

ONE

DENVER, COLORADO

APRIL 1985

If there was an award for the biggest Neo-Maxi-Zoom-Dweebie alive, I would win. They would put the crown on my head.

Just call me Queen Dweebie 1985.

I hitch my backpack higher on my right shoulder, because even I'm not enough of a dork to wear it with both straps. And I try to pretend that my best friend since the beginning of time isn't trying to pretend that she's not really with me.

To be perfectly honest, I don't blame Megan for walking a few steps ahead and not talking to me on the street. I mean, I *am* that kid who carries her milk carton from lunch around with her all afternoon in the same purple backpack that she's had since the fifth grade.

And I have been *that kid* every day for the last three months, two weeks, and four days.

I can't throw my empty milk cartons away.

I can't leave them in my locker after lunch, either.

—-1

—0

—+1

The idea of putting them (or, more specifically, the missing kids printed on the backs of them) in a metal coffin that smells like thirty years' worth of gym suits and bologna sandwiches makes me sick.

So I just stick them in my backpack, in the little outside mesh pocket. If I put them inside, where at least no one would see, my books will squish them.

I learned that the hard way.

So from fifth period through the bus ride home, an old, empty milk carton is just *there* for every kid at Pine View Middle School to see. Once wouldn't have mattered. But every day for three months, two weeks, and four days, when I'm already the kid with a dead mom and the same backpack since fifth grade?

Yeah. It matters.

It makes me a Neo-Maxi-Zoom-Dweebie.

"Want to hang out?" I ask Megan when we get to our street.

"Oh." She tips her head so her hair hides her face. Megan has the most perfect hair of all time. My mom called it honey blond. It's thick and shiny and cut so it's long on one side and short on the other. Not a frizzy, mousy-brown, shoulder-length mess like mine. The only thing dweebie about Megan is me. "Denny's coming over."

Her ear lobe, on the exposed side, has two stud earrings through it. One is a real ruby chip her grandma gave her for her birthday last year. It's Megan's birthstone. The other is a gold heart. Everything about Megan is cooler than me.

Denny is her older brother. For the past six months, he's lived in an apartment with three of his friends. He's studying at CU

Denver, to be an engineer. Until the last couple of weeks, Denny coming home meant that Megan and I would be in their basement begging him to play one more game of foosball with us.

Not anymore. Apparently.

I smile like I'm not upset. Like I believe her. "I have homework anyway."

She stops when we get to her house. Her eyes move to my backpack, then up to my face. "I'll call after dinner."

I shift a little, trying to hide my milk carton from her. "All right."

I watch her walk away and wish that I could just throw the stupid thing into the silver trash can on the side of our house. After I grind it into the front lawn with the sole of my left Ked.

Except when I think about doing that, I think about the face of the kid that's printed on the back of the carton. A boy today. His name is Christopher Thorpe.

He's been living inside my brain since just after fourth period, when I took a milk carton from the big silver cooler in the cafeteria. I can't imagine ruining his face with my sneaker.

I swear, I used to be solidly normal. Not popular, but I blended in. I was just like Megan. Or at least a slightly less cool version of her.

I was just like pretty much everyone.

It isn't that my best friend is moving away from me. She's staying where we've always been, and I'm the one who's changing.

Yeah. Just call me Half-Orphan Girl with the Milk Cartons. Unfortunately, the title does not come with any superpowers. Just a rotating selection of "missing and exploited" sidekicks.

—-1

—0

—+1



In my house, I turn on the kitchen faucet. While the water warms up, I carefully open the carton's top seam, then use a steak knife from the wooden block on the counter to cut out the bottom and the top flaps and slice open one side so I have a flat rectangle of waxed cardboard.

First a rinse to get rid of the milk residue that's gone a little sour. I never clean them at school. Not since Hillary MacLean caught me that one time in the bathroom by the gym.

She still calls me Cinderella, trying to make it stick. It hasn't, so far, but I'm not going to give her any more glue.

After the rinse, I squirt one drop of green dish soap onto the wet carton. Mom used it because of the commercials with the lady who says it's good for her hands.

Mom had nurse hands, dried out from being washed so many times every day. I can still feel their rough texture against my skin, if I close my eyes. The way her fingertips would catch in my hair as she brushed it off my forehead when she came in to turn out my light at night.

Sometimes we'd sit together at the kitchen table and soak our nails in little bowls of soapy green water, just like in the commercials.

Dad has not stopped buying Mom's soap. Using it to clean my milk cartons is a little like sharing my mom with these lost kids and that makes me feel a little bit like a hero. Like she was.

Mom was an army nurse during the Vietnam War. Before I

was born. She worked at the VA hospital, until she got sick, helping soldiers learn to walk again after they'd been injured.

When the carton squeaks under my fingers, it's clean enough. I'm careful not to soak the cardboard too much. It's a balance between sanitized and falling apart. I carefully pat it as dry as I can with a paper towel.

In my bedroom, inside the ballerina jewelry box that Aunt Louisa gave me when I turned six, there's a pair of scissors.

