

## Swallowed by a Secret – Bonus Chapters

By Risa Nyman

### Bonus Chapter 1

Weird how I never noticed the web of cracks in my bedroom ceiling branching out into all four corners of the room. I guess I'm always too focused on the phone that's usually glued to my hand or else my eyes are closed. But it's way hard to close those peepers and be in darkness when your dad just died.

Believe me, it is.

The awful call came from Uncle Bob as Mom was packing us up to head back from our weekend in Florida at a wedding. Dad had been rushed to the hospital, and we would go straight there from the airport.

The return flight was ten times longer than the one going there on Friday. Mom didn't talk much, and I admit I was super quiet too. I had no idea what to say. Mom's forehead lines were deep and her eyelids saggy with sadness. Silence seemed like the best course.

When the taxi dropped us at the hospital, Uncle Bob was waiting by the door. His face was damp as if he had been jogging in the hot sun, which isn't likely on a cold February day in Massachusetts. The white part of his eyes were red and brimming with tears. He grabbed Mom's hands and whispered, "Ron is dead."

D.E.A.D. That's impossible. How does a healthy guy, a former soccer superstar, die suddenly? Dad has, I mean Dad had, two speeds: go-go-go or exhaustion when he'd be on the sofa for a few days, watching old movies nonstop.

A wave of trembling tried to shake my head loose from body and stop all the thoughts about Dad from swamping my brain. No surprise Mom morphed into hyper-mother mode. She said and did all the right things-lots of hugs, reassurances that we would be okay, and asking over and over how I am.

When I said okay, she and Uncle Bob moved into a continuous huddle for a private convo. Whenever I'm wandered into earshot range, they abruptly stop talking. I'm pretty sure it has to do with Dad. There is something conspiratorial going on between them.

But doesn't the son have the right to know everything?

Okay, for now, if that's the way they want to play this.

I'm glad to be home and in my room alone and staring at the ceiling cracks until my eyes hurt. I close them for a sec and pop them open fast to test if that technique might make the ceiling heal itself. Boy, if that works, I'm using that method on my life to force it to return to a few days ago when Mom and I were leaving for Florida. Even though Dad claimed he was too tired to go with us, but he still managed to drive us to the airport.

I can't believe I'll never see him again. Dad was like my soccer manager. He claimed I was a natural, and he had great plans for me. Now, no more backyard coaching sessions, and I probably won't make varsity soccer without him.

There's a knock at my door. I know it's Mom, because she is required to abide by the agreement we made when I turned twelve a few months ago and negotiated for more privacy. No almost-teenager wants their parents barging in on them whenever they - I mean she - wants. Nuts to that.

"Okay," I say. The door opens by inches, as if she's afraid about what she might find inside and can't ramp up her courage to walk right in. But it's only me in here.

Mom stares at me for a while before speaking. I can tell she's studying my face and trying to guess what's going on inside my brain. I do my best to keep my expression neutral. If she's gonna keep secrets from me about how dad died, then I'm going to keep my feelings to myself.

Seems fair, doesn't it?

"Rocky, honey, do you want to come with me tomorrow when I make arrangements for the funeral?" she asks, lowering herself onto my desk chair as if her legs can no longer hold her up. My eyes feel dry in contrast to how wet hers are. I wonder if she thinks that's a bad sign. I cried at the hospital a bit, but not since. I feel guilty about that.

Oh well, that doesn't mean anything, does it?

"Why would I come?" I'm amazed she could imagine I'd want to do that.

"Just thought you should be included," she says, "But I understand if you prefer not to go. When I finish there, I'll pick you up, and we'll buy you a suit for the funeral."

"A suit?" Why do I need something special to wear for a one-time event? Plus, just last week I asked for new Nike cleats and was told there's no extra money, and I'd have to wait on those, but I guess she found some money for a suit.

"Yes," she answers, "Something simple but proper and new shoes."

She's going all out. I hope Dad appreciates that, if a dead person can still appreciate anything. But I don't think that's possible. Really, dead is dead.

Mom continues, "I'll have Uncle Bob come and stay here with you while I'm out, unless you prefer Grandpa."

"Can't I stay by myself?" Lately, Mom and Dad allowed me to stay alone during the day for a few hours, and once or twice at night for a short time. I'm in the seventh grade. Enough said.

