

Unbroken

13 STORIES STARRING DISABLED TEENS

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The Long Road

HEIDI HEILIG

THERE IT IS—do you hear it?

Hissssss, shhhhh. Hissssss, shhhhh.

The desert wind. Like a serpent sliding through the stones, or my mother warning me not to speak.

Shhhhh, hush, hushhhh. Say nothing. Reflexively, I press my lips together—but everyone who matters already knows my secret.

I should have kept it better, but it's too late now.

The road stretches before me and behind. It is littered with camel dung and pomegranate rinds, wet tea leaves and boiled stew bones. Along it, travelers come and go, west to east and east to west, following the arc of the sun.

And north? If I shade my eyes, I can see the desert from whence the winds come, shifting the dunes of the Takla Makan: the Place of No Return. The haze on the horizon is sand in the air. My father says it can scour the meat from the pale

bones of the dead. All travelers whisper about the wind. How, if you get too close, you'll hear it call and bid you come.

I don't hear my name on the wind—only the sound of the sand. The road we travel skirts the edge of the wide wasteland. Perhaps we are at a safe enough distance. Or perhaps the voices are drowned out by the dull ringing of the tangled amulets strung around my neck.

Chung, chung, hissssss. Chung, chung, shhhhh.

Back in my little garden in Xi'an, I used to love the sound of chimes: bone and bamboo and little bronze bells shimmering in the breath of the breeze. A happy sound. Light as the wind. My heart used to beat to their delicate music as I moved through the flowers, taking air and exercise. The sound would make me smile, except on the very worst days.

I haven't smiled in nearly a year. I forgot how to, for a long while. And by the time I remembered, on the road, there wasn't much left to smile about.

The saddle sores on my thighs, the swaying of the camels, and all their beastly smells. The sun draped heavily across my shoulders—the grit between my teeth. Not to mention the amulets I wear. They are meant to protect me, but they only remind me of what I've lost. And when I walk, I jangle, discordant: a harsh, heavy effigy of an old sweet song. They are heaped thick on my shoulders, the talismans sitting on my chest like a *gui ya shen*—a ghost's weight—and each step is a chore.

One charm is from my cousin, who said she'd pray for me on my long journey. Another from my older sister, who couldn't look me in the eyes as she slipped the charm over my head.

And one from the man who would have been my husband, if the rumors about my bad fate hadn't spread before our wedding.

The rest of the medallions came from my parents. I don't have the heart to tell them they aren't working—especially not after they've taken me such a long way from my garden, with so much farther still to go. Besides, would they want to know how I feel? *Shhhhh, hushhhh, say nothing.* But the truth is a powerful force—relentless and dangerous as the wind. It's what has pushed us here, like dead leaves to the edge of the desert.

The road we travel is not my father's typical route—and I am not his typical cargo. He is a silk trader between Xi'an and Dunhuang. Or he was, before. And my mother used to keep our books. She, like I, had never been beyond the walls of the city. This is the farthest any of us have traveled, and we're not even halfway to Persia.

What will we find there? I hardly dare dream. I want it to be beautiful—but most of all, I want it to be worth the journey. An end to the travel—and to my tribulations. A garden, perhaps, but one where I can flower and grow. But can I, a girl from Xi'an, take root in such foreign soil? If not, what then? I wasn't thriving in our little garden, either.

I shake the thought out of my head. We are far from that fate and getting farther all the while. And up ahead, somewhere on the road: the point past which it is longer to travel back home than to go forward into the unknown. Already, miles and miles of dust lie between me and my old life. But the distance was not the difficulty—that life was no longer mine.

There was a wall now stronger than the one built by the first emperor: the diagnosis.

My parents had risked two doctors to treat me—one we'd known for years, who knew our family and all its secrets—and another who might have had better news. I still think he was the one who let the rumor slip. I only told my sister—and she would never have shared the truth with anyone outside our family, not when it brought her as much shame as it brought me. Then again, my bad fate might have been obvious in my unstoppable tears or my uncontrollable laughter, the unseemly flirting or the weeks spent in bed, the times I went out with coins to spend on rice and came back with ribbons for my hair.

These days, my fate is obvious in the heaped strands of amulets around my neck—but less so, every step we travel. Because in the west, bad fate can be treated.

I hear they don't even wear amulets there—that the treatments are simple but effective. At least, that's the claim on which my parents sold everything to make the journey to Persia. I am lucky; I know that much. I have another cousin, back in Xi'an. One I've never met—never seen—who herself never sees the light of day. I imagine her sometimes, as pale as the mushrooms that spring up at night only to crack and wither in the sun.

Is her fate as bad as mine? Certainly my fortune is better, because I have a chance for treatment. For freedom.

If we can make it past the Place of No Return.

How long have we traveled? Weeks, months. So far, at least, it has been more tedious than dangerous—or is that only the bent of my mind, convincing me nothing has happened when

everything is different? I know I have seen more than I ever thought I would—ugly and beautiful, all thrown together. The green fields, where white herons watch their own reflections till the silence is broken by the jeering laughter of rough men. Or the carcasses of unlucky pack animals, ridden too hard, rotting under the clear and glorious sky. Or the long sweep of poplars to the south of the road, their green arms holding back the wasteful desert.

And the shocking emerald gems of the oases where we stop for the night.

I love the camps, and I hate them. They are a place to rest—to eat—sometimes even to wash away the dust and sweat of the road. But they are also places where traders gather from all corners, and I am not used to so many strangers. They aren't exactly frightening, but they are much too friendly for a girl with secrets to keep. And their usual questions—What is your cargo? Where are you bound?—are not so easy to answer. And then, of course, there are those who already know what the amulets mean.

