

# chapter 1

GABBY

“Ready . . .” said Gabby, stretching. “Set . . .”

She got halfway through the word *go!* before her brother, Marco, took off.

“Cheater!” she shouted, sprinting after him.

The woods behind their house grew up instead of out; trees densely piled onto hills like the one Gabby and Marco Torres were racing up now. Marco was older by three years, but Gabby was quick on her feet and knew the shortcuts. Marco always took the paths, but Gabby climbed the un-paths, the places where roots and rocks made stairs up the side of the forest.

“Come on, Gabs!” His voice rang out through the trees. “Keep up!”

Her lungs burned as she ran, twigs snapping under her shoes. She had never beaten him to the top. Even when he

didn't cheat. But maybe today . . . She caught a glimpse of his bright blue T-shirt cutting between trees, and she sped up. She was so focused on catching him that she didn't see the fallen branch until it snagged her sneaker and sent her stumbling to her hands and knees on the damp ground. She sprung back up, but by then, she'd lost him.

His laughter rang out, and she sprinted on until she burst through the tree line, breathless, and grinning. "Marco!" she called. "I won!"

But Marco wasn't there. She stood at the top of the hill, catching her breath, waiting for her brother to get there and give her some line about *letting* her win. She waited, and waited, and waited.

"Marco?" she called nervously, looking around the field.

The hill was suddenly too still and too dark. The laughter that had followed her through the woods before reached her again, but it was twisted and wrong. It was her brother's voice, but he wasn't laughing anymore, not at all.

He was coughing.

Gasping.

Choking.

And that's when Gabby woke up.

She wasn't standing on a hilltop but slouched in a stiff hospital chair next to a bed. In the bed, Marco was doubled

over, coughing. A nurse rubbed his back with one hand and adjusted his IV with the other.

“Hey there . . . Gabby,” Marco said between coughs. “Sorry . . . didn’t mean . . . to wake you.”

“It’s okay,” Gabby mumbled, rubbing her forehead. “Bad dream. Are you all right?” she asked as Marco settled back against his pillow, his face flushed.

“Right as rain,” he said, still struggling for air. “Don’t tell anyone, though,” he whispered loudly. “I don’t want them to kick me out.” The nurse toying with the machine laughed a little, and Gabby managed a thin smile. Marco was always joking.

But the coughing fit had clearly winded him. He looked tired. These days, he always looked tired. Gabby knew it was because of *the bad*.

When the doctors explained Marco’s condition to Gabby, they didn’t call the sickness by its proper name. They referred to it only as *the bad*, as if she didn’t know how to search the Internet and find out what *the bad* really was. Now she knew the proper term — *osteosarcoma* — but still found herself thinking of it as *the bad*. Not because she wanted to dumb it down, or make it seem smaller, but because it was easier for her to picture the thing attacking her brother’s body not as a many-syllabled word but as a monster.

Monsters could be fought. And Marco was fighting.

He looked at her and frowned his big-brother frown and said, “You were supposed to go home last night.”

Gabby glanced down at her crumpled clothes and thought about how wrong it felt to call the new apartment *home*. *Home* was a place in the country with wooded hills and laughter and a healthy big brother. A place Gabby seemed to get back to only in her dreams. And as bad as the hospital was, the apartment was worse. It was a ghostly shell, empty and dark — their mom spent every free minute in the hospital with Marco.

“I like it better here,” Gabby said, picking up the cheerful tone he’d dropped. “And the food’s good. Way better than Mom’s.”

Marco chuckled carefully. “That may be true . . .” he said, letting out a sigh, “but you can’t keep sleeping here. Not with school starting tomorrow.”

*Not just school*, thought Gabby. *A new school*.

Grand Heights Middle School.

The thought of starting seventh grade there filled her with a mixture of fear and hope. When Marco had first gotten sick last year, everything had changed. Not just for him but for Gabby, too. Suddenly she couldn’t go anywhere without being smothered by everybody’s concern. Teachers,

classmates, friends — their pity became like a low wall around her life. People wanted to look over and say hi, but the wall stopped them from getting too close. That was the weird thing about sickness. Even when it wasn't contagious, people kept their distance.

Even Alice and Beth, who were Gabby's closest friends, started acting strange around her. They got weird and quiet and went out of their way to be polite, and she hated it.

When Marco got transferred to a new hospital in a new city over the summer, Gabby had almost been relieved to leave.

Grand Heights Middle School would be filled with strangers, but it would also be a fresh start. Maybe she didn't have to be that girl with the sick brother.

Maybe she could just be Gabrielle Torres.

