

Sebastian
and the
**GO-KART
GIRL**

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Sebastian and the Go-Kart Girl

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To Pamala Thomas Ward

“New York is always hopeful. Always it believes that something good is about to come off, and it must hurry to meet it.”

—Dorothy Parker

CHAPTER 1

“IT’S TIME,” my dad says.

I look up from my computer screen in what Dad calls his Innovation Factory, where my sister and I are working this summer.

“Go get ’em!” he urges.

The “em” would be the other contestants in the New York State Regional Teen Math Olympics.

“I accidentally nailed my feet to the floor, so I can’t go right now,” I tell him.

“You’re mentally superior, Sebastian. Don’t let your shyness stop you.”

Mentally quick enough to be scared, that is.

Dad takes me by the arm and gently escorts me to the door. “I know you’ll kick butt.”

Is there doubt in his voice, or do I just hear it?

My sister, Lilly, punches my shoulder softly two times. Even though she’s only four years older than me, she’s wiser than most grown-ups, and her punches are her way of expressing confidence in me. I wish I had confidence in me.



My parents think I can sometimes get lost in my thoughts, so they made sure I have a brilliant app on my phone to show me what subway train to take and when to get off.

I'm practicing answering math problems on my phone when I realize the 1 train has stopped at the Chambers Street station, where I have to get off. I jump between the doors just before they slide closed.

Stuyvesant is a very competitive public high school where the Math Olympics will take place. I cross over a highway on the pedestrian bridge to get there, along with other kids my age.

Some of them are skinny-tall. Some are short like me. They look like they've come from all over the world: there are kids with turbans, Middle Eastern kids, Asian kids, Black kids, and pale kids like me. Brains have no skin color, as my dad likes to say.

They all go right through the school entrance like there's no danger of failure or humiliation in there. I hesitate. My palms are sweaty. I'm having a little trouble breathing, and I feel dizzy.

Okay. It's time.

I slouch into the auditorium, get my competitor's number, and wait until I hear my name: Sebastian Kemp. I climb onto the stage. Three judges sit at a table near the front row of seats.

The judge tapping a pencil on a grading sheet is eager to record my wrong answers. The man with Einstein-wild white hair has glacier-cold blue eyes. Cold enough to freeze my brain cells? The woman has lots of very white not-smiling teeth, which she bares like a threatening dog.

Competitors fill the seats behind them. Their glasses magnify their eyes, so all I see is an angry army of eyeballs eager for me to fail.

I hear a voice, but the words are unclear because of the nervous buzzing in my ears.

"I will repeat the question only once," Einstein threatens. "What is the square root of one thousand three hundred and sixty-nine?"

Easy: thirty-seven. But no words come out, only mouse squeaks.

"Ten seconds to answer," Bright Teeth growls.

I shout out, "Thirty-seven!" but apparently only in my head, because Tap-Tap-Tap keeps tapping out the seconds.

I pant for breath. I'm not dead, but I wish I were.

This is what could happen if I actually go into the auditorium. So I don't. I don't go get 'em.

Dad will be 100 percent disappointed in me. I don't go back to the Innovation Factory, where we work and where he lives now that he and Mom are separated. Instead, I head home to our apartment near the Museum of Natural History on the Upper West Side of Manhattan. My mood improves just a little because I spot a hawk soaring free and fretless on a breeze while I'm walking from the subway to our building. But as it flies lower, I realize it's just a mangy seagull. I guess I don't deserve to see a hawk today.

CHAPTER 2

MOM'S PREPARING LESSON PLANS at the dining room table, which doubles as her office. She's the head of the science department at Tarbell on the East Side, and she also teaches biology. I'd love to be in her class, but the school 'is just for girls.

"You're home early," she says, a little puzzled.

Which would be worse—to tell her that I lost because I wasn't smart enough or that I didn't even go inside the building because I was too nervous? Maybe I could say a gazillion locusts descended on the school, and it was unsafe to even approach it. But she knows I like to add spice to stories to make them more exciting or dramatic. She wouldn't believe that for a nanosecond.

I go into my room, where our dog, Lucky, is asleep on my bed. He's a stray my sister and I found in Central Park and adopted. I sit next to him, and he puts his head on my lap because he always knows when I'm sad.

Mom comes in and perches on the edge of the bed too. "Can I ask you something?"

She already has. "I guess."

