Because NOBODY else can see anything but blank pages and Mr. Topher's quote. Not even Roody!"

Grandma looked back down at the book, flipping through the pages. "Really? How strange. I can see 'em all right. I don't understand any of it, but I can see it."

Too late, Piper realized her grandmother's hand had grazed some of the equations. Piper tensed every muscle, bracing herself for what was about to happen. Through half-shut eyes she waited for her grandmother to freeze, to travel to that other place like she had.

But the seconds ticked by and nothing happened. Roody nudged her hand with his nose. "It's okay," he said. "She's still here. Nothing's happening to her."

Piper let out her breath. He was right—her grandma just kept turning the pages with curiosity. This was confusing.

"Grandma, Mom and Dad are still missing, so can we—"

"You mentioned an equation on the board?" her grandmother interrupted. "Half written?"

Piper tilted her head. "Yes, but I—"

But her grandmother had already bounded up the porch steps and shot through the front door.

Roody and Piper looked at each other. "I've never seen her move that fast," Roody observed as they both sprinted inside after her. They found her in the basement in front of the board. She had the book open on the nearest table and was looking from the board to the book and back. "How long has this been written up here?" her grandmother asked.

"Before this morning I hadn't been down here in a really long time," Piper admitted. "I figured it was new, but I guess I don't really know."

Roody had wandered away and was sniffing around the messy room. He probably smelled the old turkey sandwich.

The pink note card stuck out from the bottom of the book, and her grandmother noticed it. "What's this?" she asked, sliding it the rest of the way out. Without waiting for an answer from Piper, she turned it over and began to read.

Piper glanced around for Roody and saw him sniffing around the door to the workout room. Piper turned back to her in time to see her slip the note card into the pocket of her blazer. "Do you mind if I keep it?" she asked, her

eyes glassy. "It's lovely. You can tell the mom really loved her little girl."

But Piper didn't care about the letter right now, or even the book. "Grandma, I just want to find my parents."

"That's what I'm trying to do," her grandmother said, stroking Piper's hair. "I promise."

"But how?" Piper asked. "What do my book and the board have to do with anything?" Roody had begun to scratch at the gym door now, trying to reach the handle, but Piper ignored him. She wanted answers.

"I honestly don't know," her grandmother admitted. "I was hoping it would be an easier mystery to solve." She handed the book back to Piper, who slipped it into her tote bag, relieved that they could start focusing on the more pressing issue.

The scratching got louder and more annoying. "Roody!" Piper called out to him. "I already checked that room; they're not in there."

"I smell something," he insisted.

"Trust me, it's sweaty gym socks."

"Roody can *smell* things now?" Grandma asked, raising her brow.

"He's Roody 2.0 now. Long story." She turned the knob for him before he wore down his nails, and he bounded in before she'd gotten it open more than a crack. She flipped

on the light. The room was as devoid of parents as it had been earlier that morning. Both she and Grandma waved their hands in front of their noses. "I avoid this room as much as possible," Piper said.

"That fan is just making it worse," Grandma said, switching it off. "It smells like a combination of moldy socks, spoiled milk, and wet dog."

"I resent that," Roody said. He was now sniffing the storage closet on the other side of the weight bench. He paused for a second, then began to scratch at that door, his paws moving so fast they blurred like the helicopter's blades.

"Roody! Are you okay?"

He was too busy trying to break through the wooden door and didn't answer.

Piper ran up behind him. "Roody, stop! I'll open it."

"Could your parents have gone through there?" Grandma asked.

Piper shook her head as Roody finally put all four paws back on the floor. "It's just a small closet." Piper swung the door open to reveal the rows of weights, exercise bands, rolled-up yoga mats and—ew, what was that on the bottom shelf?!

"Augh!" Grandma said, backing up so fast she almost tripped over the weight bench. Piper pinched her nose

closed and went in for a closer look. The shelf held three items: a pair of rolled-up socks covered in some kind of green mold, a pitcher of curdled milk, and some kind of shriveled fruit that had long ago become unrecognizable. "What the... Why would this be here?"

"There's only one reason someone would do this," Grandma said, approaching with caution, her nose pinched tight. "To keep people away."

Piper's head was spinning. "Well, their plan worked," Piper admitted. "I've never stayed in here this long. Like, ever."

Roody must not have minded the terrible smell because he kept pawing at the shelves. "Do you hear something?" he asked.

They shook their heads.

Roody pushed his whole head into the small space. "I really hear something. Or sense it, I don't know. It's a dog thing. Like some kind of high frequency. It's coming from behind the wall! Help me push!"

Who were they to argue with a dog's sense of hearing?

Piper, Grandma, and Roody pushed on the shelves until the back of the wall actually started to move forward!

If their real lives were a movie, this would have been the part where the closet wall swung open to reveal that it was actually a secret door to a hidden room. They'd then

fall into the new room, knocking everything off the shelves on their way down.

And that's exactly what happened.

It was like one of those dreams where you're in a small, unfamiliar, musty room, but you know it's in your house even though you've never seen it before. Except Piper was 99 percent sure she wasn't dreaming, or if she was, this would be a good time to wake up. The ground was hard concrete, covered in dust mixed with dirt. They scrambled to their feet/paws, turned around to get their bearings, and were immediately greeted by shouts. "Piper! Roody! Mom? I'm so glad to see you all!"

"You're here!" Piper shouted, her eyes taking in the sight of her parents as they jumped out of a pair of old folding chairs, still in their pajamas from the night before. She flew into their arms. Her grandma sagged against the wall with relief. Roody bounced up and down yelping. Piper had SO many questions, but the relief was overwhelming her and she couldn't focus.

Grandma was the first to ask the obvious ones. "Gwen, what is going on? We were so worried. Piper filled me in on what happened, but why are you and Jason hiding back here? What is this place, some kind of old storage room?"

Piper reluctantly let go and took her first proper look at their environment. The small room was damp, with



## CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

# PIPER

rusted tools on wall hooks, the two folding chairs, a boy's bike, and a big bag of potting soil. An old battery-operated camping lantern cast the only light. Why would her parents have gone to the trouble to keep people away from a clearly unused storage room?

"We weren't hiding," Piper's dad insisted. "The force field closed in on us. We can't get past the door and—" He stopped when Piper's mom grabbed his arm.

She pointed at the floor, where Piper's tote had landed when she'd fallen into the room. "What is that?" she squeaked.

Piper picked up the bag. "This? I found it in the attic when I was looking for you two." The book had slid halfway out so she pushed it back in. "I just needed something to carry my book around. Can you please answer the rest of the questions?"

But her parents were now clutching at each other's arms, faces flushed.

"That's not *your* book," her mom said breathlessly. "It's mine."

PIPER SHOOK HER HEAD. WHY WERE HER PARENTS STALLING? SHE WANTED to know why a hidden room existed in her house and how to get them out of it! "No, it's not. I found it a few days ago at the bookstore. It was free."

Her grandmother nudged her. "Tell them the rest."

She really didn't want to put the focus on herself right now, but maybe if she finally told them, they'd be more forthcoming with their own secrets. "Fine." She pulled it out of the bag and opened to a random page. "It's full of strange symbols and diagrams and math equations. Grandma and I can see the writing, but to everyone else for some reason the pages look blank. Things...happen when I touch the pages, and I promise I'll show you after, but I just spent all morning freaking out because you guys

disappeared, and you've obviously gone to a lot of effort to keep me away from this place." Piper waved her hand dramatically in front of her nose from the smell that still hung in the air, but thankfully much less potently now.

"Wait, the book is *blank*?" her father repeated as though she hadn't said all that other stuff. He stuck his face right up to it, then he actually slapped his forehead. "Of course they DNA coded it!" he exclaimed, as though that made any sense. "Totally blank to me!"

Then her mom said, "You got it from *Pearl's store*?"

Other than the library, Aunt Pearl's was the only place in town to get used books, so it shouldn't have been that big a surprise.

Her dad began bouncing on his toes, something he used to do when he was excited, but Piper hadn't seen him do it in years. "When exactly did you get it?" he asked.

Piper was tempted to insist they answer *her* questions first, but she couldn't resist his enthusiasm. "On the way to school Thursday," she said. "But Aunt Pearl said she put it out Wednesday night. Actually, Mom, she said you helped her carry the box of blank journals to the table. That's probably why it looks familiar to you."

"Pearl was...giving it away?" her mother asked slowly. "With the blank journals? And I...helped?"

"Um, I guess so?" Piper said. "She said it had been under a leg of her desk or something. To keep it balanced."

Her parents were silent for a few seconds. "All this time," her mom gasped, wiping at her face and nose. Piper couldn't tell if she was laughing or crying, and landed on both. But why?

