

Chapter 1

It's Saturday morning, and I'm in bed watching the ceiling fan spin around and around. I don't normally have the chance just to lay in bed. Normally I have to get up early either to go play on my sports teams or go to school. This Saturday is the first Saturday in a long time that I don't need to be up for anything, so I lay awake too comfortable to get up. I roll my body towards the door to my bedroom, and when I take a deep breath in, I can smell the faint aroma of pancakes.

"Ahh, pancakes!" I say to myself, pushing my body up from the bed while moving my legs to the side. If I am going to get up for anything this early in the morning, I am going to get up for sweet and delicious pancakes. After all, they are my favorite food. I put my two feet on the bedroom floor and take another big stretch with my arms. I look toward my night stand and take a glance at a picture of me and my dad. It was taken when we went camping three summers ago. It is one of my favorite pictures and one of my favorite memories of him. My dad is in heaven now. He passed away a few years ago when another car ran into his on the 405 Freeway. Every morning, I tell Dad I love him, even though he can't say it back. Now it's just Mom and I in our townhouse.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror as I make my way downstairs. My hair is its usual get-out-of-bed look, going in every which direction. I have a cowlick on the back which I can never pat down. I'm not worried though. You don't need brushed hair for pancakes. As I make it half way down the stairs, I wondered to myself if Mom is going to put chocolate chips in today. Last batch she put in blueberries and the time before that it was strawberries. With her it's always a toss-up. By the time I get to the bottom step I can see Mom in the kitchen. She has her iPad set up and is following along with a YouTube tutorial. She usually makes them from the directions on the back of the pancake mix but I guess she is trying something new today.

"Now crack two eggs into your dry mix, being careful to whisk the mixture with a slow and steady pace," says the voice from the iPad.

"Morning Mom," I grumble as I grab one of the barstool chairs underneath the kitchen counter.

"Morning kiddo! I didn't hear you get up. Did I wake you?" Mom says coming around from the kitchen to give me a good morning hug and a kiss.

"No, I was already up but I smelled pancakes and figured it was time to come down. They're looking pretty good. But that one in the back of the griddle? It's kind of messed up. What happened there?"

"Will, you know the first one never comes out right. Even though it looks weird to you, I bet it tastes just the same as the other ones. How many do you want? Two to start?"

"Make it three, I'm a growing boy," I say trying to schmooze her with that look that sometimes gets me anything I want.

“That you are Will. “ she says going in for a hug. “Why don’t you just sit right there and wait, pancakes will be up soon,” she says making her way back into the kitchen. She starts flipping the now sizzling pancakes on the griddle.

“Did you try a new recipe today Mom? I think your video is over so I’m going to close it.” I close her iPad as she walks toward the fridge.

“What do you want in your pancakes? Strawberries or blueberries?”

I cut her off mid sentence and burst out, “Chocolate chips, please! I mean this is a new recipe what if it tastes awful? The chocolate chips will save it!”

“When has my cooking ever tasted awful?” she questions while dropping little morsels of chocolate into each pancake and smiling.

“Do you *really* want me to answer that?” I say winking at her in the hopes that I won’t get in trouble for commenting on her lack of cooking skills.

“Tough crowd. By the looks of it I think these pancakes have a fair shot. Maybe next time you should make them, if you’re so particular on how they are made,” she says pointing the spatula at me from across the kitchen.

“No, no, no you can make them then, you make great food, I was wrong,” I say quickly trying to backpedal my way out of doing actual work on a Saturday morning.

Mom and I both chuckle a little bit as she gives the pancakes one last flip.

“Alright, why don’t you grab that plate over there,” pointing to the plate with cut strawberries on the side. “Yep, that one, bring it over here and I will put your pancakes on your plate.” She puts two perfect flapjacks on my plate and puts the weird one on top.

Grinning at me she says, “Enjoy.”

I walk back to the kitchen bar, placing my plate of pancakes down and pulling out my chair. I notice Mom already has maple syrup out on the counter, so I drizzle some on my pancakes. I was just thinking about whipping cream when Mom grabs it from the refrigerator. She sets it out on the counter. I put some on my pancakes but as she starts walking back to griddle, I sneak a mouthful of whipped cream when she isn’t looking. I gobble it down and then go for another, when she calls out “Enough!” and I drop the can back down on the counter. Enough is her code word meaning, “Stop it right now”.

