

a l l y

a l l t h e s e l i v e s

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This book is dedicated to all Life-lovers out there. I know how you appreciate all the important things in life. I know how you never take them for granted and how you hold on to them as if they can be taken away from you at any time. I know how you feel. I'm one of you and sadly speaking, yes, they can be taken away from you at any time.

And to Alyssa. My universe is so bright because you're in it. And if there is ever a brighter parallel universe out there that doesn't have you in it, believe me, I will never want to go there.

Chapter One

I WAS only ten the first time it happened; not really too young for a kid that age could already do many things independently including shopping in a nearby store. But a kid that age had not yet thought about work, money or other more complicated issues.

The sun was smiling brightly on that Friday afternoon and the fall wind was polite enough to simply whisper its presence, it realized that fall was not going to come until a few weeks later.

I was sitting at the kitchen counter telling my mom about the recent result of my Math chapter test. I got an A. My mother was taking some cookies out of the oven. I still could remember the sweet chocolatey smell that filled the air. And suddenly, the tingling feeling started. I thought there was an ant on my left arm so I swiped over it with my right hand. There was no ant. The skin on my face started to tingle. I wiped my forehead. There was nothing there too. And then just like that, everything was gone.

The chair I was sitting on, the countertop where I put my

lunch box and water bottle, the glass of cool water in my hand, my mother and the sweet-smelling cookies, the kitchen walls along with the shelves and the stove, everything was gone. In fact, the whole house was gone. And there was not even a floor underneath my feet. I was not even sure whether I was standing or sitting or even falling. I was overwhelmed by the blank space. I lost track of time. Perhaps it only lasted for a few minutes but I couldn't be sure. It was not dark. But still there was nothing I could see as if I was the only human being in the whole universe. I screamed but I didn't hear myself screaming.

And then I started to see colors. Blurred at first, like a kaleidoscope of shapes that was held too close to your eyes that you simply couldn't make sense of. Then the colors flew farther away from me and I started to gain focus. Suddenly my house was back. The kitchen was back along with the shelves and the stove. I could feel the chair I was sitting on and the countertop where I rested my arms. I saw my lunch box and my water bottle on it. My mother was in front of me. But now she was stirring a pot of soup. There was no smell of chocolate cookies for there were no cookies. Instead, the smell of chicken soup filled the air. I looked to my right. I didn't know why I did that, as if there was some kind of magnet that pulled my gaze towards that direction. On the chair next to mine, sat a little boy, probably around five years of age. His red hair was messy around his round chubby face, but he was very sweet and he was smiling a big smile as if he had been smiling at me like that his whole life.

"Ally dear, why don't you pour another glass of water for your brother?" my mother said.

I stared at her, and then I stared back at my so called

brother. I couldn't make myself reach out for the water jug even though it was just in front of me. I blinked. Could this be a dream? I reached out my hand to touch the boy's messy hair, half hoping my hand would go through him as if he was some sort of a holographic image. But my hand did touch his floppy red hair. I could feel the coarse strains in my hand. He was real! Now, how could I have a brother when I was an only child merely five minutes ago?

"Who... who is he?" I asked my mother.

My mom looked at me with a puzzled expression as if I just asked whether there would be a frog jumping out of the cooking pot in front of her.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"Is he... is he really my brother?" I asked, putting the emphasis on the word brother. Mom didn't say anything. She just looked at us as if trying to judge whether her kids were playing prank on her.

"Can I have some water, sis?" asked the little boy whose name I later learned to be Albert. I reached for the jug of water and poured some into the glass that he was holding. Mom remained silent. She had stopped stirring her soup as if she needed all of her energy to think. After pouring the water, I joined the silence. The only sound in the room was Albert who slurped noisily from his glass.

My parents were deeply bothered by the fact that I had "forgotten" about my little brother. But how could I forget about someone who had never even existed before? As far as I knew, that afternoon in the kitchen was the very first time I met him. So for me, there was really nothing that I forgot. My mother then asked if I had remembered visiting her at the hospital when she gave birth. I hadn't. She took me to my brother's bedroom and she told me that I had helped her decorate it. I helped

with the wallpaper and I made the decision on where the furnitures should be placed. I was also the one who picked the bed sheets. But as far as I remembered, the room was my father's study with a huge floor to ceiling bookshelf on one side and a big desk with a computer on the other side. It was the very first time I saw the room with the blue wallpaper, and the blue bed with its blue bedsheets. And when I asked my mother about the cookies, she just raised her eyebrows as if I was asking whether we were having a dodo bird for dinner later today.

