

# HOLLIS

**THE PICTURE OF PAM HANGING OVER THE FIREPLACE WAS** like the portrait of Phineas Nigellus hanging over the headmaster's desk at Hogwarts. Watching. Judging. Pam was a perpetual presence, a denim-clad specter presiding over the suckfest that was Hollis Darby-Barnes's life.

Pam's eyes: the golden brown of a Siberian tiger.

Hollis's eyes: the brown of a dung beetle.

Pam's hair: the neat, feathered cap of an Olympic skater from the 1980s.

Hollis's hair: a blender experiment. Bon Jovi, the perm years.

Hollis wanted to rip Pam off the wall and throw her into the fireplace. Also, she wanted to throw Pam's cat into the fireplace. Pam's cat was named Yvette. She was fifteen—exactly a year older than Hollis—but unlike

Hollis, she had white, fluffy hair, a smashed-in face, and a problem with fur balls.

Hollis hardly remembered Pam. She wasn't biologically related to Pam. She felt no emotional connection to Pam whatsoever. And yet Hollis's mother continued to insist that Hollis share Pam's last name, Barnes. This, among a million other things, pissed Hollis off.

It pissed Hollis off that her mother still wore Pam's bathrobe. It pissed Hollis off that her mother referred to Pam as Hollis's "mom." It pissed Hollis off that even though Pam died seven years ago, her mother had yet to go on a single date. Worse than anything, it pissed Hollis off that her mother maintained Pam's Hotmail account. Because A) Pam was dead, and B) who the hell had a Hotmail account?

"Why?" Hollis would ask her mother every time she placed an order on Amazon as jBarnesie\_373@hotmail.com.

Her mother always gave the same answer: "Pam was the love of my life. It makes me feel better to know she's still here."

"But she's *not* still here," Hollis would say.

"When a package arrives with Pam's name on it, I feel like she is."

It was a freaking losing battle. Did Hollis want Pam's memory hanging around their house like a bad smell? No, she did not. But what could she do? Her mother was

all she had. Leigh Darby wasn't a bad mom as mothers went. She didn't do drugs. She didn't bring perverts home from bars. She didn't dress like a stripper. She made good money as a real estate agent. Every morning, Hollis's mother got up, took a shower, blew her hair straight, and put on a pantsuit. She poured cereal for Hollis. She went out into the world, smiled, and said things like "cozy three-bedroom" and "granite countertops."

Then she came home, put on Pam's bathrobe, and talked to the picture above the fireplace. "My feet are killing me, babe." Or, "Guess what, babe? I made a sale today!" Would Hollis's mother ever take Pam down and move on with her life? No, Hollis was certain she wouldn't. Even four years from now, when Hollis left for college, her mother would still be here, festering. So would Yvette, no doubt. That cat refused to die.

God, it was pathetic. Even more pathetic than the fact that today was December thirty-first and Hollis had no plans whatsoever for New Year's Eve.

"Honey?"

Hollis looked up from her cereal bowl. She gave her mother a blank stare.

"Pam just got an email."

This depressed Hollis even more. And pissed her off. "You know dead people can't get email, right?"

"It's from Milo Robinson-Clark."

Okay, wait. “What?”

Hollis’s mother smiled. “Milo Robinson-Clark is trying to get in touch with you.”

*Milo Robinson-Clark. Milo Robinson-Clark. Why does that name sound—* Oh God. Lodged in Hollis’s mind was the image of a little dark-haired boy on the other end of a seesaw. Train conductor overalls. A red juice mustache.

“That kid we met when Pam—”

Hollis’s mother nodded vigorously. “That’s right.”

“What were his moms’—?”

“Suzanne and Frankie.”

“Right,” Hollis muttered. Then, “Jesus.”

Milo Robinson-Clark emailed a dead woman. He emailed a dead woman to contact the girl he met once, a million years ago, on the other end of a seesaw. This made no sense. It only made sense if he didn’t know Pam was dead, and even then—

“How does that make you feel?” her mother asked. She sounded like the stupid grief counselor Hollis had been forced to see after Pam died. *Draw a picture of your feelings, Hollis. Use this puppet to have a conversation, Hollis. How does that make you feel, Hollis?*

How did Hollis feel about her sperm donor’s son suddenly popping up in Pam’s Hotmail inbox? She felt weird, that’s how she felt. She felt weird all over. Hollis barely

remembered meeting Milo Robinson-Clark. She'd been, what, six years old? There was a photo somewhere.

The whole thing had been Pam's idea. Right after her ovarian cancer diagnosis, Pam had tracked down Milo's moms through some lesbian life partner/sperm donor website. Hollis wasn't exactly sure how it worked, except that sperm donors had ID numbers, and her donor's ID number and Milo's donor's ID number matched, so that's how Pam and Leigh and Suzanne and Frankie found each other. The four moms had conducted a reunion of sorts. There was a playground. A picnic. Hollis vaguely remembered brownies.

And then Pam got sick, like really fast, and that was the end of that. Because Hollis's mother was swept up in caring for Pam and then she was swept up in grieving for Pam, and Hollis never saw her half brother again.

Half brother. God.