"All this time," her father repeated, shaking his head. "It was right here in town."

"It never left," her mom said incredulously.

Piper watched helplessly as her parents both laughed and cried for another two full minutes. Finally, her mom pulled herself together and turned serious. "The timelines are converging! The quantum energy field must have been pulling us here!"

"Our hard work paid off and we didn't even recognize it!" her father said.

Piper's patience had reached an end. She looked to her grandmother, who had been silent through all this, and demanded, "Do you know what they're talking about?"

"I suppose I do," her grandmother said with a sigh. "Although I prefer your parents to explain why they kept it from you."

"We had good reasons, you know that," Piper's mother said.

Piper began to tremble.

"Yes, yes, well, no time like the present." Her grandma reached into her suit pocket and, to Piper's surprise, handed the pink note card to her mom. "Here, this will give you a place to start."

"What's this?" her mom asked. Then her eyes instantly flooded as she read the words. In a raspy voice she said, "I haven't heard from my mother in twenty-five years."

Piper's trembling turned into full-blown shaking. Roody instantly appeared at her side to steady her. She'd almost forgotten he was there. She turned to her grandmother, who felt like the only solid and reliable person in the room. "Grandma, what is she talking about? Of course she's heard from you. I mean, you're her mother."

Silence. Piper looked frantically from her mom to her grandmother. Why wasn't anyone saying anything?!

"Yes, I am," her grandmother finally replied, much to Piper's relief. "But also... not exactly."

Piper stared at them all, feeling lightheaded. "I'm going to sit down now."

Clutching the book, she half sat, half fell into the nearest lawn chair. Roody jumped onto the next chair and rested his head on Piper's leg. She looked up at her mom. "I'm ready. Please tell me what's going on, Mom. Or maybe

you're not actually my mom after all since apparently you can be a daughter and not a daughter at the same time." Tears sprang to Piper's eyes, and her mom's, too, as she knelt in front of Piper's chair. She took one of Piper's shaking hands and held it tight.

"Of course I'm your mom," she promised. "I do have another name, but Mom is the only one that matters. I need you to understand that."

"And Dad is my favorite name for sure," her father said, joining their circle.

"Other... names?" Piper said, looking from one to the other.

"Okay, Piper, here it is. We—"

But the words never made it out. A flash of green light shot across the ceiling, startling all of them into silence. The flash was followed by a single *pop* like a giant kernel of corn popping on a superhot plate of oil. Piper instinctively jumped up.

A wave of dizziness hit her, and she was glad her mom was still holding her hand. She turned toward her dad to ask what just happened—only to see that his face had drained of all color, his jaw hanging open. He was staring at something behind her. A second later, her mother and grandmother had matching expressions.



Piper turned around, afraid of what she'd see. Then her own jaw fell open. The back wall of the small room was GONE.

In its place was another room, an almost exact duplicate of the one they were standing in.



## CHAPTER FORTY

# RAISA

"ARE YOU OKAY?" LEV ASKED.

"I am. Are you?" Raisa asked. "I mean, I feel a little dizzy, I guess." When she realized she was still holding Lev's hand, Raisa let go. She tried to stand, using the chair beside her for balance. The ground felt wobbly, as if it weren't quite solid.

Lev slowly got to his feet beside her. "I'm a little dizzy, too. What happened?"

Raisa took a look around the shed. The garden tools leaning against the wall. There was the workbench with the chip in the top left corner. Three bags of potting soil and one half-empty bag of mulch. The compost bin. Even that huge, smelly burlap bag of manure. But that stack of round rubber things. Had those been here? The dusty



## CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

# DR. KALLIE KWAN

window above the doorknob with a crack on the edge? She didn't remember seeing that, but there was probably no reason she would have noticed that before.

But for sure that wall in front of them had been solid, and certainly not emanating a greenish glow.

"Lev, do you see what I'm seeing?"

"I'm not sure," Lev answered. "What *am* I seeing?"

The green mist wobbled into a wavy but distinct barrier. It was hard to see through it, but there was definitely something on the other side. Another room? The glint of a bicycle frame? A workbench?

"Is that what I think it is?" Lev squinted his eyes. "Is that the shed? *Our* shed?"

It did seem to be. An exact mirror image, two identical rooms facing each other with four faces staring back at them. Plus one furry one.

NATURALLY, AT FIRST EVERYONE IS CONFUSED. I WISH I COULD EXPLAIN everything to them, but they can't see me. They can't hear me. They wouldn't believe me even if they could. They are going to have to figure it out for themselves, I'm afraid.

Lev is the first one to say anything. "Is that what I think it is? Is that the shed? *Our* shed?"

It is, but it isn't.

Raisa is standing close to him. "Who are those people?"

He doesn't have an answer for her. Not yet. "I don't know, but isn't that Roody? Hey, that's my dog!"

On the other side, in *her* shed, Piper kneels down and protectively puts her arm around Roody. "He's *my* dog."

Standing beside Piper, her mother—Gwen, as she calls

herself now—appears to be totally bewildered by what she is seeing. Who wouldn't be?

"Jason?" She turns to her husband. Her voice is uncertain and shaky. "Are we seeing an echo from when we first arrived? They're not real, right?"

Piper's dad, Jason, takes a step forward for a closer examination. "They seem awfully real to me."

"We *are* real!" That is Raisa, with her hands on her hips.

They continue to stare at one another, as if into a funhouse mirror in an amusement park that alters your reflection, but it's still your reflection. Their initial confusion has left them without words, which is fine because in Lev's shed, Raisa's mom—Pauline, my oldest friend—comes running in from behind and is doing enough shouting for everyone.

"Raisa! Lev! Don't take a single step!" Pauline's white lab coat fans out behind her as she reaches for them.

I knew she was coming. I mean, I didn't at the time when Pauline called me from her car, frantic, shouting something about following a trail of melted purple zylon to find Raisa, who had absconded with our book and the watch from the lab.

I didn't know then that Raisa had enlisted Lev as her partner in crime, or that the kids were intending to use the portal to prove that our theory of multiverse travel

was successful. I didn't know then that Pauline would find them just seconds too late to stop them from activating the portal. And then of course, as any mother would do, she went in after them. And I *certainly* didn't know that after tracking Pauline's phone I would step into Lev's shed, unfortunately, at the precise moment the energy from the duplicated books converged.

But I know now.

From my vantage point, I pretty much know everything. Past. Present. Future.

And other.

But as I said, from here, outside of it all, there's nothing I can do but watch.

"We aren't ready. We—" Pauline is frantic, until she sees across to the shed just beyond hers. And then she is simply stunned.

"What's going on... Who are those—"

She is staring intently at Gwen and Jason (wisely, I think, the alternate version of Pauline hangs back behind the others).

Spreading across Pauline's face, I see the confluence of ideas, all the possible explanations, the hypotheses, from the scientific to the fantastical as she recognizes Gwen, her own daughter—albeit twenty-five years older than she had been just that morning at breakfast.

It is Gwen who makes the first move. I can't warn her. All I can do is shake my unseen head as Gwen rushes forward, only to find she can't cross the border between the two sheds. She stops and presses her hands up to it. So softly, she murmurs, "It's you."

Pauline is still, clearly, thinking in logical science. "Are you two your universe's Raisa and Lev? But older? We must have gotten our coordinates wrong. I thought the time differential connected us to the same point in time."

Gwen lowers her hand. She shakes her head and points to Raisa and Lev.

"We are...actually them. Or they are us, depending on where you stand. I think the multiverse portal must not be just a pathway. It...must reproduce molecules. It replicates whatever crosses over. We crossed all the way through, the first time. And we've been trying to get back ever since. The energy left in the book must have brought us full circle to this moment."

Raisa always impressed me with her intelligence, and now as a grown-up, Gwen does even more so. Maybe one day she'll realize that by carrying the book out to the table that night, she kicked all this into motion.

As the reality sinks in that her daughter has been living all these years in an alternate universe without her—the tears fall freely. When Pauline now puts her hand to the

divide, Gwen does the same, their palms as close to touching as the force field allows.

"Mom, I'm okay," Gwen says. "I'm really okay." She turns to Jason. "*We* are okay. Pauline, well, the alternate Pauline, took wonderful care of us. And this is Piper... your granddaughter."

Hearing this, Piper, who had been doing her best to follow along, finally breaks. She grabs at her mom's sleeve. "Mom, you're really scaring me. That woman isn't your mother. She's, like, *your* age."

I watch Piper's head twist back and forth, weighing out the similarities, but not wanting to believe it. "*Grandma* is your mother," Piper insists. "And she's right here."