"Did you win?"

I shake my head. "I couldn't go inside."

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She gives me a hug. I wish she wouldn't be so understanding about my failings.

"Being shy isn't a curse, and it doesn't mean you're a bad person, Sebastian. The anxiety you feel about the competition is like asthma or allergies. There are ways to treat it."

"You mean go back to Dr. Pry and Poke, who poked me with questions. Talking about it just made me shyer."

She smiles sadly and leaves my room.

I can talk easily with my friend Luke, so I video chat with him on my computer. "Do you think being shy is a disease?" I ask.

"I really don't know. I'll have to look it up."

Luke is excellent at finding out stuff on the internet. "How about watching *The Big Bang Theory*?" he asks. That's a TV show about a group of scientist friends. They're brilliant but maybe a little awkward around girls and stuff.

Luke and I stream "The Dumpling Paradox" from the first season, and it does cheer me up enough that I actually laugh. There's a knock on my door, and Mom sticks her head in.

"I love it when I hear you laughing," she says in her happy voice.

"This is a superior episode."

"I heard two laughs."

"Luke's watching on his computer. We have a chat set up, so it might sound like he's in my room, but he's on speaker."

"Luke?"

"From school. He's not with us anymore, though."

"You make it sound like he moved to another planet."

"New Jersey."

"Hmmm."

CHAPTER 3

MY SISTER GETS *hmmmed* about zero times.

I know my parents have secretly trained her to herd me around the city like a sheep that needs protection. Every morning, she and I take the subway to the Queensboro Plaza station across the East River in Queens, then walk to work. I usually have to half-run to keep up because she strides so fast and is 97 percent as graceful as an impala. Today, the shepherd's walking at my pace.

"He signed you up, didn't he?" The *he* is our dad.

"Yeah."

"If the Math Olympics had been your thing, you would have conquered it."

I don't know. Maybe. Lilly's an okay older sister, but she'd be a lot better if she had a flaw. Or seven.



The Innovation Factory is in an old warehouse.

Lilly is working with Dad to build a neat solar-powered delivery van. I'm writing computer code to help his colleague Harold create a video game.

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Dad and Lilly's work area takes up the most space because of all the tools, the hundreds of parts bins, the computers, and the 3D printer that's as big as a small car. When we arrive, Lilly immediately starts sorting out a tangle of electrical wires attached to the van's dashboard.

I go to my shiny metal-and-glass desk with three computer screens in the video game area. Whiteboards covered with diagrams and flow charts outlining how the game develops are hanging on the wall. Harold has a similar computer setup, luckily not too close to mine. Sometimes he doesn't shower and can kinda smell.

Next to us inside the warehouse is an entire house with a roof, modeled on an Amish farmhouse Dad saw in Pennsylvania. He loved the building's proportions and the door and window placement and thought it was the most perfect home he had ever seen. He wanted an exact copy, so he brought Amish carpenters here to build it.

Dad's a computer engineer who admires farmers who don't use motors, computers, or power tools. Mom calls this ironic. She often uses words my sister and I don't know, and we're required to look up their meanings.

My dad comes to his house door and waves me in. "Pancakes!"

He used to be in charge of breakfast on Sunday mornings when our family was still together. While he cooked, I'd usually describe one of my fantastic dreams. Now he only makes pancakes when he wants to have a serious talk. Mom must have texted him about my Olympic failure.

We sit at his wooden-plank dining room table, but I don't eat because my stomach gets upset when I'm upset. Dad isn't eating either. His stomach must be churning too.

“You spend a lot of time alone in front of your computer, don’t you, Sebastian?”

“I guess I do.”

“It’s summertime. Get out of your room. Clear your brain with some fresh air. Isn’t there a chess club or something for teenagers at the outdoor chess tables in Central Park? You can find guys who share your talents and interests. You can make a friend.”

This is something my sister would do with no worries. She’s about as shy as a firecracker.

“Can I help?” my dad asks.

I don’t know. He doesn’t either.

Back at my desk, I search the internet to see if there is a club for teens at the Chess & Checkers House, but I don’t find one. The house is on a hill in Central Park, and I used to take chess lessons from our neighbor Mr. B before he died. He was very nice, and I miss him. He challenged me to play at a more advanced level, and one time he gave me an old subway token. I still don’t know if it had magic in it, but I beat the best chess player in school with the token hanging around my neck on a chain. I wish I’d had it when I went to the Math Olympics.