Hollis was struck, once again, by the bizarre nature of her existence. Most of the time she just futzed along through life—going to school, doing her homework, eating and sleeping and reading—and then, out of nowhere, a lightning bolt would strike.

*I was conceived in a petri dish.*

*My father is out there.*

*I have a half brother.*

“Jesus,” Hollis muttered again. “Why does he want to get in touch with me?”

Her mother shook her head. “He doesn’t say.”

“He *doesn’t say?*”

“I have it right here.”

“What?”

Her mother held up a piece of paper. “The email. I printed it out.”

Hollis felt her stomach tense.

“*Dear Pam,*” her mother began reading, with no regard. “*My name is Milo Robinson-Clark.*”

No forethought.

“*I got your email from my mom Suzanne.*”

Still no indication whatsoever from Hollis that she wanted to hear this.

“*You may not remember me, but we met seven and a half years ago in Brooklyn, where I still live. Your daughter, Hollis, and I have the same sperm donor. Which is actually why I’m writing. I’m hoping you’ll pass this message along to Hollis and tell her that I’d like to hear from her. She can email or text or call me, whatever works. Or I can email or text or call her, if you send me her info. Thanks. Hope you and Leigh are both well. Milo.*” Hollis’s mother looked up. “So?”

Hollis stared at her.

“What do you think?”

“What do I *think?*”

“Do you . . .” Her mother hesitated. “Would you like me to give him your email address or your cell phone number so he can contact you?”

Hollis picked up her spoon and shoved a massive bite of Froot Loops into her mouth. Chewed, swallowed, shoved in another bite. “Whatever,” she said finally, spraying cereal chunks onto the table.

Hollis’s mother hated the word *whatever*. She called it a passive-aggressive conversation-blocking tool, but this time she didn’t comment. This time, for some crazy reason, she took it to mean, *Do whatever you want*. Which is why, ten hours later—when Hollis’s mother went to pick up Chinese food and Hollis was lying in her bed, staring at the ceiling—Hollis’s phone pinged from the pocket of her hoodie.

She checked: area code 917. She read: Hey. It’s Milo.

Hollis almost laughed. It was such a casual text, like they weren’t on a hyphenated-last-name basis. Like it wasn’t completely absurd and random for her sperm donor’s other kid to suddenly be contacting her when they only met once, a million years ago, on a seesaw in Brooklyn.

Hey, Hollis texted back anyway.

Happy almost new year.

To u too.

How r u?

Ok.

How r your moms?

Um Leighs good. Pams dead tho.

O shit. I didn't know.

No biggie. It was 7 years ago.

It occurred to Hollis that it was rude of her mother not to let Suzanne and Frankie know that Pam had died. Because, well, wasn't there some protocol for informing your biological daughter's half brother's lesbian moms that your own lesbian partner was dead?

Hollis stifled a snort. This was so *weird*.

I know this is weird, Milo Robinson-Clark texted.

Hollis was so spooked she sat up. It was like he had read her mind or something, which clearly he hadn't, because how could he read her mind? It's not weird.

No?

No.

Well it's about to get weird cuz I have something to tell u.

Ok.

R u ready?

Yes.

I've decided to find r sperm donor.

Breath caught in Hollis's throat. She stared at her phone. She read the text again just to make sure she'd read it right. Then she exhaled. Y?

Medical reasons.

R u ok?

Yes.

Do u need a kidney?

No.

Bone marrow?

No.

???

It's complicated.

Hollis waited. If Milo Robinson-Clark wanted to tell her about his mysterious medical condition, he would. And apparently he did not, because his next text read, R u in?

In?

For finding r donor?

Okay, wait. WTF. Hollis's heart was suddenly pounding so fast she needed to lie back down. She tried not to think about this. She tried not to let these thoughts infiltrate her mind. *I am a freak of nature. I am a lab experiment. I am only half a person.* Most of the time she succeeded. But sometimes, just sometimes, she fantasized about tracking down her donor, setting up a time and a place to meet, and then—right after she said “Hi, I'm Hollis”—slapping him across the face.

Because Hollis was pissed at the guy. She didn't even know him and she was pissed. Even if he did donate out

of the goodness of his heart to help lesbians make babies. The way Hollis was “made” was fast, cold, and impersonal. Her existence had nothing to do with love. And if you’re not going to make a baby out of love, at least have a one-night stand with some hot stranger you met at the Laundromat. At least then there’s human contact. A connection between two people. It isn’t fair to just go and squirt your jiz in a cup, take your cash, and then not even *think* about where your DNA is going and who might be affected.

Hollis’s phone pinged. Pls? I don’t want to do this alone.

Milo Robinson-Clark did not want to find their sperm donor alone. He wanted Hollis to join him. He was offering her a chance—a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to meet her genetic father, to have all of her unanswered questions answered. Hollis would be crazy not to take it, wouldn’t she?

But no, hell no, sorry, no. The anger that was usually just simmering beneath the surface of Hollis’s skin now rose like a tidal wave, taking all good things with it.

I’m out.

Hollis texted the words. Then, for good measure, she chucked her phone across the room and cracked a picture frame. Which made her feel a little better. But not much.