The stares were worse closer to home—we'd left in the dead of night to avoid them, but even on the road outside of Xi'an, everyone knew. Since passing Dunhuang, though, the looks have softened from suspicion and scorn to a milder curiosity. But I still remember what it was like—the prickling skin, the chill in my flesh, the dizzy heart-pounding feel of being known as mad.

But there's nothing for it—at least, not until the journey's done. For now, night is falling as it always does, and we are nearing the next camp. Miloo, my camel, always smells the

water first. I can't imagine how, when the pungent scent of her own fur still makes my eyes sour. But I've gotten to know her signals—the way her strides lengthen when she senses there is food ahead—and so when she starts to stretch, I watch out for the greenery.

Soon enough it appears: a bright emerald burst against the dun-colored landscape. As the sun sinks, we approach the little camp. Nestled in the curve of the spring, squat buildings rattle like dice in a cup. A little frontier town, gambling with fortune on the edge of the world.

"It's called Niya," my father tells me. His smile is hopeful—his white teeth strange in his dust-coated face. Then the smile falters a little. "Or at least, that's what they tell me."

My father knew his old route like he knew my mother's face—comfortable in his familiarity but in love anew every time he saw it. I'm not used to seeing him out of his element, but none of us know the way anymore.

I try to smile back, my lips still pressed together. My mother watches me, but I do not open my mouth. At last she sighs. "Do they say whether there are baths?"

"There must be," my father says. "And lamb and hot bread and pomegranates, too."

"Flowers in gardens," my mother plays along.

"And hua mei, singing under the trees," my father replies, his grin returning.

My parents look at me sideways, waiting for me to join in. This is a game—we all used to play it. A dreaming game, where you give voice to your heart's desire, and in that way come close enough to imagine it. I don't dare—not anymore.

It feels too frivolous—too risky—so the only sound is the chime of my amulets and the tread of our camels' hooves.

The day is cooling under the purple dusk as we make our way into the camp. Tents and yurts and even some shacks spread across the scrubby grass near the bank. Many spots are already taken by travelers who made better time coming from the last oasis, or people coming from the east. Food is cooking at little fires and at a bigger, more permanent kitchen—an enterprising family serving the traders. The smells make my mouth water. Someone somewhere is playing a spike-fiddle, someone else is eating a pomegranate, spitting the seeds into the dirt: *pthoo, pthoo*.

My father goes to get water, and my mother seeks out the camp cook to inquire about food. I slide down from my camel with a clanging jangle that turns heads.

Shame creeps across my face, but I try to tamp it down. I know what I must look like—my shirt is plastered to my skin with sweat and dust, and the amulets make a thick mat across my chest, like the web of a spider with insects trapped inside. But all of us here are strangers—east and west mingling with a smattering of north and south, and when I take a deep breath, I swear I can taste the moisture in the air. At the very least, I know I don't smell as bad as Miloo.

I set to making camp—unrolling the oilcloth, spreading the tarp, driving the stakes. I've gotten better at it—quicker—though the process still leaves me breathing hard, with the amulets swaying and dragging like a yoke.

Chung, chung. Chung—pthoo!

Chung, chung. Chung—pthoo!

Someone is still staring at me; I can see her out of the corner of my eye—she’s got sun-darkened skin and a mocking smile, half-hidden behind a red fistful of fruit. Her scrutiny makes my skin crawl as the seeds land in the dust near my feet. I ignore her until she speaks.

“What are those?”

She used the language of the traders—east and west mixed together and then shortened, smoothed into sounds we all can manage. But her inflection is eastern—has she lived where I’m heading? I want to ask, but I’ve learned my lesson. My mouth stays shut.

Chung, chung, pthoo. Chung, chung—

“You’ve angered the gods.”

Despite the heat of the fading day, I am suddenly cold. She knows—of course she knows. I straighten up quickly, gaping at her, but she only smiles. I blink once, twice, then flee into the tent.

I do not come outside to eat, and my mother, worried, brings my dinner inside—warm bread with lamb gravy. I see the concern on her face. “What’s on your mind, Lihua?” she asks, and even though we’re alone inside, I’m not ready to tell her. I’m not ready to say anything.

Still, she sits beside me while I eat, her hands in her lap. The ink that used to stain her fingers is fading, replaced by grit and grime under her nails. My mother used to have porcelain skin—untouched by the sunlight. Now it is turning gold in the desert light. Does she miss her old life? I know she must. I do, and it’s my fault we had to leave it. But she never says so, and I never ask. I can’t.

After dinner, we bundle up, my mother and father joking, laughing, but it is forced between them, and I am silent. I am still silent long after they have gone to sleep, long after the spike-fiddler has stopped playing, even after the camels have stopped groaning and chewing. Still, I am awake. The amulets jostle whenever I try to burrow down into the blankets. Finally, just when I'm comfortable, I realize I have to visit the pits.

We passed them on the way in—they're downwind of the camp and far from the water. The night air is cold in the desert—I can see my breath when I step out of the tent—but I just wrap my coat tighter around my shoulders and start toward the swale.

The moon is bright, and the night is quiet but for the jingle jangle of my shame. A flash of anger—no less fiery for being familiar: I wish I could tear the whole lot of them from my neck and leave them in the pit. But I don't. Of course I don't. I want to be well. Even if it doesn't feel like they are helping.

On the way back to my tent, I walk slowly—carefully—trying to keep quiet. Placing one foot in front of the other—one foot in front of the other—so focused on my feet that I'm startled to find a person in my path.

The girl.

