

I never wanted to be a Messiah. In fact, I was woefully short on qualifications—super powers, spiritual connection, any desire to save the world. I didn't have a direct line to the tall guy with the white beard, and that was just fine with me.

I had my heart set on math, logic, and space. But sometimes the Master Planner has other things in mind for you. Big things. Things that'll freak you out if you think about them too much. It's best just to ride the wave of possibility and let the probabilities unravel.

RIGEL

Chapter 1

MONTANA, JUNE 4

There is logic in all things, even death. But that doesn't mean I'm ready to face it. Not yet.

Today was supposed to be happy and bright, the color of sunshine and blue sky. Not just because of my birthday but because today I'm an adult. Legally.

Instead, I'm sitting in the doctor's office at four in the afternoon where the only color surrounding me is a dull white, and I'm waiting for news—my test results. With my NASA internship starting next week at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, I wanted to make sure I'm fine. Better than fine. I've always been healthy, have great stamina, rarely get sick. Except this thing with my heart lately . . . the crazy beats and being out of breath. I didn't even tell Shelley and Philip I was coming here. My parents. I've been calling them by their first names for as long as I can remember because it made more sense. The idea of a dad and a not-mom never felt right. This way there's no separation between father

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and stepmother, between biology and parenting. Besides, Shelley would smother me with hand-holding and sympathetic gazes and monitor my every move, and Philip would argue empirical evidence until he and the staff were exhausted.

I just want answers.

The cold air makes me shiver and I cross my arms over my chest. There's an explanation for all this heart weirdness. There always is, because everything is logical. Were it not for order and organization, Earth would spin out of control and we'd all be flung into outer space.

Bach's Prelude in C Major plays on my headphones, pure mathematical progressions that have always served to temper erratic thoughts, to calm frustration and bring me back to harmonic resonance.

Except for today. My heart gallops and careens like a drunken race horse, apparently in violent disagreement, then all is calm. Moments later it's wild and crazy again. No matter what I try—deep breathing, imagining myself gliding through space, solving random math equations to distract my mind—my heart doesn't listen.

I knock on my chest to get its attention. "Stop that. You're driving me nuts." But nothing changes. So I soften my tone. "Look, you have to cooperate. I can't have you ruin my whole career."

Still nothing.

I kick my legs beneath the table and rub my arms. It's freezing in here. Why are doctor's offices always so cold? And where is he?

"Hurry up!" I say to the empty room. "I have places to do and things to be." My lips quirk at the little joke but my heart doesn't join in.

For reassurance I stroke my necklace. A thin silver spiral with a green tourmaline stone in the center.

According to Philip, life is a puzzle waiting to be solved and there is nothing that can't be solved with mathematics. One of the first things I learned was the special property of the golden spiral. He's right about math. Numbers have existed since the dawn of civilization, in Ancient Egypt, in Assyria, in Babylonia, where they used arithmetic, algebra, and geometry for commerce and trade. And astronomy (my favorite topic). When I was little, Philip and I would stand in the backyard under the panoply of night and gaze at the stars, millions of pinpricks dotting the blackboard of heaven, and he would point out the bright ones and make me repeat their names. Sirius, Canopus, Alpha Centauri, Arcturus. And Rigel, the seventh brightest star in the night sky, the one I'm named for.

Because of Philip I'm going to be an astronaut. It doesn't hurt that he used to be an astronomy professor at the University of Montana. Having a dad with all that knowledge and expertise was amazing. Not to mention the perks of visiting the school's planetarium and observatory and getting a personal tour or sitting in on a class and having the professor ask his "daughter" to explain the harmonic oscillator.

At last the door opens and Ryan McAndrews walks in, revered doctor and fanatical researcher. Or Mac, as I call him, the nickname he gives to all the kids. Mid-forties with curling brown hair and glasses that make him look sexy. Not that I would ever tell him.

He's not smiling, damn it. Far from it. He has the saddest eyes and a lip droop that reminds me of his basset hound Sadie. The last time he had that look one of his favorite patients died. I slip off my headphones and blurt, "Who died?"

We don't mince words.

"No one," he says. "Not yet." But his expression doesn't lift. His eyes narrow and his head drops while he scans his laptop. He tap-tap-taps the report with his finger.

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Time drags and my skin prickles. No smile. No eye contact. This isn't good. I was banking on good news for my birthday. He's mistaken; he has to be. I feel fine. Well, except for the crazy heartbeats and being out of breath. I mean, the panting when I run is normal. What's abnormal is the lack of energy. No more five-mile loops in the forest. I'm lucky if I can manage a couple miles. But that cool dampness, the sunlight shining through the canopy of giant cedars—that fuels me. That makes me happy. If I have to give that up, I might as well just chuck everything.