# MILO

## HOW TO EXPLAIN?

- 1) His immune system was a paranoid schizophrenic.
- 2) A peanut was not just a peanut; it was an enemy combatant to which there was only one response: Attack! Attack!
- 3) He was fifteen years old and he was a prisoner of war.

Okay, maybe that was too dramatic. Milo wasn't literally imprisoned. He was just allergic to dairy, eggs, wheat, gluten, all melons, citrus, tomatoes, potatoes, peanuts, tree nuts, coconut, fish and shellfish, soy, and casein. He occasionally—but only occasionally—had to be hospitalized for an allergic reaction. There was that time in sixth grade when he'd eaten a coconut bar on his class camping trip. He had asked the head teacher, who had asked the

mom who made the bars, if they were okay for him to eat. Lists were checked and double-checked. Milo had been *assured* that the bars were safe. No one knew about the coconut. He had never eaten coconut before, and he had never been tested for it. He had no idea he was allergic until he took a bite of coconut bar and his throat closed up.

That visit to the hospital had been crazy. Random details still floated around Milo's brain: the starfish ring on the nurse's finger, the antiseptic taste of the tube they jammed down his throat, the crushing pain in his chest as he gasped for air and found none. Had there been a light, or a tunnel of some sort? If there had, he didn't remember it. But in the moment when he woke up and Suzanne and Frankie were hugging him, crying and laughing, he knew that he had dodged a bullet. According to the attending physician, Milo had been clinically dead for three minutes.

There had been lesser reactions. Times he had needed to use an inhaler because his chest was tight, or an EpiPen because his mouth was suddenly tingling and his lips were swelling up like balloons. Milo was used to it. Used to wearing a medical alert bracelet. Used to checking ingredients. Used to carrying Benadryl and epinephrine at all times. If he ate the wrong thing, he could die.

Milo knew this and, for the most part, acknowledged

that being alive was preferable to being dead. But sometimes he just wanted to eat pizza and french fries like a normal teenager. He wanted not to be the skinniest kid in the locker room. He had been called Twiggy since he was ten years old. Or Skeletor. Or Skindiana Bones. There were so many good nicknames. It was hard to pick a favorite.

Milo knew he wasn't alone. His moms—growing up gay in the Midwest—had endured their share of name-calling. They'd told him all about it. *Dykes! Carpet munchers!* They had suffered, Milo was sure, more than he ever had. Still, could they blame him for wanting his life to be easier?

The TGFB1 gene. That's what Milo's allergist had mentioned at his last appointment. Dr. Daignault was referring to a new study reported in *Science Now*, suggesting that a single genetic aberration of the "transforming growth factor beta 1" could explain everything from hay fever to food allergies to asthma. One mutated gene could be responsible for Milo's whacked immune system—one mutated gene that he didn't get from Frankie because they shared no DNA, and he didn't get from Suzanne because she wasn't allergic to anything. "What about Milo's biological father?" Dr. Daignault had asked as Milo and his moms sat on the hard orange chairs in his office. "Any known allergies?"

“Lactose,” Suzanne had answered. “And ragweed pollen.”

“Anything else?”

“Not as far as we know.”

“Have you considered asking Milo’s biological father for some genetic testing? Could be instructive.”

Ask his father for genetic testing? It was one of those crazy moments when Milo heard the word “father” and remembered that he actually had one. Not just a sperm donor: a *father*.

Suzanne and Frankie had been open about his conception since Milo was a little kid. “A good and generous guy gave us some seeds so we could grow you!” The story sounded a lot like “Jack and the Beanstalk”: mysterious man, magic seeds. A fairy tale. For a long time, whenever Milo thought of his donor, he pictured a giant in the sky, strumming his golden harp. It was stupid, he knew. Juvenile. Just like it was juvenile to walk through Park Slope looking at all the dads and wondering if one of them could be his. There was no logic to it. For one thing, the sperm that made Milo came from a cryobank in Minnesota—where Frankie had gone to graduate school and where, presumably, Milo’s donor still lived—so the odds of him walking around Brooklyn were slim. Also, Milo had never seen a picture. Did the guy have a beard? Glasses?

They could pass each other on the street and not even know they were related.

There was a baby album. Pictures of Suzanne pregnant with Milo, lounging on a beach chair, a glass of lemonade perched on her high, swollen belly. Suzanne looked different then. Softer. Her hair hadn't gone gray yet. It was long and chestnut colored, and she wore it in a thick braid down her back. Her face, normally sharp and angular, looked round. There were pictures from the actual birth, Milo covered in slime—which he could do without—and about a million pictures of both his moms holding him, kissing him, feeding him, burping him. Frankie looked the same. Short and stocky, with flaming red hair cut close to her scalp and spiked up in front. There was a series of shots of Frankie holding Milo against her chest, tucking his little bald head under her chin. Milo liked looking at those pictures, but they weren't the big draw. In the back of the album there was a pocket. And in that pocket was the personal profile for Donor #9677.

**Race:** Caucasian.

**Ethnicity:** Scottish-Italian.

**Religion:** Open-minded.

Milo must have read that piece of paper a thousand times. This man was his *father*. He was, according to the profile, six feet tall. He had hazel eyes. His hair, like Milo's,

was dark, thick, and curly. Did he have to get it cut every four weeks to avoid looking like a mushroom? Did he also have dark, thick eyebrows? What about body hair? These were the little things Milo wondered about. The big things—the TGFBI gene, whether his father had been skinny, or nerdy, or a failure with girls, whether he ever wondered where his sperm went—stacked up in Milo’s brain like blocks, threatening to topple. There were so many questions.

