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## CHAPTER ONE

# Ayrton

Mum won't look at me. I can only see half her face for most of the journey, even when we hit gridlock on the motorway and we don't move for twenty minutes. But I know that expression. It's the one where she wants to carry on, no matter what. I've seen it when she's setting up a new computer or trying out a complicated recipe or replacing new tiles in our old bathroom.

But as soon as we pass the sign for Luxworth, she swerves down a side road to a service station. She parks and turns off the engine. A few minutes later, the removal van pulls in next to her. The driver gets out and comes up to her window. Mum lowers it.

“Sorry,” she says. “I felt a bit dizzy. I’ll be OK in a minute.”

“Right,” the driver says. “It’s just that we’ve got another job this evening.”

“A few more minutes, please.”

“And we had quite a wait for you this morning.”

“I appreciate your patience,” Mum says. “The flat’s only twenty minutes away and there’s not much to unload. I won’t be long.”

The driver doesn’t look happy, but he nods and returns to the van. Mum’s fingers tap the steering wheel. She closes her eyes and takes deep breaths.

“Mum?”

She opens her eyes and turns to me. The “no matter what” expression’s gone.

“Maybe we *don’t* have to do this, Ayrton,” she says.

“We do, Mum.” I keep my voice calm, even though we had this same talk just before we left our old house early this morning. I’d really thought that she was going to send the removal men away and we’d be camping in a park tonight.

“I know we can’t afford two homes,” Mum carries on, “but I’m sure we can find tenants for the Luxworth flat. I mean, the other ones stayed for eight years, didn’t they? They must have liked it. Once we’ve got new

people in, we can rent somewhere else, somewhere further away.”

“Maybe we can, Mum. But you’ve already tried that, haven’t you? And no one’s been interested. Right now, we haven’t got anywhere else to go.”

She taps the steering wheel again. “I’d rather be anywhere than back in Luxworth.”

Mum’s been saying this ever since the old tenants moved. She was really sure we’d get someone else in quickly to replace them, but then the estate agent told Mum she needed to do some repairs before they could rent it out again. Mum agreed, but six months later the flat’s still empty. Now it’s going to be our home again.

The removal man hoots his horn. Mum hunches into herself.

“I can’t do this, Ayrton. How can I return to Luxworth after what happened?”

I’m trying so hard to be patient, but it isn’t always easy. “You *can* do this, Mum. It was all a long time ago. I can’t even remember it! Nobody remembers it.”

“I do.”

I know. It’s burrowed deep into her and changed everything from the inside.

“But you’ll have to start a new school, Ayrton,” she says. “That can be quite traumatic!”

Mum wants me to agree with her. I always used to, but I won't do that any more. Mum's like a sleeping bag zipped up around me, keeping me warm and safe. Then the zip goes up too far and I can't breathe.

"Kids start new schools all the time," I tell her. "I'll be all right. Let's carry on before the removal men drive off with our stuff."

Mum takes another deep breath. "Are you *sure* you want to do this?"

"I'm sure."

She screws up her face and when she relaxes it she's gone back to "no matter what". She turns on the engine and flicks the indicator.

"Right!" she says, just a bit too loud. "Let's make this a brand-new start for us."

"You promise?"

"Mmmm," Mum says.

She keeps her eyes on the road, but I'm going to take that as a yes. A proper promise. That's what I want more than ever – a brand-new start.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Stanley

Man, I know the biology. We weren't the egg-split thing. We were the other one. Twins like me and Liv-Love don't look alike. We're just brothers who got to join the outside world on the same day. We were even stuck to our own placentas. People don't always see it, but we're very different.

I don't mean absolute proper different. I've seen *those* pictures, twins like us who've got a Black parent and a white parent and come out looking like someone forgot to shake up the DNA, so one of them's the White One and one of them's the Black One. Strangers take sneaky snaps and they end up on TV sitting on

the lap of the parent they don't match. Nah, we're not *that* different.

Me and Oliver are both the colour of eggs – the organic ones in boxes, not the twin-making ones – kinda light pinky-brown. His hair's straighter than mine, but I keep mine as short as I can without school moaning to Mum about it. We both had nits most of Reception class and Year 1. Dad took us to the barber's and I liked the look so kept it. It's simple. I don't need gel, or serum or a du-rag. Oliver likes crew cut as much as he likes being called Liv-Love. He's more afro and twist. Every Black-man hair product in the bathroom is his, because Dad keeps things short and easy, like me.

So, yeah, we're pretty different, but some things happen to both of us.

We're both standing by the fridge, watching Dad have a milk crisis.

"Is Mum drinking oat in her tea now?" he asks.

"Depends what type of tea," Oliver says.

We move aside while Dad takes out the Oatly and places it next to the three different cartons lined up on the counter.

"She likes Earl Grey with lemon, Lady Grey with oat and PG Tips with lactose-free," Oliver tells him.

“Lemon?” Dad sounds like someone’s just thrown one at him. “Why d’you have to bring lemon into it?”

“She told us what she likes on WhatsApp,” I say. “So we didn’t get it wrong for her birthday breakfast.”

“Yeah, I remember.” Dad pats his pockets, looking for his phone. It’s not there.

“I’d better check again,” he says.

Dad sighs and heads towards the sitting room. We crowd round the fridge. Like I said – we’re different, but one thing happens to both of us. The “What Are You?” question. You know when it’s happening – complete strangers scanning your face, your hair, your face again... Their brain’s scrolling through the possibilities like you’re a pizza menu, then they make their suggestion. *Are you...?*

And some of the suggestions are wild!

