

Amy T. Matthews

Someone
Else's
Bucket
List



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Chapter 1

Thanksgiving

Bree

The last months of Bree's life were, absurdly, full of hope. Hope like a burst of yellow; the vivid dash of goldenrod, daffodils, yarrow; a sudden splash of spring color in the monochrome of the wintry cancer ward. It came when she needed it most—when the world had narrowed to stark black and white. When she had all but given up.

It was a thickly snowy season in Delaware, many months into her internment in the ward. Tethered to the bed, she'd seen spring and summer froth and flourish through panes of glass that were perfumed only with Lysol, and she watched the tree-of-heaven outside her window turn bright as hot coals as September fell into October, its fiery orange leaves fluttering like Himalayan prayer flags. She'd arrived in May with a cough and was still here in November, sicker than ever. She'd thought watching summer flitter by had been difficult, but winter was looking to be infinitely worse. It was like being buried alive.

The hospital was muffled from late October on, with great drifts of constant snowfall. The gusting winds blew the last leaves from the trees well before Halloween, and November spat with ice storms and arctic temperatures. The windows fogged up and she lost her meager view. As Thanksgiving neared, Bree watched the perky newsreader on channel three sweeping her hand from North Carolina to Vermont, tracing the projection

of yet another storm. The holiday was going to be bleak. Bree wasn't sure which was worse: the weather outside, or the conditions in here, where the ice-white fluorescent lights hummed, everything had a chemical smell, and the food was so soft that it turned to paste when you tried to cut it.

And then there was *chemo* . . .

Just the thought of chemo made her want to curl into a ball. She still had mouth ulcers from her last course.

"At least you'll be free and clear of it for the holiday," her oncology nurse had told her with brisk optimism. "You'll be able to eat some turkey."

Bree could only imagine what the hospital kitchen could do to turkey. She pictured dry white shingles of meat in commercial-grade tinned gravy. Wrinkly peas. A couple of stubby carrots leached of color. If she was lucky . . .

The nurses had hung desultory paper decorations around her room to lift her spirits. There were hand-stapled chains made from craft paper in the shade of overcooked pumpkin—which seemed apt. Wanda, one of the orderlies, had taped a cardboard turkey to Bree's door. It had a slightly startled look and a weird tissue-paper tail that was the exact same shade as Clorox Bleach and Blue toilet water. Bree didn't like the Bleach and Blue-tailed turkey on her door, but she didn't have the heart to ask Wanda to take it down. Wanda had been so proud of herself for "cheering the place up"; how could Bree possibly tell her that all the cheer made her feel infinitely worse? At night Bree listened to the orange paper chains making limp rustling sounds. Like old leaves. It was the sound of seasons past, of the end of things. It made her think of the tree-of-heaven leaves, snatched from their moorings by the wind and sent tumbling into the night.

Bree wasn't a person naturally given to despair. When she'd first come into the hospital with pneumonia last May, she'd been the kind of person who posted motivational memes on her Instagram, the kind of person who took a selfie featuring the stupid hospital gown, amused by the oddly stylish wraparound print of the garment. *This gown is snatched, you guys!* She'd put a warm filter over the photo so she didn't look quite so

frightful. She hadn't felt despair when she was sent for round after round of X-rays, or when the awkward young doctor had told her she had pneumonia (she'd suspected *that*, it was why she'd come to the hospital in the first place). And when the same awkward young doctor lingered, cleared his throat, and then asked her how long she'd had leukemia . . . and could he have the number of her oncologist so he could consult about treatment options for the pneumonia . . .

She'd thought he'd made a mistake. He'd mixed up the tests. She didn't have leukemia. She had *pneumonia*.

That was about when his expression had curdled to one of horror and he'd just about melted at her feet. Like his bones had turned to liquid and there was nothing left to hold him up. "*Oh God, you didn't know . . .*"

"Know *what?*"

Even then, in that airless endless moment of realization, her first response hadn't been despair. It hadn't even been shock. It had *maybe* been denial. But it had definitely been *screw that*.

Because she was Bree Boyd. She was twenty-six years old; she had her whole life ahead of her. She had more than a million followers on Instagram; she'd had her photo posted with three (almost four) of the Kardashians; and she hadn't finished her bucket list yet. Hell, she hadn't even finished *composing* her bucket list. She couldn't *die*.

It wasn't even a remote possibility.

This was just one of those inspiring survival stories, and she was the heroine. Like a Hallmark movie, where the heroine is brave, and all her hair falls out, and there's a lot of weeping, but in the end, she gets the guy and finishes the film with her hair grown back in a cute pixie cut. Bree could carry off a pixie cut. "Right," she'd said to the boneless young doctor, way back in May when despair wasn't even an option. "What do we do about it?"

Because Bree was going to war. And at least she was doing it in a decent hospital gown, one with a faux designer-print. She'd be the first influencer to have hospital gowns trending, just wait and see. Hell, she'd have Adidas offering to sponsor her with

athleisure wear before the week was out, just watch her! She'd be a goddamn beacon of positivity and light. She'd take her green-juicing, hot-yoga, world-traveler spirit—the same spirit that had taken her trekking through the Himalayas or vertical caving in the Cave of Swallows in Mexico; the same spirit that had seen her be the first person in her entire extended family to go to college; the same spirit that had made her an inspiration to hundreds of thousands of people—and she'd apply that spirit to kicking cancer's ass.

It never occurred to her that she wouldn't win.

