

Author's Note: JJ's first story took place a few years ago, as schools were opening back up to students. I have taken creative liberties while writing this work of fiction. Possibly including mildly inaccurate information in regards to the availability of resources seemed to be the best choice to keep the story flowing. Without changing the entire time frame, of course, which would be even more confusing!
Thanks for understanding!

Chapter 1

"You should never view your challenges as a disadvantage. Instead, it's important for you to understand that your experience facing and overcoming adversity is actually one of your biggest advantages."

~ Michelle Obama

I yawned and closed the book. Squinting my eyes and looking in the direction of my nightstand, I was shocked to see it was after midnight. The house was still; the wind whistling outside my only companion.

Yes! I whispered to myself. Thanksgiving break was finally here! Mom always let me stay up and read as long as I wanted to on the first day of every break. I barely remembered her poking her head in when she headed to bed. Jasmine had been put to bed hours before that, giving me time to catch up with mom and dad and talk about our plans for the week.

Sanjay and I had lots to do next week. Biking for sure, Lego building, of course, Minecraft, movies, and at least one sleepover. I had my sister to contend with, and Sanjay's mom had a new baby in the house, and his Nanu. We'd have to strategize carefully, for maximum fun and merrymaking. That was my grandma's word for what we did, and I have to admit, it's a fun word to use in conversation.

Oh, and Thanksgiving dinner and all that family time. That was on the list, too.

Rolling over, I reached out and turned off my light. I had finished my book about Michelle Obama for my book report. Now I didn't have to worry about it over break. Mom hated it when I procrastinated over my homework and projects. This year was a different year, and I was doing my best to be a different JJ.

Shadows of the trees danced on my wall, the almost full moon lighting up my room, making it feel like morning was just around the corner. I flopped onto my back, closed my eyes, and snuggled deep under my blankets. Trying to fall asleep, my mind traveled through the memories of the past few months. My fourth grade teacher was awesome; kind, understanding, and hilarious in class. We all had a great time joking and learning at the same time. Sanjay, my BFF, was in my class again, along with Scott and Abhay. Even though we had to wear masks, and sanitize often, it was in person and way more fun than the remote year. That seemed like such a long time ago...

I didn't mind wearing my mask all of the time, even though the rules were relaxing every week. I watched the news; it wasn't safe to be maskless all of the time. Not yet, anyway. My mind wandered to the statistics. I couldn't remember them all, but people were still dying in hospitals or waiting for days in waiting rooms for treatment. COVID was still a thing, as much as people were trying to pretend it was going away. I knew better. And I was going to be safe. I'd make sure of it.

Flipping over, I bunched the pillow under my head better and focused on our big plans for the week. If I kept heading down the COVID rabbit hole, I would never get to sleep. Or I would toss and turn, sleeping restlessly.

I'd sleep too long tomorrow, wasting precious daylight hours, and be crabby. Jasmine would get on my nerves, and I would yell at her. Then I would get into trouble, possibly missing out on time with Sanjay. No bikes, no park, not Legos.

The events flowed through my mind quickly, kind of like Dr. Strange's fourteen million possible outcomes to Thanos's plan. Only one outcome would be in my favor; fall asleep quickly and be in a good mood when I woke up. Or else.

I rolled over again, staring at the dancing trees on my wall. I thought of it as an animated short, finding shapes and characters in the shadows. There didn't seem to be a pattern in the movements, but that was soothing in itself. I wasn't sure how long I watched, but finally my mind relaxed enough during the show and I drifted off.

Chapter 2

*“Do not anticipate trouble, or worry about what may never happen.
Keep in the sunlight.”
~ Benjamin Franklin*

“JJ, are you getting up today?” I could hear my mom’s voice from far, far away.

“Huh?” Oww. Just that word hurt to say. It came out as more of a croak. My face was hot; the sunlight felt like flames on my face. *What was going on?*

“Uh, oh. That doesn’t sound good.” Mom put the back of her hand on my forehead. “Yep, fever. Let me get the thermometer. Be right back.”

I tried opening my eyes, the sunlight burning into my retinas as soon as I got them open. I quickly squeezed them shut and moaned. Just a little, but the vibration of that moan burned my throat and reminded me something was really wrong.

I pried my eyes open once more, looking away from the sunlight. Assessing my body, I became aware of a few things. My throat burned, my face hurt all over, and I couldn’t breathe through my nose. I felt like I had tumbled down a hill, like the last time I tried snowboarding. Not good.

Mom came back quickly, masked up and holding the thermometer. She scanned my forehead and winced. “Oh, my. You have a fever. I’m going to need you to stay in your room for now. Mask up when you go to use the bathroom. Be right back.” She left as quickly as she came, pulling my door closed behind her.

This wasn’t good. I never had to wear my mask in the house with the family. I chose to when Sanjay came over, but my parents didn’t.

I checked the time and winced myself. It was after eleven in the morning. I couldn’t remember the last time I had slept that late. I guess I had stayed up too late reading.

I rolled over, every muscle protesting the movement. I finally got my feet on the floor and stood up. Dizziness enveloped me, and I sat back down hard. Completely out of breath, I let my body fall back onto the bed. What was going on?

Mom returned again, this time with a rapid COVID test in her hands, my dad following closely. She set it up on my dresser, and pulled out the swab. “It’s a good thing your school gives these out before break. Let’s see what we’re dealing with, hmm?”

She shoved a really long swab up my nose and swirled it around. No dignity there. Once she removed it, she shoved it up the other nostril. So gross.

“Did you do that long enough?” My dad held up the directions.

“I’m pretty sure I did. If not, the control won’t indicate. Let’s get this done.” She stuck the swab in a small bottle, and finally squeezed some snot drops into the testing thingy. “Thirty minutes and we’ll know. Hang in there, sweetie.”

Mom ruffled my hair, gathered the testing trash and left the room.

“Well, champ, we’re going to need you to wear a mask in the house, and stay away from your sister for the time being. We just need to be safe. OK?” Dad’s eyes were sympathetic and understanding, with a bit of fear thrown in.

