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DEREK NIKITAS

FIRST DAY OF MY LIFE

Mom stomped on the gas and the wheels spun but the car went nowhere. Rowan scooted up in the passenger seat to get a better view. The windshield was caked around with snow like the fuzzy edges of a dream, and the back window was even worse. Six hours back they left Queens, but now they were in the woods somewhere in New Hampshire. Rowan couldn't even see a road.

“Well, we're here,” Mom said, and tossed up her hands. Her voice steamed. They were both bundled in extra layers, but still Rowan's toes were frozen in his boots. Around them was nothing but trees and snow. There was no *here* to be.

Mom's door fanned the top inch off the snow before it bumped against a tree with white papery bark. She said, “We can walk from here. I'll just have to come back and dig us out later.” She slogged around the car to get the hatchback open. She was trying to shrug it off, pretend like usual that nothing was wrong, but Rowan had been able to feel the dark in her mood for weeks.

When he got out, the snow reached his knees. He'd have to keep his footing or get swallowed up.

“Carry your own back, bucko—but don't worry. It's right around the bend.”

She pointed down the road, but a flurry erased the distance in white.

What he saw instead was a girl. Twenty feet away, watching them, as she held the trunk of a pine tree in a headlock grip. Bare hands, no jacket, and the sleeves of her flannel rolled up to her elbows. Her hair was fuzzy with snowflakes and her skin slightly bluish. Mom gasped at the sight of her.

“Who's that?” Rowan whispered.

The girl seemed a few years older than him, maybe eleven or twelve. She didn't move a muscle except the ones in her shivering jaw. She was too far off for Rowan to get any sense of her.

“I don't have a clue. Probably just a neighbor girl,” Mom said.

“She creeps me out.”

He trudged behind his mother, canvas rucksack over his shoulder. The car kept getting farther behind them. There was a back road buried here somewhere, though you could only tell it from the gap between the trees. He gave wide berth to the pine where he'd seen the girl, even though she was gone now. Just like that, Row had looked down to right his balance, and she vanished.

Mom glanced back and offered a grin, but Row felt that clench in his gut that reminded him something was wrong. Third grade broke something open inside him that should've stayed shut. It *messed with his head*, just as Mom said on the phone when she didn't think he was listening. She blamed his teacher Mrs. Dwyer's *poor judgment*. They'd only been back in school for a couple weeks. They could all see the smoke cloud from their class windows, all the way over in Manhattan, and the teacher turned on the TV just in time for the other plane to glide into the tower.

The house was just a huge outline at first, but when they came closer it turned bright red, with doors big enough to lead a circus through. "That's the barn," Mom explained, and pointed at a much smaller building huddled beside it. The chimney was at work, lights in the windows, but there were no Christmas decorations.

She never told exactly where his grandparents lived, except that it was *too far away*. Row never met them, never came to New Hampshire before. Mom always said there wasn't enough time or money to make the trip, until this morning, Christmas Eve, when he woke to find her pulling clothes down from his closet to pack them, quietly crying.

"Are there animals in the barn?" Rowan asked.

She jostled her head just twice—*no interest in discussing the matter*. They found a shoveled path to the house, and the door opened for them before they reached it. The man there was as tall as the door, bristly white hair on the sides of his head and nothing but skin on top. He wore a knitted sweater of more colors than Row could count.

Mom froze at the sight of him. Her sad smile lasted only a second, but Rowan caught her mood and it sparked a memory of his own: *a security blanket accidentally lost in a mall parking lot*.

She dropped her bag and hugged the man for long enough to bridge the years they'd been apart. Row stood back and watched the woods for a glimpse of that girl. So

many trees and snow drifts to hide behind. No way he'd be able to sleep tonight, knowing the girl was out there, prowling and shivering.

The kitchen was like a set from a black-and-white TV show, checkerboard floors and a fridge shaped like a bullet. The woman inside there was boiling something that smelled like cabbage. She wore a sweater like her husband's and her hair was the stuffing from a teddy bear.

They took him by the shoulders, each in turn, and said pleasant things while Rowan looked at his wetted boots. They gave him hot chocolate with mini marshmallows. Alexander and Elin Pierce. His *grandfather*, his *grandmother*—ideas even more alien than *father*. These were strangers he was meant to feel some warmth toward, and for his mother's sake he tried.

