

Bridget was gone.

And Nova was broken.

Nova hadn't wanted to run away from the last foster family. They were nice enough. Sure, it wasn't easy sharing one bedroom with four other girls in three sets of bunk beds. There was no privacy for Bridget, who liked her space, and there was no room for hand flapping or bouncing, which Nova liked to do while pretending she was *in* space.

Plus there was a rule no shower could last more than eight minutes.

And they weren't allowed to watch TV, listen to records, or drink anything with caffeine.

But there had been hot oatmeal in the mornings. Cold lemonade with lunch. Warm blankets at night. Nobody yelled bad words or spanked them. Nobody made Bridget scrub floors like Cinderella. Nobody called Nova Dumbo because she couldn't speak. Most importantly, they were together.

Bridget hated it anyway.

"I'm out of here," she kept saying. "I can't stand it another day. I'm losing my mind."

Nova wasn't worried then. She knew they'd end up somewhere else eventually.

When the time came, though, leaving was different. No social worker to transport them. No paperwork for adults to sign. Bridget didn't even glare at the failed foster parents and say goodbye. Nova and Bridget just piled into a car and drove away. This was not their routine, which made Nova's tummy hurt because she hated goodbyes, but she hated deviating from the routine even more.

"Don't worry!" Bridget had kissed Nova's forehead. "I'll take care of you like I've always taken care of you!"

Now Bridget was gone.

And Nova was worried.

She rocked back and forth on her knees, hugging NASA Bear to her chest, and glanced around her newest bedroom. The first room she'd ever had all to herself.

Diagonal from the door was a double bed with a fancy carved headboard. The mattress was soft, the pillow was softer, and the blanket was plush and purple, covered in tiny silver stars.

It was too big.

The bedroom was long but narrow. It had two windows, one facing the front yard and the other facing the back. Out back there was an in-ground pool, covered up for the winter. Out front a pathway leading up to the door was guarded by two giant stone lions. At midnight the town switched off the streetlights, which made Nova happy because total darkness meant she could see the Big Dipper lurking along the horizon, where the sun set shortly before dinner each night.

It was too nice.

The upstairs bathroom had a tub long enough to stretch out in. The kitchen always smelled of fresh-baked brownies or banana bread and the color television had a remote control. Most rooms had wall-to-wall carpeting. There were lots of windows through which sun shone.

It was too much like a home.

Nova didn't want it to start feeling like home. Bridget always warned, "If it feels like home, it's harder to leave."

Nova hugged her teddy bear tighter, trying to picture her big sister in the bedroom beside her. What had Bridget been thinking, deciding to run away like that? It was already January 1986, and in August she'd be eighteen. Then Bridget could raise Nova herself, like they'd always planned.

Only Bridget was gone.

And Nova was lonely.

“You’ll start school on Monday,” new foster mother Francine warned during breakfast.

Nova hated new schools more than she hated new foster families. New schools always spent the first week or two testing her and always came to the same conclusions: “Cannot read. Does not speak. Severely mentally retarded.”

Bridget hated the word *retarded*.

“My sister’s not dumb,” she’d tell anyone who’d listen. “She’s a thinker, not a talker.”

The truth was, Nova rarely spoke and when she did, she had difficulty controlling her volume, so sometimes she’d be whispering on a crowded playground and other times she’d be shouting in church. Even when she did manage to find the right sound, forming a whole word was its own challenge. She could say “Oh” or “Kay” but not “Okay.” She could say “Wah” or “Ter” but not “Water.” She could say “Coo” or “Kee” but not “Cookie.” And sometimes when she’d try to say a simple word like “Cat” an entirely different word would come out, like “Boo,” which didn’t make sense to anyone, not even Bridget.

Most of the time Nova didn’t bother to speak at all.

Rocking back and forth on top of the fluffy blankets in the bedroom she had all to herself, Nova wondered for the two millionth time where Bridget had gone and whether she would keep her promise to return in time to see the first teacher skyrocket into space.

“No matter where we end up,” Bridget had said, “even if we have to be separated for a while, I’ll come back to see NASA make history, okay? I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”