

Excerpted from *See You in the Cosmos* (2017)

New Recording 49

The social worker said her name is Juanita. She was holding a black leather folder in one hand and Ronnie shook her other hand and told her to please come in, don't mind all the commotion outside. Juanita came up to me and held out her hand and she said, Hi, you must be Alex, and I looked at Ronnie and he nodded so I shook Juanita's hand and I said it's nice to meet her. Ronnie asked her, Can we get you something to drink, some coffee or water? and she said she just had her morning coffee so water would be great, and I said, I'll pour it! and then I covered my mouth because I forgot to wait for Ronnie's signal.

I went to the coffee table and lifted the water pitcher and it was so heavy, and Juanita shook hands with Terra and Terra said she's my half sister and I wanted to hug her, except I was holding the pitcher and I didn't want to spill the water.

Juanita sat down in the Lay-Z-Boy but she didn't recline it, and Ronnie and Terra sat down on the sofa and there was a space in between for me, and it was just like we practiced, everything was going according to plan. I gave Juanita the glass and her fingers were wrinkly and her nails had cracked red nail polish, and she said, Thank you, you have a lovely home, and I didn't tell her we cleaned it yesterday.

Juanita took a sip of her water, and Ronnie said that as she can see, I have a safe and stable environment here, and then he started telling her what we practiced, about how my accident and our mom going missing was just a bad coincidence, it was just unfortunate timing, and he's here now and he's going to keep me from getting into any more trouble and it doesn't make sense to

remove me from his care. But before he could finish saying everything Juanita put up her hand that wasn't holding the water and she said, Don't worry, I'm not here to break up your family.

I thought, Whew, that's a relief! and I looked at Ronnie, and him and Terra looked at each other and I could tell they were thinking the same thing. But I could tell they were thinking something else too. And then Ronnie looked at Juanita again and he said, That's great, I guess there's not much else to discuss?

Juanita put down her water and she opened her leather folder, and inside the folder was her iPad. She opened some stuff on the iPad and she said she's glad we're all finally meeting in person, and then she started telling us all the things she knows about us. She said she knows that my mom lost her job a few years ago and lost her driver's license too. She said she knows that Ronnie moved to LA after college to be a sports agent and that he was in Detroit recently for work, and that I went to a rocket festival in New Mexico by myself and I have a dog named Carl Sagan after my all-time hero. She said sometimes I go on the roof of my house to see where my mom goes on her walks, and that's what I was doing when I had my accident and Terra took me to the hospital. Ronnie asked her how does she know all that and she said she's been talking to my teachers and counselor and our neighbors, and my mom's doctors and my doctors and she found Ronnie's profile on his company's website and talked to someone from his work too, and this morning she came across a news article about a Golden iPod.

And then Ronnie wasn't saying what we practiced anymore. He was telling her the stuff we talked about a couple of days ago, about how I'm going to go live with him in LA for now and then we're going to move our mom there too and sell the house, and if we need to we'll find her a behavioral health hospital there and he'll become my legal guardian and a lot of other stuff that

we didn't even talk about! Ronnie said, He's here now, isn't he? Isn't that what matters? and I looked at Terra and she looked at me, and Juanita said, Yes, that matters, and again, I'm not here to break apart your family.

Juanita said it's good that Ronnie's thinking about the future, that's what she's here to help us do, she's on our side, but it makes things harder if we leave the state. She asked Ronnie do we have relatives or close family friends in Colorado that I can stay with, and Ronnie said we don't, and Terra said what's the difference between me staying with relatives in Colorado and me staying with Ronnie in LA, because either way I'm in a different home. And Juanita told us to think about what our mom might want once she's better, once she's out of the hospital.

Ronnie looked down at the pitcher of water, and I thought that our mom would probably want to go someplace familiar, someplace where she already knows the channel numbers for her favorite shows and where everything is in the cupboards. Someplace she can go for walks but where there's someone to make sure she doesn't walk too far. And someplace where I am and Ronnie is, and where there are pictures of all of us and my dad on the wall in her room. She'd probably want to come home, just like I wanted to come home.

Juanita asked Ronnie is there some way he can keep doing his job from here in Colorado, and Ronnie still didn't say anything, he picked up his phone from the table but not because he got a call or text or anything, just to hold it in his hand. And then Juanita was saying a lot of other stuff but I wasn't paying attention because I was watching Ronnie, and Ronnie kept staring at the water pitcher, and his hand that was holding the phone was turning white.

Then it got really quiet all of a sudden. And I noticed that Juanita had stopped talking, and she was looking at the potted plant in the corner of the room, and Terra was looking at Ronnie,

and Ronnie was looking at the water pitcher, and it was almost like we were in space, we were in a vacuum and everything was silent and floating. And the sun was coming through the Windex-clear windows of our living room and there were little pieces of dust floating in the sunbeams, and I thought, isn't it interesting that a couple of weeks ago Ronnie was in LA and I didn't even know I had a Terra, and now the three of us are sitting together on the same sofa for the first time, and we all have the same dad and we're all here because of my dad, he brought us all together, even after he died . . . and I looked at Terra and I looked at Ronnie and I saw the same green eyes, and it felt like our dad was there in the room with us too, not like a ghost or anything, not watching us, but everywhere. He was in Ronnie and Terra's eyes and he was in their faces and their skin and hair, and he was in my face and my skin and hair and these are like his shadows, they're how we know he existed, that he was real, and he used to walk around on the carpet in the living room and drink from the same water glasses and those are shadows also, and his back- and butt-prints were still in the Lay-Z-Boy where Juanita was sitting, that's a shadow too! And if I'm still seeing them, still seeing his shadows, still learning things from Terra and Ronnie and the Internet about him that I didn't know before, then, doesn't that mean that even though he died there's something about him that keeps living? That there's something four-dimensional, a tesseract, that never dies and we can never really see, and what if . . . what if these things I've been trying to figure out, like the meaning of love and bravery and truth, what if the reason they're so hard to see is because they're ALSO tesseracts. What if they're the SAME tesseract? What if the times when we feel love and act brave and tell the truth are all the times we're four-dimensional, the times we're as big and everywhere as the cosmos, the times when we remember, like, REALLY remember, really KNOW, that we're made of starstuff and we're

human beings from the planet Earth, human beings with dads that died when we were three and older brothers who live in LA, and moms who have schizophrenia and Terras we didn't know about and heroes who wear turtlenecks and friends with Zen koans and side adventures and sensitive digestive systems and . . . And! These words we try to use to describe it, to describe that feeling, these words like *Love* and *Bravery* and *Truth*, the reason they can't describe it all the way, and the reason that sounds or music or pictures can't describe it all the way either, is because THEY'RE all shadows too! WORDS ARE SHADOWS TOO!

And I guess I said that last part out loud because everyone turned their heads to look at me, and I was standing up, I think because I was thinking about floating. And since I was already up, I started pouring water for Ronnie even though he told me to sit still. I was pouring the water and it was splashing on the sides of the glass and a few drops spilled on the coffee table but I kept pouring, and I could feel everyone watching me but I didn't want to take my eyes off the pitcher because I didn't want to spill any more, and it got easier to pour as the water went from the pitcher to the glass and made the pitcher lighter and then I put down the pitcher and I gave the glass to Ronnie. I knew he wasn't thirsty but I knew he needed the water.