Chapter 1

Orion had always loved the stars. Maybe that was because Hunter loved the stars and Hunter was his best friend. Hunter thought the stars were the best kind of organized chaos, like the crayons he kept on the floor or the maps in his father’s office. Orion understood the idea, but to him, the stars were just beautiful. He could lay on his back for hours staring up at the night sky, laughing when Hunter pointed at his belt of twinkling lights in the darkness.

“I didn’t know your pants were so big!” Hunter would giggle and Orion would blanche at the accusation only to end up smiling from ear to ear and giggling right along with him. It was impossible not to. Hunter had an infectious laugh.

Orion loved Hunter, and he loved those nights, just the two of them and millions of stars. They would stay there pointing out constellations and making up new shapes with stories to go with them until their toes were numb from the cold and mother would usher them inside, scolding them all the while for letting time get away from them.

Those were his favorite moments, just narrowly beating out their many other daily adventures. There was never a bad moment when they were together, never a second worth overlooking. They went through everything together, forged their way in the world together. With Hunter by his side, Orion felt a warmth settle in his chest and no matter where they were, he felt like he was home.

It seemed like they were unstoppable. They were driven and energetic and endlessly curious. They climbed trees and counted the leaves. They played swords with the discarded branches and pretended they were pirates (Hunter was the captain and Orion the first mate). They would carve tiny shapes and letters into the bases of the trunks and say they were tattoos. Hunter could name every type of tree he saw, and Orion trusted that he was always right. Hunter knew those types of things.

Afterwards on days when the sky was clear and the sun bright, they hunted butterflies in the field nearby, creeping up on them and watching their wings stretch up and down. The colors always caught the sunlight and made different patterns, like drawings come to life.

Sometimes they would take their legos outside and build castles for the ants in the sand near the porch. They would construct towers and intricate arches, dig moats and create bridges. Everything was always perfect, built to belong in one of Hunter’s storybooks. Orion was always amazed by the finished product; he couldn’t see what the final picture would be when they began like Hunter could. When they were done, they told their own fairytales. Hunter told the best stories. He would find the tiniest ant and follow him on an adventure. Orion would chime in at just the right time with a plot twist just to see Hunter puzzle over the turn of events. Hunter loved puzzles. They lost time to the planning and the dreaming, to the adventures of their own making. They needed someone like mother to keep them grounded.

She had to shepherd them inside at proper times for meals, and she tucked them in bed every night with a gentle touch and a soft kiss. She always listened patiently as they rambled about their days and she would calm them once they were done by humming as she smoothed her pale hands over the covers. As the song faded and Orion’s eyes felt heavy, she’d drift away from the bed back toward the light of the hall. She would smile faintly as she turned off the lights and allowed the room to glow from the stars and moon pasted on the ceiling, and then she would close the door behind her. Hunter had placed each sticker himself to mimic the constellations, and they would drift to sleep still whispering about their stars.

Orion often woke to the sunlight streaming in through the navy curtains. It drew a line across the comforter, stretching across Hunter’s face as he slept. The stars on the ceiling still glowed ever so faintly as the day began to dim them. For a moment, Orion could imagine they were in a spaceship somewhere far away floating by the sun, catching the first rays as they drifted by.

But when Hunter woke up, they were on earth, and the stars were only in his eyes. Orion was okay with that. They practically made their own solar system anyway, orbiting around each other with their own gravity, floating in their own way. Who cared if their feet were on the ground? Hunter would shoot out of bed every morning, all energy and ambition, and together, they would take on the world.

But before the world, they would greet father. When Orion and Hunter tumbled down the stairs in that first hour every day, never heeding father’s stern warning to mind their speed, they would take their places at the table and wait for mother to offer them their favorite cereal. And before she even emerged from the kitchen, father would be up and dressed for work, pristine and proper, shirt buttoned all the way to the top in a way that had to be stifling. He would sit across from them, newspaper stretched so wide, it covered him almost entirely. His eyes were still visible above the fold though; glasses perched on the bridge of his nose. He would eat something like oatmeal or toast, bland but practical. Sometimes, his gaze would drift from the words on the page to Hunter, a glint of something gentle and warm sparkling in the grey of his eyes. Grey like the moon. Mother was the sun, radiant and bold, but father was more subtle, cool and captivating in that particular way of his that was quite like if the moon were a person. He was soft-spoken, even when firm, and he was steady no matter how winds changed. There was something wise and calm and always certain about him that Orion found reassuring.