She hesitates and maintains her focus on me as if the answer to my question is flashing on my eyeballs. "Not tomorrow, Rocky. I'll ask Uncle Bob to come."

"Fine."

She gets up to leave. "Can I bring you anything to eat?"

"Nah. If I get hungry, I'll get some Cheerios later." Right now, I'm not sure my swallowing mechanism is in proper working order, and I don't want to be barfing up anything.

Mom kisses the top of my head on her way out, but then locks her gaze on me again as if I'm iron and she's a magnet and can't get away from me. I turn away because it's hard to look into her so sad eyes and to break the hold she has me in. That works and releases her. The door closes, and I hear her footsteps on the stairs.

## Bonus Chapter 2

The cold winter sun lights up my room, and I glance at my phone. 7:00 AM. I escaped the night and don't even remember falling asleep. I'm shocked it was a dreamless night considering the circumstances. This seems like the ideal time for the dream part of the brain to be working overtime. I look down and notice the same clothes I had on yesterday.

Turning over to recapture the peace of sleeping doesn't last long, because the urge to pee can't be denied. I drag myself to the bathroom and hear Mom's car crunching the driveway gravel on its way out. I look out the window and see Dad's car parked there. He and I picked the bright red fire engine color together, so in a way I think of it as his and my car. The bold color stunned Mom, but it is perfect. I should ask Mom to keep it for me until I get my license in four years.

But that's not a good question to ask right now, is it?

I trudge downstairs and find Uncle Bob sitting at the kitchen table. He looks up at me with eyes as red as Mom's were last night. I'm starved.

Is it okay to be hungry after your dad died?

I don't really know for sure, but it's gonna take a truckload of food to fill me up.

"Need some help?" Uncle Bob asks.

"No, I've got this." I don't add I'm not a baby, because I'm not a grown-up either, despite what the social worker at the hospital claimed yesterday.

It was cringe-worthy when she said to me, "Now, you're the man of the house."

Ugh.

Ugh.

Ugh.

Does she think as man of the house I won't have to ask Mom for permission to go to Shawny's to play Xbox or to the mall with the kids for a movie? Ridiculous. I expect I'll be hearing a lot more lame-o comments. I'll have to practice self-control not to roll my eyes when people are being stupid.

I wolf down a giant combo bowl of three cereals, a Poptart and a small bag of potato chips. I side-eye Uncle Bob to see if I'll get any grief for the chips at breakfast, but he says nothing. Probably when your dad dies, you get to do lots of stuff, and no one will scold you. It's funny, a bit like scoring a Get-Out-Of-Jail free card in Monopoly, but this is the Dad Died Card you pull out so you can have more sweet snacks, stay up late, or skip school.

But you can't be happy about that, can you?

I finish eating. "Gonna go up to get dressed," I announce. Before I get into the shower, I text Shawny. He won't see the message until after school when cell phones pop out of backpacks and jeans' pockets the minute the last bell rings. Just want to leave him a message.

Me: You heard?

I know he knows what happened because his mom and my mom are BFFs.

A while later, my door opens, and Uncle Bob pokes in his head. He doesn't follow the knock-before-you-enter rule, but I give him a pass on that.

"Just checking on you." He steps farther into the room.

"I'm okay." I put down my phone. Uncle Bob and I have always been tight like he is - I mean he was - with his older brother. They used to prank and tease each other, but they were close, for sure.

Since Mom's not around, this might be the ideal time to get him to spill the truth. I unload my burning question. "How exactly did Dad's heart just stop for no reason?"

The redness in his eyes flows into his cheeks and keeps going until his neck matches. He is one giant tomato-face.

His head drops, so I can't make out his expression. "Just happens, and the doctors can't always explain why."

"But Dad was so healthy. He hardly went to a doctor."

"I know." Uncle Bob still keeps his eyes away from mine, and his voice sounds like someone who's barely breathing.

"Mom's hiding something," I complain.

In a voice so quiet, with words that exit so slowly you'd wonder if he forgot how to speak, he says, "She's doing the best she can to keep it together and help you. It isn't easy for her, you know." He moves over to sit next to me on the bed and slings his arm around my shoulder.