Marco cleared his throat. He was looking at her expectantly, and Gabby realized she'd gone quiet. She did that sometimes.

*“¿Dónde estás?”* he asked. *Where are you?* But what he meant was, *Where is your head? Where have you gone? Come back.*

“Sorry, I'm here,” she said, blinking. And then she remembered. “Oh, hey, I got you something.”

Gabby fetched a plastic shopping bag filled with school supplies from under her chair. She had picked them out

herself. Her mom hadn't been able to take her shopping, but the mall, like the apartment, like the school, like *everything else*, was in walking distance from the hospital. Gabby dug through the bag until she found the blue-and-white-striped notebook and pen. "For your homeschooling," she said.

"Hospital-schooling," corrected Marco. He was fifteen, and should have been starting tenth grade at Grand Heights High. Instead, he'd be here with a tutor.

Gabby dropped a fresh pack of colored paper on the pale hospital bed. "And this is for the rest of the time," she said.

Marco's eyes lit up. He was an *expert* paper-airplane maker, and they spent the next half hour folding the paper into planes to throw from his third-floor window and into the parking lot below. Gabby had just succeeded in landing her third purple plane on a white minivan roof — Marco cheering her on — when the door opened behind them.

"Gabrielle Torres," said a quiet voice with mock scorn. "Are you letting your brother have too much fun?"

She turned to see Marco's new friend, Henry, coming into the room in his wheelchair. Henry reminded her of paper. Not the rich, colorful kind that she and Marco had been making into airplanes, but a worn and faded white. He was pale to start with — she'd seen photos from when he

was a kid — and paler from being sick, his hair a watery blond, and his eyes a gentle, washed-out blue.

Gabby shook her head, and Henry tsked.

“Didn’t he tell you,” Henry went on, wheeling himself up to the bed, “what’ll happen if he has too much fun here?”

“They’ll kick him out?” ventured Gabby.

“Exactly!” said Henry, knocking his knees against the metal bed rail. “You don’t want him to get kicked out, do you? Who would entertain *me*?”

“*You* could have too much fun,” offered Gabby. “Then they’d kick you out, too.”

Henry’s smile turned sad at the edges. “Nah, they like me too much to let me go.” His eyes fell to the plastic bag on the bed. “What have we here?”

“School supplies,” said Marco. “Gabby starts tomorrow.”

“Wow,” said Henry with a soft, soundless laugh. “School, already? Time really does fly when you’re having fun.”

“Do you miss it?” asked Gabby. Henry was the same age as Marco, but she knew he’d been sick a lot longer, and a lot worse, and wondered how long it had been since he’d hefted a backpack onto his shoulder, or heard a shrill class bell.

“Nah,” he said with a shrug. “Best part of being here is I don’t have to go to school.”

Gabby didn't believe him. She could see it tucked away in Henry's eyes, how much he missed being a normal teenage boy, even if normal meant school and homework and chores. She could see it starting in Marco's eyes, too, even though their mom was still dragging him through the motions so he wouldn't fall too far behind. Henry looked as if he might never catch back up. The thought shot like a pang through Gabby's chest, but she didn't have a chance to dwell on Henry's condition, because Marco started coughing again.

Gabby winced as two nurses appeared out of the hospital cracks, one doing her best to get Marco settled, while the other wheeled Henry away. The bag of school supplies tumbled off the bed, and Gabby was on her hands and knees, trying to gather up the pens and notebooks, when her mom rushed in.

"What is it?" asked Mrs. Torres, only adding to the commotion. "What's wrong? Marco? Are you all right? How long has this been going on?"

"He'll be fine," urged a nurse, but her calm somehow made Gabby's mom more flustered, and Mrs. Torres gathered up the colored papers on the bed in a single sweep and dumped them into a chair. She muttered to Gabby in Spanish

about making a mess as she rubbed circles on Marco's back to help him breathe.

Gabby backed out of the room and into the hall. She slumped against the wall beside the door, every muscle in her body tense, as if she'd been the one coughing. She looked down and realized she was still holding some of the school supplies: a pretty journal with music notes and a handful of pens. Through the door, she could hear the scene quieting, but Marco's cough echoed in her head and she couldn't bring herself to go back in — she'd probably just be in the way. So she stayed put in the corridor.

Most of the halls on this floor were painted yellow or green, but this one was blue. Gabby liked the color because it made her feel like a little piece of outside had wandered in. She'd spent a lot of time in hospitals, and so often their pale walls and fluorescent lights reminded her that she was definitely *not* outside. Now, if she stared at the wall and let her eyes unfocus, she could *almost* believe she was staring at the sky on a nice day, warm and sunny and blue.