Not until the second course of chemo.

It was around then that Bree ran out of memes to post. She was *so sick*. Nothing in her life had prepared her for chemotherapy. She'd given a lot of thought to losing her hair. She hadn't wanted to look like she had mange as it fell out, so she shaved it off before her first chemo cycle. She'd staged it as part of a fundraiser. Her younger sister, Jodie, had wielded the clippers. And one by one each of Bree's friends had sat smiling (some a little wobblier than others, it had to be said) as their hair fell to Jodie's enthusiastic clipping. Even Bree's oldest and bestest friend, Claudia, had surrendered to Jodie, and she never surrendered to Jodie on anything.

Bree had gone last, after Claudia had cheerfully shaved Jodie's head. Bree had filmed her hair falling, while her friends had belted "Don't Stop Believin'" at the top of their voices. The video had gone viral, and Bree had watched it proudly, over and over again. Then she'd worn a tiara on her bare head all through her first cycle of chemo. Her followers had increased tenfold. She was a warrior princess and she was kicking ass.

What an idiot. She'd honestly thought losing her hair would be the worst of it. She'd had no idea. By the time she finished the cycles of her first course, she felt like a soldier crawling back from the front.

They warned you—they gave you leaflets and links to websites—and in all the literature there were cartoons of people looking green. But green didn't do it justice. Nothing could prepare you for chemo vomiting. It was like turning yourself inside

out. No, like drinking a bottle of sulfuric acid and *then* turning yourself inside out. Fifty times in a row.

At first, they'd given her injections to stop the vomiting, but nothing worked for long. And then after a while they'd given up, because Bree vomited no matter how many times they jabbed her with needles. Forget being a warrior princess, she was the Queen of Vomit. It got so that she'd vomit in *anticipation* of the chemo. They called it *refractory vomiting*. Refractory made her think of light, of Tiffany windows and carnival glass. Of chandeliers. It wasn't right to pair such a beautiful word with a word as repellant as *vomiting*. This wasn't *refractory* vomiting, this was odious, noxious, *vile vomiting*. This was the opposite of chandeliers and light. This was the darkness of a sewer, where carnival glass came to die.

This last chemo round, she'd spent the entire time with her head in a bucket. Just the smell of the boiled hospital food creeping through the corridors set her off. Actually eating something was out of the question. Resigned, the nurses fed her through an IV.

God, think of all the years she'd wasted dieting, she thought as she lay exhausted, inhaling the disinfectant lining her fresh vomit basin. How many times had she skipped breakfast in her life? How many slices of toast had gone un-buttered? How many pancakes un-syruped? How many tubs of yogurt had sat in the fridge, their foil seals never torn free? And don't even get her started on the years of un-tasted ice cream, or bags of Lay's, or, oh my goodness, the Cracker Jacks at baseball games. She'd loved Cracker Jacks when she was a kid. And what about all the times she'd had soda water instead of tonic with her gin? What a waste.

Look at her now. It was no effort at all to skip breakfast, and she was at her lightest weight since she'd been in grade school. And it was all so colossally awful. Who cared about being thin? She'd give anything to go back in time, to before the cancer, to sit at a ball game with her dad and Jodie and eat bag after bag of Cracker Jacks. She'd probably throw in a hot dog or two, a great big salty pretzel, and a few beers while she was at it.

She'd even post a picture of herself as she ate it all. And if she had a muffin top, or a love handle or two, she'd damn well post pictures of those too. #healthy #FoodJoy #FuckYouCancer

It was such a relief when the chemo ended and she could simply sink limply onto the rustling plastic-covered mattress and let go of the vomit basin.

Her mother came in every morning. She'd changed jobs so she could be with Bree through the hell of chemo. She came so early she beat the sun (which wasn't hard in the depths of a Delaware winter), carrying stacks of fresh magazines, fists full of hothouse flowers that she couldn't really afford, and treats to tempt Bree to eat. Grapes. Apples. Milk Duds. Once, a mango. Where had she found a mango at this time of year?

But the thing about chemo was, even if it was over and you weren't vomiting anymore, you couldn't taste anything. They didn't tell you *that* in the pamphlets. There wasn't a cartoon of some poor chemo-victim with no working taste buds. It was entirely possible that she'd never taste anything ever again. Ice cream tasted no better or worse than a handful of snow. The mango was just a slimy sensation in her mouth.

She'd tried to smile as she ate it, just to get the pinched look off her mother's face. But her mom wasn't fooled. She never was.

"Give it time," Mom said, trying to sound bright. She sounded about as bright as a flickering fluorescent tube in a subway car. Poor Mom. It broke Bree's heart to see what her illness did to her family. It had worn Mom thin, like a surface coat of paint had chipped away, revealing the primer underneath. But she was strong, Mom. She kept going. Day after day after day. And no one was keeping her from Bree's side. She'd changed jobs, to night shifts, so she could be with Bree during the day, and she came to the hospital, rain or shine, relentlessly optimistic, even if the primer shone through her flaking paint.

And Dad came by too, after he finished his shift at the warehouse. He always brought Bree a soda, from one of the pallets he spent all day moving. She couldn't taste that either. It was just a weirdly frenetic jumping of bubbles of her tongue. But she drank it and smiled. Dad always looked beat—the job was

a rough gig for a man his age, and his body was already hurting from years of work on the line at GM, before the factory had closed. When Dad arrived, Mom vacated her seat for him, gave him a quick kiss, said her farewells and went off to her new job, cleaning schools at night. They worked hard, her parents, and always had. Retirement wasn't an option now, not with the medical debts Bree had racked up. Even working as hard as they did, they were barely able to make the minimum payments . . .