The alternate version of Pauline steps forward out of the shadows, until she and *my* Pauline are face to face. "I don't know how to thank you," they both say to the other, their identical voices mixed with sadness and appreciation, their faces as close to indistinguishable as possible with their different ages.

As the puzzle pieces click together, Raisa and Lev stare at the adult versions of themselves while Piper stares at the teenage versions of her parents.

"Wait!" Raisa says. "If those people are *us*...then that girl is my...is *our*..." But she can't seem to bring herself to actually say it.

As an aside, you likely already know what became of Original Niels and Duplicated Niels, who are both currently at the bird feeder outside having resigned themselves to their fate, enjoying the fame that comes with being the only two of your species on the planet. Though I doubt these seven folks, in their respective sheds, are giving either Niels a second thought.

It's going to take them all a minute or two, or three, or four to put this all together, so while they are doing that, I'll make it easier for you and explain as best I can.

Your universe is not unique and neither are you. There are an infinite number of possible worlds, all existing in their own "bubbles," each unaware of the other. The bubbles move in their own time, orbiting their star closer or farther away, faster or slower. Perhaps with a similar mass and gravity, perhaps not. In some of these alternate worlds there is a duplicate of you, in another perhaps you were never born. Some things might be very similar, others entirely unfamiliar.

The theory is intriguing, isn't it? The possible existence of a multiverse has captured the curiosity of humans since the ancient Greek philosophers—from Epicurus to Erwin Schrödinger, from Niels Bohr to Albert Einstein, from Stephen Hawking to Neil deGrasse Tyson. But what none of them (or us) had considered was that passing from one universe to another scatters atoms into infinite,

infinitesimal quantum particles, which are duplicated and arranged again on the other side. In this way, Raisa and Lev entered the portal, and a different but identical Raisa and Lev exited. As the two bubbles began their slow return to alignment, the energy created began to pull Gwen and Jason back to their starting place—the shed, which they long ago attached to their house and hid from everyone.

As of right now (since you are limited to the concept of linear time) the bubbles that encompass their two universes are held in suspension, drawn together by the energy of both books, and by the alignment of both timelines.

"If my calculations are correct"—Pauline wipes her eyes and pulls herself back into scientist mode—"our universes are due to separate again in..."

"Fourteen minutes and fifty-five seconds," Piper blurts out.

Pauline turns to Piper. She looks at her granddaughter as if seeing her for the first time, which she is. "How did you know that?"

"I'm not sure. I...I think I'm able to sense the two different universes, and that's why I'm so good with time?" Another realization dawns on Piper and she holds up her wrist. "The watch my dad gave me! That's what it's been doing, right? It's measuring the time differential. That's why the second hand barely ever moves."



## CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

# RAISA

Lev looks down at his identical watch. “I was supposed to be the time keeper,” he says. “So we would know how long we had before we needed to go back.”

“Fourteen minutes and twenty-two seconds,” Piper says.

“Then what happens?” Raisa looks at her mom.

It takes my old friend only a brief moment to understand what is at stake. “Oh no!” she cries out. “There is an awful lot of energy in those two books now. Way, way too much to be this close.”

I could have told them that. Maybe I should have tried harder. Maybe they could have realized it sooner. But as I said, they wouldn’t be able to hear me. They don’t yet know what I have sacrificed for them. What I am still sacrificing.

Besides, it’s too late. The books have come too close, like negative- and positive-charged magnets, and the polarity is reversing. A low rumbling fills both spaces, escalates in seconds from a swarm of bees to a jet plane taking off, followed by a bright green flash and an awful ripping sound. Then all is still other than their racing hearts.

Until Piper utterly and completely disappears.

Another second, and Raisa is gone too.

EVERY TINY PARTICLE WITHIN A PARTICLE, WITHIN AN ATOM, AND WITHIN its electrons, expanded until the tiniest space between all things became the largest and most infinite. And in this nothingness, between all infinitely possible universes, there was blue and aqua and green and scarlet and violet.

Here nothing was frightening. Not even the sense of timelessness. Not at all. Quite the opposite. It was freeing.

Raisa felt weightless, and at the same time entirely grounded. She reached for her shoulder bag. Yes, right where it should be. But something in her brain felt off. Like that feeling you get when you accidentally fall asleep on the couch and then wake up hours later, a bit foggy and disoriented, and it takes you a few minutes to realize what happened and where you are.

She saw olive and ruby and mauve and gold. Rose, azure, crimson, gray, orange, pink, ocher, yellow, lilac, silver, white, red, brown, and blue.

But there were also more colors, many, many more, an entire spectrum of light fractured into hundreds of different colors. Millions. More colors than Raisa had ever been able to see before. But hadn't they always been there? Dancing in the night sky. Hidden behind the clouds. Appearing in each tiny leaf and rosebud and drop of rain.

There was movement and stillness. And all the space within that space. There was the very, very large and the smallest of the small. And nothing was different than any other thing. The moon's pull on the ocean, waves painted in the desert sand, a bird in perfect unison with a current of air, seeming not to be moving at all. She could feel herself drifting away, fragmented, connected to whatever it was she was surrounded by, part of everything, all at once.

They say it's never really silent on Earth. Not anywhere. Not at night. Not in the middle of a perfectly still ocean. Not in the woods when there isn't even a single breeze to rustle the leaves and the birds have all gone to sleep. Never. There is always some noise, no matter how soft or infinitesimal. There is always sound.

The sound of falling. The sound of nothingness dropping around her.

Slowly, like coming out of a dream, things around her started to take form. The spokes of a bicycle wheel, the workbench and gardening tools, the glint of the sun on a cracked pane of glass. Far away, Raisa could hear the sound of a lawn mower, and a crow screeching as it flew by. She was sitting on the floor of the shed, and the girl who had just been in the shed opposite hers was now right beside her.



## CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

# RAISA

BOTH GIRLS STOOD UP QUICKLY, TURNED, AND LOOKED AT EACH OTHER for one long beat before Raisa spoke.

"It's you, right? Piper?"

Piper nodded. "And you're...you're really my mom when she was a kid?" Piper closed her eyes and opened them again, as if blinking might make sense of all of this. Any of this. "That's gotta be the weirdest sentence I've ever said in my whole life."

"Weirder for me." Raisa brushed the dirt from her pants. "When you think about it."

"So your name's not Gwen...it's...?"

"Raisa."

Piper mused. "Hmm, that's pretty." Then she said, "You know I've heard my dad call my mom that a few times

when he thought I couldn't hear, and I always thought he was saying *raisin*. You know, like a loving nickname?"

Raisa felt herself blush. She couldn't think about what it meant that Lev had become Piper's dad. She didn't know why they'd have changed their names, but she could guess. She had to smile at the ones they'd chosen, from her and Lev's favorite movie. "Can we agree to skip the mom-and-daughter part of this for now? At least until we figure out what just happened?"

"Agreed," Piper said. "Did you just wind up in some kind of outer space type of place with all these colors?"

"Yes!" Raisa said, so relieved to be able to share it with someone. "Wasn't it amazing?"

Piper nodded. "Totally. I've seen a little of that when I touched the pages in the book, but this was a whole other level."

Raisa noticed for the first time that Piper had the identical bag over her shoulder, but it was a lot more faded. She must have the identical book in there, too. So strange. "What grade are you in?" she asked Piper.

"Fifth. What about you?"

"Sixth," Raisa replied. "You're tall for your age."

"You're short for yours," Piper replied.

They grinned at each other. Then they both looked around. "Where is everyone else?" Piper asked.



"Why is there only one shed now?" Raisa asked at the same time. "Is it ours or yours?"

"I didn't even know I had a shed until today," Piper told her.

"Really?" Raisa said. "That's weird."

"Believe me, I wish that was the weirdest thing that's happened in the last few days!"

"I bet!" Raisa said. "Well, one way to find out." She pushed open the shed door, and a pale sunlight filtered in.

Raisa pointed across the lawn. "That's Lev's house. That's the tree house we used to play in when we were little. We'd hide in there and pretend to be astronauts. Do you have one of those?"

Piper shook her head no and stepped back. She looked a bit like she was about to cry. "But how can that be? Where am I? How do I get home?"

"It's okay," Raisa said. "We'll figure this out. C'mon, I bet they're all inside the house waiting for us." She took Piper by the arm and slowly led her across the lawn. She'd never admit it, but she felt a little maternal toward the girl.

The back kitchen door was shut, but the screen hung open on its hinges like it always did. "My dad finally fixed that," Piper said. "In my world, I mean."

Raisa gently pulled the door open, and they stepped inside.

Piper drew in a deep breath and seemed to relax a little. "Smells like apple pie."