I stiffen as she smiles, but the mockery in her face is gone—softened by the shadows. And with her red-stained hand, she reaches up and pulls something from inside her shirt. The moonlight glints off an amulet.

It's shaped like an eye, similar to one of my own—an amulet my father had traded for. And the chill I feel now has nothing

to do with the desert air. Before I can stop them, the words escape my lips. “You too?”

She nods, and suddenly I have a hundred thousand questions bubbling up on my tongue. I’ve never met another person with bad fate—much less someone who would tell me so themselves. I’ve only heard rumors. Hushed references, memories spoken in past tense, as of the dead, but without the reverence. I stare at this girl—chin high in the moonlight—smiling as though her fate were not a burden. Could I ever be so bold? I open my mouth, but the wind picks up—*shhhhh*, *hushhhhh*—and I hesitate, so she speaks.

“Aren’t they heavy?” She nods to my necklaces and takes my grimace for an answer. “Why do you wear so many?”

I want to answer, but it’s hard to speak, even now. My mouth feels dry, so I wet my lips, then swallow the grit on my tongue. “The more the better, they say.”

“What do you say?” she asks immediately, and I blink at her, considering the question.

“Not much.”

Her lips quirk, but I hadn’t meant it as a joke.

“Who am I to argue with the doctors?” I say quickly. “I just want to be well.”

An expression flits across her face—something I can’t quite catch. “You’re heading west?”

“To Persia,” I say.

She nods, as though she’d guessed already. “That’s where I’m from.”

“What’s it like?”

“Good food.” Her eyes sparkle, but I’m not amused.

“I wasn’t asking about the food.”

She laughs—so loud in the night. Near the trough, the camels shift their weight. “It’s better than in the east, or so I hear. I’ve never been to your country, but I’ve met people who’ve fled. Cursed ones, like we are,” she adds, but in her voice it is a sisterhood rather than a conspiracy. “They come from all around, if they can afford to. All for the treatment.”

“And . . . what is the treatment?”

“Clean living,” she says simply. Then she looks me up and down. “Bad hygiene insults the gods.”

My eyes narrow—I get the impression she’s teasing me, and I’m suddenly very aware of the stains on my shirt and the sweat in my hair. Then again, it might just be the limits of our shared language—the trader’s tongue is a narrow bridge. And could that be why the amulets haven’t worked? “What does it mean? Clean living?”

“Exercise. Baths. Fresh air. Fruit. Easy enough to keep up on the road.” She looks at her fingernails, still red with juice. “Except for the baths.”

“Why did you leave?”

“Money,” she says simply. “We’re taking a load of linen east. Clean living isn’t cheap.”

“I know that.” I press my lips together, remembering all that we had to sell to come this far. How much farther did we have to go? “How long does it take?”

“What do you mean?”

“The treatment. Till you’re cured.”

Her eyebrows lift like wings. “Cured? No. There is no cure.”

“What?” My stomach twists. “But I thought—”

“There is no cure,” she says again. “The treatment is forever.”

“Forever?” I feel dizzy, so I sit heavily on the grass. My amulets clang. She kneels down beside me—a soft hand on my shoulder.

“Not so terrible, is it? At least, not as terrible as it could be.”

“But I’ll never be normal.”

“Normal?” She laughs. “What is that?”

I look at her, disbelieving—but in her face, I see something reflected—a memory of something else, something terrible. What else has she seen? *Shhhhh, hushhhh*. I look out at the desert, the sand sliding on the dunes, and the long road, silvered by the moon. My garden is back there somewhere. I’ve never felt farther from home, though we’re not even halfway to Persia.

“Didn’t you have another life, before all this? Something you want to go back to?”

The girl cocks her head. “It is all my life. Just different times.”

My heart slows. Perhaps we don’t have much in common after all. Suddenly I am so tired. I feel myself sinking into the sandy earth. Desperate, I look for hope. “Does it help, at least?”

“The treatment? A little.” Her voice is much softer now—she reaches out and brushes one of the amulets on my chest. “More than these do, anyway.”

“Then why do you wear one?” I say quickly. Then I feel it—a flush in my cheeks at my own rudeness. It’s been too long since I spoke—I am out of practice.

The girl only smiles, tucking her own amulet back into her shirt. “Because even if it doesn’t work, it reminds me that someone I love wishes it did. You must have a lot of people who love you.”

I look down at the mass of necklaces and take a deep breath under their weight—*chung, chung*. “This isn’t how I want to be reminded.”

The girl shrugs, as though she couldn’t say either way.

“Do you want to know what helps me most? More than amulets, more than clean living?”

I look up at her then, meeting her eyes. “Yes. Please.”

“Talking. Finding others like me. You’ll meet more on the journey.”

Is she lying? I consider it—do I feel better now, or worse? Worse, knowing there is no cure. But I would have learned that eventually. And it is better knowing I’m not alone. Still, I don’t know if I’m ready to tell her that, not just yet. Instead I make a face and grip the strands of my necklaces. “If this is a journey, I am a pack animal.”

“Let go of what doesn’t work, and find out what does. Try the exercise, maybe.” She wrinkles her nose. “And the baths.”

I laugh then—the first time in a while—and the sound is too loud in the night. Camels shift on their feet, and the cool air rings. “Have to get past the Takla Makan first.”

“The garden of the desert,” she says then. “We named it after the poplars, you know. Takli.”

I frown at her. “In Xi’an, we say it means the Place of No Return.”

“Taqlar?” She shakes her head and helps me to my feet. “The sound is similar, but the meanings are very different.”