Suzanne and Frankie were an open book; they always had been. Everything they knew about Milo’s donor, they’d shared with Milo. Nothing was hidden. Nothing was shameful. If anything, his moms were proud of the choice they’d made. Every Father’s Day, they sent a card to the Twin Cities Cryolab and flowers to Dr. Carroll, the obstetrician who had performed Suzanne’s insemination. They showed up for Family Day at Milo’s elementary school with a poster board collage about sperm donation. They even included a photo of Hollis Darby-Barnes, Milo’s half sister. Hollis Darby-Barnes, whom—for reasons Milo wasn’t entirely sure of—he had just texted.

The idea sprang out of nowhere. Not, in truth, because of his appointment with Dr. Daignault, but because Milo was mad at Frankie for telling him he couldn’t go to JJ Rabinowitz’s New Year’s Eve party. Frankie was a certified helicopter mom and JJ was a professional screw-up,

who yesterday had left a baggie of pot in his open backpack right there on Milo's bed where Frankie could find it.

Frankie had tried to call JJ's parents, but they were in Europe. So she flushed the pot down the toilet, which was tantamount to flushing Milo's friendship with JJ down the toilet.

"I'm sorry, kiddo," Frankie told Milo after JJ left. "I'm just doing my job as a responsible mother." She had tried to give Milo a hug, to show that she was on his side, but the damage was already done. There would be no New Year's Eve party at JJ's—or rather, there *would* be a New Year's Eve party at JJ's, but Milo would not be going.

"Why are you punishing *me* for JJ's weed?" he demanded.

"I'm not punishing you," Frankie said. "I'm protecting you. JJ doesn't make good choices."

Frankie wasn't wrong. How many times had JJ come to school baked this year? But that was beside the point.

"You don't trust me," Milo said. "You don't believe I can make my own decisions."

"I do trust you, but my job as a parent isn't to be your friend. My job is to keep you safe."

Frankie really believed what she was spouting, but that didn't make Milo any less mad. He wanted to say it—the one thing that he knew would hurt her: *You're not my real*

*mother, and I don't need to listen to you.* If he were to be very honest with himself, sometimes he actually felt this way. Suzanne was his real mother. It was her egg. She grew him. Her vote should count for more. If Suzanne weren't married to Frankie, she would let Milo go to JJ's party. Heck, she would join him.

Because of Frankie, Suzanne was stuck at home playing Scrabble on New Year's Eve. Right now, Milo could hear her shouting from the kitchen. " 'Za' is not a word!"

"Yes, it is," Frankie said calmly, "and it's worth thirty-two points."

"You're full of it!"

"You're welcome to challenge me."

"Milo!" Suzanne shouted.

Milo heard his mother but didn't answer. If he ignored her, maybe she would move on to the dictionary and leave him alone. He had enough to think about right now. Like how Hollis would respond to his text. **Pls? I don't want to do this alone.** Did he sound pathetic? He sounded a little pathetic.

"Milo!" Suzanne hollered.

Milo sighed and slid his phone into his pocket.

Suzanne was in a mood. She wanted to go dancing at the Cubbyhole, to "ring in the New Year right," just as Milo wanted to "ring in the New Year right" at JJ's party. Suzanne was ticked, Milo knew, not about the word *za*,

but because she could be break-dancing on the bar right now. But no. Now that Frankie knew about JJ's party, she suddenly wanted a "quiet night at home," and Suzanne rarely said no to Frankie. When Frankie said go to bed earlier, Suzanne went to bed earlier. When Frankie said eat more kale, Suzanne ate more kale. Frankie wasn't just Suzanne's wife or Milo's mom; she was their jailer.

Even when you presented a logical argument, like the one Milo had presented yesterday—*If you let me go to JJ's party, I won't drink beer. You know I won't; I'm allergic to gluten*—Frankie wouldn't listen. She had been this way for as long as Milo could remember. Overprotective. Smothering. "A buzz kill," as JJ would say.

"You'll thank me one day," Frankie said.

*I'll thank you one day?* Ha! It was one of those times when Milo wished he had a brother or sister, it didn't matter which, just someone to turn to and say, "Can you believe this crap?" He had said it to his English springer spaniel. "Can you believe this crap, Pete?" But Pete had just looked at Milo with his usual befuddled expression.

That was when the idea came to him. That moment, right there.

Milo had gone to Suzanne's desk, and he had turned on her computer, and he had found the email address for Pamela Barnes. *You may not remember me, but we met seven and a half years ago . . .* He had typed the message, and he

had sent it. As big life decisions went, this one hadn't been particularly well thought-out, but Milo didn't care. He just did it. He set the wheels in motion.

Now, while Milo was on his way to the kitchen to tell Suzanne that *za* was short for *pizza*—and it was, in fact, a legal Scrabble word—he heard a ping. He grabbed his phone from the pocket of his jeans.

I'm out. That's what the text said.