That was strange. For as long as she had known Lev, no one in his family had ever baked an apple pie. And the little cactus plant on the windowsill. Had that been here before?

"Lev?" Raisa called out, heading into the living room.

Piper called out, "Mom? Dad?"

It was Lev's house, but nothing was right. For one thing, there was a huge upright cello in the living room. And all this flowery furniture. There was a white, shaggy dog fast asleep in the corner, who didn't seem to even have noticed them come in.

"That's not Roody," both girls said at the same time.

"This isn't Lev's house," Raisa said. "Maybe we're in your world after all?"

Piper shook her head. "Nothing's exploding in the basement."

"Well, I certainly hope not!" The voice came from behind the girls.

Piper and Raisa startled and spun around. The woman who had walked into the living room behind them had her hair in a scarf and her hands on her hips, but a big smile on her face.

"You must be here to bring Todd his homework. Mr. Danmier said you'd be coming by, but next time ring the

bell. You startled me.” Then the woman rested her hand on the banister and called up the stairs, “Todd, your friends are here. Come down and say hello.”

She turned to face the girls again. “He’s not contagious. Just a little cold. I’m sure he’d love to see you. Can you girls stay for some apple pie? I just made it.”

Raisa and Piper stammered, but not a single coherent word came out. It didn’t matter because at that moment the floor gave way, and Raisa and Piper began falling.

Again.



## CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

# RAISA

IT LOOKED LIKE THE AFTERMATH OF A WAR. THE SHED WAS STILL BEHIND them, but the lawn (Lev’s lawn? Piper’s lawn? Someone else’s lawn?) was a patchwork of mud and tufts of brown, trampled grass. Whatever had happened to it, all that was left of the house were three walls, no windows, and half a roof. Hanging by one hinge, and just barely, the back screen door was swinging open and closed in a slow creaky rhythm.

“Where are we?” Raisa whispered, because whispering seemed like the smart thing to do.

“And *what* are we wearing?”

Raisa looked down. Her sneakers were gone. Instead, she had on what looked like combat boots, or very worn and dirty Doc Martens, which under any other circumstances would have been totally cool. She was no longer wearing

SCHOLASTIC

SCHOLASTIC

her own clothes. Instead she wore black pants and a long camouflage jacket—neither of which fit her, and both of which had clearly once belonged to someone else. Her shoulder bag with the book inside was still safely strapped across her body (whew!), but Raisa saw that she now also carried a canteen, a pickax, a leather drawstring pouch (with who knows what inside), and an empty cardboard toilet paper roll that looked like it held a rolled-up map.

“What the...what?” She looked at Piper, who was wearing not quite but very much the same sort of clothing, as if they were going camping. “What is happening?”

Actually, thinking about it, camping would be the best-case scenario.

Then Piper screamed. “My hair is gone!”

Raisa reached up to touch her head. “Mine is, too!” There was only the prickly feel, like her father’s face when he needed a shave.

Maybe they would have lamented about their hair for a while longer, but a girl came running over, anxiously waving her arms and shouting. The girl was dressed much the same as Raisa and Piper appeared to be, thick boots and jacket, army-green pants, a belt hanging low on her hips from all the survival gear tied to it. Although, apparently, the girl still had her hair. A long braid hung down her back, and a stained bandanna covered her mouth and nose.

“What are you two doing out here? What were you thinking? Get inside.”

She practically pushed Raisa and Piper *back* into the shed. Or rather, into the shed for the first time, depending on how one looked at it. Because this certainly wasn’t the shed they had been standing in last, or the time before that, when she and Lev first decided to jump the multiverse, which in hindsight, was clearly a big mistake.

“Don’t move,” the girl ordered. “I’ll fix everything.” She darted outside, pulling the wooden door closed behind her.

There were no gardening tools on the shelves. There were cans and cans of black beans, kidney beans, white beans, string beans, and SpaghettiOs. There were bottles of water. Hundreds of bottles of water, from the looks of it.

“What is this place? What are all those boxes?” Piper carefully opened the one on the workbench next to her and peeked inside. “Ramen noodles,” she said. “It’s filled with them. Every flavor.” She reached inside and held one up. “Lime Chili Shrimp. Not a fan of that one.” She put it away quickly when the girl hurried back into the shed, carrying a large metal box on her back. She flipped it over easily and dropped it onto the dirt floor. Judging by the thud it made when it landed, it was very heavy. Stenciled letters on the lid spelled out AMMUNITION.

“You know you can’t be out there without a mask,” she

reprimanded them. “The air quality is code red today. I’m sure you saw the flag.” She pulled down the cloth from her face. “What were you thinking, Piper?”

Piper’s mouth dropped open.

“Sofia?”



## CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

# RAISA

BEFORE THE GIRL COULD REPLY TO PIPER, SHE AND RAISA FELL AGAIN.

It wasn’t *falling* exactly. In fact, it wasn’t falling at all. It was more like being sucked through a vacuum hose, or what Raisa imagined it might feel like to be sucked through a vacuum hose. There was no way to tell how long it took, what direction they were going, or certainly, where they would end up, but it didn’t hurt. It didn’t even feel that unpleasant. But she didn’t like that it was out of their control.

And then Raisa and Piper were in the shed again, only this time there was no shed at all, at least none to speak of. There were four wooden posts where, perhaps, walls had once been. Lush green vines wrapped around each post, bursting with pink, yellow, and purple blossoms. There

was no roof. Overhead opened to a clear blue sky. Raisa sensed herself turning toward the delicious warmth of the bright sun. She felt her fingers spreading wide into the rich, damp earth, drinking in water. She could taste her food—the nitrogen and phosphorus and potassium. She filled herself by breathing in carbon dioxide from the air all around her and breathing it out again as oxygen.

Um, what? Raisa was...a tree?

She couldn't open her mouth because she didn't have one, but she was able, somehow, to speak to Piper, who also stood tall and rooted beside her.

*I've never felt so powerful.*

She didn't have ears, of course, but Raisa could hear Piper when she said, *Me too. It's amazing!*

Raisa could sense everything that was around her: other small trees, the flowers, and tall grasses, the mushrooms growing beneath her trunk, connecting all of them. She could even see her mother's book. It had fallen out of the bag and lay on the ground just out of reach with Piper's right beside it.

*The books!* she said/thought to Piper. *We need the books.*

*I can't reach that far.*

*Me neither.*

Growing nearby was a magnificent willow, bending and swaying in the wind. Raisa needed to ask for help.

*Can you possibly slide those books toward us?*

*I can try.*

The willow's long, gentle branches brushed against the ground, touching the books. Raisa could feel them moving, ever so slightly.

*Yes, that's it. Can you push them just a little closer?*

*I can try.*

Ever so slowly the books, one at a time, slid closer and closer—

*Yes, you got it! One more centimeter.*

—until they just barely grazed one of Raisa's giant thick roots poking out from the ground. The girls didn't have time to call out their thank-yous before the universe shifted again and everything disappeared in a swoosh.



## CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

# RAISA

"I'M SO COLD."

Raisa didn't get a chance to respond to Piper before she felt her lips begin to freeze. The inside of her nose felt crackly. She reached up to touch her face. She was glad it was still there. When she turned to Piper, she was touching her face as well.

"Where are we now?" Piper asked.

"I don't know, but we can't stay here. My fingers are numb already."

They looked around at where they stood, on nothingness, a long vast horizon of white nothingness. The sky was only slightly less white, a bluish shade of gray.

"Is there anything here?"

Piper pointed to the very tip of something brown just

barely protruding from the hard-packed snow. "Look," she said. "It kind of looks like a door."

"Maybe. To the shed? Should we try? Maybe it's a way back." Raisa stooped down to look. "It's a window." She began scratching at the frosted glass that was face down, flat against the ground. "I can't," she said. "It's too cold."

Piper knelt down beside her. "Here," she said. Piper took a flat painted rock from her pocket. "I always have one or two of these. This one is flat." She ran her finger on the edge. "Try this?"

Raisa took the rock. Turning it, she read: *You Are My Sunshine*. "Well, that's appropriate." She was about to begin scraping at the frosty surface when the window suddenly popped open from the side. A face peered out.

Lev.

"Lev?"

"Get in here. What are you doing?"

He held open the door, which now Raisa saw was a hatch to whatever was underground, under a thick wall of ice and snow. "You'll freeze to death." Lev moved aside to reveal a ladder and gestured to the girls to follow him back down.

Raisa looked back at Piper, who nodded and said, "Do we have a choice?"

Piper went first, then Raisa. Lev closed the hatch

behind him and now it was dark, completely dark, until he flipped on a flashlight.

"Where are we?" Raisa asked.