I grab my iPad, put in my secret passcode and open up the messenger app. I have a message from my best friend Andrew. It’s a picture of his Golden Doodle Roxie, under a towel with just her face sticking out. I send back a couple of crying face emojis and ask

him if he wants to play PlayStation online later tonight. I get an immediate thumb up which comes at a good time because it looks like Mom wants to sit down next to me.

“Please put your iPad away and make some room so I can sit.”

I quickly push all the mail, papers, and school work off of the counter and to the side so Mom can sit down next to me. She puts her plate down and pulls her chair close to me. She gives me a quick rub on the back and asks, “So, how are they?”

“Pretty good mom. I like them. What did you do differently?”

“It’s a new vegan recipe I found on YouTube.”

“Oh, it’s pretty good.”

We sit together eating breakfast at the counter. Saturday mornings have become a tradition for us. She works a lot now. Before Dad passed she was a mediator or as she says a “grown-ups’ ” referee. But since he’s gone she went back to her old job as a corporate attorney. She works a lot which is fine because I have school, baseball, video games, and other activities like karate when it isn’t baseball season. My school has a lot of clubs and activities and I usually stay at school until my Mom comes and gets me around five. Sometimes I get picked up by my babysitter but it’s pretty rare.

During the week, we get take out dinner or sometimes Mom makes one of those meal box deliveries that have all the ingredients in them. They come in a blue box and they aren’t bad. She can usually make them pretty quickly while on a speaker phone call with a client, judge, or another attorney. Meanwhile, I work on homework at the table. I sometimes feel left out because there is always someone wanting her attention. Sometimes I wish she could put the phone down and hangout with me more.

“So tell me, what do you want to do today? We have the whole day free,” she says taking another bite of her pancake stack.

“Hmmm, maybe a movie might be fun. Andrew said he liked that new movie that just came out about the....” I stop as I hear my mom’s cell phone ring. I know this isn’t her regular ringtone, as this one is for her boss. Mom looks at me and gets up quickly from the table, “Hold on honey, I have to take this. I will be right back, I promise.” She looks caught off guard by the call and a little anxious all at the same time. It is not like her boss to call on the weekend. He understands it’s our time because he’s a single parent with a daughter a little older than me. Mom grabs her phone and walks into her office.

“Morning Gary. What can I help you with this morning? Is this about the Marshall case? I thought we settled that she’s being arraigned on Monday for defamation and liable.”

Mom goes quiet and after what seems like forever, I hear an “Oh,” from her office. I look at my stack of pancakes and decide to cut them into pieces as I listen to the

conversation. There isn't much Mom is saying so I continue to eat my pancakes adding just a tad more maple syrup to my plate so I can dip a piece of pancake in before eating.

It's been a few minutes now and I haven't heard anything from Mom. I thought she would be out by now. I mean I'm already done with all my pancakes. I go to rinse my dish when I hear her.

"Ok, so when do I need to leave? I'll have to find a place for Will to stay. You know I don't have family here so I need time to figure this out. How long are you thinking I need to be there?". All of sudden I get a feeling in the pit of my stomach. Mom goes quiet again.

"Gary, Gary, no I hear you, I really do. But I need to get this settled on my side. I couldn't be there for a few days. Let me first get this situation with Will handled and I will call you back."

"Yes, yes, Gary, I will talk to you in a few."

"How's breakfast honey?" Mom says peaking her head out of the office. I turn around on my kitchen stool and look at her.

"I just finished."

"Ok, I am going to be a few more minutes in here. Can you do me a favor and put my plate in the microwave and help me clean up some of breakfast? This is taking a bit longer than I expected."

"Sure."

"Thanks honey."

Mom looks back at her phone, dials a number quickly, and puts the phone to her ear.

"Morning Caroline, how are you all doing?" There is a long pause in the conversation then Mom continues, "Yes, we are doing well... Will and I are fine," she pauses, "I actually called because I have a favor to ask."

"What is going on? Why is she calling Grammie?" My mind is whirling.

"Would you mind watching Will for a few weeks? I just got a call from my boss. Our firm has been working on an international case in Geneva, and well, I need to go there to work with our defense team."

She hesitates, "I know it's a lot to ask, but Will is such a good kid and I know he won't be any trouble. I just don't know who else to ask." I can hear in her voice she is worried they might say no. If they do, then what? There is a silence. I hear my mom breathe deeply, "Oh thank you, thank you, thank you! I owe you guys big time," another pause,

“I know family doesn’t owe family anything but still, this is such a relief. I’ll know that Will will be safe. I need to tell him and work out some details. I will call you later when I have everything settled.” Another pause. “Yes, I will tell him, thank you guys again. We love you both.”