The next morning I look for the girl, but I can’t find her. I wake slowly, eat slowly, pack slowly, but it is still early when we have to leave, and she has not yet come out of her tent.

Did I only imagine her, or will we meet again on the journey? If we do, I will have to ask her name.

The sun is bright but not yet overwhelming as we leave the oasis and travel down the road. Our shadows fly before us like arrows, as the camels fall into their steady pace, father first, then mother, and me behind.

Chung, chung, chung, chung. As we travel, I work my fingers into the knotted tangle, pulling one of the strands over my head. A piece of carved bone, warm on my palm. The piece my sister gave me. I bite my lip as I remember her expression—her eyes everywhere but on my face. As though what I had might leap through the air and take her by the throat if she looked me in the eye. This is not a memory I want to hang around my neck. And as the camel walks, I let the charm slide free, down into the sand.

Chung, chung, thump.

The next is a smooth wooden frog. Had I ever wanted to marry the merchant? Or was I only wedded to the idea of the life I'd expected?

Chung, chung, thoomp.

One by one I lift the amulets off my shoulders—a bit of brass, a rounded stone, a silk packet of faded herbs—and as they fall away into the dust, I am lighter with every step. I take a deep breath of fresh air—not better, not yet, but freer. I pull them off, piece by piece, lifting away the weight, until there is one left—one from my parents, shaped a little like an eye.

That one rests against my heart—a memento of their watchful care. I feel so light. A laugh bubbles up on my tongue, and Miloo senses it like she senses water. She stretches her long

legs with a ridiculous groan, and I am laughing in earnest now as the wind takes my hair. Suddenly we are flying west as the road stretches away before and behind, and all I can hear is the sound of my heart racing.

“Lihua!” My father’s voice tugs me back; I pull back on the rope and Miloo slows. Using the reins, I turn her in a circle to wait as my parents urge their own camels toward me. My father’s brow is furrowed at first, but a smile tugs at my mother’s lips when she sees my own. “Where are your amulets?” he calls, but he has already turned his eyes to the long road behind us, as though he knows I will not answer.

“I only need one,” I call back, and my voice is rusty but loud. “The others slow me down, and I’m eager to get to Persia.”

His head snaps up, and suddenly he is the one at a loss for words. But my mother kicks her camel forward, till she is eye-to-eye with me. “Understandable,” my mother says carefully. “What do you think we’ll find there?”

“Good food,” I say impulsively, and my father laughs then.

“Peacocks, too,” he adds. “And fountains.”

“Beautiful baths,” my mother says with longing.

“And people like me,” I add, and their smiles only deepen as they catch up. I take one last look east—back toward Xi’an—before I turn to join them, side by side as we journey on the long road.

Britt and the Bike God

KODY KEPLINGER

I'VE ALWAYS LOVED the climbs.

I love the pain in my legs. The feel of the handlebars gripped tightly beneath my gloved palms. My feet on the pedals, spinning and spinning and spinning as I tell myself that it's just a little bit farther, whether that's true or not. And then, just when I think I can't keep this up, the path begins to flatten out. And then it slopes downward.

And that's when I get to fly.

"Thank God," Lorna rasped from the captain's seat of the tandem. "I'm dying."

I balanced my feet on the pedals and pushed upward, standing with my hands still on the handlebars. I laughed as the wind whipped past, glad to relieve some of the pressure from my aching backside.

"Are you even tired?" Lorna demanded, then added, "Turning right," as we coasted around a bend in the path.

“You should probably go ahead and change gears,” I reminded her. “And I’m *a little* tired.”

She scoffed.

“To be fair, I’ve been riding this loop with Dad for years,” I told her. “I’m pretty used to Puckett Hill. Keep riding with us and you’ll get there.”

“We’ll see,” she said. “Gears should be good. I’m about to start pedaling again.”

I felt it when her feet began to move, and I tried to match her pace. It was slower than what I was used to, but that was okay. Lorna was new to the club, and at least I didn’t feel like I was holding her back.

That was one of the challenges of riding a tandem bike. It was easy for someone to not pull their weight. Or to push too hard and overpower their partner. The captain and the stoker have to find the right balance of speed and resistance. And, most important, communication.

Especially when the stoker—the person riding in back—can’t see.

We started coasting again, and I knew we were getting close to the park benches where the rest of the cycling club would be waiting for us.

“Don’t forget to count us down,” I said, “when we’re going to stop.”

“Right,” Lorna said. “Thanks for the reminder. Okay. In three . . . two . . . one.”

I put my foot down as the bike came to a halt. I hopped off the stoker’s seat and stretched before turning toward the benches. I only saw Dad when his pale face, slightly pink with

sunburn, was hovering only a couple of feet in front of me. He held out my cane and a cold bottle of water.

“Thank you,” I said, taking both from him.

“How was the ride?” he asked.

“Good. We did two loops, so about fourteen miles. Lorna is a good partner.”

“I don’t know about that,” Lorna said. I couldn’t see her, but when she spoke, I realized she was standing just to my left. And based on the swigging sound after her words, Dad had handed her a water bottle, too.

“I’m sure Britt’s telling the truth,” Dad said. “We’re glad to have you in the club, Lorna. And now that everyone’s back, I better go make sure we’re all prepped for the big ride tomorrow. Excuse me.”

When he was gone, I turned to Lorna. “I wasn’t lying, you know. You are a good captain. Usually it takes me much longer to train the newbies.”

Like a lot of the people in our cycling club, Lorna was a student at the local college. I’d only met her for the first time a few weeks earlier, when she’d showed up to one of our meetings at the park. Gabe, one of the other cyclists, had a class with her and had invited her to join. She may have been our newest member, but she really was fitting in pretty well.