When their eyes adjusted, they saw a large open space, a room of sorts, filled with electronics, computers, cables, monitors, batteries, extension cords, and plenty of things Raisa couldn't begin to identify. It was cold, but nothing like outside. Finally, Lev turned to Raisa.

"Who is this, Raisa?" he asked, lifting his chin toward Piper.

"You know who I am?" Raisa asked, and as soon as she did, she realized there must be another Raisa here.

"Of course, I do," Lev said. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing."

When she had thawed out enough to pay attention, Raisa took a look at Lev's outfit—a bright orange, puffy, reflective winter jacket that reached to his knees, thick gloves, and a beanie made of a material Raisa couldn't identify. When she looked at Piper, she saw Piper was wearing something very similar.

And so was she!

Raisa had no explanation for how all this was happening, but she knew, inside, that she could always trust Lev, whatever version this one was.

"What's going on, Raisa?" Lev didn't look happy. "Why were you out there? And again, who is this? She's not one of us."

"It's a long story," Piper said.

Raisa added, "A very long story."

Lev folded his arms over his chest—well, over the bumpy rolls of fabric. "Tell me," he said. "I'm listening."

So they unfolded their journey: the divide between their worlds, the time differential, and the minutes ticking by before they could—hopefully—return to their respective homes. Lev wanted to know the exact number.

"For every 0.00410958904109589th of a second in my universe, one hour will have passed in Piper's," Raisa told him. She left out the part about Piper being her daughter. *Their* daughter. It didn't seem necessary.

And it was way too weird.

But the part about how little time they had left was very important.

"Eleven minutes and five seconds," Piper told them.

"Impressive. So that book—" Lev said, after taking it all in with no questions and apparently no doubt that they were telling the truth. "It's really a device that contains an energy source?"

Both girls nodded.

"I can tell you there's no one here named Kallie. There's



## CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

# PIPER

no place called ASK. There's a Raisa, and her mom is an engineer, but my guess is that you won't be staying here long anyway. If this isn't the universe where you belong and you say neither of you come from the same one, then I'm guessing you're not going to solve any of this until you figure out how to use those books."

"That makes sense," Raisa said. "If we get to stay in one spot long enough to even look at them."

"Well, you're welcome to stay here as long as you need to," Lev said. But just as he uttered those words, the air shifted; a cold wind came in from nowhere and blew Lev's cap right off his head. "Good luck, Raisa," he shouted after them as they fell.

And fell and fell.

PIPER HIT SOLID GROUND, LIKE BOUNCING OFF A BED AND LANDING A little too hard. Raisa was lying beside her, a sadder expression on her face than Piper had seen before. It must have been hard for her to leave Lev again. Even if it wasn't her original Lev.

She looked around and gasped. The clocks! The half equation on the board! Her mom's cup of lukewarm tea. Even the old turkey sandwich! "Raisa! We're safe! We're home! My home, I mean. Where we first met you and Lev and your mom!" She jumped up and helped Raisa to her feet. "All this is my parents' basement lab—I mean, *your* lab, I mean, ahhh, you know what I mean! You guys make clocks. Amazing, one-of-a-kind clocks, and I'm starting to realize that there was a lot of other stuff going on that's



been kept from me.” Piper frowned a bit accusingly at Raisa, who held up her hands.

“Hey now, I’m new here. You can blame Gwen and Jason.” Raisa looked around. “It’s exactly the same as Lev’s basement. Except instead of these amazing clocks and what looks like a mad scientist’s lab, there would be the couches where we’d watch *Galaxy Quest* on repeat. How does it connect to the shed?”

“Through here,” Piper said, reaching for the door to her parents’ gym. “You won’t believe what they did to keep me out.” Piper tried to turn the knob, but her hand slid right through it. “That’s strange,” she said, trying again. It was almost like her hand couldn’t quite make contact with it.

“You can’t get to them.” The female voice came from the ceiling and the walls, from under the table, and behind the whiteboard.

Raisa and Piper froze. “Hello?” Piper called out.

“Who is that?” Raisa asked. “You sound familiar. Where are you?”

The voice filled the room again. “You can’t even leave this basement. And neither can I.”

Both girls raced toward the bottom of the stairs. And both bounced right back. Now Piper knew what her parents felt like. It wasn’t a fun feeling.

“Told you,” the voice said. “Sorry!”

Once they caught their breath, they both looked up at the ceiling, since looking up made as much sense as anything.

“Wait... *Kallie*? Is that you?” Raisa shouted. “We can’t see you!”

“Kallie?” Piper repeated. “The one who you told Lev about? Your mom’s partner in her lab?”

“Yes! Is that you?!” Raisa shouted even louder.

“You don’t need to yell,” the voice said. “I’m right here.”

Both Piper and Raisa spun around a few times. “Where?” they asked at the same time.

“As best I can tell, I’m stuck in the In-Between,” the woman who was apparently Kallie said. “The place outside of space-time where all the multiverses are like moving puzzle pieces.”

“We’ve been there,” Piper said.

“But how did you get *here*?” Raisa asked Kallie.

“I followed your mom straight into the portal just as the two books reversed polarity. No one even saw me. I was just *gone*. And I’ve been gone ever since. For decades now, not that time is a thing here.”

“Decades?!” Raisa repeated. “But the polarity explosion only just happened.”

“To both of you, yes. But since I was in the middle of it, it sent me to a dimension much, much farther away. It’s

taken me all this time to catch up with you. But I need you to know this—the two books have been drained of their energy. There's not enough to send us back."

Raisa's voice shook. "You're saying we're never getting home?"

For once, the voice was silent.

Piper frantically looked around the room. All the hard work her parents had done for this moment. They couldn't give up. "Now we only have eleven minutes and four seconds left. Tell us what to do!"

No answer.

Raisa shouted up to the ceiling, "Kallie! You always think of solutions. Think!"

Piper's stomach clenched as she announced, "Ten minutes and thirty seconds."

"Well," Kallie said finally. "The only thing would be to charge the devices back up. But—"

"Okay!" Raisa said. "How do we do that?"

"There are outlets all over down here," Piper said, the feather of hope fluttering. "And a whole box full of charging cords."

"BUT," Kallie repeated, more loudly. "It is EXTREMELY dangerous and will require you to create more energy than has ever been generated in this version of Earth."

Raisa let her shoulders drop. "Of course it does."

"Well, we have to try," Piper said. "Please, Kallie. We have less than ten minutes now."

"Fine," Kallie said, "but if this literally blows up in your faces, don't come running to me."

"As if we could!" Raisa said. "What first?"

"In that glass container next to the leftover sandwich is an element called gambium," Kallie said, her words coming at them fast now. "I can't even count the number of international laws Raisa had to break to procure it."

"I didn't—" Raisa began. "Oh, right. The other Raisa."

"My mom broke *laws*?" Piper asked.

"And your grandmother. You don't really think she went to the South Pole on a business trip, do you?"

Piper opened her mouth, paused, and closed it.

"Do you see the gambium?" Kallie asked.

"Yes," Raisa said, hurrying over to the counter. She pushed aside the sandwich and the cup of tea to give them space to work. "Hey, it's the Turkey Delight. I always order that from the deli on Elm."

"That's my mom's favorite, too," Piper said.

"Naturally!" Raisa said.

"I mean, other than pizza," Piper added. "We're regulars at Toozy Patza"

"Taste of Italy pie, right?" Raisa asked.

"Yes!"

"Us too!"

They beamed at each other.

"Girls," Kallie snapped. "I'm sorry I brought up the sandwich. Pay attention."

"Sorry!" they both yelled.

"It's empty," Raisa said, peering into the glass container.

"It is not," Kallie said. "In this state, gumbium is a gas. It has more than double the number of protons as uranium. When it fuses with sodium under just the right circumstances, the right temperature and pressure, the reaction releases a massive amount of energy."

"Enough to open a portal to another universe and get us all back to the right places?" Piper asked.

"That's the hope," Kallie said.

*Tick. Tick. Tick.* Piper's inner clock was so loud it was hard to think. She had to focus. She picked up the empty-looking container and held it up to the light. "Mom broke laws for *this*? I should have known those weren't clock parts being delivered in the middle of the night! And clock parts probably don't explode, either!"

"I make things explode?" Raisa said with interest.

"Piper! Put the container down VERY gently! Then one of you open your book to page three. You'll be inserting that metal tube on the rack behind you into the airtight lid as shown."

"Sorry, sorry," Piper said, holding her breath as she carefully set down the container. She pulled her book from her shoulder bag and flipped through the pages while Raisa went to grab the tube.

"There." She pointed at the page. "Right?" The fact that she was getting used to talking to an invisible, all-knowing version of her alternate-grandma's lab partner showed just how strange a day it had been.