Mom comes out of the office, looks at me and says the worst words any boy can hear, “Honey, we need to talk.”

Chapter 2

Mom comes out of her office and sits down on the living room couch. She starts to explain everything she knows. She talks about the case and how it involves the company she’s representing and their technology and how another company stole it without their knowledge. She tells me that she will be working with a team of lawyers who have to prove what the other company did. Mom tells me why they need her, and about how long she will be gone. To be honest, I kind of zone out. It’s a lot to take in and process.

“So, what about me? Where am I going?”

I know the answer but I need her to tell me.

“Well, honey, as you know we don’t have family out here, and my side of the family has some issues going on, so I would feel uncomfortable leaving you with them for such a long period of time. I don’t know exactly how long I will be gone, so it’s too much to ask Andrew’s parents to keep you until I come back.” She stops for a second and brings me closer to her on the couch.

“So I called PopPop and Grammie and you are going to be staying with them in Strongsville, Ohio until I return.”

“Why can’t they come here? We have a spare bedroom?” I ask looking up at my mom. “Why do I have to go there?”

Mom rubs my shoulder, “Grammie can’t fly honey. She has problems with her lungs but she manages just fine normally. When the plane goes high into the sky it puts pressure on her lungs making it hard for her to breathe. So Grammie doesn’t fly.”

“Oh, but can’t PopPop come?”

“PopPop isn’t going to leave Grammie all alone. I know you don’t know them that well, but they are good people, and love you very much. I would feel so comfortable knowing you were with them.” .

I look at her. I don't know what to feel, how to act, or even what to say. I have only been around PopPop and Grammie a few times when I was really little. I don't know them all that well. I'm nervous to say the least.

In the past, we would visit them for a week. Mom and Dad would sit and talk with them more than I would. Usually I would play outside, read, or just be to myself. They sit and share stories of their lives before me and I would just listen to learn more about my family or wait for a place to interject into the conversation. I would try to be a part of the conversations with them but it was hard. Our relationship wasn't forced but it felt weird, maybe a little foreign almost.

The last time I saw them was two years ago. Mom and I visited for a few days, and I couldn't tell if they were happy that we were there. Grammie said once that it was hard to be with us because it reminded her of her Dylan, my dad. She was choked up and I wish I hadn't overheard her say it. PopPop was there to cheer her up and reminded her that we are his memory. I wish I didn't overhear how sad she was and I don't want to make her sadder on this trip by being around.

My mom can see me thinking and asks, "What are you thinking about honey?"

"Nothing," I say looking down at my feet on the floor.

She looks away and then looks at me and says, "You know, I think you are really going to like Ohio." I know she is trying to sell me on this, but what's to sell when I have no choice. I just say to her, "Do you want to finish your pancakes?"

"I will in a second, but first I have to make a quick call back to Gary. While I do, why don't you message Andrew and tell him about your new summer adventure or watch a show on your iPad? I'll just be a few minutes."

But instead I head for my room.

I grab my iPad and make my way back up the stairs. One foot at a time slogging up until I make it to the second floor. My room is right in front of the stairs. I left the bed unmade with clothing and baseball gear all over the floor. I don't even care. I face plant on the bed. How can a day that started with chocolate chip pancakes become the worst day ever?

Chapter 3

I roll my head over to the side and take a glimpse of another picture of me and my dad. I am on his shoulders. I am little, probably two, not that it matters. We are at Disneyland outside of the entrance to the train station where Mickey Mouse is depicted in flowers. Our happy faces beaming. My dad in his Cleveland Indians hat, the one he always used to wear. I am dressed just the same as him. Cleveland Indians hat, white polo shirt and khaki shorts. My mom loved to dress me up just like my dad and refer to me as his little twin. I wanted nothing more than to be just like my dad. I still do now.

I wish he was still here and was still alive. If he were here things would be different. Mom wouldn't have to work so much, or travel to Geneva, and I wouldn't have to go live with people I barely know. I wouldn't be the only kid in my class without a dad or stepdad. I wouldn't be shuttled off like this. I most definitely wouldn't have to go to Strongsville, Ohio.