Hunter admired father, almost to the point of awe, and it wasn’t difficult to see why. Father was smart and understanding, kind and quiet. They shared so much in common already. Father possessed the same affinity for puzzles and problems, the same insatiable need to create and build and discover, the same love of space and stars.

Mornings with father always felt important in their own way, from the interesting things he read and shared to the careful and precise way he sipped his coffee. Even his teasing back and forth with mother felt like it was worth remembering, even if it was silly nonsense (as mother so often noted). Father always seemed to pull off silly in a way that seemed rather serious and proper, especially at breakfast time. Sometimes, Hunter and Orion could get him to blow bubbles in his orange juice, and even then, he never got a drop on his tie or his cleanly pressed shirt collar. So sure, mornings were important and wonderful, and it was all fun and easy-going. But nights with father, when he was home from work with his hair sticking up and his shirt untucked and unbuttoned at the top, grey eyes bright with excitement, those nights were the best. Because then he would invite Hunter and Orion into his study and let them use his big telescope. Space and stars. Father and son. Orion thought it was fitting.

Hunter learned a lot in his father’s study. He consumed the books hungrily, even though he didn’t always understand them entirely. Sometimes he would slide the book over to Orion and point at the pictures, proud and purposeful. Teaching, just like father. Orion wasn’t the best pupil, but he tried his best. He preferred their other games, but when Hunter looked so confident and happy, Orion could never say he hated sitting in the study amongst all the open books. As long as Hunter’s smile was that wide, Orion was always willing to be taught.

Orion was Hunter’s faithful student, but then one day mother told them that it was Hunter’s turn to be the student. Of course, she meant he was to be a student in a real school, a far cry from father’s study. St. Andrew’s or St. Mark’s or St. Paul’s, Orion could never remember what saint the school chose to represent. All he knew was it was away from home and he couldn’t come. He’d never been without Hunter, not even for a second, and the idea made him feel off balance.

“Some adventures you need to take on your own,” mother had said when Hunter asked if Orion was coming. Orion’s disappointment was hand in hand with Hunter’s until mother baked them both cookies and it was forgotten for a little while. And when they remembered to be upset, mother presented Hunter with a new backpack designed like a galaxy full of space themed notebooks and a whole new set of crayons, and the only person left to be upset was Orion. Hunter was excited for school. Orion was crest-fallen, but if Hunter was happy, how could he possibly let himself be anything less than supportive?

Hunter chattered on about school for weeks, and Orion pretended not to feel the sting of loneliness before Hunter was even gone. He had to take advantage of the time they had. So, he let Hunter spin wild fantasies about his upcoming classes and new friends, and he even contributed his own guesses, desperate to be a part of the new chapter. He threw himself into their usual adventures with more enthusiasm than ever before, listened more intently when Hunter tried to make him understand the words in father’s books, spent those nights before he drifted off to sleep savoring the memories of the day before they faded with the light from the hallway. He made the days count until finally, they were over.

Most mornings, Orion woke first to see the stretch of early morning light against the dark blankets until it brushed across Hunter’s face. Orion would watch the stars on the ceiling dim until Hunter was awake and they were there in his eyes. But then one morning, the moment passed too suddenly, and then mother was there helping Hunter change into his school uniform, a clean pressed shirt buttoned all the way to the top. Breakfast with father was brief, rushed even. And with the Milky Way slung over his shoulder and a smile so bright it was blinding, Hunter waved goodbye and he was gone.

Hunter was Orion’s best friend. They faced the world together. But one morning, Hunter took on the world alone and Orion was left behind.

He stood staring at the front door for what felt like an eternity, realizing that for the first time, he was lost. He was floating in that spaceship but without Hunter beside him there was no gravity to keep him in orbit. Without Hunter, he was lost in the vacuum of space.

Chapter 2

Time was funny without Hunter. It passed but it didn’t, and sometimes Orion missed him so much, he could almost picture him at school like he’d gone too. The images were vivid. Hunter laughing at a lunch table blowing bubbles in his chocolate milk. Hunter playing pirates with children Orion had never met before. Hunter animatedly telling stories about the stars. Orion could see it all, and if he wished hard enough it almost felt like he was there.