"Don't think about money," her dad said gruffly, whenever she tried to broach the subject. "Money will wait. You get well, that's your job. Money . . . that's mine."

He'd turn the television on and put his feet up on the bed and they'd settle in together through the long nights. Bree was glad of the company, even if he did tend to fall asleep ten minutes into whatever sitcom they were watching. Once he was snoring gently, she'd switch the channel and turn the volume down, but she often found her gaze drifting to her dad's face. Sleeping, he lost his cragginess; his thin lips softened, and his cheeks seemed fuller; she could see how he must have looked as a boy. In photos of his boyhood he always looked quizzical, head tilted, as though about to ask the photographer a question. There was something painfully vulnerable about him—as though he knew he was in for a hard life, as though he was preparing to savor the small joys, because the big ones were going to be hard-won. Asleep at the hospital, by her bedside, he still seemed so vulnerable, so easily hurt. Although he'd lost the quizzical look; now he looked as though he'd stifled all questions, because he knew he wouldn't like the answers. She loved him so much. Him and Mom and Jodie and Grandma Gloria and Aunt Pat. She'd had no idea how *much* she loved them until these last horrid months. There was something about the shadows cast by the cancer that made her love shimmer brightly, hotly, as pure as a gas flame. It was a jet. And the words *I love you* didn't do the feeling justice. Nothing in the world could tell them how she felt. All she could do was ask the nurse to throw a blanket over her father as he slept, and to drink the soda he brought her, even though it had lost all flavor and was just a mouthful of empty bubbles.

On her rare days off, Jodie brought Grandma and Great Aunt Pat in for a visit. If Mom looked flaked back to the primer, Jodie looked stripped bare. Like all of them, she performed, keeping a smile up for Bree's sake. But Bree could see she was sleep-deprived and worn out. Sometimes she'd nod off in the chair, even when Grandma and Aunt Pat were bickering at full bore. You had to be pretty tired to sleep through Grandma Gloria and Pat when they got going.

The two old women were night and day, just like Bree and Jodie were night and day. Grandma and Aunt Pat had lived in the same neighborhood their whole lives; in fact, their houses shared a back fence. They'd fashioned a gate decades ago and they popped in and out of each other's houses, harping at each other over endless cups of tea. When she was a kid, Bree had assumed that that's what she and Jodie would be doing when they got old. She assumed it was what all old women did. Had sisters who plonked themselves at your kitchen table and annoyed you, from the cradle to the grave. It had never occurred to her that cancer might get in the way.

The thought made her feel like one of those autumn leaves, brittle and trembling on the bough, at risk of being blown away.

What would she do without Jodie? Her angular, unsure, prickly younger sister. The person who brought her ski socks and leg warmers to keep her feet warm (in the most ridiculous colors and patterns); the person who'd thought to go get Bree's old stuffed cat, Ginger (who was black and white and not ginger at all) to keep her company in the hospital; the person who never once sugarcoated the horror of things, and who even when Bree was throwing up called her names and stole her pillow.

And what would Jodie do without *her*?

Jodie had always been awkward and anxious; moody; a loner. She had a sharp tongue and had never bothered to smile when she didn't feel like smiling (except here in the hospital, and how Bree hated to see that forced smile—it made the horror of it all too real). She'd never been the kind of girl to dress up, or color her hair, or wear makeup, or self-tan, or swoon over boys. She never brought her boyfriends to meet the family. Bree had

only ever guessed *one* of Jodie's crushes, and that was because he was the only person (other than Bree) that Jodie followed on Instagram. But Bree had never dared ask Jodie about him. God forbid. Jodie would bite her head off.

How had they grown so far apart? When they were little, Jodie had been her shadow. When Bree wore red, Jodie had to wear red; when Bree had bangs cut, Jodie had to have bangs cut; when Bree got rollerblades, Jodie screamed blue murder until she got a pair too. But at some point, they'd gone in different directions. Jodie had eyed Bree's venture into "an international career in posing" (as she called it) with distaste. The only thing they still had in common these days was baseball—but Bree didn't even go to games anymore. Here in the hospital they'd got through Bree's vomitous summer by watching the Phillies; Jodie had lent Bree her precious vintage cap, the lucky one. Even after a cripplingly busy shift at the airport, where she worked in car rentals, Jodie came by, stuck the cap on Bree's bare head, and put the game on. Bree would lie there feeling ill, listening to the commentary, and trying not to hurl. From the corner of her eye, she could see Jodie flinch at every retch. Jodie's hand would reach out and curl around Bree's ankle, above the bunched-up ski sock, her thumb stroking Bree soothingly. She never said a word, but her presence meant the world to Bree. It calmed her. And when the vomiting was over and she couldn't stop crying, Jodie climbed into bed with her, uncaring of the stink and mess, and wrapped Bree in her arms. Now and then she'd ask Bree to vomit quieter, when she was interrupting the game, but she never let go.

But by the time the World Series rolled around, Jodie couldn't get into bed with her anymore; Bree was too sick and too frail. "I feel like I'd break you." Jodie sighed. But she kept a hand on Bree, cool on the back of her neck, or on her arm, or curled above the ski sock, tethering her to the room, and to the sound of the game, when Bree felt it would be easier to just shrivel away. The sound of the crowd, the crack of the bat, the low rise and fall of the commentary was like a beacon. When the season ended, Bree missed it terribly.

