

# ONE

**M**Y HOUSE looked the same. Same windows shaped like jack-o-lantern eyeballs, same drooping rain gutters, and same red doorknocker like a dopey dog with its tongue stuck out, happy to greet me. I wondered if I looked the same. I didn't feel the same. The world, to me, felt different after everything that happened. The Hero Academy fight, Mom's return, followed by her disappearance, once again. The massive cover-up. I felt different, too. I had a tiny, beaded braid in my hair for proof. I had just been on the best trip of my life, spending weeks helping indigenous farmers in the Amazon rainforest. It was so beautiful, days in vivid yellow and green, nights that felt like endless blue. I ate the best coconut I'd ever had there, saw rainbow-colored birds the size of insects and was bitten by insects the size of airplanes. PeriGenomics had touched down, door-to-door service, dropping me and my bag of stuff off on the lawn — "Jump, Sarah!" they said — and then the propellers clattered back off into the sky, only to disappear, and I was alone. Returned.

I took the spare key from under the frog next to the welcome mat and walked inside the house. It was empty.

I felt a flicker of disappointment, even though I had known it was going to be empty. A few weeks earlier, after he stopped yelling at me on the phone, Dad said that he was spending the last half of August in Maine, camping and communing with nature. He was off the grid. “Look, you’ll be fine,” he said. “Johnny will be around.”

“He can barely feed himself!” I replied, trying to will myself to get good reception even though I was on some ancient brick of a phone on a one-way street in a shadow of a town. “You guys need me, right?”

“It’s not as if you gave us an itinerary, Sarah, before you just went on a helicopter ride with some PeriGenomics drone.”

“You’re a PeriGenomics drone,” I pointed out, and we laughed.

So the red carpet that you secretly wish for when you return home was nonexistent. Just an empty house. Dad on vacation and Johnny who-knows-where. I had missed my family and friends when I was away, and I wanted to see them immediately to tell them all about my amazing journey. But the only one listening was the four walls of my small house in Doolittle Falls.



Dad said he would only be gone for ten days. I think this was day three. But from the look of the house, it had been abandoned for decades. Dishes piled up in the sink. Clothes all over the floor. The lawn half-mowed. Empty bags of chips and drinks all over the place. And the couch looked worn in, more so than normal. I could nearly make out the shape of my brother’s body. He had pulled the video game console out into the living room, in front of the large TV, ready at a moment’s notice.

I went up to my room and put my bag on the floor. My whole summer was in the bag. Postcards, seashells, a jar of sand, new clothes. When I got in the plane with Sam I only had the things on my back. PeriGenomics had let me borrow some gear, but in the end they took back everything that wasn’t a PeriGenomics t-shirt.

I surveyed my room. Everything I left was there: the humidifier, my Black Zephyr poster, my computer, clothes, books. All of it. It was the same as when I left it. The bed was made, although I got the distinct impression that someone had been sleeping in it. As I walked over to inspect it I saw a few brightly colored drops of dried paint on the floor.

It could only be one person: Hamilton.

Johnny must have been using my room for guests. I was going to kill him. I went back downstairs, sent him a quick text, and I made a sandwich. As I stood at the kitchen counter, chewing, half-famished, I realized there was only one person I wanted to see. I called Alice. The phone rang and rang but no one picked up. I tried a few other friends but the same thing happened.

Where was everyone? I had this fantasy in my mind; they'd all be hanging out somewhere waiting for me to get back. They should've known I was coming back. Between calls and texts and emails, I'd practically sent out a virtual little trumpet boy to herald my arrival.

It was time to canvass the streets. I grabbed my bag and went outside into the thick summer heat. When I got to the pizza shop on Main Street, I saw someone running toward me, flailing their arms. It was Betty. She had spent the summer at the Academy retreat in Cuernavaca, Mexico, or, to be clearer, three weeks there and the rest of the summer scooping ice cream. I went for a hug but she grabbed me by the shoulders. "Hey! Betty! It's great to see you!" I said, a little confused.

"We need your help. Where is he?" she demanded. She looked at me, quizzically. Her hair was pulled back in a neat ponytail and she had on a black t-shirt and Capri pants. She looked like Audrey Hepburn dancing with bohemians in *Funny Face*. I felt epically bedraggled in comparison: ratty t-shirt with holes in it, cut-off shorts, and a braid that felt like it was disintegrating on my head.