But he wasn’t, and the house was quiet and empty and sad. Father went to work. Mother hardly looked at him. And Hunter’s absence made every space feel haunted. Orion felt aimless and unimportant, and that was when Al beckoned to him.

Al stood at the top of the stairs close to noon time, waving him over, and Orion was so desperate for the company, he practically ran to meet him. Al had never been overly eager to spend time with Orion, but that was mostly because he always managed just fine on his own. He had his own rhythm; his own way of handling things and it was always slow and unbothered and easy. He didn’t need the help and he never liked to be a burden. With his hands tucked in his green overalls, green hat tilted a little forward on his head, and emerald complexion a little dirty from working on one thing or another, Al always seemed to know where he was going and why he was going there and when he would arrive. And he wasn’t the most talkative, but he was certainly the most understanding.

Al was a farmer, simple and soft-spoken. He worked hard, though Orion never really knew what he did most days. But he was always around, lingering in one place or another. He spent most of his time hovering near Anton, Hunter’s older brother. Since Anton started school though, Al’s presence was a little less predictable. So, when Al lead Orion down the upstairs hall, strolling leisurely past the various rooms, Orion held back his questions and followed.

They stopped at the old nursery. It still looked relatively the same, a crib in the corner, a rocking chair with a knitted blue blanket draped over the back, a few teddy bears resting against the far wall and a changing table painted with flowers all along the edges tucked between a set of shelves and the window. Orion found his eyes drifting to the trimming at the top of the walls, all different birds between ornate letters, the alphabet stretching all the way around the room. It was all just like he remembered it. The nursery had been his first home, just like it had been Hunter’s and Hunter’s sister’s before him and his brother’s before her. They’d grown out of it of course but being the youngest meant that there was no baby after them to take over the space, and consequently, it had fallen into a bit of disrepair.

The wallpaper was peeling, and some of the shelves dipped in the center from the weight of objects that had since been relocated. There were boxes stacked off to the side, neglected pieces of furniture in various states of togetherness littered throughout the room on top of what used to be a soft cream carpet but was now matted and worn and rather beige. Instruction manuals to appliances they no longer owned shared a place with old homework assignments and birthday cards in haphazard piles. There were old toys missing appendages, remote controls and wires, even clothing in trash bags surely meant to be donated but long since forgotten. The nursery had always been a place for transitions, but now it seemed truly stuck in between. It was where everything that didn’t have a spot in the rest of the house came to stay. And maybe one day things would be put away in their proper places, the clothes would be given away, the toys repaired and returned to their owners, the remotes and manuals and wires all attached to the respective appliances and hidden away, but it seemed for now they were stuck in limbo. Always in between, outgrown and forgotten, but never quite gone.

It made sense that this was where Al brought Orion on that first day without Hunter.

Al drifted to the bench by the window, sitting on the cushion despite the fact that it was coming apart at the seams and the stuffing was starting to peak out. He sat with his back to the glass, stretching his legs out and Orion carefully stepped around him to settle in by his side. Al’s eyes scanned the room, thoughtful. Silence never bothered Al, but Orion was far too impatient to accept it with such ease, so after a few minutes he spoke up.

“Hunter went to school today.”

Al slowly tilted his head to the side until his gaze was level with Orion’s, then he nodded and returned to regarding the room. He knew that Hunter was gone, and he didn’t need Orion to tell him.

“I couldn’t go with him,” Orion continued, though that fact was obvious. When Al still didn’t speak Orion huffed a little and slumped forward, resting his elbows on his knees and plopping his head in his hands.

“I don’t know what I’m supposed to do without him,” he admitted. “We always do everything together. I mean I don’t understand why I can’t just go with him.” He was grumbling, and though Al was silent, it was nice to know he was listening.

“You should have seen him,” he went on. “He was so excited to go! We have so much fun when we’re home and it’s the two of us. I don’t see what’s so great about school anyway. Especially if I’m not there!” The anger rose from the pit of his stomach to his chest until it burst like a balloon and he deflated just as quickly.

“Why can’t I go?” He mumbled, too sad to really be angry for long. He was too hurt, too lonely and confused. “Have you ever gone to school with Anton?” He looked to Al and maybe it was the sheer desperation in his eyes that prompted a response.

“Once.”