What if it's the last season I ever see?

Don't. Don't let any of those thoughts in. Keep the airlock closed and the pressure of the void out.

But as the vomitous cycles bled her dry and the leaves blew from the trees, as the baseballers packed away their mitts and bats, and the golden tones of October faded to the grays of November, the thoughts crept in, with more and more frequency. She grew used to the lung-emptying shock of them. It was like opening the door to the midwinter air: slappingly, painfully cold. Relentless.

By Thanksgiving, baseball seemed a long distant memory. And when Jodie came, she brought the damp smell of snow-melt with her; the smell of wet wool and . . . Lysol. Everything smelled of Lysol.

All of November the sky was low and distended, the color of dirty water. The streetlights were orange lozenges above the salted road. In advance of the holiday, there was traffic beginning to flow—people off to their Thanksgivings, their headlights cutting through the murky dawn. Bree would give anything to be in one of those cars, instead of up here, listening to the rubber squeak of the nurses' soles in the hospital corridor, and to the electronic chiming of the buzzers calling those nurses to patients' bedsides.

Bree was lucky to have a room with a view—or so the nurses told her. Even though it wasn't much of a view. She could see the back end of the east wing and the parking lot, and off to the right a small park and the road. The few trees that broke the monotony outside were leafless black slashes, like pencil drawings on an empty page. The whole season of her chemo had been surreal and suffocating. Like being trapped inside a snow globe.

But then, unexpectedly, the evening before Thanksgiving, that was when hope came with a burst of yellow.

Dr. Mehta brought the change, standing there in his silk tie and white coat, clicking his pen energetically. The conversation certainly didn't start out a hopeful yellow. If anything, it was pretty black. "There's no change in the cancer marker," he said. *Click*, went his pen. He was a stout man, with a round face that

made him seem younger than he was. His eyes were large and luminous behind his wire spectacles.

"That's good? That's good, isn't it?" Mom's fingers had curled around the metal arms of her chair. She was sitting ramrod straight in front of the window, which was fogged up from the radiator. Bree's mother was gaunt and there were deep lines bracketing her mouth and grooving her forehead between her eyebrows. Her clothes hung loosely and she hadn't taken the time to go to the hairdresser; her roots were severely gray. She looked old. And not in a cuddly, grandmotherly way. "You're telling us it's *good*." Mom wasn't asking a question.

It wasn't good. Bree knew it wasn't good. *Mom* knew it wasn't good. She was just clutching at whatever straws she could. There was supposed to be a *reduction* in the marker; or, if miracles spangled into existence, it would have disappeared.

No change meant . . .

"It's not *worse*." Mom was flailing now and there was an edge of panic in her voice that hurt Bree worse than she knew she could be hurt. "If it's not worse, that means you did some *good*, right?"

"Mom," Bree said, reaching for her mother's wrist. "Don't."

"There's an option," Dr. Mehta said, in his usual slow way, proceeding as though Bree's mother hadn't spoken.

"Option?" Mom prodded the doc sharply. She didn't like him much. Not him, not the nurses, not the hospital. Mom blamed them all for how sick Bree was, for how hopeless the season had become. Being angry was probably better than being afraid. Bree knew that all too well herself. Fear tended to come late at night, when the corridors were quiet and the wind shuddered at the windows. A fear so airless and cold that it was like deep space.

Chemo had taught Bree that fear was an emotional black hole. It had gravity so dense it not only pulled you in, it pulled you inside out. It was best to avoid it. To deny it. To chart a course in the opposite direction.

"We could try a bone marrow transplant," Dr. Mehta said. He was staring straight at Bree. He tended to ignore her family in

these meetings. She was an adult; it was her illness. She was the one who had to make the decisions. Because it was *her* cancer.

Lucky her.

But now . . . *bone marrow transplant*. The words were a spell, cast into the antiseptic air. Dr. Mehta clicked his pen three times, in quick succession. A staccato punctuation. *Bone-marrow*. Two more clicks. *Trans-plant*.

Bree felt a savage hope so bright it was dangerous.

She was going to live. *Of course she was*. Hope: yellow as sunshine, hot as summer.

She leaned forward. Dr. Mehta's dark eyes were very serious, but *he* didn't look scared. "Tell me," she said. She was still holding her mother's wrist; she could feel her mom's pulse hard against her fingers.

Click. Bone. *Click-click*. Mar-row.

"The cancer isn't responding to treatment," Dr. Mehta told her, his voice as bland as if he was ordering a coffee. "The latest round shows no change."

"Which is *not* good," Bree added, giving her mother's wrist a gentle squeeze. She heard her mom's breath catch and then Mom grabbed her hand. Bree couldn't look at her. She didn't want to see the expression on her face. It would be too awful.

"No," Dr. Mehta agreed. "It's not." He gave her a sympathetic look. It wasn't like him and it scared the daylights out of Bree. She didn't want sympathy. She wanted *fury*. She wanted him to go to war with the tenacious black threads of cancer curling through her blood.

"There are many reasons for a bone marrow transplant," he said mildly. "For acute myeloid leukemia, such as yours, we'd be looking to replace your cancerous stem cells with the donor's healthy ones."

