

# Chapter One

## The Escape

My parents are sort of freaking out. Dad is yelling at Michael to stop running around the front yard, and Mom is trying to figure out what to do with the stuff in her purse. I can tell they are stressed out. Finally Mom calls Dad over to help her dump it all into a zip top bag. She tries to do it without touching the purse too much; then she walks over tosses the purse into a cram-packed dumpster on the other side of the driveway. Cram-packed full of stuff. Our stuff. My stuff. All going to the dump. She stares at it, blank, tired, with a little sadness I can see even though she tries to hide it.

Bye, bicycle, I think in my head. Bye, books. Bye teddy bear I have had since I was two. Bye favorite blue comforter. Then I stop thinking because I am not going to let anyone see me cry.

Jeff comes walking down the sidewalk. We both go to John Harrison Middle School. Except apparently I don't anymore. I am going to be homeschooled. Homeschooled? Only weird people do that.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"Why are you throwing out all that stuff out?"

"I don't know."

"Looks like good stuff to me."

"I know." I look down. "Toxic mold," I mumble.

"Toxic what?"

I sigh. "Mold." I think to myself that I hate mold. That mold ruined my life. But I don't say this to Jeff.

We stand in silence until Mom and Dad finish throwing things from the pile in the driveway into the dumpster and taking turns going to the neighbors to wash their hands.

"Let's go, Alex," calls Dad.

"Gonna miss you," says Jeff shyly.

"Me, too."

Jeff ambles back to his house. I turn to look at our house one last time. Mixed feelings. I want to just be sad, but part of me is happy to leave the nightmare house behind. After all, this house tried to kill my mom.

## Chapter Two

### The Hotel

Five hours later I wake up with seatbelt marks on the side of my face. Dad pulls into the hotel parking lot. He goes inside the lobby and comes back with an attendant holding a bunch of keys. We get out of the car and stand there.

“We sure appreciate this,” Dad is saying.

“No problem.” The attendant smiles.

We follow him to a room, which he unlocks. Mom goes in and stands there. She shakes her head.

“Can we see another?” Dad asks. The attendant unlocks room after room. It is getting embarrassing, and Michael and I are tired. Finally, when Mom walks into the room on the end, she smiles. Whew, we are finally going to get a rest.

But not quite. First we have to get our new sets of clothes, shower one at a time, bag the other clothes. The other clothes were new, too, but since we had showered at the mold house, they probably were bad now, too. Mom and Dad had discussed all of us showering that morning at the neighbor’s house, but they had decided it was too much to ask.

Finally I threw myself across one of the queen beds and grabbed the TV remote. I found Sponge Bob and decided to see how long I could watch before Dad told me it was driving him crazy and to turn it off. Fortunately Michael likes Sponge Bob, too, so I figured I would not have to fight him for it.

It is April, and I should be doing homework for school on Monday. I should be lying on my bed with my stuff around me and my bookshelf full of books and my stuffed animals that I keep even though I am too old and my desk full of my stuff. Instead, I am in a hotel, with 2 sets of clothes and one set of PJs and my new Kindle and that’s it. And no one really knows what is going to happen next. I feel very strange. Who is the thief that stole my stuff? Stole my life? I miss my friends already. I miss my school. I even miss my teachers.

“Pizza for supper, hon?” Dad nods yes in answer to Mom, and they figure out toppings.

Well, pizza is something, anyway.

When the pizza comes, we dive in. I am happy to see cinnamon bread sticks, too. Mom has salad. Yuck. But she even lets us drink pop.

“First non-moldy pizza we have had in five years,” Dad jokes. But no one laughs. He smiles weakly.

I can tell he wants things to be okay, so I say, “Good pizza, Dad.” His smile widens just a bit. Then I think it does gross me out a bit that everything in that house was moldy. Invisible mold spores on our stuff, our beds, our hair, our food. Yuck. I guess I am glad to be out of that. I wonder if I will keep on having migraines. Mom says they might get better now. I don’t know what to think. How could mold do all that? How could it make Mom so tired?

Dad has laid new blankets on the bed for Mom, covering the hotel sheets. He has more blankets for her to keep warm. “Do you think that will work?” he asks Mom.

She crawls in bed and nods. “I can still smell scent, but I think I can sleep anyway.” Her eyes have dark circles around them.

Michael bounces into the trundle bed, happy. I am glad I get a big bed to myself. Dad putters around tidying up and then washing up in the bathroom. Soon he turns the lights out and gets into bed. He reads on his Kindle, and Mom lies there with her eyes closed. I can’t tell if she is asleep. I close my eyes but lie awake a long time, thinking.

I can barely remember about three years earlier when Mom started getting sicker and sicker. She would have lots of headaches, and then she started having trouble eating. She got really tired and could no longer work. She had muscle pain, but nothing helped. She struggled to cook and clean, and one day her legs buckled under her when she tried to stand. I heard her telling Dad, “All of a sudden I could not feel my legs. Like they were not even there.”

I think about how Dad took her to these doctors, but none of them knew what was wrong. None knew what to do. “Stupid doctors,” I heard Dad say one day. “If they do not know what is wrong, they just want to blame her. They just tell her it is in her head.” I have never seen my dad cry, but I think he was close that day.

Then I remember the day they came home from seeing Dr. Jones. I was confused by the looks on their faces. “Mold. All this time.” Dad shook his head.

“Yes, it finally makes sense.”

“I know. I know. I am so relieved. You are going to be okay.”

“Yes, but what are we going to do?”

“We will make it through somehow. At least we know what it is now.”

Then over the next weeks, I heard a lot of talk about some Dr. Shoemaker, mycotoxins, asper-something, stackie-something, and ermy. Then we left. And here we are.

I cry myself to sleep. But very quietly so no one hears.