

## CHAPTER

# 1

Gregor had pressed his forehead against the screen for so long, he could feel a pattern of tiny checks above his eyebrows. He ran his fingers over the bumps and resisted the impulse to let out a primal caveman scream. It was building up in his chest, that long guttural howl reserved for real emergencies — like when you ran into a saber-toothed tiger without your club, or your fire went out during the Ice Age. He even went so far as to open his mouth and take a deep breath before he banged his head back into the screen with a quiet sound of frustration. “Ergh.”

What was the point, anyway? It wouldn't change one thing. Not the heat, not the boredom, not the endless space of summer laid out before him.

He considered waking up Boots, his two-year-old

sister, just for a little distraction, but he let her sleep. At least she was cool in the air-conditioned bedroom she shared with their seven-year-old sister, Lizzie, and their grandma. It was the only air-conditioned room in the apartment. On really hot nights, Gregor and his mother could spread quilts on the floor to sleep, but with five in the room it wasn't cool, just lukewarm.

Gregor got an ice cube from the freezer and rubbed it on his face. He stared out at the courtyard where a stray dog sniffed around an overflowing trash can. The dog set its paws on the rim, tipping the can and sending the garbage across the sidewalk. Gregor caught a glimpse of a couple of shadowy shapes scurrying along the wall and grimaced. Rats. He never really got used to them.

Otherwise, the courtyard was deserted. Usually it was full of kids playing ball, jumping rope, or swinging around the creaky jungle gym. But this morning, the bus had left for camp, and every kid between the ages of four and fourteen had been on it. Except one.

"I'm sorry, baby, you can't go," his mother had told him a few weeks ago. And she really had been sorry, too, he could tell by the look on her face. "Someone

has to watch Boots while I'm at work, and we both know your grandma can't handle it anymore."

Of course he knew it. For the last year his grandma had been slipping in and out of reality. One minute she was clear as a bell and the next she was calling him Simon. Who was Simon? He had no idea.

It would have been different a few years ago. His mom only worked part-time then, and his dad, who'd taught high school science, was off summers. He'd have taken care of Boots. But since his dad disappeared one night, Gregor's role in the family had changed. He was the oldest, so he'd picked up a lot of the slack. Looking after his little sisters was a big part of it.

So all Gregor had said was, "That's okay, Mom. Camp's for kids, anyway." He'd shrugged, to show that, at eleven, he was past caring about things like camp. But somehow that had made her look sadder.

"Do you want Lizzie to stay home with you? Give you some company?" she'd asked.

A look of panic had crossed Lizzie's face at this suggestion. She probably would have burst into tears if Gregor hadn't refused the offer. "Nah, let her go. I'll be fine with Boots."

So, here he was. Not fine. Not fine spending the whole summer cooped up with a two-year-old and his grandma who thought he was someone named —

“Simon!” he heard his grandma call from the bedroom. Gregor shook his head but he couldn’t help smiling a little.

“Coming, Grandma!” he called back, and crunched down the rest of his ice cube.

A golden glow filled the room as the afternoon sunlight tried to force its way through the shades. His grandma lay on the bed covered by a thin cotton quilt. Every patch on the quilt had come from a dress she had made for herself through the years. In her more lucid moments, she’d talk Gregor through the quilt. “This polka-dotted swiss I wore to my cousin Lucy’s graduation when I was eleven, this lemon yellow was a Sunday dress, and this white is in actual fact a corner of my wedding dress, I do not lie.”

This, however, was not a lucid moment. “Simon,” she said, her face showing relief at the sight of him. “I thought you forgot your lunch pail. You’ll get hungry plowing.”