According to my mother, I loved my brother, my brother adored me and we got along fine. So she believed that my "amnesia" was not a pretense on my part. I was not the type of sister who wanted to get rid of my brother because I felt that he was a nuisance or an attention grabber. So my mother did what a confused mother would do. She brought me to a psychiatrist. I didn't know the meaning of that word at my age, but from the way the room looked, I knew that a psychiatrist was a type of doctor even though I didn't really feel sick. I told the psychiatrist the truth. I told her the same story that I had told my mother and father so many times: I was an only child who was just sitting in the kitchen watching my mother taking out a batch of chocolate chip cookies when everything suddenly disappeared. And when everything came back, I was sitting at the exact same spot, only my mother was making soup and I had a younger brother sitting next to me.

When the psychiatrist couldn't make sense of my story, my mother took me to another psychiatrist. When he also couldn't make sense of my story, he ran a few scans on my brain and afterward, he still couldn't make sense of it. And after several more sessions with different psychiatrists and neurologists and other brain-scans with no solution, my parents decided that they couldn't afford anymore tests and they just had to accept

the fact that I had forgotten about my brother for the first five years of his life.

So my parents filled me in with what happened in the past five years with the help of several photo albums of our family. Well, I didn't have amnesia. I remembered my birthdays, my school friends, my teachers and all the major events in my life. I just didn't remember that there was a younger brother in my life. And yet, the photographs told me otherwise. There were hundreds of pictures of us growing up. There was a picture of me and my newborn brother at the hospital. I was five and was wearing a favorite outfit that I remembered having. A red skirt with white polka dots all over it. And there were lots and lots of pictures of us, just us two, or with our parents or grandparents. By that time, I had started to believe that Albert, my brother, truly existed and I must have bumped my head really hard at school that day and a piece of my brain that contained all the memories of him had been clouded. Or maybe the bump had severed some of the brain synapses, obliterating some parts of my brain and those parts happened to contain the memories of my brother.

But bottom line was, my brother was as real as myself. And so I just continued my life as normally as I could. Although every now and then I would catch myself staring at Albert and tried to remember my life with him or without him from earlier periods and tried to make sense of it all. It was something complicated for a ten year old. And in the end, I just gave up. My brother existed. There were no evidence that proved the contrary. He was there in the flesh with his chatty voice and big smile and all his car toys and baseball cards. He was very noticeable and very real. And we grew up together until it happened for the second time.

Chapter Two

I WAS already in high school the second time it happened; not a kid anymore, but not yet an adult either. However, at that age, I already had a part time job and had read a lot about all the complicated things in the world. We were still living at my parents' house in Mountain View area. It was a three-bedroomed house with a backyard. Albert was twelve then and he had started to get rid of all the blue things and plastic toy cars. He replaced them with neutral brown-black-navy colored stuffs and more expensive toy cars that had to be assembled; the ones with real engine that could go fast.

But still his change in color taste didn't change his chatty voice and big smile. He almost always came home later than I did in those days. It was because he was always into something: baseball practice, swimming club, basketball practice, debate team, you name it! About an hour or so after I reached home, he would burst into the house. His eyes would light up when he saw me and he would start talking. He would tell me about the most recent basketball match. He would tell me about Cindy, this girl whom he had had a crush on since the third grade. He

would tell me about the newest debate topic he was working on. He would tell me anything. I was already used to having a brother back then. Although every now and then, I would remember the time when I was younger and he wasn't around. I guess that time only existed in my mind.

One afternoon, I was sitting in the living room with my laptop on my lap. I was trying to finish my literature paper. The TV was on but I didn't quite remember what program was on. It was either one of the soaps or one of the talk shows. The house was always quiet before my brother came home. That was the reason I turned on the TV even though I didn't plan to watch it. My mom was busy in the laundry room. I could hear the soft hum of the washing machine doing its rinse cycle. And suddenly, I began to feel that tingling feeling again. I started touching my arms and face to see if there were any ants. When I didn't find any, I knew right away what it was. And just like that, everything was gone. I could no longer feel the weight of my laptop on my lap because it was gone. The sofa I was sitting on was gone. The TV was gone. The wall was gone with all the family pictures on it. Everything disappeared.