They sat around the kitchen table and the grandfather made a lame joke about Rowan's Pierce-*ing* eyes and the grandmother groaned and swatted him. Mom hunched over her tea and hardly talked while these strangers pretended nothing was off-kilter.

Rowan chanced to look through the door glass, and there was the girl. She rushed down the path toward the house, and when she burst inside, Mom cried out in surprise. The girl narrowed her pale blue eyes down to slits and backed against the wall. Snow dropped in clumps from her jeans. Her feet wore only wool socks, not even shoes. She was there only for a second, then she leaped over the luggage and barreled off down the hall.

Mom's brow wrinkled just below the flip of her wool cap. "Um..." she said.

The grandfather chuckled. "Lots of surprises today," he said.

The woman squeezed her husband's wrist and said, "*That* was Sophia. She's ours."

"*Yours?*" Mom said.

"We brought her into our family," the man explained. "Six years now."

"Six *years?*"

The bad taste of this discussion soured the cocoa in Rowan's stomach. Somewhere deeper in the house, the girl attacked a set of steps like it was inclined hopscotch. If she really belonged here, he'd have to sleep in the same house with her.

"If we'd had any way to reach you..." the grandfather said.

Mom yanked off her hat, and her nest of hair collapsed into her face. Row understood her dizzy dislocation. It reminded him of when she promised to stop dating a guy Row didn't like, and then, a week later, Row woke to find the guy sleeping overnight in her bed with her. He felt the same confusion then.

"So... what, you adopted her?" Mom asked.

"That's right," the grandfather said.

"So she's, like, a *replacement*?"

"Of course not."

"You're being unfair, Amanda," the grandmother added.

Mom scoffed. For Rowan, understanding was like peering through a blizzard. Whatever was wrong between Mom and her parents was hidden beyond his sight.

He asked to go back outside, and in that chill air he escaped those stifling kitchen moods. Back in Queens the outside was too many honking cars and people hurrying on the sidewalks. Outside was where those towers sagged their shoulders and collapsed like slain giants, where people stumbled through clouds of ash, coughing and caked in gray. Even from three miles off, the soul-cry of suffering rose and crested over him and he could never be the same again. But that was there. *Here* was nothing, no one.

Only the barn bothered him. It was a hulking shell that might topple from too much snow on its roof. He headed away from it, across the flat field where in spots the drifts rose past his waist. The dustiest snow whorled on the surface like sand on desert dunes, unbroken by any other explorer. At the forest edge, the land climbed toward a granite shelf that cut a gray wall across the whitewashed hill, five times his height.

A girl's voice startled him: "No way could you climb that." She appeared from behind another tree. Her whole body shivered and her hair was stiff, like it would shatter if you tapped it. Even her eyes were ice cubes.

"How can you walk around like that? Without a jacket?" he asked. His heart pounded. He'd looked back toward the house a dozen times and never once saw her following him. But now it was there, plain to see, a second path cutting through the snow.

"Makes it easier," she said, shrugging. She scrambled toward the rock face, snatched it in both hands, and curled her sock toes into crannies to hoist her body upward, skirting all the ice patches. In less than a minute she scaled the top and turned, let her legs

dangle over. *Last year, catching that mouthy kid's pop fly in the outfield*—Row felt a similar glow of triumph shining down from Sophia on her perch.

“Who are you, really?” she called down.

“Rowan Pierce. Amanda's my mother.”

“Why'd you come here?”

“Didn't they tell you? Because—because it was Christmas.”

She snorted at him. “We don't do Christmas,” she said, like that somehow proved him a liar.

“They said you were adopted.”

“Not true. I hatched from a giant egg inside the barn. I was already five years old.”

“That's crazy.”

“Want to bet? I can show you the broken shell. It's still in there.”

“So you're, like, a chicken?”

“Chickens can't fly.” She pushed off the edge with a howl, flapping her arms, and the fall really did seem almost too slow for gravity. Row had enough time to wonder if she might catch an airstream with those arms and glide, but then she dropped into the snow, flopped onto her back, and laughed.

“Are you all right?” he asked. He only chanced one step toward her.

She sat up, steam puffing from her lungs, and hurled a handful of snow at him.

It broke apart midair and splattered his jacket. “What's your problem?” he asked.

“What's *your* problem, chicken?”

“Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder,” he told her

“What the hell does that mean?” she asked.

“It's what the brain doctor calls it.”

She searched his face, suddenly fascinated. “You mean your brain got messed up? From some terrible thing that happened to you? What was it? What happened?”

“The terrorist attacks.”

“Wait, you were *there*?” She wasn't even shivering anymore.

“No,” he admitted. “I saw it on the television at school.”

Watching the magician's other hand palm something in his pocket, ruining the trick...

"Come on," she snapped. "I thought you were serious. We *all* saw *that*."

She walked off, shaking her head at him. He didn't see her again until supper, and there she tented herself behind her hair as she slurped. The grandmother ladled out chicken soup and bits of information—Sophia was eleven, starting junior high next year. But the girl wouldn't engage in any talk.

Rowan's condition was what drove her away, just like with most people. Counselors and doctors—so many questions, such concern. The pills they prescribed made him nervous and twitchy, so Mom stopped treatment. You're not supposed to be traumatized for life because of television. You weren't *there*. Those falling buildings just triggered a defect already inside you. *Hypersensitive, obsessive thoughts, displaces his emotions as a defense mechanism...*

The thousands of terrified and dying had poured their pain into him all at once. That was what happened. He blacked out, and they say he had a seizure. Dropped from his desk and writhed on the dusty classroom floor, coughing and gagging on ash, except there was no ash that far from Ground Zero.

The Pierce farmhouse, at least, was three hundred miles away from all that, more like a museum than a living space. There were no television sets, or radios. Nobody had a cell phone. The world and its turmoil didn't exist here, somehow.

Rowan got a guest room to himself, with a twin bed fitted inside a dormer. He had a window for a headboard and could watch the moon upside-down from his pillow. Mom plugged his nightlight into the wall, then worried at his blankets, tucked them tighter and tighter. She was inside of her cloud again—distracted, always rubbing her eyes and yawning. Three months changed them both.

"How long are we staying?" he asked.

"Few days," she said. "I thought it was time you met your family. You're a lot like them."

Each of his mother's lies stung like a sudden paper cut, though he learned how to stop from showing it. He didn't have to demand that she tell the truth anymore. It was always there in what she said, just upside-down.

“We came here because of me, right?”

She took a long swallow of nothing. “I think that they’ll be able to help you,” she said. “They’re very—intuitive—about these things, your grandparents. You’ll see.”

“Sophia said she came from a giant egg in the barn.”

Mom tried to laugh but *the cloud* wouldn’t let her. “She’s just testing you, to see what you’ll believe. I was talking to your Nana and Papa earlier. Sophia has something called amnesia. It gives her trouble remembering the time before she came here.”

Rowan sat up in bed. He never could’ve guessed there was anything wrong with the girl. She was invincible, scaling rock faces and leaping from them, braving winter in sock feet. He asked, “How does it happen. Amnesia?”

“Lots of reasons. It might be that she went through something traumatic, like you.”

“So she came here to get help, too?”

Mom tilted her head toward a thought. “Maybe you’re right, bucko. It’s sad to forget. It’s been so long I almost forgot how peaceful it was here. We used to come up when Papa was off from teaching, winters and summers. Here, or Arrow Island. All I wanted was to get back home, but I was a spoiled kid who didn’t know any better. I never got along with this place. Too much of a city girl, I guess.”

Forgetting probably hurt as badly as *never knowing*. Like how Rowan never knew, or forgot, that he was meant to call his grandparents *Papa* and *Nana*, that Papa was a teacher, that Mom spent summer vacation in this place or somewhere else called Arrow Island. Knowing gave him a hunger to know more.

No, Rowan’s problem was the opposite of forgetting. His past came back in lightning flashes, hit him ten times stronger than when they actually happened. Even now, *on the edge of a diving board at the YMCA, finally resolving to jump, gasping that last breath before the water swallowed all his senses*. That sudden memory, it told Rowan how his mother felt right now, seated on the edge of his bed, as she settled on a final choice.

She turned off the milk glass lamp with a skeleton-key switch. In the nightlight glow, Rowan concentrated on the way her wild hair looked shocked, how her chin was a bit too sharp, like his. He wanted to remember. He’d have to stay in his own bed, no

matter what came into his brain. No running off to find her down the hall, to lie beside her and press his knees against her back while they slept.