They're small and sharp, shaped like a golden bird with a long neck. Mom used them to snip threads when she sewed. I use them to carefully trim around the picture on the back of the milk carton.

When I push my finger and thumb into the holes to work the scissors, I imagine how often my mom's fingers were there. It's almost like we're holding hands. For a minute, I miss her a little less.

I collect a different picture most school days. That's important. There are no repeats. A boy. A girl. Brown hair, blond, red, black. One kid is bald. I think he might have cancer. Blue eyes, brown, hazel, green. White skin. Black. Brown. Freckled. Babies. Toddlers. Little kids. Kids my age. Teenagers. Some snapshots. A lot of school pictures.

Today's picture is a school portrait of a kid who is twelve, like me. A little alligator perches on the left side of his polo shirt and his wavy brown hair is long enough to brush the collar.

He looks like some of the boys in my class.

While I trim, I say his name exactly three times.

Christopher Thorpe.

—-1

—0

—+1

Christopher Thorpe.

Christopher Thorpe.

I wonder if his friends call him Chris.

Then I say his birthday. He's only two weeks older than I am.
He's probably finishing up sixth grade like I am.

And the place where he lives. *Cincinnati, Ohio.*

And the color of his hair and eyes. *Brown and brown.*

And his height and weight. *Five-four, 130 pounds.*

I don't memorize his stats. Not yet. But I will. Eventually, I will. For now, my ritual is over, and I exhale as I pull a shoebox from under my bed and add Christopher Thorpe to my collection, alphabetically.

He is number thirty-nine and goes between Allora Simmons and Lisa Turner. And I say out loud, "You are the last one."

I've said that to myself for the last eight school days, and also when I added Juanito Diaz from our quart of milk at home over the weekend. So far, it hasn't worked. Maybe today it will.

At least now I can pull out my notebook and start on math homework. I've been thinking about Christopher Thorpe since 12:38 p.m., when I chose him after turning over four cartons. It's been worse. There are days I spend long, horrible minutes, turning every carton until I reach the last one and I'm sure there isn't a kid in the case that I don't already have.

Making sure there isn't a new kid is the only way I can skip carrying a milk carton around in my backpack all day. So, either way, I've gone from perfectly normal to that kid with the milk cartons.

The night before last I was up past midnight staring at the

ceiling with my heart pounding. There was no new kid that day. At least not in the milk cooler. It occurred to me for the first time that someone else might have had a boy or girl on their milk carton that I didn't have in my collection.

What if I'd missed a new kid because I took too much time getting into the cafeteria?

Today, I'd hurried in as fast as I could, pushing my way to the front of the line. And now I'm afraid that the next time I don't find a new kid in the cooler, I'll have to go look at the cartons sitting on tables. Or dig through the trash.

So now I'm that kid who insists on being first in line, turns over all the milk cartons in the cooler, and then carries her garbage—or maybe yours—home with her.

Fantastic. Thanks a lot, brain. It's not like I needed any help in the not-normal department.

I've stood in the cafeteria turning over milk cartons until kids notice. Until the lunch lady says *Just take one, they're all the same*. Until the school counselor calls me out of fifth period to talk to me about grief and healing. Until my dad says something vague about therapy.

It's a relief for Christopher Thorpe to let go of my brain.



My dad's not big on rules. He never has been. That was always Mom's thing. But there's one he sticks to like glue. *No answering the phone during dinner.*

Even if dinner is just pizza, again.

Megan doesn't usually call during dinner, because she knows

—-1

—0

—+1

she'll get the answering machine. But tonight, we're eating late. Also, again.

Dad's a high school history teacher, and for my whole life, he was home by 4:30 every day. But lately it's been more like six or seven. Even eight, like tonight, with a pizza or some Kentucky Fried Chicken.

So when the phone rings at a quarter after eight, we're still sitting at the kitchen table with a Pizza Hut box between us. He's telling me a story about how a kid in his second-period American History class tried to get him to raise his grade.

"Offered to do anything for extra credit," Dad says as the phone rings a second time. He draws his fingertips over his cheekbones. "Crocodile tears and everything. If they were real, I almost feel sorry for him."

"Are you going to give him extra credit?"

Dad lifts his eyebrows. "Maybe I should have him come clean your room. It would be like an archeological dig."

The answering machine picks up the call, and I hear Megan's voice. "Hey, Tessa. Um . . . guess you're still eating. Want to come over after? Call me back."

I look up at Dad. He takes another bite of his pizza, then says, "Go on."

"Are you sure?" Part of me wants him to make me wait until we're done eating. He was in the middle of a story, and I want things to be the way they used to be. I want him to stick to his one rule.

"I have papers to grade," he says. When I walk past him with

my plate, he puts a hand on my arm to stop me. “Is your homework done?”

“Yeah.”

He nods and goes back to his pizza, and I see him slipping away to wherever it is he goes when he’s with me but not really with me. That’s been happening even more than usual the last few weeks. Since Mrs. Benson, the school counselor, called him about the milk cartons.