Milo didn't know what he'd been expecting, really. *I'm in?* Or a bunch of thumbs-up emoticons? Hollis Darby-Barnes wasn't exactly a known entity. They'd only met once, when Milo was in second grade. But still, this was their sperm donor they were talking about. Their *father*. Milo would be lying if he said he wasn't disappointed. Because . . . come on. Wasn't she even curious?

"Milooo!" Suzanne hollered again.

She would never shut up. Suzanne was like the lion at the Bronx Zoo, roaring and roaring from boredom. She couldn't stand being penned in. She needed to be on the African plains with the other lions.

*This is bullshit*, Milo thought. *It's New Year's Eve.*

Forget his moms.

Forget Hollis Darby-Barnes.

He was going out.

# HOLLIS

**HER PHONE BUZZED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT. SHE** glanced at the clock on her bedside table. 12:07. Only seven minutes into the New Year and they were already at it.

*Buzz, buzz.*

Hollis didn't need to look at her phone. She knew who it was. There were these girls from school—not Shay and Gianna, who Hollis sat with at lunch and sometimes hung out with on weekends. These girls weren't her friends, not even close. They were known to call in the middle of the night. Hollis usually powered down her cell before bed so she wouldn't have to deal. Whatever they had to say to her—*Happy New Year, Slut!* or *Skank it up in '16!*—it would sound worse in the dark than it would in the daylight. Lately, Hollis had been erasing the voicemails

without even listening. There would be plenty more where those came from. Texts. Tweets. Instagrams. The hits just kept on coming.

*Buzz, buzz.*

She'd let it go. It wasn't like her mother could hear the phone vibrate. Leigh was downstairs, conked out on the couch in front of the fireplace, where she slept every New Year's Eve so she could ring in the New Year with Pam and her stupid cat.

*Buzz, buzz, buzz.*

Jesus. Didn't they have anything better to do tonight?

Hollis grabbed her cell off the bedside table and, without even glancing at the screen, pressed it to her ear. "What do you want?" *Slut. Skank. Ho.* It would be one of the three. They weren't very original, these girls. Hollis would respect them a lot more if they called her something with pizzazz. *Floozy. Trollop. Harlot. Strumpet.* There were so many better—

"Hollis?"

A boy's voice. Not Gunnar's. A voice she couldn't place.

"Who is this?" she said.

"What?" There was noise in the background. A lot of noise.

"Who is this?" Hollis said again, louder.

"Milo."

Hollis felt a jolt of—what? Surprise? Relief? She wasn't sure. "Where are you?" she said.

"Party. Big party. Hollis?"

"Are you drunk?"

"A little."

"Should you be drinking, with your medical condition?"

"Probably not. But listen—"

"I'm listening."

"I've been doing some research."

"Yeah?" She was thirsty. She could still taste moo shu shrimp on her tongue, remnants of the Lamest New Year's Eve Ever.

"Hollis?" Milo Robinson-Clark said. "We're not the only ones."

That was the thing about Chinese food. It tasted good while you were eating it, but then, hours later—wait. "What?"

"There's this website," Milo said. He sounded like he'd raised his voice, but the noise in the background still made it hard to pick out, so Hollis pressed the phone closer to her ear. "The Donor Progeny Project."

"What?" Hollis said. Not because she hadn't heard him. She heard, but *what was he telling her?*

"He has five kids. There are five of us."

# MILO

**HE WOKE UP IN HIS OWN BED, STILL WEARING HIS CLOTHES** from last night. Fully functional except for his tongue, which felt like it was wearing a sweater. *The vodka.* He'd brought a bottle of vodka to the party as a peace offering, to make up for Frankie flushing JJ's weed down the toilet. How much had he drunk . . . three shots? Four? The taste had been awful at first, like battery acid, but when the heat hit Milo's chest, then his belly, suddenly it was like his whole body—every cell, every follicle—was filled with warmth, and he realized, standing on JJ's coffee table, surrounded by dancing bodies, that *this is why people drink.*

Someone was knocking on the door. Milo felt a moment of panic. He'd left the apartment after his moms were asleep, but when had he come home? *How* had he

come home? His memory was hazy. Maybe Suzanne and Frankie had slept through it, but Milo was still in his clothes. This would raise suspicion. And if it didn't, the missing bottle certainly would. He'd taken it from the cabinet above the refrigerator—a full liter of Grey Goose—and he hadn't even thought about how he would replace it. He'd *stolen* Suzanne's vodka.

Pete, who had been asleep at the foot of the bed, now looked at Milo with woeful eyes. Pete knew.

Milo had never stolen anything in his life. He'd never snuck out. He'd never drunk alcohol. JJ had. JJ was a master delinquent, but not Milo. How to explain? The fact was that until this week Milo had never been invited to a party. Okay, this wasn't strictly true: he had been invited to parties when he was younger—birthday parties, the ones thrown by parents, where the whole class got invited and everyone went home with a balloon. But all that stopped in seventh grade. Groups formed. Sports teams. Kids Milo had hung out with in elementary school started drifting away with other kids. It didn't happen overnight, but that's how it seemed. One day he had friends and the next he was . . . well . . . the weird, skinny kid eating beets in the cafeteria when everyone else was eating pizza bagels.