His grandma had been raised on a farm in Virginia and had come to New York when she married his

grandfather. She had never really taken to it. Sometimes Gregor was secretly glad that she could return to that farm in her mind. And a little envious. It wasn’t any fun sitting around their apartment all the time. By now the bus would probably be arriving at camp and Lizzie and the rest of the kids would —

“Ge-go!” squealed a little voice. A curly head popped over the side of the crib. “Me out!” Boots stuck the soggy end of a stuffed dog’s tail in her mouth and reached up both arms to him. Gregor lifted his sister high in the air and blew a loud raspberry on her stomach. She giggled and the dog fell to the floor. He set her down to retrieve it.

“Take your hat!” said Grandma, still somewhere back in Virginia.

Gregor took her hand to try to focus her attention. “You want a cold drink, Grandma? How about a root beer?”

She laughed. “A root beer? What is it, my birthday?”

How did you answer something like that?

Gregor gave her hand a squeeze and scooped up Boots. “I’ll be right back,” he said loudly.

His grandma was still laughing to herself. “A root beer!” she said, and wiped her eyes.

In the kitchen, Gregor filled a glass with icy root beer and made Boots a bottle of milk.

"Code," she beamed, pressing it to her face.

"Yes, nice and cold, Boots," said Gregor.

A knock on the door startled him. The peephole had been useless for a good forty years. He called through the door, "Who is it?"

"It's Mrs. Cormaci, darling. I told your mother I'd sit with your grandma at four!" a voice called back. Then Gregor remembered the pile of laundry he was supposed to do. At least he'd get out of the apartment.

He opened the door to find Mrs. Cormaci looking wilted in the heat. "Hello, you! Isn't it awful? I tell you I do not suffer heat gladly!" She bustled into the apartment patting her face with an old bandanna. "Oh, you dream, is that for me?" she said, and before he could answer she was gulping down the root beer like she'd been lost in the desert.

"Sure," Gregor mumbled, heading back to the kitchen to fix another. He didn't really mind Mrs. Cormaci, and today it was almost a relief to see her. "Great, Day One and I'm looking forward to a trip to the laundry room," Gregor thought. "By September, I'll probably be ecstatic when we get the phone bill."

Mrs. Cormaci held out her glass for a refill. "So, when are you going to let me read your tarot, Mister? You know I've got the gift," she said. Mrs. Cormaci posted signs by the mailboxes offering to read tarot cards for people at ten bucks a shot. "No charge for you," she always told Gregor. He never accepted because he had a sneaking suspicion Mrs. Cormaci would end up asking a lot more questions than he would. Questions he couldn't answer. Questions about his dad.

He mumbled something about the laundry and hurried off to collect it. Knowing Mrs. Cormaci, she probably had a deck of tarot cards right in her pocket.

Down in the laundry room, Gregor sorted clothes as best he could. Whites, darks, colors . . . what was he supposed to do with Boots's black-and-white-striped shorts? He tossed them in the darks feeling sure it was the wrong decision.

Most of their clothes were kind of grayish anyway — from age, not bad laundry choices. All Gregor's shorts were just his winter pants cut off at the knees, and he only had a few T-shirts that fit from last year, but what did it matter if he was going to be locked in the apartment all summer?

"Ball!" cried Boots in distress. "Ball!"

Gregor reached his arm between the dryers and pulled out an old tennis ball Boots had been chasing around. He picked off the dryer lint and tossed it across the room. Boots ran after it like a puppy.

"What a mess," thought Gregor, laughing a little. "What a sticky, crusty, dusty mess!" The remains of her lunch, egg salad and chocolate pudding, were still evident on Boots's face and shirt. She had colored her hands purple with washable markers that Gregor thought maybe a sandblaster could remove, and her diaper sagged down around her knees. It was just too hot to put her into shorts.

Boots ran back to him with the ball, dryer lint floating in her curls. Her sweaty face beamed as she held out the ball. "What makes you so happy, Boots?" he asked.

"Ball!" she said, and then banged her head into his knee, on purpose, to speed him up. Gregor tossed the ball down the alley between the washers and the dryers. Boots flew after it.