As he outlined the procedure, Bree felt the day get brighter. She had sunshine in her veins. *Yellow*. Sunflowers of hope. "Who?" she asked, sitting straighter. "Who would the donor be?"

"You have a biological sister?"

Chapter 2

Jodie

Not without risks. That was the phrase the doctor had used over and over again. Jodie thought she'd understood most of what he'd said. But she'd had to work pretty hard at it. The medical talk was bad enough when you were feeling sharp, but Jodie was slow-witted after a twelve-hour shift at the airport. The holidays were brutal at Philly International; people came tumbling off their flights, dragging tantrum-y toddlers and insane amounts of luggage, their moods as filthy as the weather outside, and Jodie had been snapped at, cursed out, patronized and under-tipped since well before dawn. She was hungry and her feet were sore. But when Mom had left a message, urging her to come to the hospital, Jodie had got Nena to cover the end of her shift and come running.

Mom had already gone by the time Jodie got to the hospital. She'd had to get to work. Jodie had skidded in just as the doctor had been preparing to leave. He hadn't looked too thrilled at having to stay back to explain the "procedure" to Jodie. He kept checking his watch. Jodie wondered if he had a booking somewhere for dinner. She bet it was somewhere nice—it was a pretty fancy watch.

Not without risks. He kept saying it. Jodie looked at the pamphlets he'd given her. They had brightly colored cartoons on them. She wasn't sure if the risks were to her or to Bree, and

she was too tired to work up the courage to ask. Jodie was more than a little intimidated by Dr. Mehta. He gave long-winded sterile descriptions of procedures that sounded like something out of a textbook. People like him made her feel stupid. There was a bunch of Latin words in there, and there was something about chemo . . .

“She doesn’t need to know about that,” Bree interrupted from the bed.

Jodie glanced at her sister. It felt weird to be having this conversation *in front* of Bree. But no one was in any doubt that Jodie would say yes to the bone marrow transplant. She’d do *anything* to save her sister. Even the horrible-looking things featured in these oddly cheery cartoons. If there was no chance Jodie was going to turn around at the end of Dr. Mehta’s speech and say *no*, then there was no real reason for Bree not to be here. Although maybe it would have spared her having to hear about the “pre-transplant preparation” again, a preparation which seemed to include a lot more chemo.

“You don’t need to know about that,” Bree reiterated firmly, this time in Jodie’s direction. Jodie knew how much she hated chemo. And from what Jodie understood from the doctor’s long, confusing speech, this chemo was *not without risks*.

But what risk was greater than dying of cancer?

It seemed to Jodie they were past the point of risk assessment, and well and truly into the realms of desperation. “I’ll do it,” she said abruptly, cutting the doctor off. She thought of Bree vomiting endlessly into that shiny plastic basin . . . if Bree could do that, then Jodie could suffer through a needle or two. A spinal needle or two . . .

Oh God. Just the thought of spinal needles made her stomach go weak and wobbly and a cold wave run from her scalp to her toes.

“Bend over,” Bree told her sharply. “Put your head between your knees and take even breaths.”

“Is she sick?” The doctor sounded like he was speaking from a great distance, down a tunnel. That wasn’t a good sign.

Jodie bent over. She kept her gaze fixed on the tips of her ugly but sensible work shoes and concentrated on breathing. Don't think about needles.

As if. *All* she could think about was needles. Long ones with horrible sharp points.

"No, she's fine," Bree said. "She does this all the time. She doesn't like needles."

"Not *all* the time," Jodie protested between breaths. That made her sound pathetic, and she wasn't pathetic. She was just anxious. A lot of people had anxiety, and a *lot* of people hated needles. Look at the cartoon woman in the pamphlet with her bugged-out eyes. *She* clearly didn't like needles either.

"To be a donor, she can't be sick." Dr. Mehta sounded very worried.

"She's *not* sick. She's just a dweeb."

Jodie put up with that, but only because it was good to hear some liveliness back in Bree's voice.

"Breezy-Breeze, have I got a treat for you tonight!" A staccato knock sounded at the door and an orderly sailed in with the dinner trolley.

Dr. Mehta looked relieved to see the orderly arrive. He gave his watch another glance; Jodie could see it out of the corner of her eye, even bent over her shoes. "I'll get out of your way," he said in a hasty retreat. "I'll forward the paperwork for the procedure."

The paperwork. Which would include the cost. A very underestimated cost, which would mount and mount as they did the "procedure," adding onto their already crippling debt. Jodie closed her eyes. Hell. She was going to be working at the rental stand at that airport every minute of every day, for the rest of her life. Jodie had packed up her apartment and moved home, and she'd switched her college degree from full-time to part-time, so she could help pay the bills. Not that she begrudged it. She'd do it all happily if this worked. She wouldn't even complain. Not if she could come home to a healthy Bree. Although if Bree was bouncing around again, she'd be off on one of her

adventures, and not home at all. Jodie imagined Bree traveling again. Off in Madrid, or Santiago, or even in New Jersey. A blazing smile, a cascade of hashtags, full of joy.

Anything was worth that. Needles. Working at the airport. *Anything*.

Jodie sat up.

“Oh heavens, you scared me.” The orderly put a hand to her heart in shock. “Where’d you come from?” It was Wanda. Jodie liked Wanda. She’d gone out of her way to brighten the place up for Thanksgiving. She didn’t have to do that, but she did.

“She was feeling a bit woozy,” Bree told her, eyeing the approaching dinner tray with distaste.