"Yes, that's it," Kallie's voice said.

Raisa followed the diagram and slid the tube in like a pro.

"Good," Kallie said. "You will hear a click when the tube is locked into place. Now, be sure to keep the valve in the middle tightly closed. If gumbium mixes with oxygen it will spontaneously explode and take the neighborhood with it."

"Well, that's not great," Raisa muttered.

"Okay, the hardest step comes next: adding the liquid sodium. Combining the two elements needs to be done at precisely the right speed."

"But that's not humanly possible," Raisa complained.

Kallie only said, "And try not to let the liquid sodium come into contact with the air, either."

"Let me guess," Raisa said. "Or it will explode, too."

"Exactly."

Raisa examined the pieces of equipment set out before her. "I can't do this. I'm too nervous."

Piper rested her hand on Raisa's arm. "I've watched you measure out exactly the right number of herbs and spices for your famous spicy meatballs, down to the grain of salt. You can do this."

"That makes no sense," Raisa said. "I've never made meatballs a day in my life."

"Not yet."

*Four minutes and forty-one seconds.*

*Four minutes and forty seconds.*

"Piper." Kallie was now talking very softly and slowly, which made things sound even more dire. "We need the sodium now. It's right there behind you, do you see it? The container marked *Na*?"

"Yes." It looked like gray baby powder.

"Now bring it back to the counter. You got this," Kallie told her.

"Okay." She carefully placed it between her and Raisa. "You got this," she told her.

Raisa took a deep breath. She picked up the sodium vial and gave Piper a weak smile. And then, because of course it did, the front doorbell rang, buzzing through the basement speakers and making them both jump. Raisa spun back around and accidentally knocked over the cup

of lukewarm tea, at which point, in an effort to stop the tea from spilling onto the book (which she failed to do), she also dropped the vial of sodium on top of it all. They both watched with matching expressions of horror as the vial dropped on top of it, shattered, and the sodium burst into flames. At least it wasn't the neighborhood-destroying explosion that dropping the gambium would have caused.

Raisa ran to grab water from the sink.

"No water!" Kallie shouted. "That would only make it worse. It's too late."

They could only watch helplessly as the book sparked and flared, its corners curling and turning black, and in a matter of seconds, it was entirely consumed in the fire.



## CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

# RAISA

RAISA STOOD, FROZEN, AND WATCHED AS THE BOOK SPARKED A FEW more times, then shriveled up into a pile of ash. She couldn't have felt worse. "I'm so sorry, Piper."

"It was an accident," Piper said. "No one ever rings our doorbell!" Then she called out, "Kallie? We still have Raisa's book! We were only going to power up one anyway, right?"

Raisa yanked her book from her bag. "And we still have the gambium!" Then her stomach sank. "But all the sodium burned up." She looked frantically around the room full of so much stuff. "We need to find something else. Something else that acts like sodium."

"Wait. Look! There." Piper pointed to the turkey sandwich on the counter.

Raisa's eyes widened when she saw the big pile of salt packets next to it. "Awesome!"

Piper handed them over. "My parents save them to sprinkle on their pizza!"

"Okay, weird," Raisa said, then shouted up to Kallie, "Salt contains sodium, right? Sodium chloride? And when you dissolve table salt in water, you get sodium ions. Could the energy from gambium and a sodium *ion* fusion be enough to get us back through the portal?"

*One minute and fifty-nine seconds.*

"I don't know," Kallie said. "Try. Your mom would try. Both of your moms."

The celestial clock agreed. *Tick. Tick. Tick.*

Raisa began.

Get another glass container.

Four packets of salt.

Fill with water.

Stir.

Put on air-tight lid.

Stick the other end of the metal tube inside.

Raisa willed her brain to tell her hands what to do and do it correctly. She felt a drop of sweat roll down her forehead, but she couldn't risk taking her hand off the beaker. She tried to focus on what Piper was saying.

Light up the Bunsen burner.

*One minute and ten seconds.*

"Try. Concentrate," Kallie instructed. "Slowly. But quickly. Now open the valve."

They could see the gambium bubble up through the salt water.

*Forty-eight seconds.*

Now all she had to do was get the fusion energy into the book, but how to do that? Kallie gave the final instructions and Raisa followed. "There should be a tiny cap hidden in the top of the book's spine. One full turn counterclockwise. Once. Only once. Two turns clockwise. Only two. Open carefully. A metal syringe should emerge. Fill it with the solution. Touch the syringe gently and it will withdraw back into the book's spine and lock automatically."

They heard a click as the syringe and cap snapped back into place. Raisa lowered herself onto the floor. With the book in her hand, Piper sat down beside her.

Raisa looked at Piper. "We should do this together." Then she looked up at the ceiling. "Kallie?"

"Hurry," Kallie shouted. "There's two seconds left."

Raisa flipped the book open to the center, and at the same time, she and Piper placed their hands on the equation.

A blinding green light lit up the basement.

The room vibrated, flickered like a movie stuck on a frame.

And it seemed the multiverse would have something to say about what happened next.



## CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

# RAISA

RAISA FELT HER BODY BREAK INTO A MILLION TINY PIECES. IT DIDN'T hurt. It wasn't frightening. It was just the returning to the stardust of the cosmos, to the very moment before the beginning and all the moments that came before. She was back to that place, the In-Between place. But she couldn't say when. Or even where. She couldn't feel her body, her hands, her feet, her head. It was all there, but also not. As if she were joined with everything around her, and everything around her was a great expanse. She rolled her neck, stretched out her legs, and reached her arms out to either side, like a cat first waking up after a long, luxurious nap.

But why was she here again?

Had it worked? If it had worked, wouldn't she be in the shed?

"Piper! Are you here?"

"I'm here." Piper shimmered into visibility. "But why aren't we back in the shed?"

"I don't know," Raisa answered. "And where's Kallie?"

"I'm right here," Kallie said. "And don't worry. You won't be here long."

"I can see Piper, but I still can't see you."

"I know," Kallie said. "We're still not in the same dimension. You'll understand one day. But, Raisa, when you get back, please tell your mother about this place where matter and energy truly are one and the same. Tell her how beautiful it is."

"You should be the one to tell her," Raisa said.

"Unfortunately, I won't be able to."

Raisa suddenly felt more grounded than she'd felt in this space before. "What do you mean?"

"The compound worked," Kallie said. "The sodium ion you created was enough, but not enough for all of us." Already Kallie's voice was fading.

"This isn't right," Raisa called out, but Kallie had all but disappeared. There wasn't anything she could do. Something was shifting and it was happening fast.

"It's okay," Kallie shouted to be heard. "I promise. Tell your mom to listen for a signal on the lab's quantum computer. Tell her to turn it to 5.345 megahertz, the amateur

radio frequency we programmed for Niels.” Kallie’s voice was a far-off echo. “Now hold on to each other.”

Raisa reached out and clasped Piper’s hand. Something passed between them, though neither would have been able to say what it was. Perhaps an understanding of a future that was never going to happen. A broken connection between a mother and daughter, and a forged one, at the same time. Strands of DNA interwoven across time and space.

They held tight as ribbons of light danced around them, blending one into another, bending and twisting, forming new colors. Sound waves of all frequencies blended into silence. Another instant, and it all blew away.



## EPILOGUE

# RAISA

RAISA WANTED TO LAUGH AT THE SIGHT. LEV SAT WITH HIS LONG LEGS bent at the knees, not able to stretch out. He barely fit in the wooden tree house anymore, but they’d both wanted to come up here. After everything that they had been through, they just felt like being little kids again. This seemed like the best place to do that.

Raisa sat across from him, leaning her back against the wall. Roody was sleeping on the grass at the bottom of the ladder. Lev told her that Roody had been following him around wherever he went, upstairs, downstairs. He even waited outside the bathroom door.

“It’s like he knew I was stuck in the shed in that In-Between place,” Lev said. “Even though it couldn’t have



been more than a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of a second for him.”

Raisa leaned out the window cut out of the side and looked down. “Sometimes it feels like none of it ever happened.”

Since getting back from the In-Between and everyone returning to the worlds where they belonged, things had gotten really hush-hush.

“We have to make sure no one finds out we’re still working on the project for now,” her mother had told them. “With the information Kallie has been sending using electromagnetic radiation we’ve learned so much about the structure of the multiverse, but we don’t yet know how to navigate it. That kind of energy and our equations in the wrong hands could be very dangerous.”

Raisa knew her mother was sad to have “lost” her best friend and partner, but Kallie has been assuring her she was right where she wanted to be—a living, breathing, scientific experiment. And perhaps they would one day figure out a way for her to return, if she wanted to.