"Who?" I asked

"Butters!" She was tense, like a soda can ready to pop. What had

happened? Did the world threaten to end, again?

“Well, I’ve been back for about five minutes now,” I said slowly. Maybe this radio silence meant that we were in the middle of a post-apocalyptic dream world. Maybe that’s why I couldn’t find anybody.

“I sent him to find you when we heard you were getting back. I should have gone myself. That boy is so distractible. And the Sectors! We’ll never make it.”

I looked at her, totally confused. “Betty, slow down. What’s going on? Is someone after you? Is it the Hero Academy again? Did Dr. Mann resurrect himself in order to make a bigger, better machine?” It had to be something important. The last time she was this worried she was about to confess to me regarding George.

“No. It’s bigger than that. The whole world depends on it,” she said.

“What is it? Is the town under attack? Is Dr. Mann back?” We were standing still on the sidewalk, facing each other. She wasn’t very good at getting me wherever I needed to go.

“No. Worse,” Betty said. She looked at me with the most serious face in the world and spit out the truth: “Karaoke!”

# TWO

SHE LOOKED at me. I'm sure my face was as off-kilter as a Picasso. "Okay, maybe I overstated it," Betty said. "The world doesn't depend on it. Just Butters' world. I'll explain later."

She grabbed me by the hand and we went on a walk to her car. We cruised through the town looking for Butters. The Karaoke state championship was happening tonight and Butters had qualified to represent Doolittle Falls' region, the Sleepy Valley. If he was in the top three he'd get to compete at the regionals in the New England Championship, and if he won that, he'd go on to the Karaoke nationals in Washington DC.

"There's a Karaoke nationals?"

"There's an *everything* nationals these days." Betty said. "Haven't you ever watched singing shows?"

"What does he get if he wins?"

"Fifty thousand dollars and a spot on *The Sing-Along*."

"The what?"

"Ugh. You really were off the grid this summer. *The Sing-Along* is the biggest reality musical show in the country. Everyone—Normals, Heroes, Misshapes, even supervillains—cover songs and the best

singer gets a record deal with Titan Records.

“And Butters wants to get on the show?”

“Everyone wants to get on the show.”

“That’s awesome.”

“It could be. It’s still far away, and I can’t even get him to the regionals.”

“What do you mean?”

Betty explained to me that there had been a series of events leading up to the competition. Butters was calling it his curse. Before he performed, strange things would happen. Bouts of laryngitis. Downed power in the bars. He’d almost gotten hit by a tree. “I think it’s the Admiral,” Betty said.

“Admiral Doom?” I asked. “Why would he want to stop karaoke? Doesn’t he have bigger plans, like his Doom Ray?”

“Not Admiral Doom, silly,” Betty corrected, executing a perfect turn. “Admiral Skylark. He’s in the competition as well, and he also has powers and money to recruit minions to help him.”

Once we got off the main drag, I put my head out the window to see if I could spot Butters. The slow echoes of doo-wop filled the air. We followed it like hounds on a scent until we pulled over to the field where Butters was standing in the middle distance, belting “It’s In His Kiss (the Shoop Shoop song)” with full back-up by the Sectors. Butters was okay. The Sectors were amazing.

We tumbled out of the car, approaching Butters from behind. “I don’t want to interrupt him,” Betty said, putting a finger over her lips. “He’s nervous enough as it is.” We watched him finish the song, then start again. He made the same exact gestures each time, never moving from his space. It was like he was caught on loop. When we got up to him we could see that he was singing against his will. While his whole body was into the performance, his small hands making large circles and his feet doing a tap-dancing soft shoe in place, there was fear in his eyes. We tried to talk to him but he kept going. We tried to move him but he was stuck, as if by glue, in place.

“Is someone messing with you?” I asked.

Butters nodded, almost imperceptibly.

We heard a loud, slow clap when he finished. Christie emerged from behind a lonely maple tree, a smirk on her face.

“Bravo. They figured it out. Bravo.” She paused and looked over at Butters and the Spectors. “Again!” she shouted. “Less vibrato this time. If I wanted Christina Aguilera murdering a classic, I’d ask for it.”