Duh. Of course, I know it's not easy for her. Am I an idiot? I am not.

But keeping it together doesn't pass as an excuse for not having to tell the truth, does it?

Uncle Bob stands up. He heads toward the door and glances back over his shoulder. "Just come down if you need anything." And out he goes.

I'm sure he can exhale now that he has ducked my questions.

But can I breathe better?

### Bonus Chapter 3

Three o'clock, and as expected, my phone pings while I'm in the dressing room tucking my t-shirt into the suit pants. I check the text.

Shawn: Heard. Sorry, man.

He adds a bunch of sad emojis, and I'm relieved he didn't send a ton of hearts like most girls would.

Me: Gotta get a suit. Text later.

I put my phone down and head out of the dressing room. Mom gives me the once-over. "That looks fine. You just need a belt and a tie."

"A tie, too?" I ask. OMG. I once wore one of those for Halloween, and it strangled me until Dad showed me how to pull the knot down just enough so I wouldn't faint. He should be here to tie my tie.

But if he was here, I wouldn't be needing a dumb old tie, would I?

On the way home from the store, Mom says, "The arrangements are set. Shawn's mom helped me. The funeral will be on Sunday."

"Uh, huh." Because what else can you say? Great, can't wait. Looking forward to it.

I don't think there's a good response to learning when your dad's funeral is, is there?

Back at home, I call Shawn.

"Hey, bro," I say.

"Hey, bro," he responds.

"Sucks," I say.

"Sucks," he repeats, as if he is on autopilot copying me word-for-word, but really I'm sure he just doesn't know what to say. I get that.

"Funeral is next Sunday," I say.

"No! What?" He kinda screams into the phone.

"What, what?" I ask.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course, I’m sure,” I reply, “You don’t think I’d mix up the day of my own father’s funeral. Hey, man, don’t be such a doofus.”

“Sunday,” he repeats.

“Yeah, Sunday. Wassup?”

“The game. The big game. The state championship for middle grade teams. This is it. Everything we’ve been working for all season is on the line.”

“You’re joking,” I say, but I’m sure he wouldn’t joke about that. I guess I had a brain fart and didn’t remember about the game.

“You have to be there,” Shawn says. “Our back-up goalie stinks, you know that.”

I sure do. Plus, if they win without me... This causes my mind to start down a very dark path.

“Gotta go,” I say.

I hang up, completely bummed by this new development. Since Uncle Bob’s phone call slammed my life against a brick wall, more terrible stuff wants to attach to it.

I stare at the suit bag draped over my desk chair and the shoebox on the floor, struggling with the looming question in my brain, which I bet lots of people have dealt with when they face a choice like I have to make.

Are dead people even aware if you attend their funeral, and do they care?

If there’s a place where Dad is watching down on us, wouldn’t he like to see me skunk the Lincoln Lions and take the gold medal? He’d be so psyched and would probably charge onto the field against the rules to congratulate me. I see him brushing his hair off his forehead with the same gesture I use, while he pumps his chest full of air and looks around the bleachers to find other parents to high-five.

My brain must look like my ceiling, with lines of thoughts going in all different directions. My phone pings with an incoming text, and I sit up.

Shawn: We’re on our way over for dinner. My mom’s bringing pizza. C U soon.

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Me: Okay. Thanks for the heads up.

When Mom yells from the bottom of the stairs, “Rocky, Shawn and Rochelle are here with pizza,” I rush down.

Shawn looks at me funny, not with his usual goofball expression. I’ve known him since kindergarten, and this is not his regular face. Then, just as odd, he stands frozen in place like he’s waiting for an invitation to sit down when usually he’s at the table as soon as there’s food. I sit and put a piece of pizza on my plate. As if that gives him the okay, he sits next to me. I guess kids get all confused about what to do around the son of a dead father.

Would I be the same if this was the other way around?

I take a bite and ask while chewing, “Are you okay, man?”

“Yup.” He takes a slice and starts eating. His leg twitches under the table, because I guess eating with your buddy whose father just died can give you the fidgets.

“Mom,” I say, “Did you remember about the big soccer game this Sunday when you set up the funeral?”

