

# Chapter 4

“You do sound a little hoarse,” said Mrs. Meade, the school nurse, when I told her about the chills.

She leaned back in her worn desk chair, which had a child’s block taped onto one of the legs where a wheel was missing. Her office was in the basement, and she had filled it with fake plants and the lace doilies she crocheted when there weren’t any sick kids around. I used to love to go see Mrs. Mead. She treats the little kids like they’re puppies, rubbing their foreheads and stuffing them with lemon drops that are supposedly some kind of medicine. She always has Kool-Aid in her mini-fridge, and she doles it out in Dixie cups decorated with stupid knock-knock jokes, like, “Eileen who? Ei-leen-over to tie my shoe.” But after you’re in fourth grade, she treats you like an ex-con—to get any kind of sympathy from her at all, you have to throw up or have a fever.

Until last year, when a kid in Julia’s class had hallucinations in the lunchroom and his parents sued the school. Apparently, he had been writing about the voices in his head for months in the journal he was keeping in his English class and going to Mrs.

Meade twice a week to complain of headaches. She'd thought he was faking. Ever since then, Mrs. Meade sends kids home at the first hint of sickness.

"There's a chance you're coming down with a cold," she mused again, "and if you're coming down with a cold, then you're most certainly contagious. I'm going to call your mother. I think you should see your *family doctor* right away. In fact, I'm going to type you up a little note that I'll keep a copy of right here in my file."

Since my mother was in a meeting, her secretary told Mrs. Meade it was okay for me to go home in a car service by myself, which is something you can do only if your parents sign about twenty-five forms in the first week of school. In the car, I decided that as soon as I got home, I would fix myself a peanut butter and Fluff sandwich, and go back to playing *Midtown Madness*. Definitely not *Aliens Versus Predator: Extinction*. *Aliens Versus Predator: Extinction* is new, and I was already feeling a little light-headed, and kind of lost in the way you feel in the beginning of a video game, when you keep falling off the same cliff.

I was still really cold. I'd zipped my jacket up to my chin and crossed my arms in front of my chest, but it wasn't helping. Maybe peanut butter and Fluff would help. But as soon as I got home and took a bite of my sandwich, I spat it back into the sink and tossed the rest of the sandwich into the trash. It was the sugar. Somehow, mixed with the cold, it hurt my teeth. My mom can't drink cold water first thing in the morning—she says it makes her fillings hurt, and that's how I felt now, like there was a shooting pain from the outside of my teeth traveling into my

gums and then straight into the bones of my jaw. Was it my fillings? I don't have fillings. What was going on with me?

Inside the fridge, I found leftover creamed spinach. Creamed spinach usually makes me retch. But now I took the container of it over to the microwave. As soon as it started to cook and I could smell the rich, creamy bitterness, I knew it was exactly what I was in the mood for.

When it was hot, I put as much in my mouth as I could. It was slippery and slimy and I could taste the part of it that always made me gag, the part that tastes the way the grass smells in the spring in the park. But at the same time, it melted on my tongue almost like chocolate, and the gritty parts of it didn't bother me.

After I'd finished the spinach and licked the bowl—licked it!—I felt good, but only for just a second. I sighed, and as soon as I inhaled that big sigh back in, I was cold again.

“A good smoke,” I heard myself say out loud. A smoke? I don't smoke. If my mom caught me smoking, she would kill me. She likes to say “I want to catch you stealing before I catch you smoking.” But I wanted a cigar—not even a cigarette!—so much that I didn't care how much trouble I would get into if I got caught. I went back into the front hall to put on my coat and go out to find a place that would sell cigars to a thirteen-year-old who looks like he's nine.

What was wrong with me? I wondered for a second if I should tell a grown-up. But if I told a grown-up, I wouldn't be able to get a cigar. And I had to have one. Right away.

In our front hall, the wall across from the elevator is covered

in mirrors. It's very hard to walk past it and not catch a glimpse of yourself. Julia spends hours staring at her reflection here. But on my way to get a cigar, I caught a glimpse in the mirror of something that made me stop. When I turned for a second look, I was expecting to find staring back at me nothing more than my own reflection. But my own reflection—my frizzed-out hair, my untucked shirt—was gone. This totally blew my mind, but I swear it was true. My reflection—me—I wasn't there.

It took me a second to see what was in the mirror in my place: an old man. His white hair was cut short, and his eyebrows were bushy. He wasn't fat, like Santa Claus. He was thin and looked strong. He was dressed in a plaid wool shirt and jeans that looked like they were about to go in the knees. He was smiling a little too intensely, like someone who has been hit on the head with a shovel.

It was Grandpa. Grandpa-who-was-dead.

I closed my eyes and opened them again, waiting for the vision to go away.

But Grandpa was still there. He turned when I turned. When I stared again, he stared. I lifted my left hand. He lifted his right. I waved. He waved at the same exact time. I could look down and see my own self, but when I looked into the mirror, the old man was me.

I felt like one of those guys in a cartoon who runs over a cliff edge and then hangs in the air with his legs moving. I was thinking, *If this doesn't go away pretty soon, I'm going to have to start thinking it's real.*

I walked up close to the mirror and looked at the man there—Grandpa. I really looked, the way you stare into your own eyes, wondering how other people see you. *Go away*, I was thinking. *Now it is time for this to start making sense*, I thought. But it didn't make sense.

And then the cold got worse. Not a little worse. Or a slow worse. A really fast, bad worse, like suddenly, the cold I'd been feeling before was actually warmth and this new, unbearable, sharp pain was redefining what it meant to be cold. The new cold had come from the inside of Grandpa—the bloodshot whites of his eyes. The second I looked into them, the cold in my chest suddenly spread, like an explosion into my shoulders, down my arms, through my hips, to my toes and then back up. The cold pounded against the inside of my forehead. It clogged my ears. I couldn't seem to take a breath. When I tried to look down, I found I couldn't move my eyes. They were locked on to Grandpa's.

"Stop it," I said, though it was hard to move my lips. "Let go." And then—because I didn't have time to figure out if I should try not to panic or just beg, I begged. "Please," I said. "Please, please, please."

The cold feeling had moved all the way down to my feet. I could hardly feel them, and it was like they were getting heavier, like I was being pulled down. I pedaled my arms, gasping, kicking my feet to try to make them grab on to the floor, but the floor was feeling strangely un-solid. There was no one to call for help. My parents were at work, and Julia wouldn't get home from school and ballet for hours.

“Help!” I begged Grandpa in the mirror. He wouldn’t let go of my eyes. “Let me go.” He just stared.

I felt my legs disappearing. I was sinking into a current of dark air that was so cold it was thick, like water right before it starts to freeze. Moving down faster and faster, I struggled against what was pulling me in. I couldn’t see.

Mr. Blum once told us that when you step outside in the Arctic, it takes one minute to get frostbite, which is your skin freezing so badly it dies. It wasn’t my skin I was concerned with. It was my bones. I was so cold I worried they were going to crack.

It’s funny, in video games when you die, it’s not that big a deal. Sometimes it’s even funny, like when a voice comes on that says, “Yay, you win . . . not!” or when blood and guts spill out of the fighter you’re playing. I’d never for a second in my life thought I was in any danger of dying for real. Until now. It was different. It was scary. All I wanted was to go back to my life. I didn’t care anymore that I wasn’t like Gus, that Julia always won. I wasn’t mad at my dad. I could see in one big rush that I had the best, easiest, happiest life in the world. I wanted it back—Julia, Gus, my dad. My mom. I wanted everything to stay exactly the same as it had always been. I wasn’t ready.