Butters opened his mouth. A tremulous warble whispered through the air.

I was going to shout something clever at Christie, so she’d stop it with Butters, but her mind control moves at the speed of thought, and by the time I finished, I’d be in Butters’ chorus line, singing and dancing forever. I sent a bolt of lightning ripping through the sky. It landed with an enormous BANG twenty feet away from Christie, splitting a branch in the tree. Everyone jumped, clutching their ears and falling to the ground in a ball, including the Spectors. Butters stayed upright, with a marine’s posture, still singing. Some debris from the tree hit Christie in the head and she yelped. Betty gave me a nod of approval.

“Why’d you do that?” Christie moaned. “It hurt.”

“Consider it a warning,” I said. “The next one won’t be.”

“I can have you doing—” she was about to launch into a spiel about how she could get me to do anything, absolutely anything. We had heard it before from the Glanton family.

I cut her off. If there was one thing I learned this summer it was how to talk big. Apparently, it’s half of what they teach you at the Academy. “Hey Christie, the second I sense you getting into my mind at all it’s done. In fact, right now, my hand’s not on the trigger, it’s over the muzzle. The shots have been fired, and I’m the only thing between you and the bullet. You move, you wake up in a year with white hair and some serious memory loss. Your call.”

It was a bluff. A big one. I didn’t have nearly that kind of power.

Or control. The tree thing was luck. I was aiming thirty yards east of it. But Christie didn't know that. She just knew that I was more powerful now, and I scared the hell out of her. Would it be worth it to test me? She wrinkled her nose.

Butters' body collapsed. Out of breath, he fell to the ground. Betty went over to him while I continued to stare Christie down. I felt like a cat locked in a neighborhood battle. She smiled at me and I smiled back, and we slowly backed away from each other, never breaking eye contact until she had shrank in my vision to the size of a peanut.

# THREE

“**W**HY WOULD Christie waste her time tormenting Butters?” I asked. “No offense, Butters.”  
“You! Are! FORGIVEN!” the Sectors replied.

“Nice to see you,” Butters said.

“She’s just a sadist,” Betty said. “It’s probably just revenge for hearing ‘Build Me Up Buttercup’ during the fight one hundred times.”

Butters, surrounded by his Sectors, smiled. They chirped, in unison, “Tweedle-dee-dee, Tweedle-dee-wop.”

“What?” I asked.

“It was Skylark,” Butters said. “He put her up to it. Paid her off.”

“She probably would have done it for free,” Betty said.

“Yeah. But the \$250 helped,” Butters said.

“But she doesn’t need the money,” Betty said. “She’s soooo spoiled and her stupid family is going to take over the world.”

“Money was probably just the excuse,” I said. “Though I’m worried that this Skylark can use money or her natural cruelty to get her to do anything.”

“He’s a huge jerk,” Butters said.

We passed a beat-up car with the words “Lofting Rodent and

Pest Removal” stenciled on the side. Alice stood at the front of the car with the hood up, white smoke billowing in her face. She stepped back to get some air. Her face was covered in grease and soot.

“Hey lady, need a ride?” I yelled out the window.

She looked totally shocked. “Sarah! It’s you!” There was a flicker of something on her face, but it was wiped away by a big smile. “I actually do need a ride.”

A car honked behind us. “Okay, I get it,” Betty grumbled. “You have places to go in Doolittle Falls. Have to get to the hardware store before four p.m., right?” She beamed at Alice. “Let me pull over.”

“Hey, we got that karaoke competition tonight,” Butters said. “If we make it in one piece.”

“I’m there with bells on, Butters,” Alice replied. “As long as we can bring someone else, too.”

“Who?” I asked.

“I promised your brother a ride. He’s obsessed with Butters.”

“Where is that jerk, anyways?” I asked. “He leaves the house a mess and rents out my room like it’s on AirBnB.”

“Just at Pete’s Record Store,” Alice said, pulling open the backdoor and smushing in next to Butters and the Sectors.

“Wait,” Betty added, “is this many people in my car legal, technically?”

“Well, three of us are technically mental projections so I think we’re okay,” I said.

“Who you calling a projection?” the Sectors shot back at me.