I take the picture and turn it face down so I can't see him. I don't want to think about him or look at him. It's his fault we are here. It's his fault he's gone. Anger rushes through me. Why can't life just go back to the way it was? I grab Jake, my Cleveland Indians Build-A-Bear that Dad got me when I was little, and cuddle him close to my chest. I accidentally hit Jake's paw setting off the speaker inside. I hear my Dad's voice, "I love you, Will." Just that little voice makes me cry which puts me back to sleep. Maybe when I wake-up this will only be just a nightmare.

I wake up two hours later to itchy eyes, puffed from crying. I hear my mom on the phone and the clicks of her keyboard from downstairs. I put Jake away and come downstairs. I look at the clock and it's 12:30pm. My mom sees me come down the stairs and tells the person on the other end of the phone call, "Hey can I call you back? Will just got up." Mom puts her phone down and motions me to join her on the couch. She moves her laptop to the other side.

She starts, "You know our Friday movie nights, where we make popcorn and watch old movies online?" I nod. "Well, we could do that again tonight if you like even though we did one last night. It might just be nice to get cozy and watch a movie together."

I nod.

"Come here," she motions me to inch closer to her on the couch. "You know, I think you're going to like this trip more than you think."

"How so?"

"When I first met your dad, he would talk all about his times in Strongsville and we would go back there often, when we lived in Cleveland, to hang out with his friends. He had a best friend he was close with since he was about your age. He was even with us the night we met."

She stops for a minute, "Did I ever tell you how your dad and I met?"

I shake my head no softly back and forth.

"Oh this is a good story. I can't believe I haven't told you," she says clearing her throat just a little bit. "We were at a baseball game and our seats just happened to be next to each other. I went to the game with a friend of mine and your dad went to the game with a friend of his. We just starting talking while waiting for our friends to come back with

food. We swapped phone numbers right there at Jacob's Field, and the rest is history. That's why we named your bear Jake, so we could remember that moment in time.

"Yah, I always wondered why his name was Jake. It didn't sound like a bear's name to me. Usually bears are just named Teddy or something like that."

"Yep, that's how your dad and I met. I had just moved from Chicago to Cleveland and your dad took me all over the town. He said it was to show that Cleveland was a better city than Chicago... I never believed him but you know your dad. Once he had something made up in his mind it was that way forever."

"Yah, dad could be stubborn sometimes."

"Yes, he could," she says with a soft awkward laugh, "that he could."

"I remember one time he took me to a concert in the park in Strongsville, and you know what? I really liked it. I didn't think I would, since I had never been to Strongsville and country music cover bands usually aren't my favorite. I remember thinking *why do we have to leave downtown Cleveland? We can do everything here* but he was one of those people it was hard to say "no" to so I agreed, and I'm glad I did. Small towns are the best and the people there were so friendly and welcoming."

I readjust myself on the couch to sink even deeper into the couch to get even more comfortable.

"See you have never lived in a small town, but they are really great. It's not like LA where everyone is coming and going. Instead it's a true community. I wish that we had that here for you but that's what's so special about this trip. You get to experience new places with new people. Think of this as an unexpected adventure and a chance to learn about communities and people different from you. Come on Will, don't you love a good adventure?"

"Yah, I guess, Mom" I begrudgingly answer her.

We just sat there on the couch for a little while longer. I listened as she told me more of his stories. Some of the stories I knew like the stories of him riding bikes in the neighborhood, planting a garden with his dad, and sneaking out to meet his friends for a bonfire in the woods. She also told me stories that I didn't know like how he broke his two front teeth on a pogo stick or how he played the lead role in his middle school play, *Oklahoma*. She went on to tell me about the time he and his friends played pool in the basement and tried to burp the alphabet after daring each other to drink a liter of soda.

Through those stories my mom made my dad real again. It's hard when you lose a parent. Most people don't know the first thing about how to help. When my dad first died, so many people came up to me saying, "I'm so sorry." They apologized for something they weren't involved in. They weren't the distracted driver speeding on the freeway. They weren't sending that one last text at the cost of my dad's life. Sorry won't

bring my dad back, but stories like the ones Mom is telling me, those bring him back, even if just for a few seconds.

After a few more stories, Mom gets up from the couch to stretch.

“What if we watch E.T. tonight for our movie and put out some Reese’s Pieces of our own. Maybe if we are lucky we could lure E.T.” she says with a wink.

“Yah, let’s do that.”

“Why don’t you hang down here with me today and later on we can get ready for the movie. Let’s just be us today.”

I smiled back at her. And with that our day concluded in the way it started, just the two of us.