In the morning, he came down to pancakes and sausage. Nana flipped the pancakes and poured more batter into the pan. The stack was high enough for twice as many people. At his place setting, Papa ate like he was figuring out the taste of every bite. *Papa* and *Nana*. If Rowan kept thinking those words, they'd stop sounding so strange.

One plate at the table was dirtied with syrup and crumbs.

"Sophia's already up and about," Papa explained. "She can't get enough of the snow."

"She doesn't even wear a jacket, or boots," Rowan said.

Nana slid sausages onto his plate. "The child runs incredibly hot," she said. "Never been sick."

"We're lucky we can keep any clothes on her at all," Papa added, shared a laugh with his wife.

"Will I go to a new school now?" Rowan asked.

Papa stopped chewing, and Nana glanced over her shoulder at him. Rowan couldn't get a read on them like he did with most everyone else. They stayed hidden from his sensing, muted like a TV set without any volume.

Papa finally said, "And here I thought we were going to have to delicately explain things to you. I s'pose I should've guessed you'd be a sharp one. Your mother warned us that you take after me."

Nana chuckled and shook her head as she cooked. "God help us."

"The psychologist couldn't figure me out," Rowan announced.

"Quacks, mental midgets," Papa said.

"Mom couldn't deal with me, either. That's why she left."

"No, no," the grandmother insisted. She grasped her husband's shoulders with both hands as they looked upon their only blood grandchild. Sitting, Papa was almost as tall as his wife. Neither one of them denied that their daughter had left overnight while Rowan was still asleep. Probably Papa even helped dig her car out of the snow.

Nana said, “Your mother didn’t leave because of you. I’m sure she would’ve stayed if she thought she could help, but... not everybody chooses to inherit the Pierce family heirlooms, I suppose.”

“This has never really been the place for her,” Papa said. “We need to respect that, I think.”

“She left you some things. Presents. She’ll come up and visit you, to be sure,” Nana said.

Rowan didn’t believe that last bit. Since September, he had been a cranked-up thermostat in their cramped Queens apartment, suffocating his own mother with his heat. Now that she could breathe, it would be a long while before she exposed her nerves to him again.

The presents were stacked beside the living room hearth, all wrapped in newspaper. He had almost forgotten it was Christmas—no tree or lights, though an eager flame popped and crackled in the fireplace. Rowan knelt and unwrapped the last of his mother’s surprises: a Dell laptop, a digital alarm clock, books, winter clothes. She was almost a ghost already.

“We don’t see the allure of the whole computer thing,” Papa said, “but Sophia couldn’t get by in school without one. We had to install that, what’s it called?—the information floating in the air?”

“Wi-Fi, you Luddite,” Nana said, and smacked him playfully on his elbow.

The last gift was a badly wrapped wad of newspaper. When Row tore it open, a rock dropped into his hand. Dull gray and smoothly rounded, golf-ball sized. It used to sit on Mom’s dresser top with her jewelry, so commonplace that Row never bothered to ask about it before.

“Do you know what that is?” Papa asked.

“Yeah,” Row said. “It’s Mom’s rock.”

“Granite, smoothed out over centuries by melting glaciers and then river currents. She found it in a stream not far from here, when she was your age. It’s a symbol, of sorts. The smooth texture reminds us how time shapes all things. The shaping current is *time*, always pushing forward. The rock bears the markings, so the rock is *memory*. We call it a memory rock. Do you understand?”

Rowan faked a smirk and nodded. If he chucked the stupid thing through a window, that would be memorable, but instead he tucked it against his stomach. It felt warm, even through his pajama shirt.

After breakfast he dressed and went outside. The sun made him almost snow blind, but he spotted Sophia, out on the flat field with a plastic sled. She pushed it ahead of herself, huffing clouds like a train engine. Closer, he began to see the rings she'd plowed—concentric circles cut through with her tracks, connected here and there by lines angled toward the center. The circular maze was the size of a soccer field, hours of work.

He'd seen a show about people who did this with boards in corn fields and blamed it on aliens.

"Stop!" she screamed, holding out her bare hands. She was on the far side of her maze.

"I wasn't going to step on it!"

"You have to wait. It's almost done." She didn't hurry her pace as she circled back. When she finally reached him she threw the sled aside and stood panting for a moment, admiring her design. Rowan felt her emanations and again remembered the triumph of catching that fly ball in gym class.