We pulled over by the record store, where Johnny was outside, leaning against the brick wall. He was still limping a little from the bite he’d gotten last year but seemed much better.

“Hey, sis. Long time no see,” Johnny said, and got in the car. He winced when he sat back down. “Where we headed?”

“Springfield.” He smushed next to Alice and the Sectors, out of room, disappeared.

“Why Springfield?”

“We’re off to the glamorous karaoke capital of Massachusetts,” I said.

“You in?” Alice asked.

“Hell yeah.” He kicked at the passenger seat. “Let’s get this tour bus on the road.” It was like I had never been away. Johnny was still exactly the same.



A long stretch of highway and country road was standing in the way between our car and Springfield. When we got the exit, a large blinking sign said it was closed. We had to drive another twenty minutes for the next exit, winding our way down rural roads to get back to where we were going, using Butters’ phone to guide us. There was road closure after road closure, sign after sign that meant we had to redirect our route. We ended up on the last road into town from the outside world, passing only John Deere tractor stores and the occasional chrome-lined diner.

Butters exhaled, nervously. “It’s like someone’s trying to seal off Springfield.” “Or trap us on this road,” Alice added.

“I hope not,” I said just as we began to slow down to a stop because of traffic. I craned my neck out of the window and there was a line of cars. It looked like a parking lot.

“What do you think? Just too many people trying to get in on the last road?” Johnny asked.

“Or some accident,” Betty said, trying to peek around the large truck in front of us.

We sat for ten minutes. Occasionally the car would get the chance to crawl forward three feet. “Did you know,” a Spector said, sitting on Butters’ lap, “that your brain gets annoyed when you can’t see the way forward in a car, and it’s the same part of your brain that hates hearing other people’s one-sided phone conversations?” “Ooooh, I totally get that,” said Alice. “It’s like an animal instinct. You want to hear both sides and see where you’re going.”

“This doesn’t feel right,” I said. “Even with everything, why so many cars and why so sudden?”

“It’s the Admiral,” Butters said.

“All this for Karaoke?” Johnny asked.

“You don’t know what people would do to win that spot on *The Sing-Along*,” Butters said.

“Well, we’re not getting anywhere just sitting here in traffic. You stay here, Betty. Sarah and I can go to check it out,” Alice said. “We’ll jump back in when the problem’s solved.”



We got out of the car and started walking ahead. I wondered why Alice volunteered me for the job. Was it because she believed in my powers? People looked despondent in their vehicles. Resigned to be stuck in traffic forever. Some honked in desperation. The whole time it was as if Alice wanted to say something but instead she made small talk about the back up. The amount of cars made it seem like one of those apocalyptic movies where everyone tries to abandon the city at once. But they were heading into a city. And, oddly, there were no cars in the other direction.

Then we saw the source. A tree. A big one. It was nearly as tall on its side than I was standing up. There were a few onlookers who had also gotten out of their car to inspect it.

I summoned all my strength and tried to create a wind strong enough to move the tree. Some leaves rustled and a couple of tiny branches snapped. A hat flew by me. It was at least gale force, but when I saw the tree barely budge a centimeter, I lost control and it died down to a light gust.

“That’s a big one,” a man said, picking up his Bruins hat. “Need a little more wind to move it.”

“Probably took ten times that to knock it down,” said another man.

I took another minute to size up the tree. Maybe Johnny could

convert any water in it into alcohol and burn it down. But then we'd have a giant fire in the middle of the road and probably an explosion if he turned it into high-octane. I was fresh out of ideas.

A group of older grizzled men formed a conclave that was sizing it up and talking about their options. There were lots of "MmHmms" and "Yups" but little in the way of actual movement.

"I got a chainsaw in my truck but nothing that can handle something that size. Especially lying like that," said another man.

A younger man, in a plaid shirt and jeans, said, "Probably gonna take a road crew to clear that. Two-hour job. Maybe three."

"I can do it in thirty," Alice said. "And that's minutes."

They all turned their heads in shock.

"What are you doing?" I whispered to her.

"I got this. I learned a new language this summer. I think it might just come in handy."

"How do you suppose you'll do that, little lady?" said a man the size of a small truck with his thumbs wresting in his belt loops.