Orion’s curiosity was a creature of its own at times. It could overtake him entirely in an instant. For a moment, Orion didn’t have the sense to be worried about what Al might tell him. He scooted closer.

“Once?” he echoed hopefully. Al nodded, reached a hand up to adjust his hat, and sighed deeply.

“It ain’t no place for us, kid,” he said. Orion couldn’t hide his disappointment. It certainly wasn’t what he’d been hoping to hear.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “Why? What happened?”

Al said nothing.

“But… Well, maybe *I* could try…”

Al shook his head solemnly and Orion burst.

“But why? Why isn’t it a place for us? It has to be!” he whined. Al gave him a soft, sympathetic look. Something in his eyes knew more than he could ever bring himself to say to Orion.

“It just ain’t.”

There was something very final in the way Al said it, and the hope flickered out like the candle mother kept burning on the credenza after a long day. Often when the flame died, Orion would marvel at how fast it happened, and with little to no prompting. One second there and the next second, smoke.

He slumped back in his seat and tried not to pout (ultimately failing). The silence of the room felt significantly less promising than before and he wished Hunter would break it by rushing through the front door and running up the stairs. But the grandfather clock downstairs chimed exactly one time and Orion could have cried.

One o’clock.

Another hour until Hunter would be wrapping up his school day, probably another thirty minutes before he would reach the house and another unbearable 20 seconds between the driveway and the front door.

Too long.

Orion wasn’t sure he could sit in his sadness for another hour, especially after having his hopes so thoroughly dashed. If Hunter were here, he’d suggest a game, but Orion was willing to bet that Al didn’t play games, at least not the kind that he would enjoy. Besides, despite Al’s good intentions, his disheartening answers made Orion resent him just a little. It would pass, but for now, he wasn’t too keen on the farmer’s company. Just as he was about to stand and make his way back into the hall, a figure appeared in the doorway, blocking some of the light and making a fierce silhouette.

“There you two are!”

Chapter 3

Sarah wasn’t like most astronauts, not that Orion knew any personally, but he’d seen enough pictures to know that most astronauts didn’t wear square helmets. And he highly doubted that astronauts wore their spacesuits in the house. It must be quite stuffy. The thought distracted him, and Sarah huffed.

“Well, are you coming or not?”

She was also incredibly impatient, much like Hunter’s sister Margot. Orion could understand it and he was undeniably grateful for the change of pace. Al didn’t talk much, but Sarah never stopped. At least she would keep him distracted until Hunter was back.

“Where are we going?” He asked. The pause before she answered probably meant that she was rolling her eyes, but her helmet kept her face hidden and he couldn’t be sure.

“Margot’s room, of course!” She spun around, hardly willing to wait for him. Sarah was around for such short spans of time and she couldn’t exactly afford to waste a second. Orion jumped up to follow her, a bit overeager to shake off the gloom. When he turned to face Al, the farmer hadn’t moved.

“Aren’t you coming?” Orion asked. Al simply shook his head and waved his hand, urging Orion to go on without him. Three’s a crowd and Al didn’t care for crowds.

Orion didn’t need further prompting. He took off out the door, leaving the too quiet nursery behind. He practically ran to catch up with Sarah, skidding to a stop in the doorway of Margot’s room. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d been here. After all, Margot was busy and hopped from one activity to the next at a rate that was overwhelming to Hunter, so while there were days that she joined them in their games, it rarely went the other way and Hunter kept to his own end of the hall. Hunter had scored the far bedroom and didn’t have to share a wall with anyone (a fact he was rather smug about). Margot, however, was wedged between Anton and the bathroom. It led to countless arguments ranging from Margot’s complaints about Anton’s loud music (and her retaliating late-night flute performance) to Anton’s frustration with Margot’s dancing that shook his room when he was trying to play video games. The screaming matches at the dinner table were constant reminders of how lucky Hunter was to have a corner to himself. Privacy was as good as gold and he was rich.

With all of the kids at school, though, Margot’s room wasn’t half bad.

It was brighter than Hunter’s room, walls painted lavender and window blasting the floral bedspread with sunlight. There were sketchbooks on the floor and sheet music on the little desk against the far wall which seemed sort of backwards to Orion. He almost tripped on a soccer ball as he made his way to Sarah who’d perched herself on the edge of the mattress. He hopped up to sit beside her.

“So today was Hunter’s first day, huh?” She began, leaning back against the wall.