JJ was new this year—a transplant from the Buckley School. JJ was tall, good-looking, and loaded. The fact

that he'd chosen Milo as a lab partner was as much a mystery to Milo as to anyone. But he had. And he'd invited Milo to his New Year's Eve party—the first high-school party Milo had ever been invited to—and Milo wasn't about to let something as trivial as an overprotective mother stop him from going to his first high-school party.

“Milo?” Frankie's voice. Door opening. Pete, lifting his furry head in anticipation. *Treat? Walk?*

*Crap*, Milo thought. *Crap, crap, crap.*

It wasn't just Frankie walking into his room; it was Suzanne, too. Both his moms in their pajamas. Frankie in her brown fleece robe, Suzanne in some multicolored silk number, bare feet pointed out like she was about to teach a ballet class. Frankie pulled the swivel chair over from Milo's desk and sat. Suzanne perched on the bed beside Pete, pelican legs folded beneath her.

“Hello, Pete,” Suzanne said, giving his nose a pat. Then, “Hey, kiddo.”

Milo nodded. He didn't trust his voice.

Frankie slid her hand into the pocket of her robe, and when she pulled it out, she was holding Milo's phone.

“You want to tell us what's going on with you?” she said. Where to begin?

The truth was, Milo hadn't had a real conversation with either of his moms since before seventh grade. Not about anything that mattered. And he wasn't about to start now.

What good would it do? Suzanne and Frankie didn't want to hear about him changing for gym in the bathroom stall to avoid comments about his chicken chest. They didn't want to hear that he got a boner every time he saw Hayley Christenson walk down the hall. And anyway, did Milo want another "open dialogue" about puberty from his mothers? Did he want another "masturbation is healthy" proclamation at the dinner table? Hell no. What Milo needed was a man to talk to. Not Dr. Dagnault. Not his moms' gay friend Charles, who once took Milo out for ice cream in an attempt to jump-start—at Suzanne and Frankie's request—a painfully awkward conversation about male anatomy. Milo needed a father. He felt guilty for thinking this, because even though they drove him crazy, he loved his moms and didn't want them to think that they weren't enough.

Milo tried to shrug his shoulders under the blanket, without revealing his clothes. "Nothing's going on with me."

"Let's talk about these texts," Frankie said, cupping Milo's phone in her hand.

Milo closed his eyes. This was the deal he'd made when they first bought him a phone: full parental access. They had his password. They had his consent to monitor all activity. He'd signed a *contract*.

"Texts?" he said, playing for time. His stomach was

flipping around like crazy. Had he done something stupid last night? Had he inadvertently forwarded a naked photo to the whole school? Or, worse, had someone at the party taken his phone and done something to mess with him? This was entirely possible.

“The 612 number,” Frankie said.

*The 612 number?* Milo opened his eyes. His mouth was so dry. He would kill for a glass of water.

“Honey.” Suzanne squeezed Milo’s leg through the blanket. “Why didn’t you tell us you were in touch with Hollis Darby-Barnes?”

Milo almost laughed. Here he was, afraid that his moms had found out about the party—the sneaking out, the vodka, some idiot thing he’d done with his phone while he was drunk—and all they were talking about was Hollis Darby-Barnes. They’d seen his text asking Hollis to help find their sperm donor, and her text back to him saying—wait a minute . . . a memory was forming in the back of Milo’s mind. JJ’s bedroom . . . JJ’s laptop . . . the Donor Progeny Project. Had he really gone onto that website last night and plugged in his information?

To his mothers, Milo croaked, “He has five kids.”

Frankie gave him a funny look. “Who does?”

“My sperm donor.”

Suzanne let go of his leg. “You started looking?”

“Yeah,” Milo said. “I started looking.”

They'd talked about it, the three of them. Right after the appointment with Dr. Daignault they'd gone out to lunch at Taco Pacifico—one of the few restaurants in Brooklyn where Milo could eat safely—and discussed the possibility of finding his donor. Suzanne had been pretty cool about it, but Frankie was another story.

“*Instructive?* He thinks it would be *instructive* to ask this man we've never met to undergo genetic testing?”

“Information gathering, Frankie,” Suzanne said calmly. “That's all Dr. Daignault is suggesting.”

“Opening a can of worms is what he's suggesting.”

“It's a noninvasive procedure. It's a Q-tip swab on the inside of the cheek.”

“That's not the point.”

“Ma,” Milo said to Frankie. “Didn't you hear what he said? There was a whole article written about this gene. My donor might carry the mutation.”

“And?”

“And that could explain why I'm allergic to everything.”

“And?” Frankie persisted.

“And . . . I don't know . . . it might help me.”

“How?”

“What?” Milo said.

“How would it *help you* to know that he carries this aberrant gene? *If* he actually does.”

Milo didn't have an answer for that. And even if he did, Frankie wasn't in a listening place. Frankie was off and running.

“Here's what I don't get . . . I'm unclear on how finding your sperm donor is actually going to *benefit* you. If I knew that it would . . . oh, honey, of course I would say let's track this guy down. I would pin him to the floor and swab his mouth with a Q-tip myself. But it's not like finding him is going to make an anti-allergy pill appear out of the blue.”