I’m sure he couldn’t help it. I was scared, for sure. I had worked so hard for almost two years to be safe and not get sick. Not only was the timing pretty sucky, it probably wasn’t just a cold. I swallowed hard, my throat burning, my eyes watering.

“Can I go to the bathroom, please?” I croaked.

“Yep, here’s a clean mask. Wash your hands well, please.” Dad handed me a fresh mask and helped me stand up. The room spun, and I grabbed ahold of him for balance. I felt like I had just gotten off of a horrible, spinning carnival ride. The kind you don’t eat corn dogs or churros before riding, because then you’ll just barf. Yuck.

“Let’s get you to the bathroom together.” Dad helped me shuffle out of my room and down the hall to the restroom. “Can you do it yourself?”

“YES!” I thought I shouted, but my voice failed me. “I don’t need more help, thanks,” I finished politely. It wasn’t my dad’s fault I was sick.

“I’ll be right here if you need me. Take your time.”

I closed the door behind me and looked into the mirror. Yikes! No wonder my parents were worried. I looked like death warmed over. At least that’s how my mom would describe it. I pulled down my mask and splashed water on my face. It refreshed me, cooling me down quickly. Feeling slightly less like a nasty zombie, I finished my bathroom business. I washed my hands and face extra long, scrubbing vigorously with water hot enough to scald. Almost. It was really hot, though.

Knock, knock.

“Are you OK in there?” Dad called through the door, worry in his voice.

“Coming out now,” I whispered. That felt much better on my throat. I shuffled to the door, grasping the doorknob with a weak hand. Turning slowly, I pulled it open and realized my mask was still on my chin. Quickly pulling it up to cover my nose and mouth, I continued into the hallway.

I could hear my mom on the phone downstairs. “Yes, the test will be done in less than a half an hour. We’ll know then. I can test Jasmine, too, if you are more comfortable with that, before you come. I’ll call you back later this morning. Oh, it will probably be afternoon at that point.”

“Who’s mom talking to?” I kept moving toward my door, but the hall seemed to keep getting longer the more I shuffled. It was like something from a movie. A scary one.

“Auntie Aimee. We’re thinking of sending Jasmine to her for a few days. That way you can recover and we can hope to keep Jasmine from getting sick. Auntie has already had COVID, and gets tested before every shift, so it makes sense.”

His words settled in the pit of my stomach as I fell into bed. Both of my parents thought I had COVID, the virus that has killed so many, and put even more into the hospital. What was going to happen to me?

Chapter 3

"You're braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think."

~Christopher Robin

I awoke to my mom's hand on my forehead. I could only really see her eyes and her scrunched up forehead, but she looked concerned behind her mask..

"How are you feeling, sweetie?" She turned to pour some Tylenol. Handing me the small cup, her eyebrows raised with her question.

"OK, I guess," I croaked. "Do I have COVID?"

"You sure do. I called Sanjay's mom, but there's not much else we can do. Auntie Aimee came to pick up Jasmine a few minutes ago. She tested negative, so we'll hope she stays healthy. I'm just worried about you. This is not the ideal way to start your Thanksgiving break. I'm so sorry."

"I'm sorry, Mom, I don't know how I got it. I sanitize all of the time, and wear my mask all day at school. Except for at lunch, but I eat alone when I can. Sanjay even sits across the lunch table and down a bit. We barely talk." I sighed in resignation.

"Tylenol should help bring your fever down, and ease your sore throat. What else is bothering you?"

"My nose is stuffy and my chest feels tight. I felt great yesterday; I don't understand it. How did I get this?" After being so diligent the past few months at school, I couldn't wrap my head around this mess. This would probably be the worst break ever.

"No one really understands this virus, to be honest. I know you watch the news more than I'm comfortable with, but I am sure you've noticed the different angles presented in different newscasts. We're all floundering, and now it's my job to keep you safe. The best I can. I'm going to grab some tea, decongestants, and your inhaler. I know you haven't used it since you had bronchitis, but I'd feel better if your chest wasn't so tight. Be right back." She kissed her hand, touched my forehead, and dashed out. Probably going to sanitize. Could I blame her?

I lowered my mask and drank the Tylenol. It felt kinda OK sliding down my throat. My eyes still burned, even though the sun was too high to shine right in my eyes anymore. I tried to take a deep breath, but that hurt, too. Sighing loudly, I looked out the window. Blue skies seemed to tease me, the sunlight winking at me. The singing birds were saying, "Ha, ha, you're stuck inside. We're free out here!"

Rolling over, I turned my back on the taunting sky, the winking sun, and the teasing birds. I snuggled deeper under the covers, just closing my eyes when I heard my mom come back. Sighing, I sat up once again.

"Swallow these with the tea. Then I want you to hop in the shower, as hot as you can tolerate. I want to try to loosen your congestion better than with just these." She

gestured to me with two ginormous pills between her fingers. Even on a good day they would be hard to swallow. With my aching throat? That was sheer torture.

Taking one in my mouth at a time, and with a big swallow of mostly hot tea, I finally got them down. It helped a little that the tea dissolved them a bit, but that just filled my mouth with bitterness. Could this day get worse? I was afraid to voice that thought.

Taking a huge swallow of my cherry tea, I swished it around my mouth to wash the cruddy taste away. I handed my mug to Mom and hopped out of bed. The sooner I showered, the sooner I could find something to do. If I felt like it.

Mom helped me to the bathroom, even though I was a little less dizzy after my power nap.

“Holler if you need anything. Dad is up here, so he should hear you. I’m going to make some oatmeal. That should slide right down. If you’re hungry later, I’ll have pudding for you. I’ll leave a bottle of Gatorade on your nightstand. Auntie Aimee brought some earlier. Keep drinking, so you don’t get dehydrated. I left your inhaler on the bathroom counter. You remember how to use it?”

“Yeah. I’ll be fine. Thanks, Mom.” I closed the door gently on her worried face. Guilt filled my gut. What if I gave it to my family? What if someone ended up in the hospital? It would be all my fault. That’s a lot of guilt for one small, sick child.

