

A photograph of a person with long, light-colored hair, seen from the back, wearing a dark backpack. They are standing in a dense forest of tall, thin trees. Sunlight filters through the canopy, creating a dappled light effect. The overall mood is mysterious and slightly unsettling.

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SPOOKED BY  
A  
SUSPICION

PART 1:

HOME IN MILTON

# CHAPTER 1



**M**y nostrils twitch. I crank open my eyelids halfway and suck in the aroma that's seeping under my bedroom door. That smell signals this will not be an ordinary morning. In superhero speed, I'm out of bed and pulling on my sweat pants because there's a strict no-boxers-at-the-table rule.

I fly down the stairs. Aha! I knew it! C-buns crowned in white in the middle of the table. I reach over and give one of them a squeeze. Still warm.

"Hey, Mom," I say, about to ask her what's the occasion, when she pivots around from the stove like a ballet dancer. She stuns me with a smile that's almost too large for her face to hold. Oh, yeah, there's going to be some rockin' good news today. Maybe even great news.

"Why are you so happy?" I ask, noticing scrambled eggs, bacon, and OJ that looks fresh squeezed. She's prepared a feast. I snag a bacon strip as I park my butt and crunch down, listening to the crispiness echo in my ears.

"No yoga today?" Mom never misses her Saturday morning class, insisting it decompresses her after a week of studying spreadsheets with endless columns of numbers.

She brings over a bowl of melon chunks and says, "I've got a big announcement. I'm just waiting for Grandpa to come down."

The gears in my head rotate on all the possibilities for best surprise announcement until I get to Harry Potter World in Orlando, and they stop. That's my number one choice, but club seats for a Revolution's soccer game is a close runner-up. The most outstanding news would be seeing Mom flash a winning lottery ticket in my face. We could be millionaires!

Grandpa walks in and pours his coffee before he joins me at the table. "How's my handsome goalie grandson this fine morning?"

"Hungry!" I say.

Mom takes a seat, still wearing that supersized smile.

"Hey, what's with the major breakfast today?" I ask, putting a cinnamon bun on my plate and buttering it. Mom always says no need for added butter, but I totally disagree.

She clangs her fork and knife against the table while making rat-a-tat-tat noises, and says, "Drum roll, please."

Grandpa and I look up at the same time as she announces, "Ted and I are getting married."

What did I just hear? My mouth stops mid-chew.

"Ted's very special," she continues, but her words are losing their form in my ears like a puff of smoke. I'm not listening anymore. How could this happen?

Yes, that guy has been here a lot, but I thought his accounting work must be so complicated it had to spill over into dinnertime. They went to the movies once or twice, but does that mean you have to marry someone? Then she chopped off her long hair, which annoyed me because Dad always complimented her blonde, silky ponytail. Did she do that for Ted? And she did give me the talk about how she hoped to remarry someday, but I assumed someday meant four years from now, when I'm away in college. *Rocky, you're so clueless!*

"And me?" I ask. "Aren't I special?" Yikes, I sound like a whiny baby. I glance at Grandpa, waiting for him to step in and clean up this pile of crap that has landed in our dining room, but his eyes tell a different story. They sparkle in a way usually reserved just for me, his only grandchild.

"I'm so happy for you, Marybeth," he says.

Well, Grandpa, you can have the luxury to be on board with this catastrophe because it isn't your life taking a deep dive into the unknown. Another change in my life might kill me. Okay, that might

be an exaggeration, but she's dumped me in a pit of quicksand, and I'm struggling to keep from going under.

Mom says, "You're special, Rocky, in a different way. You're my son. The more you get to know Ted, the more you'll see how wonderful he is."

When she mentions his name, her grin grows even wider in a record-breaking stretch, and her blue eyes shine with silvery specks as if she sprinkled them with glitter. Now that I know her joyful expression isn't predicting anything good for me, I wish she'd tone it down.

"When's this supposed to happen?" I ask, curious how much time I have to pull the plug on her plans.

"No definite date yet," she says.

There's still time.

"Does he have kids?" I need to know everything about him, so I can stop this craziness.

"No. He's never been married before. Also, I asked Ted to come to your game today. He's picking us up at ten thirty. Guess what? He's never attended a soccer game before in his whole life!"

So, in a flash, this guy morphs from client status into about-to-be husband and scores an invite to watch me play.

Kids should only have to have one major change in their lives, and I've already had mine.