He nodded.

“I miss him.”

“That’s only natural kid. I miss Margot like crazy when she’s not around,” she confessed. Her voice was always just a touch muffled, but it was genuine. “You’ll never like it, but you’ll get used to it.”

“That’s easy for you to say, you’re used to being alone!” Maybe it would have been a harsh accusation if it wasn’t true. Sarah spent most of her time on missions. She was only ever home for a couple weeks at a time, during Margot’s offseason for her soccer team. The longest she’d ever stayed had been two summers ago when Margot broke her ankle. Those couple months hardly compared to the countless days Orion spent with Hunter. Margot just didn’t know what it was like to spend every waking minute with someone. While Orion envied her trips to space, he didn’t envy the loneliness, and while she sympathized with his situation, she could never truly relate.

Sure enough, she shrugged, conceding the point.

“I’m away a lot,” she agreed, “But that doesn’t mean I love Margot any less. I’m there when she needs me, but she loves being on her own. Sometimes that means I have to go away for a while. It doesn’t mean I like it.”

Orion knew where she was going, and he crossed his arms.

“When you love someone a lot, sometimes that means doing things you don’t like so that they can be happy.” She cocked her head toward him, and he imagined she was giving him a pointed look. “You know that Hunter was really excited about starting school. It’ll be good for him. You can put up with missing him for a little while as long as it’s the best thing for him.”

Orion hated that she was right. As upset as he was, he couldn’t bring himself to discourage Hunter from leaving. School made Hunter happy and Orion would do anything to make sure Hunter was happy, even if that meant he was left feeling unhappy. Love was complicated like that.

“But why does he have to do it alone?” He demanded. Sarah sighed. She shifted to pull one leg beneath her, letting her other leg dangle.

“That’s part of growing up, I guess. Learning to enjoy things by yourself. Getting to know yourself better.”

“But *why*?”

“Well, it’s kind of hard to explain,” she said. It was the kind of answer someone gave when they didn’t really know the answer. His expression must have given such thoughts away because she hurried to clarify, sounding a little exasperated as she did. “Everyone needs to be independent sooner or later, Orion. That helps them figure out who they are when they’re with someone else. If you only ever know what it’s like to be a pair, you’ll never really feel like your own person.”

Orion didn’t understand, but Sarah said it like it was an obvious fact, something that he would be foolish to keep protesting. So rather than try to make sense of something that he didn’t think would ever really make sense to him, he dropped it and shifted closer to her, mimicking her by leaning back against the wall as well. Today was lost cause and as frustrating as it was to admit defeat, Orion knew when he was spinning himself in circles. He let out a long sigh. He’d find a way to get answers tomorrow. So, he shifted focus.

“When do you leave again?”

“In another couple of weeks,” Sarah replied. “I think I’m going to visit Saturn. Margot loves the rings, so I figured she’d love to hear about them when I come back again.”

“Hunter says that you can’t land a spaceship on Saturn,” Orion said.

“Well you can’t, but you can land on a moon, like Titan,” Sarah said easily. “And then you have a better view of the rings anyway.”

The two of them launched into a conversation about Saturn, how big it was and what the rings would look like in person. Sarah joked that she would try to steal one and shrink it down so that Margot could wear it on her left hand just like mother. Orion countered that she could make it the size of a hula hoop and both Margot and Hunter could have a contest (he claimed Hunter was sure to win but Sarah insisted that Margot would beat him). By the time their playful banter gave way to laughter, the clock downstairs chimed twice.

Time flew with Sarah.

Orion wasn’t sure what he would do when she finally left for her mission, but he suspected Al wouldn’t be nearly as much fun.

They continued talking about space after that. Orion asked her about the planets she’d seen, and she launched into wild tales about her travels. She talked about Mars the most, red deserts stretching for miles. She called herself a space cowboy. He got so caught up in her stories that he almost forgot what he was waiting for. That is until he heard the front door swing open.

He practically jumped off Margot’s bed. Sarah chuckled.

“Go get him, kid,” she said, and he could tell from her voice that she was rolling her eyes again, but she was more amused than she was annoyed.

Orion didn’t need any further prompting. He sprinted out into the hall and practically slid down the stairs. When he came face to face with Hunter, it was like everything clicked back into place. Gravity was back and the things that had been hazy were clear and in focus. Hunter was smiling.