She smiled. “Thanks, Britt.” She paused and raised a tanned arm to wipe sweat from her forehead before saying, “Can I ask you something?”

“You just did, but sure.”

“Is it scary? To ride in the back? I feel like it would freak me out to not have control of the bike.”

“Well, when you can’t see, the idea of having control of the bike freaks you out a little more.”

“Fair point, I guess.”

“I get what you’re asking, though,” I said, tucking my water bottle under my arm so I could use my free hand to unhook the chinstrap of my helmet. “And it used to. Back when I had more vision. I would sit on the stoker’s seat and try to turn the handlebars. I kept forgetting that I couldn’t actually do that. But I got used to it.”

“You’re brave,” Lorna said.

“I’m not,” I assured her, trying not to bristle. I hated being called brave. It was almost as bad as *inspiring*. “It’s not bravery. I just really like bikes.”

That was an understatement. Mom used to joke that I’d come out of the womb pedaling, and the reality wasn’t too far off.

Dad had been into cycling since he was a teenager, so the minute I was big enough, he bought my first tricycle. It wasn’t long before I got my first real bike, and only a few months after that that the training wheels came off. By the time I was seven, Dad was taking me out to the local bike path with him every day.

I wasn’t the fastest or the strongest, and, usually, I didn’t mind. It wasn’t about being the best for me. It was about that rush when I coasted down a big hill after a challenging climb. About the satisfaction of aching leg muscles the next day. It all felt like home. For me, cycling felt as natural as walking.

So when my vision first started to go, not being able to ride anymore was my biggest fear.

“We’ll deal with it as it comes,” Dad had promised me.

And for a while, it came slowly. Retinitis pigmentosa is gradual, but persistent. First to go were the night rides. Even with the lights along the bike path in Kuehn Park, it was too dark for me to see well enough to ride safely anymore. So Dad and I started riding in the mornings. And that worked for a while. But then the edges of my vision begin to creep inward. My field of vision steadily narrowed, until I was missing turns and not noticing other cyclists off to my left and right.

And that’s when Dad brought home Tandy.

Tandy was not your typical tandem bike. She wasn’t like the big, clunky things you see cute older couples riding on vacation. No. Tandy was a road bike. Slim and light and fast. She was a beautiful hunk of metal, and she’s what kept me pedaling—sight be damned.

It’s been three years since Tandy and I got together. She is my prized possession.

“How many miles did you get in?”

I turned and found myself almost nose to nose with Andre. He smiled at me, a grin so big and bright even the blind girl couldn’t miss it. It spread wide across his face, stretching the dark brown skin of his cheeks and causing his eyes to nearly disappear. I didn’t normally notice this much about other people’s smiles, but I’d spent way too much time using what little vision I had left looking at Andre.

Not that I was going to let him know that.

“Fourteen,” I said. “Just two laps. We got started a little late, though. What about you? Seventy miles?”

“I’m not *that* fast,” he said.

“Sixty-three, then?”

“Twenty-eight,” he said. “Four laps.”

“Oh no,” I teased. “Slow day. You’ll get ’em next time, Dre.”

He touched my arm when he laughed, and I thought I was going to die. Luckily, Lorna spoke up, distracting Andre from the fact that I was seconds away from melting into a puddle on the sidewalk.

“Andre,” she said. “You help with the bike maintenance, right?”

“Oh yeah,” he said. “Sorry, Lorna. I was being rude. Hope you had a good ride, too.”

“I did,” she said, a hint of amusement in her voice.

“And thanks for reminding me. I was coming over to ask—is everything good with Tandy? She ready for tomorrow’s ride?”

“For the most part,” I said. “The gears were jumping a little bit, but nothing too bad.”

“I’ll take a look just to be safe,” he said. “I don’t want her giving us any problems tomorrow.”

“Andre!” I recognized the voice as belonging to Sid, Andre’s roommate and one of the other cyclists in our little club. I couldn’t see him, but it sounded like he was a few yards away, off on the other side of the benches. “Did you stick that extra patch kit in your backpack?”

“Yeah,” Andre called back. “Just a second and I’ll grab it.” He turned back to me. “See you guys tomorrow. It’s gonna be great.”

“Bye, Andre,” Lorna said.

“Later,” I said.

Two years ago, Dad had decided to start a cycling club.

Partly because he liked riding with other people, but I think it mostly had to do with me. My high school didn't have any blind-friendly sports, and while I loved riding with my dad, sometimes I wished I had real teammates. People close to my age who loved the same sport I did. We lived in a college town full of cyclists, so it just sort of made sense.

A few of our members were older men and women, bike enthusiasts like Dad, but most were like Lorna, Sid, and Andre—college students. It was a mix of avid cyclists and newcomers just looking for a way to stay active. We accepted everyone. No skill level required. All we asked was that they let me teach them how to captain a tandem bike and, if they felt comfortable with it, volunteered to captain for me every once in a while.

Andre had joined about a year ago, at the start of his freshman year at the local university. And he was *good*. I'd been riding since I was a kid, but I was nowhere near as fast as Andre. He was by far the fastest on our team, which had won him a lot of favor with Dad. And the admiration of basically everyone else.

He was also a total bike nerd. After riding with us for about three months, he worked up the nerve to tell Dad that the mechanic everyone was paying to service our bikes was ripping us off. He wasn't fixing them properly so we'd just have to keep coming back to him. So Dad offered to pay him to take care of our bikes—and ask the rest of the club to hire him, too. Andre agreed. Our bikes had never been better.

Basically he was a nineteen-year-old Bike God.

A really attractive nineteen-year-old Bike God.