“I know that,” Milo said.

“It takes *years* to develop drugs.”

“I know.”

“You're not going to find him and suddenly be able to eat a peanut butter sandwich.”

Suzanne had stopped her right there. She said Frankie needed some air. She said Frankie needed a margarita. But later that night, when Milo was in bed, he could hear his moms arguing again.

FRANKIE: He's too young!

SUZANNE: He's not a little kid anymore, babe. It's his decision.

FRANKIE: It can be his decision when he's eighteen.

SUZANNE: It's not about age, Frank. It's about medical history. It's his birthright to know where he came from.

FRANKIE: Easy for you to say. You're his biological mother.

SUZANNE: Did you seriously just go there?

FRANKIE: Yeah. I did.

SUZANNE: You're as much his mother as I am. You know that.

FRANKIE: Am I?

SUZANNE: (Silence)

FRANKIE: Am I really?

SUZANNE: Come on, Frankie. This isn't about your ego. It's *his choice*. You agreed to this when we decided to use a donor. You knew this day would come.

FRANKIE: So—what? You're saying we should just go ahead and let our fifteen-year-old get in touch with a complete stranger on the off chance that this guy has some genetic mutation? A mutation that scientists in this one study *theorize* might be connected to food allergies?

SUZANNE: Yes. That's exactly what I'm saying.

\* \* \*

Now, in Milo's room, they were both looking at him. Frankie from the swivel chair, Suzanne from the edge of his bed. Milo looked at the ceiling, avoiding eye contact. Frankie didn't know what Suzanne and Milo knew. Frankie had no idea, but when Milo was thirteen Suzanne had told him about the Donor Progeny Project. She'd explained how the site worked. She'd said that he was officially a member. The login name and password—whenever Milo was ready to use them—would be his and his alone. Suzanne had handed Milo an envelope. She'd asked him to please not tell Frankie until he had actually decided to start searching. In the meanwhile, Suzanne had said, there would be no reason to cause Frankie undue pain. Which was bullshit, Milo thought now. Cause *Frankie* pain? What about *Milo's* pain? What about Milo spending his entire life without a father? Fifteen years without a man to talk to? No one to show him how to tie a tie, or how to shave, or how to ask a girl out?

Milo had kept the envelope in his sock drawer for a while, until he'd realized that Frankie sometimes rearranged things when she put away his laundry. So he'd folded the envelope into thirds. He'd stuck it in his wallet. He'd carried it around with him for over a year, and he never opened it. Until last night, at JJ's party, after he'd drunk an indeterminable amount of vodka.

Milo peeled his eyes away from the ceiling and looked

at his moms. He didn't know what to say. Or rather, he did know what to say, but he couldn't say it out loud. Deep down, Milo knew why he'd gotten on the DPP website last night. Did he really expect to find a cure for his allergies? No. How would it *help him* to know if #9677 carried this aberrant gene? Maybe it wouldn't. Maybe he was just looking for an excuse to start looking.

There. He'd admitted it. He wanted to find his father. Was Frankie capable of hearing this? No chance. Suzanne would be okay, but not Frankie.

Milo's head was starting to ache. His mouth was a desert. All he wanted was water.

"I need a drink," he rasped.

"Don't we all," Frankie said drily.

# HOLLIS

**FATE. KARMA. DESTINY. IT WAS ALL CRAP, AND YET HOLLIS'S** mother was convinced that the email from Milo Robinson-Clark to jBarnesie\_373@hotmail.com was Pam's work. Pam, reaching out from the grave—just as she had once reached out in life—to bring Hollis and her half brother together.

This is what Hollis discovered on New Year's morning, when she shuffled into the kitchen and found her mother waiting for her. "Happy New Year," Leigh said. She was smiling, which was weird enough. She was fully dressed. And, weirder still, she had made some slimy-looking egg dish.

The sight of pans on the stove was so rare it actually spooked Hollis. Her mother never cooked. Pam had

been a chef, so when she was alive she did all the cooking. Pam had owned a restaurant in Maple Grove called Figs. That's where she and Leigh had met. After Pam died, Hollis's mother stopped appreciating food. She made sure Hollis was fed, but meals were usually takeout, and breakfast was always cereal.

Hollis stared at the disgusting egg dish. "What the . . ." she muttered.

"Pam loves eggs Benedict."

Hollis shot her mother a look. Did she even realize she'd used the present tense? It pissed Hollis off, but she didn't have the energy to fight. She didn't have the stomach for eggs, either. Between last night's moo shu shrimp and the bombshell from Milo Robinson-Clark, Hollis felt vaguely nauseous. Her mouth still tasted like garlic.

"Sit," Leigh said, sweeping an arm through the air like a game-show host. "Eat."

Hollis sat tentatively on the edge of a chair. There was something wrong with her mother; that much was clear. Maybe she'd been drinking. Hollis looked around for evidence, but found none. Maybe she'd finally started taking her happy pills. The thought of this made Hollis livid. But why? For years she'd been begging her mother to take the depression medication prescribed by her shrink—not the grief counselor Hollis once saw, but some other woman.