"It's a-*maze*-ing," he said.

She frowned at him, one eye squinted shut against the sun glare.

"I brought you something," he said, and opened his glove to show her.

She stepped back and studied it from a distance. She twisted her lip and said, "It's a rock."

"It's a memory stone, for you."

"Why?"

"To help you remember where you came from."

She snorted, but plucked the stone from his grasp. Rowan worried she'd just toss it somewhere and laugh at him, but instead she shut her eyes and squeezed it with her red swollen fingers.

"Nothing's happening," she said.

"Maybe it's over time—slow magic," he suggested.

That squint again. "You believe in that crap? Magic?"

“No,” he said, without thinking about it.

She snatched him by the arm and said, “Then come look at this.”

“What about the maze?”

“It’s not a maze. It’s meditation exercise, and it’s done. Come on.”

When he realized they were headed to the barn, he dragged his pace. Sophie just tugged harder on his jacket sleeve. He knew what she’d show him: a hundred human-sized eggs all warm and covered in slime, waiting to hatch under incubator lights. He prayed one of the grandparents would call out *stop* before she pulled him in there.

No such luck. She slogged through waist-high drifts and wedged herself between the barn doors so Rowan could squeeze through. “Go on,” she said, nodding into the darkness beyond. He didn’t want to be the first inside, but he refused to be called chicken again. Besides, she didn’t mean him any harm. He could feel it. So he crouched and crawled under her legs.

It was no warmer inside, maybe colder. The straw floors crackled underfoot. Bands of sunlight cut between the slats and striped what was stored below: an antique car rusted in a far corner, farm equipment from some other era, much more beyond the light that he couldn’t see. A barn cat skittered behind some crates.

“Look,” Sophia said, and pointed toward the loft. A pair of thick chains hung from the rafters in a tight V, suspending a wooden crate at twice Rowan’s height. It creaked in the wind draft like a ship mast in an old pirate flick. He took a step toward it. He’d seen such a box many times on television, tapered at one end and broad toward the other, to fit the shoulders.

“Is that—a coffin?”

“Maybe,” she said.

It was hanging upside down. Whatever was inside would’ve crumpled to the head, or *pooled* there. Row backed off. The chains could snap, or the coffin could spill its contents like a morbid piñata. His gawking must’ve looked idiotic to Sophie, who stood by with her arms crossed, grinning.

“Ever heard of a guy named Christian Rosy Cross?” she asked.

“You mean Jesus?”

“Hell, no,” she said, though a shift in light showed a cross engraved on the coffin lid. A complex cross with three buds at each end, star points beaming from all corners, sprinkled with dozens of little symbols that looked like the zodiac signs on those Chinese paper placemats. The cross was upright, even though the coffin was inverted.

“There isn’t a vampire in there?”

“There’s no such thing as vampires, retard,” she said, and nudged him toward the coffin, just to see him squirm. “Rosy Cross was a mage in the Dark Ages. Like a magician, but not the kind that saws people in half. When he died, his body never rotted. He was really dead—not *undead* or nothing—but he always looked the same as he did when he croaked. Hundreds of years later, still rosy. True story.”

“He is *not* in there,” Rowan insisted.

“Did I say he was? No. It’s called symbolism and it’s the kind of serious hard stuff you got to get used to around here. You and me are a couple mutts dropped off at the pound, so we’ve got to stick together, right?”

“I guess.”

“Damn straight. You’re my *frater* now, and I’m your *soror*.”

He didn’t want to seem stupid again, but his blank look gave him away.

“It means brother and sister,” she explained. “But not in the way like we came from the same mother. Look, I know you can see inside my mind or whatever. You were born that way, you know. It just took a few years to stick. They told me all about your *problem*, so there’s no point in me trying to screw with your head, right? You’re a human lie detector test.”

He allowed only a tentative nod.

She smiled and opened her right hand. “I got my own problems,” she said. The memory stone was still there. Her breath caught for a moment, the coffin creaked on its chains, loose straw skittered, but Rowan watched the stone, faithfully. He did not miss when it lifted three jittery inches off her palm and then hovered, spinning in place, like one magnet repelled by another.

“*Ha*,” she said. “How about *that*, brain picker?”