

Together

Annie Lim (2023)

Someone wheels me over to the couch and switches on the news. Soft padding interrupts the blaring TV. I try to turn my head, but deep down I know I'll never be able to. Thankfully, the person walks in front of me so I can see them. It's my brother James. 'Hi Amelia,' he says in a soft tone. *He looks tired.*

I wish I could say something. He's the only person that really understands me. Everyone else just stares and whispers to each other behind cupped hands. *If only I could talk, that would make everything easier.*

James has been very protective of me ever since I was first diagnosed with Rett Syndrome. As a person with Rett, I tend to have uncontrollable tantrums where lots of screaming is involved. Even if I don't mean it, it just comes out. I can also be extremely sensitive to noise or change. I hear James' keys jingling in his back pocket. He must be going out. *Drive safe.*

I turn my attention back to the bright screen and sigh. Other kids, normal kids, enjoy watching TV. Not me. Whenever something happens, I get put somewhere. That somewhere is usually in front of the TV. Everyone forgets about me except for my brother. I don't know what I'd do if something ever happened to him.

Twenty-two minutes and forty-eight seconds later I watch the news reports flash across the screen. One in particular catches my attention. A picture of an upturned blue Mini on the side of a wet road appears on the TV. *Wow, that car looks exactly like James'. It even has the same number plate.* Then it hits me. I freeze.

That is James' car.

Panic rushes through my veins like juice through a straw. I try to talk, try to move, but I can't. A few minutes later someone thuds down my wheelchair ramp behind me. It's too loud, I can't control myself. So, I scream. I scream for my brother, and I scream because it's too loud. I thrash violently, almost falling out of my wheelchair. Someone runs into the room; I can tell it's Dad because I can hear his voice competing with mine.

'Amelia, shhh,' he soothes, as my cries turn into whimpers.

I shift my eyes back to the screen; another picture of James' Mini is being showed. His eyes follow my gaze. His face crumples and his knees buckle as he falls to the floor. He cries out. My vision blurs and I'm stuck in slow motion as Mum comes skidding down the ramp and into the room.

I try to block my ears, my head hurts like crazy. I can't think.

So,

I

scream.

I scream loud. Larry Birdwood, our neighbour, comes to see what all the commotion is, closely followed by his wife, Beryl. Mr and Mrs Birdwood manage to calm my parents down by making some chamomile tea and soothing them 'til their cries turn into soft whimpers. That's when the police arrive.

Red and blue lights mesmerise me as they dance solemnly on the plaster walls.

'Amelia,' a soft voice whispers, pulling me out of my trance.

Officers are led into the kitchen and the door closes behind them so that all I can hear are their hushed tones bouncing off the kitchen door. Mrs Birdwood wheels me away from the chaos, humming softly. My arms droop, my eyelids get heavy, and I find myself fighting sleep. 'Don't fight it, honey,' Mrs Birdwood says, as if reading my mind. My eyelids fall shut as I drift away from reality and sleep engulfs my tired body.

I arouse to the mouth-watering smell of Mr Birdwood's famous pancakes; the sun soaks my face with warm rays of light. It's a beautiful day!—then a flashback of the news report brings my mood plummeting down. Suddenly the sun isn't so warm, and the day is not so beautiful. I can hear heavy footsteps coming down my ramp. *It's Dad.* He walks slowly, dragging his feet under him as he enters my room. I catch a glimpse of his face. Big, dark circles loom under his eyes and I notice he has a five o'clock shadow. He wheels me down the ramp and parks me at the kitchen table. Beside me, he slumps into a chair.

Mr Birdwood stands watching over the stove, checking his precious pancakes every second, careful not to burn them, while Beryl puts the kettle on. Golden, rich and smooth, the pancake sits in front of me cooling a few minutes later. Some dribble escapes my mouth and drips onto my chin. I try to communicate, *feed me, feed me!* But instead, a mighty scream comes

out. This gets Dad's attention, and he snaps out of his trance to feed me. 'Sorry, Amelia,' he says, his voice cracking. I look into his eyes and realise they have clouded. *I wish I could comfort him.*

Mum comes into the kitchen. 'Come on Amelia,' she says, pushing my chair out the door while rummaging around her bag for the keys.

'Do you really think it's a good idea to go now?' Dad says.

'She needs to keep this appointment. It's important,' says Mum.

Just before she starts the car, she stops and stares at the empty seat beside her. James's seat. She tilts her head up, eyes overflowing. I want to help her.

But

I

can't.

She tries to start the car, but it's too hard for her. She takes me back inside and leaves me, closing the door to her room behind her.

One week later.

Mum helps me out of the car and wheels me to the entrance of my therapist's office. She pauses, saying, 'Amelia, just try to be quiet. Please.'

I will try my best, Mum. I want to talk so badly. I start to thrash violently. Mum stops and places a soft hand on my shoulder. Be good. I remember. I try to keep my thrashing at bay. Be good. Be good. Be good.

We get to Administration. The lady behind the counter stares at my misshapen body. I can see that she's trying not to, but I don't mind. I'm used to it. We're called in by my therapist, Amanda Jones.

'Hi Amelia,' she says in her professional voice.

All I do is stare.

I do some exercises with Amanda and, after all the work I do, I'm exhausted. Mum drops me off at our house, wheeling me to my room, and goes to do her hospital night shift. Dad puts me to bed, and I notice he has trimmed his beard. He tucks me in and kisses me on the forehead before heading back downstairs to watch the footy.

I stop and listen. I can still hear sniffing and crying, but we have each other, and we will get through this.

Together.