I turned the shower on, and while it heated, I brushed my teeth. I didn’t like wasting water, but I needed the water to be really hot. As much as I needed to rinse the yucky taste out of my mouth.



□

Did you know this is called a dinkus?

Sighing loudly, I tossed my book aside. I wanted to do something, anything, and reading had seemed like a good idea. My eyes thought differently, though. They still burned, and my forehead ached.

I fluffed my pillows and sat up a little. The hot shower and medicine helped me feel a little better. Mom had come back a few times to bring me more Tylenol, pudding, and more Gatorade than I had ever drank before. It didn’t seem like she was worried about the sugar and chemicals like she usually was. This meant my situation was probably more serious than my parents let on. Dire. *What was going to happen to me?* I wondered, not for the first time since waking up. If only I could see into the future.

Chapter 4

"Don't be a red sock in the load of white laundry."

~Lisa Freels

Three days later, I was climbing the walls. Actually, that would have been a lot more fun. Instead, I got to lay in bed, watch Disney+ on my iPad, play Minecraft with Sanjay, and read. Normally, these would be excellent ways to spend a break, as long as bike riding and *seeing* people were in the mix. People other than my mom and dad.

I even missed Jasmine. She was now at our other aunt's house, since Auntie Aimee had a shift. She's a firefighter, and sleeps at the firehouse when she's on shift. So my mom's other sister, Auntie TJ, was watching the beast. The tornado. The hurricane of children. Stitch. I could go on for days, I had that many nicknames for Jasmine. None that I would say out loud, though. They'd get me into trouble, for sure. Even if my parents agreed with me, which I was sure they did! They just couldn't admit it. Probably some sort of parenting code.

"Good morning, Sweetie. How are you today? You look pretty good." Mom breezed into my room that Tuesday morning just like she had been for days.

"I'm fine. I'm just bored. Sanjay left with his family to Grandma Nisha's this morning. All the time we could have spent doing *something* is gone. And our family won't be coming here for Thanksgiving like they had planned. Nothing is working out like I expected. Like I hoped." I have to admit, I was near tears. We only got one Thanksgiving break a year, and mine was being wasted. I wished I could have gone to visit Nanu's sister, Grandma Nisha, this year. Or gone anywhere, besides the bathroom.

"I'm sorry you feel that way. There's nothing much we can do about our situation; just make the best of it. Be glad the meds are working and you're not worse. I'd rather you be crabby than too sick to complain, to be honest. But remember, complaining isn't going to change anything. It will just make you feel worse, mentally. What can I do to help?" Mom perched on the end of my bed; not really sitting, but more than leaning. She still didn't want to get too close. I didn't blame her.

"Nothing, really. You're doing a great job taking care of me," I praised her. She really was trying.

"Well, let me know if you need anything. Your dad was going to the bookstore after work to grab something new for you to read. That's something to look forward to. Or you could write your own story. I have a notebook if you would like to write for a change."

"Sure." My enthusiasm was lackluster at best.

Mom didn't even blink at my bland response. She smiled, probably, blew me a kiss I could hear, but not see, through her mask, and stood up. "Be right back."

I got out of bed, left the prison of my room, and headed to the bathroom. That was the only other place in the house that my parents would let me hang out in. I

needed to keep everyone else in the house safe. Not that I just hung out in the bathroom. Gross.

I showered and put clean clothes on. That really did help me feel better. So did brushing my teeth. The medicine they gave me made my tongue taste weird, but the minty flavor helped. I found myself brushing my teeth way more than I normally did. My dentist would be proud. Maybe I just liked leaving my room, too.

Once I was done, I sat on my bedroom floor to look through my books. There were a few series I was interested in, and I wanted to see which had a new book coming out. Then I could call my dad and put my order in. I appreciated that he was going to the store personally; ordering online would take longer. Eventually I'd be sprung from my room. I'd get to see sunshine in person, take a bike ride, and see my friends at the park. Someday...

Chapter 5

"You can make anything by writing."

~ C.S. Lewis

I sat at my desk, happy to be out of bed for a while. Sitting in a chair was more fun than being propped up by pillows. I was feeling better, but still confined until I tested negative. Mom was going to test me tomorrow. My fingers were crossed in my mind, permanently.

What to write? I wasn't sure what the class was going to do with the nonfiction books we were assigned. I had finished mine days ago, but couldn't move forward with that. Maybe a graphic novel? I could write OK, but couldn't draw more than stick figures.

The story of my life? We were studying biographies in class, but I wasn't sure my autobiography was worthy of my notebook.

I loved reading fantasy books. Maybe I could make up a fun story to share with my friends. I tapped the pencil eraser on my lips as I thought, then realized how gross that was. I threw the pencil away and got another from my desk drawer. No cooties allowed.

We had written suspense stories last month. Mine was OK. I could have done better, probably. Maybe I could work on that? Or start a new one... My mind couldn't focus. Probably because of COVID. Or the medicine. My head felt fuzzy. Maybe it was time for some tea and a snack.

I walked to my door and called out. "Mom, can I get some tea and some..."

Before I could finish my request, there she was. She walked in with a steaming mug of tea and some crackers with cheese. Just what I needed; a break before I really got going.

"How's the writing?" She gestured with her chin toward my notebook.

"It's harder to get started than I thought. I don't know what to write about."

"Well, I've found that just jumping in with a speck of an idea is better than worrying if your idea is a good one. You can take a tiny idea and go in any direction you want to. If you don't like it, try again. Go back, read your story, and decide when you started to not like it. And go a different way. If you can't find a different way, start again. This is a great chance to try something new. No consequences, no grades. No one even has to read it if you decide you don't want to share it. Though I hope you will. Share, that is."

As she spoke, she put my snack on my desk and pulled out the thermometer from her back pocket. Running it across my forehead, she nodded to herself and put it back.

"No more fever; it's been gone for a few days. I think tomorrow's test is looking more positive." She really was so punny. "Can I get you anything else? Spaghetti for dinner; please don't eat in bed." At least she was joking with me again. She didn't joke much when she was worried.

