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Someone told me at a funeral that people die twice. First, when their heart stops beating, and then again when somebody says their name for the last time.

Why did I remember that? Well, because it was that time of the day again ... I was thinking about death.

I'm always worried about dying in my bathroom.

Other twelve-year-olds find showers annoying. Me? Beyond stressful. You gotta understand you're an easy target in the shower. Even if no terrorists attack your house while you soap, what about the other dangers? Did you know it's more likely you'll die stepping out of your bathtub than in a plane crash? Fun!

So, I was already on edge when I stopped doing push-ups because someone screamed downstairs.

Yeah ... *push-ups*.

If I had to shower for at least five minutes (Mom got upset when I tried 'express showers'), why not break a sweat while I was at it?

At four feet nine, I'm still the perfect height for floor exercises in my bathtub. I wasn't gonna do jumping jacks or something stupid. I just wanted to keep busy. Also, working out meant getting closer to being a hero, like Dad.

Wait. What was I telling you about? Ah, yes, the scream.

So there I was, staring at the water going down the drain, when I heard Donnie yelp for help. I stood up so fast that I almost slipped. (I'm aware of the irony.) But I had to save my little brother.

Still dripping, I wrapped myself in the Rambo towel I got last Christmas and stormed downstairs. Without missing a beat, I threw the first cushion I saw at the laughing girl pointing her phone at Donnie.

"Hey!" she said. "You mental?"

Her name was Blair—a thirteen-year-old redhead, expert in CQB (close-quarters bashing). Her pale, freckled face reminded me of a bowl of Corn Flakes filled with sour milk.

"Certified," Caleb, her tank of a brother, replied.

Tightening his chokehold on Donnie, he stared me down with icy eyes, and I kept my distance. Trust me, you would have too if you knew his dodgeball body count.

Blair and Caleb Tate... The Sucky Siblings. How Immigration let those two monsters into the U.S. remains a mystery. Thankfully, they lived on the other side of the ocean, so I wouldn't have to deal with them for much longer.

I didn't want Mom to go out with anyone. Period. But why date the Sucky Siblings' dad, of all people? To make things worse, she'd been too busy at work to notice they tortured Donnie around the clock. Were some strange bugs in the parks more important than her own children? It figures.

In any case, Mom always gave Blair and Caleb a pass because their mother passed away last year. So it was up to me to keep my brother in one piece over the summer break. I'd never wished to fast-forward through July before, but I wanted them out of here!

"Let Donnie go," I said.

"Why?" Caleb's pale face flushed with malice. "We're having a laugh."

"Only making ourselves at home, Babes." Blair smiled. "It's your fault Father dragged us here."

I sized up the battlefield. I was tougher than delicate Blair, but Caleb could pass for a Navy SEAL. Dressed or not, I knew better than to challenge him one-on-one without my plastic nunchucks. If I've learned anything from my favorite movies, it's that a one-person army can take on an entire island with the right weapons.

Was there something lying around I could use to fight them off? A half-built LEGO set on the coffee table; my brother's tablet, streaming a video of a boy at the abandoned mini-mall; the triangle flag display case above Mom's bookcase ... No. Nothing useful.

Then my eyes met Donnie's. Other eight-year-olds might have tried biting Caleb's arm, stomping on his foot, or, if they were mean, even going for his privates. But Don is a pacifist, or, as I like to say, a *patsyfist*.

Blair pointed her phone's camera at me. "*Lush* outfit. Who are you wearing?"

"Let. Donnie. Go!" I demanded.

"The little bloke is our friend." Caleb rubbed his knuckles against my brother's blond hair. "And friends don't lie."

"We thought it'd be hilar to use a duck filter and make him quack," Blair said.

I wish I could be one of those witty kids who come up with insults on the fly. But as Mom often complains, I'm more of a punch first/strike hard kinda girl.

So it shouldn't have surprised anyone when I kicked Blair's hand and sent her phone flying across the living room.

"Owww!" she yelled.

Caleb pushed my brother to the couch and charged toward me. “Hey!”

He almost pinned me against the wall, but I backed out of his grasp. I punched him in the chest and snuck under his arm, but while I struggled to keep my towel on, he pressed me against the front door.

“Donnie, go upstairs!” I said, worried about what they’d do to him after they were done with me.

“You okay, sis?” Caleb asked Blair without breaking eye contact with me.

“She looks like a boy ...” Blair checked her phone. “But she kicks like a girl.”

That insult rubbed me up the wrong way. I loved my pixie haircut! And what did she mean by kicking like a girl? We can be stronger than boys! Besides, what did she think *she* was? An alien?

A teenager, a voice answered in my head. *She thinks she’s all grown up because she’s thirteen. As if growing up was all that.*

“Quack.”

We all turned to Donnie.

“No,” I muttered.

“Quack.” His eyes were glued to the floor. “Quack.”

Caleb laughed.

“See? He’s our friend.” Blair leaned on her brother. “Your mum wants us to be best friends, too. And besties care for each other.”

“Yes. They do, sis.”

“So, let’s take care of Lily.”