I gasped. I wasn't even sure whether I was standing or sitting. The floor underneath my feet was gone. A wave of *déjà vu* swept over me. The fact that I had experienced this before didn't make me any calmer. In fact, I was even more overwhelmed than when it happened the first time. I was frantic. I was desperate. I screamed but just like the first time, I couldn't hear my own voice. I knew that sound couldn't travel through a vacuum. But if it was a vacuum, why was I breathing? Perhaps time had dulled the memory of my first experience a few years back. Or perhaps the first time it happened I simply didn't know

that the Moment of Nothingness, the phrase that I gave to that strange experience, would change my life. It had given me a brother back then. What would it do now? The nothingness was suffocating me. Just like the first time, there was no darkness, yet there was nothing to see. I didn't know what to do so I simply closed my eyes, wishing it would pass soon.

And then I started to see colors. Slowly but surely everything came back into focus. I was back on the sofa with my laptop on my lap and the TV was showing one of the daytime soaps. I jumped out of the sofa as fast as I could as if my back was on fire. I threw my laptop on the sofa and I ran to the wall, almost tripping over my laptop power cord. My heart was thumping hard and fast. I looked at the biggest framed photo there. Our family photo. My father was there. My mother was there. I was there. And my brother was there with his red hair and big smile. A blanket of gladness enveloped my heart. My gut feeling told me that the moment of nothingness would take away my brother this time. Apparently it had not. I observed all the photos one by one. They were the exact same photos as before the Moment came and both of us were in most of them. I couldn't help but smiling. I was even thinking of buying the pair of brown sneakers that my brother was eyeing at the mall the other day. Yes, I decided to go to the mall the next day to get the sneakers for Albert. It would definitely make his day. Yes, I would do it tomorrow.

I returned to the sofa and to my literature paper; only a few more paragraphs to go. The sound of the washing machine was replaced by the dryer. It was almost dinner time when my mother appeared in the living room with a pile of my clean clothes. She deposited it next to me.

"Thanks, Mom," I mumbled.

"It's your turn to do the laundry next week," she said. In our household, we took turn doing the laundry.

"No, Mom. Next week is Albert's turn. Mine is the week after," I said. My mother who was already on her way back to the laundry room to get the other piles of clothes halted abruptly. She slowly turned around and stared at me. I saw a strange look in her eyes. "That's true, Mom! You can ask him later when he gets home," I added. My mom walked to me slowly and sat next to me.

"Are you alright, dear?" she asked.

"Of course I am. Why wouldn't I be?" I asked.

"Well, you mistakenly said that it was Albert's turn to do the laundry next week. So I thought maybe you are not feeling well, not thinking straight," my mom said.

"Mom, it's really his turn next week. You see, I have done the laundry two weeks ago. Last week was Dad's turn. This week is yours. So next week is his turn and the following week is mine," I explained to her. Then my mom did something I didn't expect. She wept. I put my laptop on the table and slid closer to hug her. "What is it, Mom? I'll do the laundry next week if you want me to," I said. I was so baffled. Why would she cry over such a simple thing as a laundry schedule? She cried harder. Right at the moment, the door opened. I was expecting Albert but it was my Dad.

"What's the matter?" he asked when he saw my mom crying in my arms. I told him what happened. "Ally, that's very cruel of you to do that to your mom!" my Dad said.

"Do what?" I asked.

"To... to talk about Albert as if he were still here. You know it's very difficult for your mother to lose him. And I know the past year has not been easy for all of us. Please be more sensitive next time you make some sort of a joke," my Dad said.

I was stunned. I didn't understand. What did he mean by losing Albert? Where was Albert? My dad took my mom to their bedroom to calm her down. I remained in the living room, staring at the door, and glancing at the clock on the wall. My brother should have been home by now. Anytime now he would burst into the room with his red hair and big smile. But suddenly I knew it wouldn't happen. Albert would never walk through that door again because this time, somehow, like I suspected, the Moment of Nothingness had really taken him away from me.