“How about some pudding in a bit?” I gave her my wide eyed stare. She couldn't resist that, even when I wasn't sick with some sort of flu.

“How about pudding after dinner? And an apple or banana later?”

“Hrmph,” I expelled. “Sure. Thanks for the snack. Love you.”

“Love you, too, sweetie. Holler if you need anything. I've been getting a lot of work done with Jasmine staying at your aunt's. I feel a little guilty, but I'll get over it.”

“How is she?” I was still worried I had given my baby sister the crud.

“She's great. Enjoying the time with your aunts. She thinks she scored a great vacation. I'm afraid of how spoiled she'll be when she comes back home.”

“I'm sorry. I didn't mean to catch COVID.”

“I know you didn't. All we can do is keep you as healthy as possible, and hope no one else in your family gets it. I'm just glad Sanjay was negative. This won't be the ideal Thanksgiving, but we'll manage. We have lots more to look forward to. Promise.” She kissed her fingers and touched my forehead. Our new “thing”. *Sigh...*

Chapter 6

"Words are our most inexhaustible source of magic."

~ J. K. Rowling

With dinner some time away, I had nothing to do but write. My eyes weren't in the mood for more screen time. But I would never tell my mom that!

I started to tap my pencil on my lower lip again, but caught myself in time. I sighed, put the pencil to paper, and wrote 'Once upon a time...' Well, I started. That was something.

Shifting in my seat, I reached for my tea. Blowing on it before I took my first sip, I thought about the story I had written for class. It was only a few paragraphs long, but maybe I could make it better. Add more details, and some dialogue. We learned how to do it in class, and though it took a while to perfect, I'm pretty sure I knew what I was doing.

I took a quick sip of my tea, shoved a cracker with cheese in my mouth, and looked around for my backpack. I had been so excited on Friday, I hadn't taken my returned schoolwork out to show my parents. They probably didn't want to touch it now. I wasn't sure how that worked. Did COVID live on paper? If so, for how long? Should I spray them with Lysol? Maybe I could seal them in a plastic bag to kill the germs. Did COVID need oxygen to live? I decided to find out later, when I had some time to research online.

Rifling through the papers, I finally found what I was looking for. I smoothed out the wrinkles and laid it on my desk. Well, I didn't need the 'Once upon a time' part. I would use the same beginning, and add details. I began to write, scribbling hastily before the ideas fell out of my head.

It was a dark and stormy night... No, that isn't right. It was a bright and sunny morning. No. Not spooky at all. Hmmm...

I woke up to the sound of rain tapping on my window. It seemed like it was still night, even though my alarm clock showed 7 AM. I stretched in bed, kicking Daisy to the floor. She yelped in irritation, then hopped back onto the bed, purring loudly. Sheesh.

I started my morning routine, just like every other school day. Teeth brushed, face washed, dressed for the day, I headed downstairs. Two cats and a baby sister raced me down the stairs. I was lucky I survived the trip.

The smell of maple sugar oatmeal wafted around me like a cloud of happiness. It sounded as if a hundred cats and dogs were chasing each other above me as I sat down for breakfast. I guess that's what they mean by "raining cats and dogs". I dug into my oatmeal while my mom fed my sister.

"I talked to Sanjay's mom. I will take you to school and she will pick you up. No biking in the rain today."

“OK,” I responded with my mouth full. I swallowed, and downed my glass of milk, totally ignoring the look she gave me. Talking with food in my mouth was something my mom did not like at all.

A thought struck me as I took my dishes to the sink. Rainy day recess. Stuck inside all day long. Ewww. It was going to be a long day.

** * **

This is a more common dinkus.

The ride to school was mostly uneventful, even though my mom hated driving in the rain. Sanjay and I chatted quietly in the backseat while we rode. We didn't want to stress her out more than she already was. We pulled into the parking lot, and I saw blue skies looming behind Playa Vista. I thought that maybe it could turn into a good day...

“Good morning!” called Mrs. P. from the curb. She waved as we exited the car. She was always so cheerful, you just had to smile.

“Good morning, Mrs. P,” Sanjay and I echoed as we trudged to our classroom. Trying to walk between the raindrops was impossible, so we were pretty soaked by the time we got there.

As we entered the classroom dripping wet, a strange feeling came over me. I shuddered and looked around, trying to pinpoint the origin of the strange feeling. Had I forgotten something? I remembered putting my lunch and homework in my backpack. Nothing seemed out of place, even though I looked pretty thoroughly around the classroom. The feeling wouldn't leave me, as much as I tried to shake it off.

I walked to my desk, putting my books inside, and laying my homework on top so it could be checked in. As I headed to the door to hang my backpack outside, I glanced uneasily around the classroom again. This time I noticed an extra desk. Odd. Why didn't I notice this before? I wondered if we were getting a new student.

Quiet chatter filled the classroom as tonight's homework was written in planners and last night's checked in. The chaos of the morning settled down as we got to work correcting our math homework in our table groups. No new student joined us, though.

I stretched after I finished writing the last word. I liked the dialogue I had added, and some of our spelling words I used. Feeling very satisfied at my suspense narrative upgrade, I finished my now cold tea, ate the remaining cracker, and crawled back into bed. Daisy hopped up and cuddled close. I wondered if my mom knew she had snuck into my room.

*My head hurt a little, and my muscles ached. It was probably time for more medicine, since my nose was stuffy again. After sitting at my desk so long, I felt tired and weak, like I had run a marathon instead of crafting a story. *Stupid COVID*, I thought, as I drifted off to sleep.*

Chapter 7

"Believe you can and you're halfway there."

~Theodore Roosevelt

I woke up feeling much better than when I had drifted off last night. Hungry, because I missed dinner, but less stuffy and achy. I stretched and mentally checked how my body felt. My head didn't hurt, my shoulders felt less tight, and my neck held my head up without a problem. Much better than the day before.

I actually hopped out of bed, feeling almost like myself. I put on my mask, grabbed clean clothes, and left my room. The house was silent. Was I up before my parents? I walked quietly to the bathroom. Not tiptoeing, but almost. I decided to hop in the shower and start the day off right. Turning the hot water on, I brushed my teeth as it heated up. I could probably have brushed longer, but that would have wasted water. I didn't want to do that, of course.