The doorbell interrupts my daydreaming about Mr. B and the token. On the security camera, there’s a teenage girl who looks as sleek as a Doberman. She’s about Lilly’s age, and when I buzz the lock, she bounds in, and I realize she’s Kyle Ryan’s daughter, Naomi.

“Sebastian!” she yells.

Her bright red sneakers with prancing black horses barely touch the floor as she sprints over. I’m pretty stiff when people hug me, and I take a step back. The last time I saw Naomi was

at her father's memorial service, where she had shrunk into a twisted ball of sadness. Today, her head is held high, and her chin's out, friendly and fierce. Her hundred-watt green eyes and 110-watt smile light her up and make me smile right back.

"Bosco!" Lilly shouts from the van area.

"Rosco!" Naomi shouts back.

They grab each other's hands and twirl around, chanting "Matolly, Matolly." That's the sleepaway camp where they made up those dumb nicknames.

Dad gives Naomi a big hug. "What a wonderful surprise! How's your mom?" he asks in a shaky voice. He's mostly not an emotional person, but tears streamed down his cheeks at the memorial for his best friend, Kyle.

"Ruth has good days and bad days," Naomi says. She likes to call her parents by their first names. She forces herself to smile. "She's making sculptures again and got a job at an art gallery in Litchfield." She looks over at the van workshop area. "And how about you guys? Ruth says you're working on the van again."

"It's going great," Dad says.

"Come on," Lilly says. "Take a look."

The van with its steel frame exposed reminds me of the dinosaur skeletons in the Museum of Natural History. The van's body, or "skin," with solar panels is attached to a crane high above and will be lowered onto and attached to the frame when the time comes. Until then, the gauges, wires, and electric motors by each wheel are exposed, making them easy to work on.

Do I see disappointment on Naomi's face? Dad must have read her reaction too. "I know it looks like we're not very far along," he says. "But we're pretty close to getting the whole thing put together."

Naomi jumps into the driver's seat and runs her fingers over the dashboard. "Do you need help? I learned a lot about mechanical stuff working on the XKE and my go-karts with Kyle."

"Of course," Dad says.

"Yeah!" my sister shouts. "We're installing brakes today."

Naomi pulls a wrench off the wall, where tools are neatly organized on brackets. "Then we'll need this brake bleeder."

Lilly and Naomi high-five.



I'm at my computer desk, not concentrating on code because I'm watching Lilly and Naomi laughing and singing along with the radio.

Why does Naomi seem so happy? Didn't her father's death make her sad and angry? It certainly made my dad feel that way.

Mom thinks whatever sunny optimism Dad had died when his best friend and business partner passed away. He became supercritical of Lilly and me. We were slackers because we didn't get perfect scores on every test and homework assignment. I slouched too much, and even when I did stand up straight, it wasn't good enough for him. Mom got the same treatment. He complained that the food she cooked tasted terrible, and the apartment was always filthy.

I used to put a pillow over my head so I wouldn't hear them arguing about how harshly he treated Lilly and me. They also fought about his fixation on Kyle's list of things he really wanted to see and do but never could because he died so quickly from cancer.

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Dad decided to honor his friend by seeing the objects, visiting the places, and doing the activities on Kyle's list. Mom called his undertaking a fool's errand—a waste of time. The shouting about this got loud and frequent, and eventually, Dad left our family for three and a half months. At least I didn't have to put a pillow over my head to block out their angry voices anymore.

When he got back, he was eager to tell us all a story. Mom wasn't so interested, but Lilly and I were. The last item on his list was to climb Denali, the tallest mountain in Alaska. "It was the hardest thing I've ever done," he told my sister and me. "I hired a guide, and it took us twelve days to reach a camp near the summit, where we rested so our bodies could adjust to the thin atmosphere. We struggled to the top in the darkness. As the sun slowly rose, I experienced an overwhelming emotion that released me from the sadness and negativity that had haunted me since my friend's death. Now I can celebrate his life, not just mourn him. Kyle would be delighted that I'm eager to discover something good in each new day and every person."

I think Lilly and I are included in "every person." Since he got back, Dad has been more encouraging and less critical. But he and Mom still argue, so he's living here in his Amish house and doesn't come with Lilly and me when we take Naomi back to our apartment for dinner.