So I've put off a checkup. Everything gets out of sync once in a while, even a body. If something were really wrong I wouldn't be able to run at all.

Mac has to be mistaken. "So what's the scoop?" I ask. "Give it to me neat, no ice." Years back, when I came in for a flu shot, a shot I so did not want to get, Mac told me a story about an old rock hound who got banged up in an accident. Mac's grandfather examined him in the hospital and when the fellow asked for the report, the doctor said, "Do you want the good news or the bad news?" The fellow huffed out a breath and said, "Whatever you have to say I can take. Give it to me neat, no ice." So when I braced for the shot, Mac told me it would hurt like the dickens. The actual shock made me scream "son of a bitch." Then I added, "Geez, you couldn't just give it to me straight. You had to throw in a side of rattlesnake bite for good measure." Mac laughed so hard tears streamed down his cheeks.

But today is different. Mac closes his laptop slowly and straightens his white coat. The delay makes my heart kick hard then stutter. I press my hand to my chest.

Mac sighs. "You know how much I care about you, right?"

"You don't have to sugar coat it. I'm not some kid," I say, remembering all the tests he arranged: EKG, stress test, troponin levels, cardiac MRI, even an echocardiogram.

He sighs again and a sliver of fear wedges between my ribs. My chest constricts, then my heart pounds, and he's telling me to open my mouth and breathe deeply. I do what he says for a moment, then I'm annoyed at myself, at him, at the situation. "Tell me," I demand.

Mac looks me in the eye. "It's not good."

"How bad is it?"

"The tests are concerning. The good news is the blood count in your metabolic panel is normal."

"Hurray, something in my favor." He doesn't smile at my little quip.

"The bad news is the tests suggest evidence of cardiogenic shock. Your heart weakened at some point and it's been fighting to supply your body with the proper blood flow."

"Okay, I'll eat better and cut my runs down to a mile."

"Rigel."

The tone in his voice makes my eyes water. I shake my head. I'm not a crier. This time I don't look at him. I can't bear to see the pity. But when I open my mouth, nothing comes out and I have to cough. "As bad as the rattlesnake bite?"

"This looks like takotsubo, what people call broken heart syndrome. It's a rare occurrence, especially in someone so young. I want to refer you to an electrophysiologist."

Broken heart syndrome. Is that even real? "I've been coming to you my whole life. Why do I need someone else?"

"I'm a GP. I don't have the experience that you need."

I wrap my arms tighter, really squeeze my ribs, as if the constriction can protect me. "Then what happens?"

"He'll decide if medication will solve the problem or if you need to get an ICD—an implantable cardioverter defibrillator."

"A defibrillator. Jesus Christ."

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“Ah, so you’re religious now?” Mac tries to grin but his mouth ends up in a twisted grimace.

“And if I don’t go?”

“You’re at serious risk. If you don’t take care of yourself it could be . . . fatal. But that won’t happen to you. You’re young and strong and—”

“You’re wrong, you know.” I have a huge need for air. Fresh air.

“Sure. Of course.” But he just stands there.

“The tests are wrong,” I snap. “You’re wrong. I’m not ready to . . .” My eyes are stinging now and I swipe at them with fury. “I’m going to my NASA internship next week. I’ve been getting ready for it all year. I’m going!”

“You know I—”

“Don’t!” And I stare at him with all my might. “Don’t say it. Don’t make me mad at you.”

He holds up his hands in the age-old “I’m sorry” gesture and I hang my head. Mac’s always been there for me, through all of my shots, the bout with tonsillitis, the nonstop itching with poison ivy. He’s never shouted, never lost his temper, never stopped looking for an answer.

I glance at him and his shoulders are just about in his ears. This can’t be happening.

“Sorry. I—” I want to apologize but I can’t. I need to leave. This instant. “Gotta go. I’ll call you.”

“Look, I’m referring you to a colleague in Florida. Dr. Sullivan. He’s been getting some pretty spectacular results with heart disease patients.”

I look into Mac’s eyes, into those depths that so want a different answer. *I want a different answer.*

Nanette Littlestone

“The human body is a miraculous thing,” he says. “I have faith in you.” He squeezes my shoulder and I try not to flinch. Then he leaves me alone.

With my thoughts.

With my fears.

With my failing heart.

Faith. Miracles. Those can't help me now. I need something I can trust.