Once I was clean from head to toe, I turned off the water. Feeling so much better, I began to towel off. As I rubbed my head vigorously so my hair didn't drip down my neck, I heard a knock at the door.

"Hey, Champ. How are you feeling?" My dad's voice traveled through the closed door, surprise lacing his words. It wasn't often that I was up before them, especially not in the past few days.

"I feel a lot better. Maybe I'm negative now? And we can have Thanksgiving with everyone?" I asked hopefully.

"Well, even if you're negative, we want to give it some more time. We need to clean the entire house, air it out, and sanitize. I think it's best that we just keep it to the three of us this year. If you are negative, we can do everything we need to, and Jasmine can come home tomorrow. She's been asking for you, and Aunie Aimee wants to see you. She picked your sister up from Auntie TJ's yesterday when she got off shift."

Disappointment filled me like a gutter full of rain. I really wanted to have a normal holiday. I guessed that wasn't going to happen, though.

"I'll be out in a minute. Thanks, Dad." I finished drying off and put on a clean tee shirt and sweatpants. No more pajamas during the day, I decided.

I put on a clean mask and left the bathroom. No more shuffling, either. My muscles were only a little achy, but I still felt a million times better than before.

I entered my bedroom and saw my mom putting tea and cereal on my desk. Lucky Charms! My favorite! I was so happy to *not* see another bowl of oatmeal for breakfast.

"Your dad says you're feeling better. True?"

She probably thought I was making it up so we could have a normal Thanksgiving.

“I do feel better. My nose isn’t stuffy, my head doesn’t hurt, and my body isn’t as achy. I don’t feel perfect, but I am much better. Can you please test me?” I widened my eyes and stuck my lower lip out just a bit. My mom melted at my big eyes.

She smiled and pulled out a box from her back pocket. “Of course. Don’t get your hopes up, though. Before or after you eat?”

Since it took half an hour to get the results, I chose the ‘before’ option. Now, having a long Q-tip shoved up your nose is not my favorite way to spend any amount of time. But if it would get me out of my room any sooner, I would do it every day until I was COVID-free.

Finishing up, she put the plastic test strip on my bookshelf and gathered the trash. “Need anything else?”

“I’m good,” I mumbled, my mouth full of cereal. Swallowing quickly, I managed to say, “Thanks,” before she turned to go.

Rolling her eyes at my terrible manners, she held her watch up. “I’ll be back in thirty minutes. Let me know if you need anything before that.”

“I will. I’m going to work on my story for a little bit today. I’m tired of screens, believe it or not.” That hurt to admit.

“Have fun, then. I’m sure Dad will be up to check on you soon, too.”

Once she was gone, I quickly finished my cereal. Blowing on my tea, I grabbed my notebook and pencil. I tapped the eraser on my desk. I think I was developing a much better habit than putting my pencil anywhere near my mouth.

I looked at what I had written last night, and took a bit of time deciding how to proceed. Finally it came to me.

Thirty-one sweaty kids trudged back to the classroom after PE in the MPR. We were kinda ready to start math.

Groans, sighs and the sounds of gulping water filled the room as we entered and sat at our tables. I looked around and I noticed Anish was not in his seat. He hadn’t been absent today. Maybe he got hurt during PE and was in the office. I had talked to him before we went out for PE. Mrs. P didn’t seem to notice right away as the math lesson got underway. When it was his turn to explain his solution to a math problem, though, she did notice.

Taking a moment to call the office, Mrs. P asked if Anish was there. Nope. She looked very confused, and began to talk to herself. Maybe he wasn’t at school that day? She let them know Anish was absent and she had overlooked it when she took attendance.

I was pretty sure I had not only talked to him, but seen him outside, too. The mind can be tricky, so maybe I was remembering recess yesterday. Mrs. P continued with the math lesson, stopping every once in a while, lost in thought. She looked as confused as I felt.

After math, we began writing. We were supposed to edit with our writing groups, either in the room or at the tables outside. Alexa and Eisha walked out right in front of

me, heading for one of the tables. It wasn't raining anymore, but the tables still looked wet. Sanjay and I chose to sit on the ground near our backpacks and use our clipboards.

Ten minutes later we went back into the classroom, ready to make the suggested changes to our writing. I saw Alexa at her desk, but not Eisha. Since she could have been anywhere, it was only a passing thought. I put my head down and began fixing my story.

Stretching, I realized more than thirty minutes had passed. I looked at my bookshelf, but the COVID test was gone. I hadn't even noticed Mom or Dad coming in. I stood up slowly; I felt like I had been sitting for a long time. Walking toward the door, I looked at my clock. Over an hour had passed. Wow!

Chapter 8

"It always seems impossible until it's done."

~ Nelson Mandela

"Mom, did you take the testing thingy?" I called out of my bedroom door.

The house was strangely quiet. It was Thanksgiving, and it should have been filled with family. At least my sister should have been tearing something apart, or shouting as she played. This was not the holiday I had been looking forward to.

My mom appeared in the hallway, coming out of her bedroom with an empty laundry basket. Nothing says Thanksgiving like putting clean laundry away.

"You're still positive. I'm sorry." She walked toward my room. "It wouldn't have changed anything if it had been negative, though. I think another day or two and you'll be negative, since you're feeling more like yourself. You never even heard your dad go in and check the test. You were really involved in your story. What's it about?" Mom leaned on the door jamb and put her basket down.

"I started it at school, but kinda ended it before I wanted to. We needed to edit it with partners, then type it up, before we turned it in. It's about some kids in my class disappearing. We had to ask our friends if we could use their names in our stories, but most said it was OK. It's been more fun than I thought to keep working on it and making it better. Maybe I want to be a writer instead of a professional snowboarder."

My mom's eyebrows jumped high on her forehead. I had only been snowboarding a few times, and fell down the hill more than I actually shredded.

"Just kidding. Anyway, I don't want to tell you how it ends so you can be surprised when you read it."