“So,” Lorna said once Andre had walked away. “When’s the wedding?”

“What? Never. No. Shut up.” I hoped that if anyone saw the blush creeping up my face, they’d just excuse it as a side effect of exercise.

She giggled but was quickly drowned out by Dad’s voice.

“Listen up, guys,” he said. “Tomorrow is the annual Lake Sussman ride, and all of you who signed up are now registered. As you know, there are three different course lengths, and we’ve got riders in all three. Start time is at nine a.m., but we should get there by eight at the latest. If you’re driving yourself, let me know, and I will make sure you have directions. Otherwise, be at my house by six to ride in the van. Talk to Andre if your bike needs anything before tomorrow morning. And remember, guys. This isn’t a race; it’s just a ride. So let’s keep it fun. Barbecue at my house afterwards.”

A few people cheered at that last bit.

I turned to Lorna and grinned. “So will I be riding with you tomorrow?”

“Sorry, Britt,” she said. “You said you were gonna do the fifty-mile course, and I just . . . cannot handle that yet. I’m nervous about the twenty. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I said. “I wonder who Dad put me with, then.”

Captains usually worked on a volunteer basis, and the same handful of people typically agreed to ride with me. Lorna, though new, was one of them. Sometimes Dad would just pick someone at random, which I hated because I didn’t want anyone to feel forced to ride with me. I’d told him that several times, but he didn’t change the system. He refused to let me be

left out just because no one volunteered. “Besides,” he always said, “no one minds riding with you at all. They’d tell me if it was a problem.”

But of course they wouldn’t. He was my dad. Even if they acted cool about it, I was sure that, inside, they were frustrated and resentful.

“Ready to go, kid?” Dad asked a minute later.

“All set,” I said. “But quick question. Lorna says she’s doing the twenty mile, so does that mean Gabe is riding with me tomorrow?”

“No. Gabe’s not doing the ride. I think he said his sister’s getting married.”

“Oh. Well, then who is my captain?”

“Right, I forgot to tell you. You’re riding with Andre.”

It felt like I’d been hit in the gut with a baseball bat. I wanted to be sick. Or maybe just to cry a little. Because doing a long-distance ride with Andre was literally the last thing I wanted.

I flashed back to our conversation about Tandy a few minutes earlier. When he’d said he didn’t want her to give us problems, I’d assumed *us* meant the team as a whole. But no. Oh God, he’d meant *us*, as in me and him, on a fifty-mile bike ride.

Don’t get me wrong, the idea of an afternoon spent with Andre, mostly alone, near a pretty lake? That sounded like a dream. Spending that day on a bike with him, though, was a nightmare.

I’d trained Andre to captain just like everyone else, but other than that lesson, I’d only really ridden with him once on one of the other annual rides a few months earlier. Dad had asked him to captain for me because none of my usual partners

could, and Dad himself was feeling a little sick and wasn't up to doing one of the longer courses. Andre, being a nice dude, had agreed, but it had been a disaster.

First, we had a hard time getting in sync. His legs moved faster than mine, so my feet kept slipping off the pedals. And I hate using shoe clips—I always have trouble getting in and out of them when I kick off or stop—so when he offered to let me use his, I'd said no. Then, in our effort to find a pace that worked for us both, we kept switching gears. Eventually the chain fell off, and we had to pull over to fix it. That was when I could tell he was getting frustrated. He didn't say anything. He was too much of a gentleman for that. But he did get very quiet, which was almost worse. When we finally got going again, I could tell he was slowing himself down for me.

I was a good cyclist, but I rarely averaged more than fourteen or fifteen miles an hour. Andre was a speed demon. He was probably used to being the first one to finish every ride. And while we hadn't been in an actual race, people obviously still compared times. We hadn't had the worst time, but we were far from the front of the pack.

I could tell he was disappointed, and he barely spoke to me the rest of the day. Later, when I'd tried to approach him to apologize for how things had gone, I overheard him talking to Sid.

“How was the ride with Britt?”

Andre had groaned. “A mess. I don't think I've ever ridden that bad.”

After hearing this, I'd turned around, too embarrassed to say anything.

Being a burden was the last thing I wanted. I felt like one a lot since losing my sight. Like I was inconveniencing the people around me. I felt like I was constantly working my ass off to keep up, to require as little assistance as possible. Not just in cycling, but every day. It was exhausting. And with Andre, I felt like I'd failed. I'd held him back. He'd had a miserable time because of me, and I didn't want to do it again.

But it didn't seem like I had much of a choice. If Dad had picked Andre, that meant no one else had volunteered, and riding with Dad wasn't an option. He'd agreed to be on van duty, ready to drive out and help anyone who might get stranded along the path. At least one of our bikes always broke down, and you had to have someone who knew what they were doing at the ready. This time it was Dad's turn.

Which meant that I was stuck with Andre.

Or, more accurately, he was stuck with me.

It's funny how when you are dreading something, it seems to come faster. It's like the opposite of biking up a hill. When you're doing a climb, you want to get to the top so badly, but it seems forever away. But when it's something you don't want, it rushes toward you.

Before I knew it, 6 a.m. was upon us, and I found myself piled into the van with Dad and about half of our cyclists. We had a trailer hitched to the back, housing our bikes, and the interior of the van smelled like coffee and bagels.

Andre wasn't riding with us. Sid had a car, so they were driving up to Lake Sussman together. Thank God for small mercies, I guess. The idea of spending two hours trapped in

the van with him, knowing he was dreading the ride as much as I was, would have been torture.