“She needs time,” he’d told Mrs. Benson. “Her mother just died. If some kids have to wait for a few minutes for their milk, I don’t think it’s the end of the world.”

Mrs. Benson must have said something about that not being the point, but before he hung up, Dad said, “The point is that Tessa needs time, and I don’t think it’s asking too much to give her that. If I think she needs to talk to someone, I’ll take care of that.”

I go out the kitchen door into our backyard and through the hole in the oleander bush that I always use to get to Megan’s house.

She must have heard me coming, because she opens her kitchen door before I can knock. “Denny’s still here.”

I smile. “We’re so going to cream him this time.”

It would be the first time, but she nods like it’s a no-brainer. “Come on.”

Our basement is full of dirt and spiders and the furnace. Megan’s was turned into a rec room before they moved in. The walls and floors have paint and carpet instead of concrete and exposed pipes.

—-1
—0
—+1

There's a little bar down there with a fridge that Megan's mom keeps full of Cokes. Megan opens it and gives me one, then takes one for herself.

Denny's standing at the foosball table with one of his dad's beers. He has dark-blond hair, like Megan. When he was in high school, he wore it short, but he's let the back grow out since he started college. He's trying to grow a beard, too, but it's not really working. Right now, he has a look on his face like he's been waiting hours for us to play him, two on one. "Ready to get your butts kicked?"

"Not this time," Megan says. "We're totally going to win."

We take our places. Megan and I on the left side of the table, Denny on the right. I'm in control of our defense, including the goalkeeper, and Megan takes the offense. We've been doing this a long time, and we don't have to talk about it.

I save, she scores, always.

Denny drops the ball, and the game starts. He can still beat us, even both of us together, but we're getting better. We've started to win sometimes.

And they're real wins, too. Denny never goes easy on us.

He slams the ball past my defense players. I grunt as I reach to block with my keeper. Not quite fast enough this time. The ball goes in.

"Not bad, Tesseract." Denny's nickname for me is an inside joke. He's the only person who can get away with calling his sister Meg, and he's Denny—short for Dennis, which is close enough to Dennys—like the brother and sister from *A Wrinkle in Time*. And he always calls me Tesseract. "You almost had it."

“I’ll get it next time.” I take the ball out of the pocket.

He swallows the rest of his beer and shoots the can at the Broncos trash bin by the bar. It goes in, all net.

“Aren’t we playing again?” I ask.

“Not tonight. I have a paper due Monday.”

“Only one game?” I look at Megan, expecting her to help me convince her brother to stay longer. “I just got here.”

Megan shakes her head, only she’s not looking at me. She’s looking at Denny. “It’s okay. We can play again later.”

“Plus, I’ve been here all afternoon,” Denny says to me. “You should have come over earlier.”

Right. A cold knot forms in the pit of my stomach. “It’s okay.”

“Cause that other girl—”

Megan still doesn’t look at me.

“Kind of sucks.”

“What other girl?” I try to sound casual. Like my heart isn’t beating hard. Like I don’t feel a little sick.

Denny looks at Megan, who closes her eyes. He says, “See you guys later.”

After he walks up the basement stairs, Megan finally looks at me. “Want to play again?”

“Sure.” I really want this to be no big deal. I don’t want it to mean that Megan lied to me about not being able to hang out after school. Or that she doesn’t want to be my friend anymore.

She pulls the ball out of the pocket and takes Denny’s side.

I get control after the drop. I use one of my midfielders to shoot it back to my defense, then nudge it toward the edge of the field before rocketing it down the line.

—-1
—0
—+1

We play without talking. Megan gets the first shot, and I take the next two points. We play to five and then stop, both of us breathing hard, leaning against the table.

“It was Hillary, okay?” she says. “I didn’t invite her. She just showed up.”

I wonder if she thinks it’s kinder to lie to me. I know that Hillary MacLean did not *just show up* at Megan’s house with a sudden urge to play foosball.

“I think she has a crush on Denny,” Megan says, when I don’t respond.

Lame.

“I had homework anyway.”

Even lamer.



By some unwritten, unspoken rule, after that day in the basement, Megan starts having Hillary over after school. They do their homework, she says. Hillary is in the gifted and talented program, just like Megan.

I’m just a regular seventh grader. Not gifted or talented.

I go over after dinner, and we hang out for a while until it’s time to go home to bed. Hillary and I never cross paths.

Dad seems distracted lately. That’s stewing in the back of my mind. Something’s going on, and I don’t know what it is.

Normally, I’d talk about it with Megan and try to figure it out. Instead, I just pretend everything is A-OK. Nothing to see here, folks.

-1—
0—
+1—



A few days later, after I cut out Darian Marshall, aka milk-carton kid number forty-four, I start on my non-gifted-and-talented homework and wonder if Hillary is over at Megan's.

So far, I've resisted the urge to hide in the oleander to see if she shows up. I've also had good luck finding new lost kids to add to my collection, and somehow those two things have mixed up in my head. Like, if I spy on Megan and Hillary, I'll jinx my milk-carton juju.

I push the idea of spying out of my head and just start working on my history homework instead.