"Gotcha. Dad is putting the turkey in and I'm making mashed potatoes and green beans. Anything else you want today?"

"I want Jasmine to come home. And for our family to be together. But I know that's not happening today. I'll settle for pie and vanilla ice cream, I guess." I shrugged. Nothing about this break was on my list of hopes and dreams.

"I have apple and pumpkin pie, whipped cream, and your dad picked up ice cream yesterday. I have a surprise for you in about an hour. Think you can occupy yourself until then?"

I sighed. "Yep. Me and my pencil will be at my desk, maybe with some snacks? I smell something yummy, and it's not the turkey."

"My pencil and I," mom corrected automatically. "And yes to the snacks. I'll bring a plate up." She kissed her fingers and placed them on my forehead. My *cool* forehead.

I turned and walked back to my desk. My pencil was indeed waiting for me to resume my story. I guess I needed something to do for an hour, and writing seemed to be the best choice.

I reread the last bit I had written, and jumped right in. My pencil was scratching frantically in my notebook, so I didn't lose my ideas.

Thankfully the playground had dried a little so it wasn't slippery and dangerous, so recess was outside. Almost thirty one students walked quickly through the classroom door, eager to eat our snacks and hang out with our friends. Once I got to the playground, I ran to the basketball courts to meet my friends.

We gathered in a group and formed teams. I noticed Aamir and Aarav weren't there. I shrugged it off, thinking they were eating their snacks at the tables. I jumped and dribbled and ran, having a better recess than I thought I would.

When the whistle blew, we all lined up. It seemed my line was a lot shorter than normal when Mrs. P came to pick us up. Did she even notice? Maybe my classmates were picking up stray balls in the grass.

Sanjay and I chatted as we walked to our classroom. Once inside, we got our reading books and notebooks out. We were reading in our book club groups, and it wasn't our turn to meet with Mrs. P. That meant we could work outside if we wanted.

I grabbed my pile, made eye contact with Cameron, and we walked outside. Strangely, we were the only two in our group outside. But the rest of our group wasn't inside, either. Where were Emma, Sophia, and Clover? Were they meeting somewhere else?

I walked back into the class, scanning the groups for my classmates. I didn't see them, and Mrs. P was already working with her group. I decided to not interrupt her, turned around, and went back outside. Cameron and I finished our reading quickly, taking turns reading entire pages instead of paragraphs. We high-fived and went back into the classroom. Since it was still reading time, I had time to start my reading homework.

It was really quiet in the class, which was weird. Groups were supposed to be reading or talking about their reading, and it was never this quiet. I looked around, noticing so many empty seats. I hadn't seen too many people outside working, so it was really strange.

"What was going on?" I wondered out loud.

"Did you say something?" Anna asked.

"I was just wondering where everyone is. Our class seems empty," I responded.

"Maybe they're in band class? Is there something special for the concert?"

Anna's suggestion seemed reasonable. If Mrs. P wasn't worried, I wouldn't be, either.

"Yeah, that makes sense. Well, I guess I'm going to work on my reading until lunch."

Anna turned away and began her own work.

I put my pencil down and stretched. Peering at the clock, I realized almost an entire hour had passed. I picked at the cold snacks left on my plate, anxiously waiting for my surprise.

Chapter 9

"Friends are family you choose yourself."

I was sitting at my desk, chin resting in my hand, just waiting. Staring out the window. Wondering when I'd be able to leave my room and spread my wings and fly, like the birds I was watching.

Not really, though. I knew I couldn't really fly. One jump off of the fence with homemade wings safety-pinned to my sweatshirt proved that undisputedly. Good thing for soft grass and the sleeping bags Sanjay and I had spread out.

I jolted when I heard a quiet knock on my door jamb. I turned around quickly and watched my mom come into my room.

"How are you doing, sweetie?" She absentmindedly felt my forehead with the back of her hand. I hadn't had a fever in a while, but I guess she needed to check.

"I'm bored and tired of being stuck in my room. I miss Jasmine, miss riding my bike, miss watching TV with you and Dad." The words just flowed from my lips, then I let out a big sigh. "Sorry. I wasn't expecting that. It's not your fault."

"I know. And I'm sorry. Just a bit longer, I promise. Now, are you ready for your surprise?" She reached for my iPad, making sure it was plugged in.

"Yes!" I was instantly excited, mostly for a change in my routine.

I watched my mom open the Google Meet app on my iPad, and suddenly Sanjay's face filled the screen. He was smiling widely, and I felt tears well up. It seemed like I hadn't seen him in years, even though it was only days. Not even a week, really.

"Hey, man, how are you feeling? It's great to actually see you, not just chat online." Sanjay swept the hair out of his eyes and waited for me to respond.

"I..." I choked out, then had to clear my throat. "I'm good. Just bored. I can't believe I got COVID, during break even. It's really unfortunate." Actually, I didn't use the word *unfortunate*, but a different word my mom would not be happy to hear. Thank goodness she had closed the door when she left.

"What have you been doing? How's Astrina and the rest of your family? Is Priya driving you nuts?" I had so much more to ask, but ran out of breath before I could get the words out.

"It was a long drive, and my sisters made it seem longer. Astrina slept and pooped, ate and cried. It really did take longer than it usually does. And Priya wouldn't stop talking. About herself, of course. I pretended to sleep, then I really fell asleep. That made the drive a lot better." Sanjay almost always saw the bright side of things. I tried, but it didn't always work.

"How are you feeling? I'm sure I got COVID from someone at school." I really didn't want Sanjay's baby sister to get sick.

"I'm good. My mom tested me after your mom called her, and again before we left for Grandma Nisha's. Still negative."

I was so relieved, I couldn't hold my smile back. "That's great news. It would have ruined your family trip, for sure. When are you coming back?"

"Saturday, sometime. Do you think you'll be better by Sunday? I don't know what time we'll leave here, and it could take a long time. Again."

"I feel fine; I just keep testing positive. Mom says we can try again tomorrow, then I can at least leave my room for somewhere other than the bathroom. None of the family is coming over today, so that's cruddy. Believe it or not, I miss Jasmine a lot. She keeps us all busy. She's been negative this whole time, so we are all pretty lucky. Tell me more about your trip."