Andre was waiting for us when we got there, though. He didn't say much to me before the start time. He was busy checking everyone else's bikes, but I had a feeling he was probably avoiding me, too. I would never forgive Dad for this. He was seriously ruining the love life I'd invented in my head.

A voice came over a speaker, announcing that we'd be starting in fifteen minutes, and cyclists from other teams and clubs began getting into place. That's when Andre finally came over to me. He had on that big, dorky smile I loved. I appreciated the front he was putting on. It was just like him to try to make the best of this. But it only made me resent Dad even more for putting him in this position.

"Ready to go, Britt?"

"Sure," I said. "I'm . . . ready when you are."

I pulled my helmet on over my short hair, then took Andre's arm as he led me over to Tandy. Together we wheeled the bike toward the starting area. Once he was settled in the captain's seat, I climbed on the back. In theory, we should have been a good fit to be tandem partners. We were almost the same height—I'm on the tall side for a girl—but I was a little bit lighter, which helped when you were a stoker.

In practice, though . . .

The kickoff was a bit of a mess. I was so in my head that I didn't even hear him counting down for me. He pushed off the ground and I didn't. The pedals began spinning while my startled feet scrambled. We lost balance and had to try again. Something that almost never happened to me with other captains.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“It’s okay.”

But it wasn’t. People were already zooming past us. Five seconds in and I was already messing things up for Andre.

The second attempt was a success, at least. And once we got going, things went smoothly. At least for a while. Andre’s legs definitely moved faster than what I was used to, but I was able to match them at first.

We sped around corners and powered up hills, overtaking several other cyclists along the way. I loved imagining their faces when they realized the bike that had just zoomed past them was a tandem. Especially since most of them had probably seen us at the starting line and chuckled or thought, *That’s cute*. No one took tandem riders seriously—until you showed them how much faster you were.

But I couldn’t keep this kind of speed up for much longer. And I guess my fatigue was showing in how hard I was pedaling, because about thirty minutes into the ride, Andre said, “If I’m going too fast or if you want me to change gears or anything, just let me know.”

“No . . . no,” I said, though it came out through ragged breaths. “I’m fine. Just . . . ride like you would if you were alone.”

“But I’m not alone.”

“I know, but . . . don’t worry about me. I can . . . I can keep up.”

He didn’t buy it, though. Andre slowed down, almost by half. So slow that it only took a minute for a few cyclists to pass us. I was embarrassed. Was this how slow I seemed to him? Was this the pace he thought I could handle?

I pressed harder, forcing the pedals to spin faster. The thing about tandem bikes is either the captain or the stoker can really change the pace. Whoever is pedaling hardest takes control, which is why it's important to find a partner you can get a good rhythm with.

Typically, I just tried to match the pace of whoever my captain was, which wasn't usually that difficult. Most of the time I was the one slowing myself down a bit for the comfort of my partner. I liked it that way. That I could be an asset rather than a hindrance. It wasn't possible with Andre.

We couldn't seem to find a pace that worked. We'd go too fast then too slow. While I tried to prove how hard I could push and how quickly my legs could spin, he was trying to set a speed he thought would be comfortable for me—a snail's pace. Eventually, we were both confused and annoyed.

And I heard him in my head over and over, telling Sid what a mess the last time had been. How, with me, he'd ridden worse than he ever had.

"I'm sorry," I kept saying as other cyclists passed us. "I'm sorry . . . I'm sorry."

And then things got worse.

We were on a flat stretch when I noticed that something felt off. Tandy wasn't riding as smoothly as usual, and a second later I heard hissing from just behind me.

"We need to check the back tire," I said.

"Crap. Okay. Stopping in three . . . two . . . one."

We came to a stop at the edge of the road, right along a grass-covered hill. I hopped off the stoker's seat and reached out to touch the back tire. Sure enough, it was almost flat. I groaned.

“It’s fine,” Andre said. “I’ve got a hand pump and a patch kit in my backpack. Just give me a . . . oh. Damn it.”

“What?”

I could hear him rustling through the contents of his backpack as he muttered to himself. “Damn it. Damn it. I can’t believe . . .”

“What?” I asked again.

“So . . . I don’t actually have that pump.” He sighed. “I must have left it in Sid’s car. I’ve got a patch, but that won’t do us any good unless we can put some more air in the tire.”

“Oh.”

“Let me call your dad. He can bring something out here.”

I pulled off my helmet and sat down in the grass next to the road while Andre walked off. I could hear him talking on the phone now, his voice full of annoyance and frustration. I couldn’t blame him. As if riding with me wasn’t bad enough, now my bike had a flat, and we were stuck here until help came. This was definitely not how he’d wanted today to go, and it was all because he’d been forced to ride with me.

“I’m sorry,” I said when Andre got off the phone. He came over and sat next to me in the grass. I was glad he was on my left now, where I couldn’t see him.

“Why do you keep saying that?” he asked. “You’re not the one who forgot to pack a pump.”

“Yeah, but it’s my bike.”

“That . . . still doesn’t make sense,” he said. “Unless you poked a hole in the tire when I wasn’t looking.”

“No. Obviously. I’m just . . .” My fingers twisted in the grass, pulling a few blades loose. “I’m just sorry you got stuck with me.”

There was a long pause; then, in a quiet voice, he asked, “Why would you say that?”

“Say what?”

“That I got *stuck* with you.”

“Because you did. No one volunteered to captain, so Dad asked you.” I kept my eyes down. Never before had I been so grateful for tunnel vision. All I could see were the tops of my shoes. “And it was very sweet of you to agree, even though I know it’s annoying. I hate . . . *hate* feeling like a burden.”

“A . . . burden?”