Raisa decided not to ask what specific danger her mom was referring to, since she had gotten a first-hand glimpse of what dangerous might look like in some of those alternate Earths.

It would be a lot harder to keep the whole experience

a secret if she didn’t have Lev to keep it with her. As far as they knew, they were the only two people in the multiverse who had actually ever been duplicated. If she thought too hard about that, it would keep her up at night. So she tried not to. Lev had made the difficult decision not to tell his parents that a version of him had been lost in another universe. That would be too much to put on them.

Maybe one day he would, Lev had told Raisa. Maybe one day he would, when, or if, the multiverse project was perfected and everyone knew about it.

Lev told Raisa about how he had signed up for two weeks at a neutrino robot training camp when school was over, and Raisa told Lev that she would be spending her time at home with her family. Her mom had wanted to keep her close lately. Time might move differently in different universes, but summer always went by too fast.

“Are you hungry?” Raisa asked. “Pizza?”

“Always,” Lev said. “And always.”

But when he tried to get up on his feet, he forgot how tall he was and banged his head on the wood ceiling.

“Ouch.” Raisa winced in sympathy. “You okay?”

“Yeah. I guess,” Lev said, rubbing the top of his head. “My mom says if I keep growing like this, maybe I should join the travel basketball team.”

“I can totally see you playing basketball,” Raisa said,

because she could kind of see it. *Feel* it was more like it. Maybe everyone could sense a tiny bit of their alternative selves somewhere in the multiverse, and they just didn't know it. So they called it déjà vu.

Lev jumped down onto the grass. "I have to put Roody inside first. Then we can go." He whistled. "C'mon, boy." Roody bounded across the lawn after him and inside the house. "I'll meet you out front," Lev shouted back to Raisa.

But there were also things Raisa *hadn't* talked about to anyone.

All those universes, all those places she and Piper had seen—it would have been too hard to explain. How do you tell someone what it meant to be a part of nature? Not just walking in the woods and oohing and aahing at the trees and ferns, but to be embraced by it all, all at once, hearing it, feeling it, *talking* to it. How could she mention a world where everyone was fighting and afraid all the time? Or living in a frozen tundra, forced to stay underground? And it would have been impossible to try to describe the In-Between place. If there were no words for blue, how could a person describe blue?

But the weirdest thing for either of them to talk about—the elephant in the shed so to speak—was the possible future they had gotten a tiny glimpse of. So neither of them had mentioned it.

Raisa already had her hands on the handles of her bike, waiting on the curb, when Lev came out and pulled the front door closed behind him.

"Ready?" he called out.

"Yup."

Lev took off.

"Wait up," Raisa yelled, pedaling as hard as she could to catch up, letting the wind blow her hair back behind her. "Hey I forgot to tell you, alternate us puts salt on their pizza!"

"Huh. But it's already salty."

"Go figure." Raisa sped past him.

The ride to town took about ten minutes. They parked their bikes in front of Toozy Patza and went inside. It smelled delicious: garlic, oregano, basil, warm dough. They took a booth way in the back.

"Hey, you two!" The waitress smiled when she saw them. "The usual?" She stood beside their table. "One Taste of Italy?"

Raisa looked at Lev, and just the grin on his face told her how hungry he was. "Yes, please. Large."

"Anything to drink?"

"Two waters, please." Raisa lifted her eyes to Lev, who nodded back in agreement, and the waitress headed off to the kitchen.

Raisa leaned back against her seat. "So what do you think we'd have discovered if we had gone to that alternate universe?" she asked. "If we had gone..." A couple walked in and took the booth directly behind them. Raisa leaned over the table and lowered her voice. "You know, if we had gone through and gotten to walk around the alternate Earth."

"Candy for dinner?"

"Flying cars!"

"No homework!"

Raisa laughed.

They fell into an uneasy quiet while they waited for their food. The elephant in the room was taking up a lot of space at the table.

Raisa drew in a breath. "You know," she began. "Just because our other selves lived their lives one way doesn't mean we have to..." She stopped abruptly when the waitress returned and set the pizza on the stand. As soon as she was gone, Raisa started again. "Not that we *don't* have to live their lives. I just meant..."

"I knew what you meant," Lev said. He slid two slices off the stand and didn't bother to put them down on his plate before biting into both at the same time.

"It's just that we aren't them."

"I know," Lev mumbled, his mouth full.

"We're just us," Raisa said, and she knew that no matter what, whatever happened, she and Lev would always be best friends. And who knew, maybe one day they'd get to travel the multiverse together.

A ripple at the center of a puddle will be days from reaching the edge. The blades of a spinning fan appear to be standing still. An autumn leaf falling from a tree will take years before landing softly in the grass. She could wait.

# PIPER

"IS THIS A GOOD ONE?" SOFIA HELD UP A FLAT, OVAL ROCK FOR inspection.

Piper smiled. "It's perfect."

Sofia placed it atop the steadily growing pile at her side.

The August heat floated around them as they sat together on their favorite boulder, dangling their feet in the refreshing water. Roody lay under a tree farther up the creek, gnawing on a tennis ball. He still came with Piper everywhere, but only because they both liked it that way.

It had been over two months since Sofia had come to Piper's house to drop off the robotics trophy. When no one answered the door (due to Piper's parents being trapped in the shed and Piper and Raisa handling explosive elements in the basement), Sofia left the trophy on the porch. It took

Piper a few days to find it there, since she was so busy asking her parents all the questions one would think to ask when one found out one's parents had spent much of their childhood in an alternate universe. It was like getting to know two whole new people. Her parents kept pausing to hug her, saying how happy they were to finally be able to talk to her about their childhoods. So that felt nice. They'd even started mingling more with people, like bringing lemonade out to the bird-watchers, whose numbers had recently increased. Apparently, that one-of-a-kind bird who hung around their bird feeder had made a friend. They were now two of a kind and didn't seem to mind the attention.

"I'd like to show you both something," her dad had said after dinner one night. He pulled a very thick folder out of his briefcase and plopped it on the table with a thud.

"What's this, Jason?" her mom had asked. (They'd agreed to keep their new names, as they'd had them longer than the old ones and they felt right.)

He put his hand on the folder and said, "First, just let me say that Pauline has always been a wonderful mother to both of us, and I'm very grateful for her. But every once in a while I really missed my own parents..." He lifted his hand and stepped back.

Piper and her mom shared a look, and then her mom slowly opened the cover.

The folder contained years' worth of photos, articles, and interviews of his alternate parents and the alternate Lev, basically anything he could find online and print out. And it turned out he had a younger sister, too.

Piper's mom started crying when she saw all of it, apologizing for being selfish and not thinking enough about what it was like for him having his alternate family so close by but not having them at the same time. Piper's dad put his arms around his wife. "It's not your fault, honey."

"*That's* why we almost never leave town!" Piper said, the realization hitting her. "You didn't want to run into them! Right?"

They both nodded. "Or anyone who might know alternate Lev," her dad said. "It wouldn't be fair to complicate his life. And we didn't want to attract attention."

"Maybe that made sense when you were younger," Piper said, "but what if he actually *wanted* to meet you? It might be the best thing that ever happened to him. Had you thought about that?"

Her parents exchanged looks. Clearly they hadn't. Piper threw up her hands.

Her mom spread out some of the photos in the folder. "You and alternate Lev do look pretty different now," she said to Piper's dad as she reached up to tousle his hair. "Gravity wasn't as kind to him."

Piper rolled her eyes at their show of affection.

"Maybe we could befriend the family somehow?" her mom suggested. "You wouldn't have to explain who you were if you didn't want to."

"I'd like that very much," he said, kissing the top of her head.

Piper pushed away from the table. "And I'm out!"

The next morning, her mom told her that now that Piper knew the truth, she should have a special confidant to share it with. One that didn't walk on four legs. Piper had only one person she wanted to explain things to, and she hadn't exactly made it easy to be her friend. But she had to try. So her mom dropped her off that afternoon at Sofia's house with a plate of homemade brownies and her blessing.

Piper's heart had thumped hard as her finger hovered above the doorbell. Where would she even begin? She knew she wouldn't reveal too much about her time spent in between worlds, not only because words couldn't do that place justice, but because she wanted to have some part of the adventure that only belonged to her and Raisa. She couldn't help wondering if Raisa would still have a daughter and name her Piper and if they would be anything alike. She was getting better at accepting that she'd likely never find out.

The first thing Piper saw when Sofia invited her inside the house was the trail of painted rocks that formed a curved path from the front door to the kitchen like an indoor sidewalk.

"I've been collecting those since I was a little kid," Sofia said when she saw Piper staring at them. "I find them all over town and I always get so excited, like someone left me a secret present. Is that weird? I hope you don't think that's weird."