It was Oliver’s idea to make a “What Are You?” chart. He’s stuck it bang in the middle of the fridge door with Mum’s “Treat Your Feet” magnets. He insists that it isn’t a competition, even though he came up with a points system, which I’m pretty sure runs in his favour. It’s one point if the “Are you...?” suggestion’s already on the list. Double points if it’s something new. Double-double points if it’s a bit weird. (Of course, it’s Oliver who decides what’s a bit weird. A bubble-tea seller once

asked me if I was Taiwanese and I really had to argue hard for double-double points for that.)

Oliver taps my Taiwanese entry. “The one I got today’s double-double for sure.”

“What was it, Liv-Love? Alaskan? Or Romanian? Or Māori? No double-double for anything less than that.”

My brother shakes his head and gives me a smug smile. “They asked me if I was Sardinian. And don’t call me Liv-Love!”

“Sardinian is Italian, right?” I run my finger down the chart. “That’s third behind Brazilian and Spanish. How’s that double-double?”

I grab a Sharpie and add a small cross to Oliver’s box in the Italian row. He’s got three crosses in there already.

“You don’t know the full story,” he says. “Sardinian is very specific.”

I cross my arms. “Uh-huh?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Who called you Sardinian?”

“Some guy behind me on the bus. He probably couldn’t even see my face.”

“He thought you were Italian from your cane row?”

“Sardinian, Stanley. It’s different.” He rushes on before I can argue back. “It was because of what I was doing.”

I don’t ask because I know he’s going to tell me.

“I was conjugating ‘esse’ out loud,” he says.

Maaaaan.

“It’s ‘to be’ in Latin.”

Double-double maaaaan. (That’s maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaan.)

“I couldn’t work out the connection,” Oliver says.

“Like, maybe Sardinians really do have cane row. But then he said he thought I was speaking Sardinian. And no,” he adds quickly, when he hears me drawing breath. “Sardinian isn’t the same as Italian. It’s really close to Latin.”

Maaaaan times infinity.

Oliver crosses out *my* cross in the Italian row, then writes “Sardinian” at the bottom of the “What Are You?” chart and gives himself four points.

“But what if, though?” I say. “What if we really are part Sardinian?”

“Or Taiwanese, Stanley?” Oliver drops the Sharpie back into the kitchen drawer. “Because that’s just as likely.”

“You know what I mean. What if we really are something like that? We don’t know!”

Oliver shakes his head. “Forget about it. You know how much it upsets Mum.”

He stalks out of the room, brushing past Dad who has a face like he’s just squashed a hedgehog.

“After all that, she wants chamomile,” Dad says.  
“With no milk.”

I open the fridge so he can put the cartons back.

“Dad?”

“I’m not raising your allowance,” he shoots back.

“I don’t want money,” I say. Well, actually I do. If I printed out my wish list, it would stretch all the way to school, even though it was me and Oliver’s birthday last month. We got some good presents, but there’s a few aunties and uncles that need a bit more guidance in time for Christmas.

“I was just thinking...” I say.

Dad closes the fridge and looks at me. I rummage in the cupboard above, take out the box of chamomile teabags and hand them to him.

“I was just thinking about Mum’s mum,” I say.

“Oh,” he says. He flicks the kettle on again. He’s done it so many times there’s going to be nothing left but steam inside.

“I mean, she’s not a bit ... you know, Taiwanese or something, is she?”

“I can categorically tell you that your maternal grandmother is not a bit Taiwanese or something, Stanley.” He glances at the “What Are You?” chart. “Anything brought this on?”

“We were talking about DNA tests in religious studies.”

“You want to take a DNA test to prove you’re not Taiwanese?”

“No!” Though I’ve thought about it. Imagine being able to flash my DNA profile at the next nosy person who asks me none-of-their-business questions about my family. “It’s more about whether DNA makes you family or not.”

“It doesn’t,” Dad says, like he’s ready to argue his case.

I wouldn’t argue back. We don’t share DNA with some of the uncles and aunties who are most definitely family. But I’m thinking about it from the other way.

“What if you do share DNA?” I ask. “Doesn’t that make you family whether you like it or not?”

Dad finally makes Mum’s tea.

“It depends on your definition of family,” he says. “If you’re looking at it from a strictly biological point of view, then I suppose it does.” He fishes out the teabag. It’s probably not the best time to remind him that Mum likes her teabag kept in. “But you know that me and your mum don’t look at things that way.”

“It’s not really the biology – it’s just...” I shrug. “It’s like there’s a bit of me that I don’t know anything about.

If I knew more about Mum's mum..."

"I'm sorry," Dad says. "But there's nothing I can do."

"But maybe if you talk to Mum..."

"I've tried," Dad says, "but she's made it very clear. The relationship between her and her mother is dead."

"Do you know where Mum's mum is?" I insist. "Because maybe I could talk to her without—"

"Absolutely not!" Some of the chamomile slops over the edge of the mug. "I've no idea where your grandmother is," Dad says more gently. "But I would never go against Mum's wishes and nor should you."

"Are you growing that tea?" Mum appears in the doorway. She glances from me to Dad. "Have I interrupted something?"

Dad looks at me.

"I'm off to do my homework," I say.

"Good to hear," Mum says. She reaches out for a quick hug as I pass. I've got friends who get embarrassed if their family try and hug them, but I don't mind, as long as it's nowhere too public.

I head upstairs. I almost knock on Oliver's door. I need to talk this through, but he'd just agree with our parents.

But it's not right. Somewhere I've got a grandmother. I know that she did something wrong – but it can't have

been that bad, not so bad that she should get thrown out of the family and be banned from seeing us ever again. Me and her are tied together through blood.

The more I think about my mum's mum, the more I want to know about her. But I don't even know her name.