“The doc does have that effect on people. I tell him to just speak in plain English, but he doesn’t listen.”

“Maybe you should tell him in Latin, so he understands,” Jodie muttered. She opened the pamphlet. Even the *cartoon* needles looked horrifying. She closed the pamphlet again.

“Thanksgiving’s come early,” Wanda told Bree, whipping the plastic lid off the smallest container. “Ta da! Pumpkin pie!”

“Is that what that is?” Bree gave it a dubious look.

Jodie wrinkled her nose. It looked like a wedge of brown Jell-O.

“So they tell me,” Wanda said cheerfully. “No turkey—they’re saving that for tomorrow—but there is cornbread.”

“What’s *that*, if it’s not turkey?” Jodie asked, when Bree lifted the lid on her main plate, revealing a lump of white meat.

Bree prodded the white shingle of meat with her fork, as Wanda peered over her shoulder.

“Might be chicken.”

“Might be?”

“You can cancel her turkey order for tomorrow,” Jodie said, glad she wasn’t the one who had to eat the chicken shingle. “We’re going to bring in food; she won’t be needing the turkey from a can, or whatever it is.”

“Can?” Wanda looked appalled. “What do you think this is? We only have the finest around here. Our turkey comes in boxes, not cans.” She winked at Bree on her way out.

"I'm going to get something out of the vending machines." Jodie sighed, ramming the pamphlets into her bag as she stood up. "I might call Dad and ask him to bring in a pizza or something on his way. You want anything?"

Bree shook her head. "I'll eat this. It all tastes the same anyway."

Jodie winced. Imagine. "I'll be back in a minute."

"I'm not going anywhere."

The thing about cancer, Jodie thought as she scuffed her way to the vending machine in the lounge, was that it was horrible in more ways than you could count. There was the big obvious horribleness, but then there were all these little awful moments. Like not even being able to just get your sister a candy bar. Because she couldn't *taste* it.

As Jodie stared at her dinner options (Fritos, Chex Mix or Doritos?) her phone buzzed. Cooper. Again. She didn't respond. She was sick of him and his random hookups. She wanted someone who cared that she was here in the hospital with her sister; a guy who'd feed her when she got home, exhausted and heart-sore; a guy who'd wrap her up in a solid hug. It wasn't too much to ask, surely? For something more than a self-serving hookup. She punched the numbers into the vending machine and waved her card past the sensor, and then she collected her balanced meal of Fritos, M&M's, and a can of some revolting energy drink and headed back to her sister. At least it would keep her awake enough to perform for Bree and then drive home.

"I never thought I'd say this," Bree said dryly as she saw Jodie's haul, "but I think my dinner might be better."

"They clearly pumped you full of too many drugs today." Jodie popped the can and tore open the Fritos. "Sure you don't want one?"

Bree shook her head.

"Your loss."

"Did you call Dad to get pizza?" Bree asked, as she pushed the chicken shingle around her tray. She'd mastered the art of mashing her food up but not actually eating it. She thought Jodie hadn't noticed, but she had.

“Nah. He’ll be too tired. I can eat properly when I get home.” Jodie sighed. Although she wouldn’t. She never did. By the time she got home, she’d be too beat to face even microwaving soup. She’d kick her shoes off and collapse on the couch, where she’d fall asleep before she even turned the television on. Then a couple of hours later, she’d wake up grumpy and have to get herself to bed, so she could get a few hours of proper sleep before she got up and did it all over again. You know. Just the usual fun life of a twenty-something.

Luckily Jodie finished her junky dinner before Claudia arrived. She would have died of mortification if Claudia caught her eating M&M’s for dinner. Again. She already felt like a clumsy slob whenever Claude was around. She didn’t need to confirm Claude’s suspicions that she ate garbage every night. Even though she *did* eat garbage every night.

Claudia swept into the room in her usual cloud of Coco Mademoiselle, chic as ever, her still-short hair covered by a raspberry beret. Only Claude could carry off an actual raspberry beret. How did women like Claudia do it? Jodie’s anxiety rose in its usual sweaty, skittery way, with its perpetual sense there was something deeply wrong with her. That everyone else knew some secret she didn’t.

Claude was weighed down by packages and parcels but still somehow managed to get a hand free enough to snatch the limp cardboard turkey off the door on her way through. It made a rasping ripping sound as it tore.

“Claude! Wanda put that there!” Bree tried to sound appalled, but Jodie could hear that she was secretly thrilled. That was the thing about Claudia. She made things like ripping down a cardboard turkey seem wickedly mischievous and fun. If Jodie had done it, it would have just seemed mean.

But that was probably because Jodie wouldn’t have replaced it with anything, whereas Claude pulled a wreath from one of her packages with a flourish, looking for all the world like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat. And of course it wasn’t any old wreath; it was the *perfect* wreath. Handmade. Enormous. Glorious.

The circle of entwined branches was decorated with autumn leaves in shades of amber, gold and pale yellow; there were grapelike clusters of berries, the soft greenish yellow of citrons; and spotted throughout were puffs of cotton pods and tightly furled pinecones in shades of unripe limes.

"*Yellow.*" Bree breathed. Her eyes had gone all sparkly in their deep shadowy sockets and Jodie felt a stupid bolt of jealousy. Hell. Why hadn't she thought to bring a wreath?

"Did you make that?" Jodie asked, unable to keep the sourness from her voice. Who made a wreath like that? Who had the *time*?