Piper's threshold for "weird" had risen substantially. She shook her head. She'd thought that maybe she'd need to build up to revealing her secrets, like wait until they were really solid friends. But seeing these rocks that she and her parents had so lovingly crafted, seeing how much they meant to Sofia, it made the decision to trust her an easy one.

Without taking a breath in between words, Piper said, "Me and my parents are the ones who hide the rocks. They always keep a few in their pockets, otherwise they'd only barely graze the ground because they come from an alternate universe where gravity is ever so slightly different. They won't ever get back home, but that's okay because a duplicate pair of them will still get to grow up in their own world." She pressed herself up against the door, not daring to breathe as she waited for Sofia's reaction.

Sofia tilted her head, assessing Piper. "Are you making that up?" she asked, her tone more curious than accusing.

Piper shook her head. "I always wanted to be your real friend, not just a school friend, I mean, but it just felt too hard, with my parents always being... well, a little odd."

Sofia tilted her head in the other direction, still assessing. "I've always wanted to be real friends, too. And I would have stayed at your house that time I came over for a playdate, no matter how weird things were getting. But we can start now, if you want?"

Piper nodded. She wished she'd given Sofia more credit. It would have been a lot less lonely to have a close friend all these years. "I'd like that." She handed Sofia the brownies. "Also, my dog can talk."

Sofia laughed. "Of course he can."

They had been pretty much inseparable since that day.

"Are you okay climbing up?" Sofia asked now, reaching out a hand in case Piper needed it as they made their way up the grassy slope toward town. "Why aren't you wearing your watch?"

One of the many things Piper had learned was that her dad had originally built Roody to help keep her steady on wobbly legs that weren't entirely meant for this world. Piper, born to her alternate-universe parents, had a foot in each place and gravity hadn't quite settled on where she belonged. Her dad had figured out a way to add some

kind of magnetic compound to the steel in the watchband in order to keep her equilibrium centered so she wouldn't keep falling and getting hurt. Every time they'd had to take her to the doctor for one childhood illness or another, her parents had been worried someone would notice the slight difference in her muscle and bone density and start asking questions they couldn't answer.

"The watch is at home," she said proudly. "They agreed to let me try a few hours a day without it if I promised to do strength training with them. It's beyond boring, but my legs are getting stronger, and now I understand why my parents work out like they do."

Sofia slung the bag of stones over her shoulder. "So bizarre," she said for at least the hundredth time, but she always said it good-naturedly.

"Totally," Piper agreed.

"Should we go get some pizza and pepperoni puffs?" Sofia asked.

"Totally," Roody replied, trotting up ahead.

"The talking dog is still taking some getting used to," Sofia said.

Piper reached out to scratch Roody's head between his ears. "Aw, he's not too bad once you get to know him. Even if his breath does smell really bad now that he convinced my dad to program him to eat."

Roody rolled his eyes up at her.

"No, I'm serious," Piper said. "It's, like, *really* bad."

Roody stopped and looked up. "Really?"

Sofia nodded.

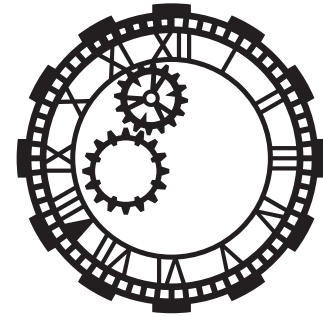
Roody frowned. Then he opened his mouth wide and blew a stream of dog food–flavored air directly into their faces.

They screamed and took off running toward Toozy Patza, giggling. When Piper would veer sideways, Sofia would steer her back to the path.

Piper looked back at Roody, who trailed lazily after them. She knew Roody was almost as glad as she was that she'd finally made a real friend. Dad had reprogrammed him so he now gave her a little more free range. This was helpful when, at night, she would sneak down to the lab and tune in to 5.345 megahertz and wait to hear Kallie's voice.

Piper turned back and linked her arm with Sofia's. "Hey, did I ever tell you Roody can play videos out of his butt?"

SCHOLASTIC



SCHOLASTIC





## AUTHORS' NOTE FROM WENDY AND NORA

*WHAT IF* SCIENTISTS' THEORY THAT WE MAY BE LIVING IN A MULTIVERSE is actually true? *What if* there's another version of you on another Earth? *What if* you got the chance to find out? *What if* you couldn't get back? Those two magic words, *what* and *if*, led to hours and days and weeks of letting our imaginations travel the multiverse so we could bring you *The Planet, the Portal, and a Pizza*. We hope you enjoyed the mix of fiction (no talking dogs—yet!) and science. Here are a few nuggets of real math and science that inspired the story.

Scientists have come up with many ideas about what the multiverse might look like, including the Many-Worlds Interpretation, where every quantum event can create parallel universes, and the Bubble Universe theory, where other universes might be all around us. *The Planet, the Portal, and a Pizza* takes bits and pieces from these concepts and mixes in a bit from our own imagination.

On the cover of the book, you can see the equation that Piper doodled in art class and her parents wrote on the board

in their lab. This is the real Time Dilation formula, which grew out of Einstein's Theory of Relativity. It explains how time passes differently for observers in relative motion.

Niels the bird is named for Niels Bohr, who won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1922. Bohr's work in quantum mechanics and the atomic structure helped create modern science.

The probability problem that lands Raisa in detention is tricky. When the question is phrased as:

What is the chance that both kittens are boy kittens?

Then only 1 of the 4 possible combinations is boy kitten / boy kitten. So the probability is:

$$1 \text{ out of } 4 \rightarrow 1/4 = 25\%$$

When the question is phrased as:

What is the chance that both kittens are boy kittens, if we know that *at least* one is a boy kitten?

We remove the case where both are girl kittens; now there are 3 remaining combinations, and only 1 is boy kitten / boy kitten. So the probability is:

$$1 \text{ out of } 3 \rightarrow 1/3 \approx 33.3\%$$

The long series of numbers and symbols that Piper and Raisa discover in the center of the book was based on the Theory of Everything, which is what scientists consider the final equation that would reveal the true nature of the universe (if it is ever found!).

And while the last naturally discovered element in the periodic table was francium in 1939, scientists do speculate there could be other elements that might exist in extreme environments, like neutron stars, supernovae, or merging black holes. Gambium, however, is not one of them. (And it is named after Wendy's family's dog Gambit. ☺)

May you always find wonder in life's mysteries. And good pizza.

xo,

Wendy and Nora



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

BETWEEN THE ALTERNATE STORYLINES AND POVS, WORLD-BUILDING TO keep track of, and puzzle pieces to put together, this book had more moving parts than Piper's parents' clocks! We would not have been able to put it all together without the amazing, supportive, brilliant folks at Little, Brown Books for Young Readers, led by our ever-patient editor, Alvina Ling, and her assistant, Crystal Castro. A huge tip of our hats to:

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Wendy Mass and Nora Raleigh Baskin.  
Summer 2007, when the authors first met!

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is the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Candymakers series, *11 Birthdays*, and over thirty more novels for young readers, including the American Library Association Schneider Family Book Award winner *A Mango-Shaped Space*. She lives in New Jersey with her family and a very cute (but not robotic) dog. Wendy invites you to visit her at [wendymass.com](http://wendymass.com).

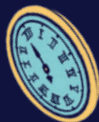
## NORA RALEIGH BASKIN

is the award-winning author of fifteen novels for middle-grade and young adult readers. She won the American Library Association Schneider Family Book Award for *Anything But Typical* and the International Literacy Association Notable Book for a Global Society for *Ruby on the Outside*. Nora received starred reviews from both *Kirkus Reviews* and *Publishers Weekly* for *Nine, Ten: A September 11 Story*. She invites you to connect with her at [norabaskin.com](http://norabaskin.com).



## Don't panic *yet*.

Piper's life has always been unusual: Her parents are clockmakers whose inventions tend to blow up, and she's the only kid she knows with a talking robot dog. One morning, her life takes a turn for the truly bizarre—her parents start to act stranger than usual, and Piper finds a book full of equations that even a math whiz like herself can't decipher.



Meanwhile, Raisa and her best friend, Lev, travel through a portal to Piper's world so Raisa can prove that her mother's multiverse project works. Now she just needs the book containing her mother's instructions to get back



to her own world...if only she can find it! Raisa, Piper, and Lev join forces for an adventure that takes them across the multiverse, but they'll need to discover their place in the cosmos if they ever want to find their way back home.

Mystery and adventure collide in this humorous, heartfelt, and planet-hopping journey from beloved award-winning authors Wendy Mass and Nora Raleigh Baskin.



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