“I’m not depressed,” Leigh said, every time Hollis’s Uncle Drew, a psychiatrist in North Carolina, brought up the subject of medication. “I’m grieving.”

Well, she certainly wasn’t grieving now. She was digging into her eggs Benedict with gusto. She was smiling across the table.

Hollis scowled.

“Why the face?” her mother said.

“Why are you acting so weird?”

“I’m not acting weird.”

“Yes,” Hollis said. “You are.”

“Look under your plate.”

“Why?”

“Just humor me.”

Hollis felt her eyes roll upward—the clichéd teenager. Well, forgive her, but she was exhausted, and what was her mother doing, exactly?

“Go on,” Leigh said.

Hollis sighed and lifted her plate.

There were three photos. Not just the one Hollis remembered—of her and Milo on the seesaw with their matching juice mustaches—but two others. Group shots with Hollis, Milo, and the four moms. Leigh looked so young and so pretty, Hollis barely recognized her. Her face was tan. Her hair was streaked with blond. She was smiling up at Hollis, who was perched on Pam’s shoulders and

grinning wildly at Milo, who was held aloft by one of his mothers. Hollis wasn't sure which—Suzanne or Frankie.

“Huh,” Hollis said.

“It's your family.”

“What?”

“Those people, right there. They're your family. That's what Pam has been trying to tell us.”

*Here we go*, Hollis thought. Her mother was forever looking for signs that Pam was still with them, imbuing even the most random occurrence with meaning.

“The email,” her mother said now. “It was a sign.”

*Of course it was.*

“It came to Pam's Hotmail account for a reason.”

*Right.*

“Pam wants you and Milo to find each other again.”

“Mom,” Hollis said with as much restraint as she could muster, “I don't know how to break this to you, so I'm just going to say it . . . Pam's dead.”

“In the physical sense, yes.”

“In *every* sense.”

“Love never dies.”

“And unicorns are real.”

There was no point in using sarcasm on Hollis's mother. It rolled right off her.

“Pam arranged that visit, you know.” Leigh gestured to the photographs. “She organized the whole thing.”

“I know.”

“It was important to her.”

“I know.”

“We wanted to give you a brother or sister. We wanted to use the same donor and have Pam carry the baby. But then she got sick.”

“I know, Mom.”

If Hollis had a dollar for every time she'd heard this story she could buy a boat and sail away from the kitchen. Find an island somewhere. She wouldn't need much, just some food and her favorite books and—

“He had hazel eyes.”

“What?”

“Your donor. We picked him because he had hazel eyes, like Pam. And he was smart. And tall.”

Hollis gave her mother a blank stare. “Why are you telling me this?”

“I wanted to give you some information.”

“*Why?*”

“I thought you might like to know something about him.”

“Well, I don't,” Hollis snapped. “I don't want to know one thing about that mother-effer.”

*Mother-effer.* The irony of the word was not lost on Hollis. She would laugh if she weren't so mad. Her body was pulsing with anger. She would chuck her eggs Benedict

across the room if the sight of them quivering on the plate didn't make her stomach churn.

Leigh's eyes widened. Blue eyes, not hazel.

"Sorry," Hollis muttered.

"No. This is good. I want to know how you feel."

"He has five kids, you know." Hollis stabbed a piece of toast with her fork. "That jackass."

"I know."

Hollis looked up. "What?"

"I spoke to Suzanne. She filled me in."

"*What?*"

"I couldn't stop thinking about that email yesterday. I couldn't stop thinking that if I'd closed Pammy's account Milo would never have found us. Everything happens for a reason, Hollis. It wasn't random. It wasn't an accident. He found us because of Pam."

She sounded excited. Hollis couldn't remember the last time her mother had been so excited. She hated to piss on her mother's parade, but this was the twenty-first century. Milo could have found them any number of ways. Google. Facebook. Whitepages.com. But her mother was on a roll about Pam. And when her mother was on a roll about Pam, nothing Hollis said could stop her.

"So I started thinking, what would Pam want me to do now? And I thought, she'd want me to call Suzanne and Frankie. So I did. First thing this morning. And they

invited us to Brooklyn. And then I thought, what would Pam want me to do with this invitation? She'd want me to book us a flight—”

Okay, wait. “What?”

“She'd want me to book us a flight. So I did.”

Hollis stared at her mother. “Are you serious?”

“We leave at two o'clock. We fly back Sunday afternoon.”

Here her mother was, smiling. Practically clapping her hands. How could she book them a flight when they hadn't been on an airplane since before Pam died? They never went anywhere. Not even to North Carolina to see Uncle Drew and his kids. But now—all of a sudden—they were flying to Brooklyn to see three people they barely knew? *Now* Hollis's mother wanted her to have a family?

“Well?” Leigh was waiting.

*WTF?* That was Hollis's response. She was tired, nauseous, disgusted by the sight of Pam's cat, who had just leaped onto her mother's lap and was proceeding to lick herself another fur ball.

“What about Yvette?” Hollis said.

“She'll come with us. She'll be my carry-on.”

“Mom.”

“What?”

“Please don't bring the cat.”

“Okay.”

*Okay?* Hollis stared across the table. Her mother loved that cat like the second coming of Pam. “Seriously?”

“This is your trip,” her mother said. “You make the call.”