"I did," Claude said, tossing aside the poor ripped-up cardboard turkey. "I also made *these.*" From one of the magic packages came yards of bunting.

"Are those real leaves?"

They were. They were real leaves. The madwoman had gone and strung fall leaves onto yards and yards of string. Where did she even get them all? The long strands of leaves were heart-stoppingly pretty. Strung on simple brown string, the leaves (tangerine, apricot, saffron, ruby, claret) glowed like embers. Bree was glowing too, as she watched Claude shove an armful of the crackly things in Jodie's lap. There were long golden serrated oak leaves; blazing tri-pointed crimson maples; fan-shaped, green-edged sycamores; and curling wheat-brown ash leaves; and here and there were finger-slender coal-bright tree-of-heaven leaves, brought in from the cold.

"Do you know tree-of-heaven is a pest?" Jodie said, running her finger down one of the leaves.

"Careful," Claude scolded, "they're fragile."

Even though she was exhausted, Jodie obediently hung the bunting where she was told. How could she not, when Bree looked so happy? More than happy. *Transported.* As Jodie and Claude decked the horrid little room in arboreal splendor, the hospital fell away and instead they were in a secluded autumnal glen. Far from all their cares.

Claude really was a magician.

When Wanda came back for Bree's dinner tray, she stood fro-

zen in the doorway, her mouth open. She was so enchanted that she didn't even notice her destroyed cardboard turkey slumped on the floor. Surreptitiously, Jodie kicked it under the bed. She'd hate to hurt Wanda's feelings.

"Good lord," Wanda breathed. "Where did all this come from?"

"My fairy godmother." Bree laughed. Surrounded by jewel-bright leaves, she looked beautiful. The long pointy spinal-needles would be worth it, if this bone marrow transplant worked, and Bree could look this happy every day. Just like she used to. Hell, Jodie would put the needle in herself if she had to.

"You want to come decorate my place sometime?" Wanda asked. "They don't sell anything like this at my local dime store."

"I'm booked up, I'm afraid. But you can help yourself to the leftovers." Claude handed over the bag with the last strands of bunting.

"It's still a third full," Wanda protested.

"You must have been stringing leaves for months." Bree laughed. She'd sunk back into her bed, looking more like a Kewpie doll and less like a rag doll. Her eyes were all big and sparkly and her smile beatific as she watched the strings of leaves drift in the air conditioning.

Until Bree got sick, Jodie hadn't realized how painful love was. It stung. Like lemon juice poured on an open wound. But worse. It wasn't pink and pleasant; it was bloodred and visceral. Fearful.

"I might hang these in Mrs. Vincent's room. She's had a hard time with chemo this week . . ." Wanda took the enchanted-forest-in-a-bag with her, entirely forgetting about Bree's dinner tray. Which wasn't at all empty.

"Don't sit down." Claude blocked Jodie from the chair. "There's more."

Jodie groaned. "Don't you ever sleep?"

Out of the bag came a cheerful burst of color. It was a buttery soft, fat knitted blanket. It was wide knit, as though made on giant needles, and had a meticulous ribbed pattern.

"*Yellow!*" Bree just about squealed with joy.

"This is your lucky Thanksgiving blanket." Claude unfurled the blanket gently over Bree's legs.

Claude had made Bree a lucky blanket for summer too, Jodie remembered. It had been celestial blue and had been so abused by vomit over the season of chemo that it had been beyond saving. Here's hoping the yellow blanket would be luckier than the blue . . .

"Are you getting *any* sleep?" Bree asked Claude, running her hands over the soft wool. Jodie reached out and rubbed a corner between her fingers. It was divinely soft. Jodie wondered if Claude would make her one. Jodie had never had a nice blanket; or a nice anything. She was still using her baseball quilt from when she was ten. She could offer to pay Claude for a soft woolen blanket . . . only all her money went to medical bills.

"You know me. I don't ever sleep much." Claude absently handed Jodie another bag and sat on the edge of the bed by Bree's feet.

"What am I supposed to do with this?" Jodie asked. All she wanted to do was sit back down. Her feet hurt. "Where do I put these things?"

"Wherever. I'll fix it later."

Jodie rolled her eyes. Fix it later. Like she couldn't scatter a decoration or two without screwing it up. Claude treated her like she was still Bree's annoying little sister. Which she wasn't. She was Bree's annoying adult sister.

Jodie peered into the bag and inhaled a hefty dose of nutmeg and cinnamon. There were a bunch of candles in there. Overly scented ones.

"You know she can't light these in here?" Jodie told Claude, pulling a cinnamon candle as big as a dumbbell from the bag.

"They're decorative." Claude sighed. "Just put them out on the sill."

What was the point in candles you couldn't light? And Bree couldn't even really smell them anyway. Jodie shrugged. What did she care if no one was ever going to light them? The quicker she got them on the sill, the quicker she could sit down and put her feet up.

As she plonked the heavy candles along the sill, she listened to Claude and Bree talk softly. Everyone except Grandma Gloria and Aunt Pat spoke softly in the hospital. It was that kind of place. Like a library or a funeral home, it had a weighty hush to it. People spoke so low you could barely hear them over the toneless river of air pushing through the ducts. The place was pressurized with air sucked dry of life.

“You should sleep, Claude,” Bree was saying in a papery murmur.

“I do. Just not much.”