"Just watch and see," she said.

Alice walked to the edge of the forest on the side of the road and started making a gurgling noise in the back of her throat. It sounded bestial. Inhuman. And it kind of creeped me out. She looked down at the map on her phone, which seemed to be some app that identified local animal populations.

"There should be some near enough to hear, there's a lake two hundred feet in that direction," she said, pointing into the thick forest. I couldn't see anything but trees. She made some more odd noises and then a smile crept across her face.

"Thank god. There's one right there. Let's hope he brought friends."

She pointed to a small creature trundling through forest. It looked like a fat cat at first, with small thick legs but an odd tail. As it got closer I could see it didn't have a long, thin tail like a dog or a cat but rather a wide, almost triangular, one. It was brown with a flat face

and large protruding teeth.

“A beaver, Alice?” She smiled.

Moments later, Alice was leading a small posse of beavers to the middle of the road to assess the tree. The men looked on in disbelief. Alice had the beavers set up to start gnawing through the wood. They called over more and soon there were three-dozen beavers gnawing at full speed, kicking up wood chips in every direction. The brown bark gave way to a reddish layer and then a pale yellow. They cut it by biting little sections, leaving small pock-like marks with each bite. They split the tree into sections that we took into the forest.

Each one was kind of slow, but working together they got through most of it in the promised thirty minutes, with the help of some of the men who weren't too proud to prove Alice right, and some other bored drivers eager to get out. Once the tree was gone, the cars started moving again. Betty pulled over, and we piled back in, making it into Springfield just under the wire so that Butters could perform.

# FOUR

**T**HE BAR was in Springfield's deserted downtown, a block away from the Basketball Hall of Fame, which was, legitimately, a building shaped like a giant basketball. Sadly, the karaoke wasn't in the ball, but at a chain restaurant called Wingdinigans. It had the faux kitschy front of a place called Wingdinigans. Booths circled the perimeter and there was a bar dead center. They had set up the stage and karaoke machine there, and people were crowded against the bar, teetering over the people seated at small round tables. When I made for a tiny table, a man in a striped green and purple shirt ran over to me.

"Excuse me, but it's twenty-one and over only for our drinking establishment. If you'd like, I can get a waitress to seat you at a booth."

"I get my drinks for free anyway," Johnny said.

The man glowered. I stared at my brother, wishing that he'd shut up before he wasted all our efforts.

We were exhausted from the whole trip and didn't have time to have a Wingdinigans manager stop us at the finish line. Butters was too busy mumbling to himself and running through his routine to notice any of it.

“The competition,” Betty finally said. “We’re here for the karaoke.”

“Ohh,” he said, drawing the word out. “In that case the registration is over there. Lower turnout than we expected. But if I see you drinking anything from the bar that isn’t soda or water, you’re out of here immediately. All of you. I should be carding ya,” he continued, “but you got lucky tonight. Be good, okay?”



There was a stage with a solitary microphone on a stand up front, a small TV pointing at the mic, and a folding table. Three people sat at the table drinking enormous cocktails from Hurricane glasses, with fruit and umbrellas tumbling out of the perimeter. They had the look of “wacky” local celebrities, you know the sort: they host the morning zoo radio show, complete with fart sound effects, or the meteorologists that have a special hat for every holiday or pseudo-holiday. It seemed a little preposterous that we had used all our powers to get Butters here so the goofiest people in the room could decide his fate.

There was a parade of middling drunken singers belting their way through rock and R & B classics. Occasionally someone could actually sing really well, and it was impressive. The judges made semi-funny comments that we felt obliged to laugh at and gave out mostly fives and sixes. The performances ranged from one person nervously singing into the mic to people wildly flailing around like they were fronting some Eighties hair metal band. One guy, in the middle of an air guitar windmill, ate it on the mic cord and nearly took out the TV on the way down.

“Fire in the hole,” the wacky DJ screamed, and he plummeted.

I was happy to be there, but as the night went on I got sleepier and sleepier. I think I was jetlagged. And something about hanging out with Betty, Butters, Johnny, and Alice felt off to me. I was so excited to see them but I couldn’t keep up. They had jokes that I didn’t know, and Johnny and Alice had started a band, maybe, and I think they