“You don’t have to pretend. I’m not clueless, Andre.”

“All right, but maybe I am.” I felt his hand touch my shoulder. He’d taken off his gloves, and despite myself, I shivered at the feel of his skin on mine. “Britt, look at me. Why do you think you’re a burden?”

I sighed, and slowly turned to face him. “It was pretty clear last time we rode together. You were so frustrated, and I get it. I’m not as fast as you.”

“It wasn’t a race.”

“I know, but—”

“Britt, your dad didn’t ask me to captain for you today,” he said. “I told him I wanted to, like, a week ago.”

I stared blankly at him. “Why would you do that?”

His hand dropped from my shoulder, and he turned to look straight ahead. “A few reasons.”

“Like what? Last time was a disaster. I . . . heard you talking to Sid after. You said it was the worst you’d ever ridden.”

“Oh, man. I didn’t know you’d heard that. Britt, I didn’t mean that the way you think.” He sighed. “One reason I asked to ride with you is that I wanted to make up for last time.

You're right—I was frustrated, but not with you. I was frustrated with myself. There's a lot of pressure in being your captain, you know? If I screw up or have an off day, it ruins the ride for you. I wanted everything to be perfect. I wanted today to be perfect, too, but . . ." He groaned. "If anything, I'm the burden."

This revelation baffled me. I was the inconvenience, the blind girl who couldn't ride her own bike so she had to slow down someone else. At least, that's what I'd thought. But here Andre was, convinced it was the other way around somehow. I should've been relieved, but honestly I was just confused.

"Andre, I don't expect my captains to be perfect," I said. "I'm just glad to be riding most of the time. A few hiccups along the way aren't a big deal. You're my partner, not a burden."

He turned back to me. "Same to you," he said. "Britt, you're awesome. And funny. And really cute. And just as dorky about bikes as I am. I don't mind riding a little slower if it means riding with you. And anyone who treats you like a burden is an asshole. I'm sorry that's what you thought I was doing."

"We're going to come back to that *really cute* part in just a sec," I said as my heart did celebratory cartwheels in my chest. "But thank you. And on the flip side, you don't have to try extra hard to make things special for me. It's cool if things get rough sometimes. I don't want to be your charity case. I want to be your teammate. Okay?"

"Okay," he agreed.

I let out a breath as an invisible weight lifted from my shoulders. I knew I'd likely still worry about inconveniencing people. I'd spent too much time internalizing the comments

of others, the messages I'd picked up from movies and TV, maybe even my own perceptions of disability from before I lost my sight. I wasn't sure if I'd ever truly untangle it all, but it felt good to know that, maybe, there was at least one person I didn't have to worry about that with.

"And now," I said, "let's get back to the other thing."

That goofy smile spread across his face again. "Which other thing?"

"Don't be a tease," I said, shoving his arm playfully. "You said I'm really cute. I'd love for you to elaborate."

"Oh, come on. You know you're cute."

"But I had no idea you thought I was."

"Well, I do."

I felt like my grin might split my face. "You know, the feeling's mutual."

"So you also think you're cute?"

"I meant you, and you know it."

God I loved that goofy grin of his. And loved it more when it was directed at me like it was now.

"You said there were a few reasons you asked to ride with me today. As in more than one. So . . ."

"So," he said. "I *might* have been hoping I'd get a chance to do this."

He leaned in slowly enough that I could have stopped him if I'd wanted. But instead, I leaned in also. Perhaps a little too enthusiastically. We collided a bit sloppily at first, but Andre raised his hand to cup my cheek and righted us easily.

It wasn't a long kiss. Just a brief press of his lips on mine. But damn if it wasn't perfect.

When he pulled back, Andre said, “Please don’t tell your dad I did that. He’ll never let me captain for you again.”

I laughed, then reached forward and grabbed him by the neck of his jersey and pulled him to me for another kiss. This one was longer. Our mouths weren’t enough. Our hands were everywhere. His were on my legs, fingertips running along the edge of my bike shorts. Then they were up my arms, along my back, twisting in my short hair.

And then I was sliding down the zipper at the front of his jersey. Just a little bit. So I could touch my palm against his bare chest. His heart was beating fast, like he’d just pedaled up a long hill. Mine was pounding, too, but the climb was over, and now was the good part. Now we were flying.

He bit my bottom lip, and I giggled before shoving him playfully in revenge. He pulled me down with him, our mouths never separating. And that’s how I came to find myself rolling around in the grass with the Bike God.

Luckily, we had our wits together enough to pull apart and straighten ourselves up a bit before Dad arrived in the van.

“You two okay?” he asked while Andre patched the tire. “You seem a little off.”

“Fine,” I said, praying that my face wasn’t red.

“Mm-hm,” Andre mumbled.

Now that Dad had dropped off the tire pump, I wished he’d leave. I’d forgiven him for having me ride with Andre now that I knew it was Andre’s choice. But I still didn’t want to hang out with him five minutes after I’d been rolling around in the grass with the Bike God.

Dad, however, completely misread the awkward tension.

“I know it’s stressful when you have to stop like this,” Dad said. “But this kind of thing happens. You’ll be back on the road in no time. And remember, it’s not a race. It doesn’t matter when you finish.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I said.

When Tandy’s back tire was all patched and Dad was *finally* gone, Andre and I put our helmets back on and climbed onto our seats.

“You know,” I said as I spun my feet backward to get our pedals in the right position for kickoff. “It’s not a race, but I bet there are still quite a few people who haven’t caught up to us yet. Let’s at least kick their asses.”

Andre laughed. “Deal. Okay, taking off in three . . . two . . . one.”