As the game continued, Gregor tried to remember the last time he'd felt as happy as Boots did with her

ball. He had had some decent times over the past couple of years. The city middle school band had gotten to play at Carnegie Hall. That was pretty cool. He'd even had a short solo on his saxophone. Things were always better when he played music; the notes seemed to carry him to a different world altogether.

Running track was good, too. Pushing his body on and on until everything had been drummed out of his mind.

But if he was honest with himself, Gregor knew it had been years since he'd felt real happiness. "Exactly two years, seven months, and thirteen days," he thought. He didn't try to count, but the numbers automatically tallied up in his head. He had some inner calculator that always knew exactly how long his dad had been gone.

Boots could be happy. She wasn't even born when it happened. Lizzie was only four. But Gregor had been eight and had missed nothing; like the frantic calls to the police, who had acted almost bored with the fact that his dad had vanished into thin air. Clearly they'd thought he'd run off. They'd even implied it was with another woman.

That just wasn't true. If there was anything Gregor knew, it was that his father loved his mother, that he loved him and Lizzie, that he would have loved Boots.

But then — how could he have left them without a word?

Gregor couldn't believe his dad would abandon the family and never look back. "Accept it," he whispered to himself. "He's dead." A wave of pain swept through him. It wasn't true. It couldn't be true. His dad was coming back because . . . because . . . because what? Because he wanted it so badly it must be true? Because they needed him? "No," thought Gregor. "It's because I can feel it. I know he's coming back."

The washer spun to a stop, and Gregor piled the clothes into a couple of dryers. "And when he gets back, he'd better have a really good explanation for where he's been!" muttered Gregor as he slammed the dryer door shut. "Like he got bumped on the head and forgot who he was. Or he was kidnapped by aliens." Lots of people got kidnapped by aliens on TV. Maybe it could happen.

He thought about different possibilities a lot in his

head, but they rarely mentioned his dad at home. There was an unspoken agreement that his dad would return. All the neighbors thought he'd just taken off. The adults never mentioned it, and neither did most of the kids — about half of them only lived with one parent, anyway. Strangers sometimes asked, though. After about a year of trying to explain it, Gregor came up with the story that his parents were divorced and his dad lived in California. It was a lie but people believed it, while no one seemed to believe the truth. Whatever that was.

"And after he gets home I can take him —," Gregor said aloud, and then stopped himself. He was about to break the rule. The rule was that he couldn't think about things that would happen after his dad got back. And since his dad could be back at any moment, Gregor didn't allow himself to think about the future at all. He had this weird feeling that if he imagined actual events, like having his dad back next Christmas or his dad helping to coach the track team, they would never happen. Besides, as happy as some daydream would make him, it only made returning to reality more painful. So, that was the rule. Gregor had to

keep his mind in the present and leave the future to itself. He realized that his system wasn't great, but it was the best way he'd figured out to get through a day.

Gregor noticed that Boots had been suspiciously quiet. He looked around and felt alarmed when he couldn't spot her right away. Then he saw a scuffed pink sandal poking out from the last dryer. "Boots! Get out of there!" said Gregor.

You had to watch her around electrical stuff. She loved plugs.

As he hurried across the laundry room, Gregor heard a metallic klunk and then a giggle from Boots. "Great, now she's dismantling the dryer," thought Gregor, picking up speed. As he reached the far wall, a strange scene confronted him.

The metal grate to an old air duct was wide open, secured by two rusty hinges at the top. Boots was squinting into the opening, about two feet by two feet, which led into the wall of the building. From where he stood, Gregor could see nothing but blackness. Then a wisp of . . . what was it? Steam? Smoke? It didn't really look like either. Some strange vapor drifted out of the hole and curled around Boots. She held out her arms curiously and leaned forward.

"No!" yelled Gregor as he lunged for her, but Boots's tiny frame seemed to be sucked into the air duct. Without thinking, Gregor thrust his head and shoulders into the hole. The metal grate smacked into his back. The next thing he knew, he was falling down, down, down into empty space.