She stops talking to Rochelle, and her eyes go wide like when she sees a creepy crawly anything inside the house. Obvs, she didn’t remember.

“Um... um... no, but that was the only time the chapel could give us. Sorry.” She says. The blood in her body moves into her feet, and she is colorless.

“Well, I guess I could go to the game, anyway. Shawn’s dad could drive me.” I watch for Mom’s reaction. It’s pretty clear that idea throws her off balance. Her mouth and eyes seem to have gotten a double dose of gravity pull.

“But you should be at the funeral,” she says, “You’ll regret it later if you don’t come. Maybe you want to prepare something to say at the funeral about Dad.”

“No, way,” I say. “I’m not doing any speeches about Dad. Period.” I can just picture the people with their oogle eyes eager to see if the son will lose it or say something dumber than dumb. “No way,” I repeat.

Shawn and his mom eat and keep their eyes low, clearly not wanting to get into the middle of this.

“Man of the house,” the social worker had said in the hospital. Well, if that is true, I’ll man up and make my own decision on this, so I say, “Mom, I’ll let you know what I decide to do.”

That does nothing to ease the lines on her face and bring her look into something more normal, but it’s the best I can do for her right now. She has some secret about Dad she won’t tell. Maybe I’ll start keeping secrets, too.

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The days until Sunday drag, and I wish I was in school with my friends or practicing soccer, but Mom thought it best if I didn’t do the usual activities until after the funeral. I still haven’t told her if I’m going to be there, because I’m desperate to play in the championship game and be part of the winning team.

Every night my mind replays Mom saying I’d regret it later if I don’t go to Dad’s funeral.

You can’t redo a funeral, can you?

The night before the funeral, I picture myself on a divided road. On one side, I’m walking in a suit and tie with shiny black shoes and on the other side, I’m wearing my red goalie shirt and old cleats with my almost brand-new neon yellow goalie gloves. Dad gave me those gloves a couple of weeks ago, and Mom had scolded him about the price tag. They did sometimes argue about his extravagances and what Mom called his “going over the top,” but in the end, she let me keep them. I’ve worn those beauties a couple of times, and it’s so easy to grip the ball with them. Dad’s last present.

Thinking about those goalie gloves cements my decision. I text Shawn to let him know. He replies with a thumbs up. Done.

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On Sunday morning, I wake up relieved to have this settled. While I brush my teeth, I smile in the mirror, feeling proud this is my own decision, and I didn’t automatically do what anyone said I should, even Mom. I didn’t ask anyone’s opinion - not Uncle Bob, not Grandpa, and certainly

not Shawn, who is getting weird around me lately. He never cracks a joke with me anymore, has stopped making those body noises to be funny, and never ever mentions anything about his dad. It's unnatural. I hate it, but I can't be angry at him. I haven't seen the other guys yet, so I'm not sure what to expect when I'm back at school on Monday.

I should be ready for anything, but will I?

Once I shower and dress, I go downstairs. Mom's having coffee with one elbow on the table so her palm can hold up her head. She looks at me with a glimmer of a smile which has been AWOL since we were doing some joint-loosening dance called the Marcarella or Marrena at the Florida wedding. I have to admit seeing her smile puts a sliver of a grin on me, too.

Mom stands and hugs me, and of course, I let her, but only for a few seconds. I pull back and say, "Hey, easy does it on the new duds, Mom."

She backs off and looks at me. "How did you tie your tie by yourself?" Her smile grows.

"YouTube. No problem."

"Of course. I should have realized that." She almost laughs. "Eat a little before we go."

"I plan to."

While I'm working on my bowl of Cheerios, Mom says, "I understand and respect your decision not to speak at the funeral. It isn't a requirement to share your feelings with others. You know what's in your heart, and I'm sure Dad would be proud that you can make your own excellent decisions."

When Mom goes upstairs to finish getting ready, I head for another pee before leaving. In the car, she reaches over and squeezes my hand, and I squeeze back. Today, I'm not upset she hasn't told me the truth about how Dad died. Today is a day for remembering him.

When we walk inside the chapel, my eyes immediately check out the people. There, in the back row, are my teammates in button-down shirts and some even have on ties and jackets. They didn't go to the game. They're here for me, and I don't have to picture them winning the championship without me.

The End