Almost an hour passed as Sanjay and I caught up. We laughed and I shared part of my story with him. He was impressed I was actually doing something academic during break. I told him it didn't feel like school because I was doing it for myself, not my teacher.

Finally, I saw Priya come up behind Sanjay.

"Time's up, kid. Mom wants you in the kitchen. Hi, JJ." Priya drove Sanjay nuts, but was a little nicer to me. Mostly.

"Hi Priya. Happy Thanksgiving. I guess you gotta go, Sanjay. It was great seeing you. I'm hoping we can do something on Sunday." I mentally crossed my fingers.

"Bye, JJ. I'm glad you're feeling better. See you Sunday!" One smile later, the screen was blank.

That was probably the highlight of my break, I thought. I sighed, closed the iPad cover, stood up and stretched. The smell of turkey wafted upstairs. Something to look forward to later. Turkey and pie!

Grabbing my notebook, I got busy, hoping the time til dinner would pass quickly.



Finally it was lunch time. It was a smaller class walking to the lunchroom. I'm not sure Mrs. P even noticed. We were still a rowdy bunch, not walking, not being very quiet. She pulled a few classmates aside, and instructed the rest of us to keep walking to the lunchroom.

When we got there, I realized I had forgotten my lunch. I walked quickly back to grab my lunch bag from my backpack. Strangely, the door was open when I got there. Mrs. P always closed and locked the door when we left.

I took a quick peek inside. The room was dark and almost quiet. It should have been quieter than it was. I could hear the faint calling of voices, so I flicked on the lightswitch.

"Help, help, help!" The voices sounded vaguely familiar, but so far away. Were kids outside messing around? I hadn't passed anyone. Maybe someone was in a classroom next door, playing a prank. I took a peek into both classrooms, and found

them both to be empty. I walked back into my class, passing the extra desk. As I did, the voices seemed to get louder. Now that was really creepy.

A shiver traveled down my spine as I leaned in closer to the desk. Yes, the voices seemed to get even louder.

Dare I open the desk? It should be empty, but a feeling of foreboding settled in the pit of my stomach.

Why was I so nervous?

I hesitated a little bit longer, then reached for the desktop. My hand shook as I touched the underside of the lid, slowly lifting the desk open. The voices got louder as the opening got wider. Creeaak..... I jumped, completely startled, probably screaming a little, too.

The opening of the desk was wide enough for me to bend over and peek into. I couldn't see the bottom of the desk. In the swirling depths I could see the tops of a few of my classmates' heads, their hands waving in the air. How had they gotten inside the desk? I was afraid of falling in if I got too close.

"Are you all OK?" I called out to the group.

Faint cries called back. "We're OK. Help us up. How did this happen?"

"Hang on! Let me see what I can do." I looked frantically around the classroom. What could I use to pull them out?

"Hey, what if we tie our jackets and sweatshirts together?" Anish has the best ideas.

"Ok, how do you get the end to me?" I wondered out loud. Why couldn't I think? "Wait! Let me grab some yarn." Luckily we had been working on yarn art a few days ago. The basket was still on the counter for the kids who hadn't finished theirs.

I grabbed a skein of yarn. I had looked up "skein" after Mrs. P used the word during the art lesson. It meant a wad of yarn, but also what a flock of flying geese was called. Strange.

I held one end of the skein, and tossed the rest into the swirling desk pit. I could see the others tying their sleeves together. Anish caught the yarn, and tied one end to his sleeve. I pulled the yarn up until I caught his jacket.

"Hold on!" I started to pull Anish up, trying to stay away from the edge of the opening. It was hard work, but we managed to get him out of the desk. With his help, we managed to pull out Eisha and Emma. Clover, Sophia, Aamir and Aarav were next. We all collapsed on the floor, as far away from the desk as we could get.

I was exhausted from saving my classmates. They were near tears from the experience of being sucked into what they thought was an empty desk.

"What happened?" I gasped, when I had enough air in my lungs.

Anish answered first. "I have no idea. I was walking past it to sharpen my pencil. I passed the desk, and it opened by itself. I looked in, and before I knew it, I was inside. I couldn't jump high enough to get..."

Eisha jumped in. "I thought I heard something when I was grabbing a book. I went over to the desk and opened it. I felt a huge blast of air, and I was next to Anish."

Anish cut in. "I tried to stand on Eisha's shoulders, but we weren't high enough. We could hear everything, but couldn't do anything about it."

"Anish started to cry and..."

"I did not! You did!"

"See what I had to deal with?" Clover asked. I gave her a quick pat on her shoulder.

"I still don't understand how this all happened, and I could see that it did. Are you all OK, really?" Really, how did this happen?

"Yeah, we're kinda hungry, though," Aarav sighed.

"OK, let's get to the lunchroom. We need to decide what we tell Mrs. P."

We left the room, each of us looking uneasily at the creepy desk as we passed it.

Chapter 10

"Do what you can with what you have, where you are."

~ Theodore Roosevelt

I was feeling pretty hungry when my mom brought a plate up for me. Shockingly, my dad followed her with two more plates. I looked at her questioningly.

"We can't let you eat alone on Thanksgiving. It's not right. Your dad and I will be right here." Mom answered my silent question as she slid down the wall, sitting across from my room in the hallway. Dad handed her the two plates and did the same.

So there we were, me in my desk chair and my parents sitting on the floor. Now that wasn't right. I carried my plate to the doorway and sat down. It wasn't the Thanksgiving dinner I had hoped for, but I was incredibly grateful to have such great parents. They didn't ask for me to get COVID, but made the best of a crummy situation. I even told them that.

"Son, we know it hasn't been the best break you've ever had. Not by a longshot. But you have been a trooper, spending all of that time alone in your room. I have a feeling you will be better soon. And hopefully you can get together with Sanjay before you have to go back to school." I guess my dad heard a part of my conversation today.