When Jodie couldn't sleep, she lay in the dark staring at the rind of orange streetlight around her blind. She roiled with thoughts, like gusts of blizzard ice that pelleted her out of the darkness, stinging as they hit. She worried about money, about the future, about Bree, about her parents, about the way days ticked by and nothing ever changed or got better. She lay in the no-time between days and felt her feet throb, memories of endless days at the car-rental place flicking through her head. The voice over the tinny PA announcing flights to places Jodie would never go; the rubbish computer she worked on that crashed at least three times a day; the sick feeling in her stomach when customers got that tone in their voice that meant they were about to chew her out. Maybe she should follow Claude's example and get up and string leaves on brown string, or knit lucky blankets, or bake until the sun came up.

“How's your mother?” Bree asked Claude carefully.

“I don't know.” Claude's voice was flat.

Jodie kept her back to them. She didn't want to look like she was eavesdropping. Even though she was. Claude's mother was a touchy subject; Jodie would never have dared ask about her, even though it was obvious when Claude was crafting like a loon that her mother had gone off the rails again.

Tactfully responding to Claudia's flat response, Bree changed the subject. Jodie didn't need to look to know that she was squeezing Claude's hand. “Let's get a picture with your leaves,” Bree suggested brightly.

Jodie rolled her eyes, setting the last monolithic candle down with a *plonk*, but she felt her eyes prick. It was good to see Bree posing again. She had more of her old spark back now that the chemo was over . . . for now anyway. The bone marrow transplant would mean she'd soon be banning photos again, not wanting anyone to capture the gaunt pallor of the Vomit Queen.

Jodie slumped into the chair to watch the two of them pose against the backdrop of leaves. She'd never dare tell either of them, because she gave them hell about what posers they were, but she envied them this. They were the undisputed champions of turning a bruised moment into its opposite: glamorous, aglow, caught in a frame that cut out the worst of the world. They edited their stories down to the moments of gratitude. And they looked great while they did it. Bree's Instagram story tonight would be a carnival of leaves, with none of the lingering smell of Lysol, or loss of taste, or the perpetual pumping of tepid air through the vents.

Jodie caught her reflection in the mirror over the sink and pulled a face. Her honey-brown hair had never been anything special, but without it she looked angular and pinched. The fluorescent lights made her grayish eyes seem colorless. Thank God no one wanted a photo of her. She was an oatmeal-colored, drab, tired-looking wren. Instagram was for the birds of paradise of the world. For women like Bree and Claudia, who were luminescent. They looked so good together too. Before they'd lost their hair, they'd looked like bright scoops of expensive ice cream on a sunny day—Claude's natural blonde cool, Bree's pricey golden streaks creamy.

Jodie was just pale brown in comparison. Tan. Taupe. *Beige*.

She turned away from the mirror. Her whole involvement with selfies and posing was best limited to liking Bree's posts. Not everyone could be ice cream. Some people were just the cones.

"I can't stay too long," Claude told Bree regretfully once they'd posted their pictures. "I have to get back to finish off the pumpkin pie."

Jodie's mouth watered. She would give anything for a slice of Claudia's pumpkin pie right now. For anything other than Fritos and chocolate bars really.

"But before I go, one last surprise." Bree pulled a quilted purse from her handbag. "We're going to paint your nails!"

Jodie took her cue and groaned. "What do you mean, *we*?" She knew how this went. They'd done this a lot as kids. Claudia made Jodie paint Bree's toes, while she did her fingers, and she'd do nothing but bitch about how messy Jodie was. *Color in the lines, you dweeb!*

"Can't we do something less girlie?" she complained. But her complaints were halfhearted because Bree was wriggling with happiness.

Claudia was immaculate at nails, of course. She gave Bree the most fastidious French manicure. To spite her, Jodie alternated fluorescent green and orange on Bree's toes. Bree didn't mind. In fact, she loved it.

"Look at you two, getting along," Bree said blissfully, laughing when Jodie got smears of orange on the sheets. Jodie swore like a soldier as she spilled the green polish as she tried to mop up the orange.

Claudia didn't look up, but a muscle twitched in her jaw. Jodie could tell she was keeping herself calm by *not* looking at Jodie and the botch job she'd done on Bree's toenails.

"I love you *soooooo* much." Bree sighed.

"We love you too." Claudia kept her gaze lowered but her voice was choked up.

"Don't talk for me," Jodie said, horrified that everyone might start crying. "I merely tolerate her." She could feel her nose getting stuffy and hot like it did before tears came. They were supposed to be making Bree *happy*, not weeping all over the place.

"I dare you to tell Claudia that you love her," Bree teased. "We all know you always take a dare."

Jodie scowled. "Not anymore. Only when I didn't know how sadistic you two could be." She'd gotten herself into so much trouble as a kid, because of the dares Bree and Claudia had issued.

“Remember the time she stuck a swizzle stick up her nose and had to go to the hospital to get it removed?” Claudia said serenely.

Bree giggled.

Well, at least no one was threatening to cry anymore.

“That was child abuse,” Jodie muttered.

“Or the time we dared her to roll through poison oak?”

“You two are sick.” Jodie tried to wipe a blob of green polish off Bree’s pinky toe. Her sister’s feet looked like a Jackson Pollock painting. Jodie glanced up in time to catch Claudia’s absolute disbelief.

“What?”

Claudia held out a baggie of cotton balls and the bottle of remover. “Do it again.”

And she did. Because deep down she was still in awe of Claudia, a perpetual little sister tagging along after the big girls.