"Thanks. I'm just sorry all of our family plans didn't work out. I was looking forward to playing Clue with Auntie Aimee and cards with everyone else. Except Jasmine, of course," I joked.

"There will be other family get-togethers and holidays. This is just one in a long line of them. Let's keep making the best of it, shall we?" Mom smiled and took a bite of her potatoes.

I nodded and took a big bite myself. We may not have had a houseful of family, but the three of us were together. That was something to be thankful for. And no one else had gotten sick, which was a big blessing, too.

We finished our meal, mom going back for seconds for all of us, and dad going back for thirds. I was happy to actually eat with my parents, and be able to share what I had been writing. Mom and dad shared what the rest of the family was doing, and what they were doing at work. It was truly a great meal, all of us essentially picnicking on the floor, laughing and eating.

Eventually our meal ended, and they both left to tidy up the kitchen. That was a bright side; I wasn't invited to help clean. I read a little, then was drawn back to my notebook. Who knew I would be compelled to finish my story without my teacher asking me to?

We walked into the lunch room quickly. Luckily there was still a line to buy lunch, so no one really noticed us. I quickly sat down next to Cameron and opened my lunch bag. He looked at me inquisitively but didn't say anything. I smiled and nodded,

indicating I would tell him the story later. Once we finished lunch and were on the playground, a group of us gathered near the tetherball courts. No one had put the balls up, so the place was empty of other students.

“Well?” Anish asked. “What are we going to do? Are we going to tell Mrs. P?”

“Tell her what?” Cameron asked.

We quickly filled him in on the creepy desk situation. He looked at us like we were crazy.

“Seriously?” The disbelief on his face was all we needed.

“Seriously, but I don’t think we can tell Mrs. P. She wouldn’t believe us in a million years,” Clover pointed out.

“Agreed,” Anish chimed in.

Eisha and the others nodded. We were all in agreement that this would stay between us.

“We just need to stay away from the new desk, and keep everyone else away, too,” Aarav advised.

We all nodded again and split up to enjoy the rest of our recess. Cameron and I headed to Sanjay and a group playing kickball.

“Did that really happen? How?” Cameron wanted to believe us, but I could tell he wasn’t there yet.

“Yep. You’ll see the new desk when we go to the class. I think they all left their jackets tied together on the floor. The yarn is still tied to the end. You’ll see.”

Cameron just sighed and pointed to our friends. “Let’s play before the whistle blows.”

Since I agreed, I started running toward the group, ready to forget the incident altogether.

** * **

We walked sorta quietly back to class after recess ended. The “desk survivors” and their rescuer, me, kept making eye contact as we walked, but remained silent. We entered the class in what was mostly a line, sanitizing and heading to our desks.

I saw the pile of jackets at the back of the class, and gestured to it with my head. Anish grabbed it and carried it back outside, trailing yarn behind him. I could see Cameron watching, his eyebrows high on his forehead.

What I didn’t see was the extra desk. I looked around once we were all seated, and there wasn’t an empty desk in the room. What???

I could tell the others were just as surprised when they noticed. If I hadn’t seen the pile of jackets and yarn, I would have really been worried. We kept looking at each other silently until Mrs. P asked us to get out our social studies books.

I took out my book and left to get a drink of water. Outside the class I grabbed my water bottle from my backpack and unscrewed the cap. As I began to drink, my eyes

wandered to Mrs. C's door across from us. The custodian was bringing a new desk into her class. She was standing outside the door, asking if she was getting a new student.

I quickly put my water bottle cap back on and ran into my classroom. I didn't want to get too close to that desk again...

I sat back and smiled. I had done it. My story was finished! And just in time. I could hear mom coming up the stairs. Hopefully with pie...

Epilogue

"It always seems impossible until it's done."

~ Nelson Mandela

I tested negative on Friday, just like my parents thought. Jasmine came home that afternoon, after my parents fumigated my room and bathroom. Well, they just did a deep clean to make sure all of the germs were gone. I got to see my aunts, sharing turkey sandwiches and pie with them. It was like a second Thanksgiving, and I really had a lot to be thankful for.

On Saturday Jasmine and I built with Legos all morning. I knew Sanjay was on his way home, and hoped we could hang out on Sunday. Our moms had talked, so I was thinking it would work out.

Look at me, I thought. Thinking positively for a change. It's about time.

About noon, Dad interrupted our Legofest. "Come on, kids, time to get our tree."

Since before I was even born, my parents got their Christmas tree the day after Thanksgiving. Now it's a family tradition. We load up the truck, head into the mountains to the tree farm, and chop down our tree. We take cocoa and cookies and make it an adventure. With Jasmine, it had become even more of one! Juggling a baby, hot cocoa, cups, cookies, a tree and a sharp saw was a job for all of us. Last year dad let me carry the saw; that was epic.

Piling into the truck, we fastened ourselves in. Well, I fastened myself, and helped Mom get Jasmine secured. She was more wiggly than usual, probably because she sensed our excitement. She was a little harder to wrestle into her car seat, but we managed. Teamwork!

Finally, we were on our way. COVID had tried to mess up our plans, but we prevailed; that means we won. And we were only a day late.



Sunday morning sunshine blazed through my window, hitting me square in the face. I stretched, and smiled widely. Yes, it was the last day of Thanksgiving break. Yes, I'd had COVID for most of it. Yes, school was back in session tomorrow. But even through these clouds, I could see the sunshine.

I was going to hang out with Sanjay all day today. He was coming over for breakfast, we were going to help my parents decorate for Christmas, and then we'd get to choose our own adventure. Biking, hanging out at the park, Legos, a movie marathon. We'd decide after breakfast.

A lot depended on the weather. Rain was predicted, but that was no guarantee we'd have to be inside. I could look out of my window and predict rain, and still be completely wrong. So we were keeping our plans loose, like my dad says. We were

going to hang out, catch up, and make the most of it. What more could a guy hope for on the last day of break? Well, pie for breakfast.

I hopped out of bed, ready to plead my case to Mom. I had just endured COVID. Surely pie for breakfast wasn't too much to ask. I was already hoping for the best. I had come so far in a week!