ONE HEART. INFINITE POSSIBILITIES



EVERYTHING I thought I KNEW

SHANNON TAKAOKA



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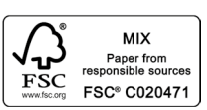
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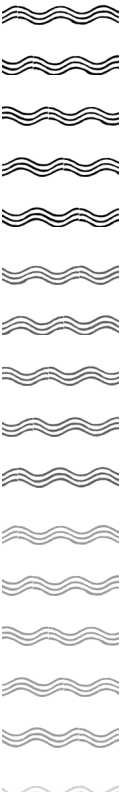
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For Emi, Evan, and Scott,
who always believed in me



BROKEN

Here's one of the many things I thought I knew that turns out to be wrong: you need to fall in love to end up with a broken heart.

That's not how it was for me. At least not at first.

Sometimes things—glass, eggs, hearts—just break, and there's no way to put them back to their exact, original form. You can't stir the cream out of your coffee. A broken plate, even if you glue it, will always have cracks. This is just basic physics, or, more specifically, the second law of thermodynamics. Not to nerd out on you too much.

But I'm already getting ahead of myself, which I tend to do, because my brain never seems to want to slow down and just *be still*. There's too much going on in there, especially now.

So let's rewind a bit and begin with the moment the universe decided to start messing with all my assumptions and well-laid plans, big-time.

October 14 at 3:45 p.m.

It's the fall of my senior year.

I'm running.

"Damn, it's hot," I say to Emma as we round the curve at the far side of our high school's track. The lane lines vibrate ahead of me in the heat. Halloween is a few weeks away, and it must be more than eighty degrees, at least.

Emma, her auburn ponytail smooth and perfect, looks like she's barely broken a sweat. "Is it?" she asks. "Feels pretty good to me." A warm spell, typical for the San Francisco Bay Area in the fall, has brought us beach weather in the middle of a month packed with college application submissions, after-school practices, and, as always, piles of homework. The result: we won't, in fact, be hanging at the beach. Cross-country is basically the only time I get to breathe outdoor air.

We're doing intervals today, and Emma's pace seems faster than usual. As soon as we are side by side, she pulls ahead. I have to push myself to catch her. I push, she pulls. She pulls, I push. This is starting to annoy me, even though it's what Emma and I always do when we practice together—we compete.

She pulls ahead again. I try to focus on increasing my pace.

Focus, Chloe, focus.

But all I can think about is water.

I didn't drink enough before practice.

I didn't drink *any* water, actually. I got held up leaving seventh period because I needed to talk to Ms. Breece about my paper proposal for AP Physics and had barely enough time to pull on my running shoes. My proposal is going to be late, which Ms. Breece made sure to note is "unlike you, Chloe," which is true, I guess, but it got me thinking about what really, honestly *is* "like me," because sometimes, or maybe even *all the time*, I'm stumped on that one. Which got me stressing again about my college application essays and whether they are mind-numbingly boring, and, by extension, if *I* am mind-numbingly boring. Which resulted in me forgetting to fill up my water bottle. This is starting to seem like kind of a big mistake, now that my mouth has gone dry and I'm dizzy and feeling like I might be about to throw up all over my shoes.

I turn to Emma. Her mouth is moving, but I only hear her last few words.

". . . don't you think?" she asks. "Chloe?" Cross-country is when we catch up on anything we didn't get to talk about at lunch. The pop quiz we weren't expecting in Calc. Weekend plans. Emma's ongoing analysis of her five-minute conversation with Liam Morales about *Catch-22—Was it an excuse to talk to her? Or did he just need some quick info from someone who actually read the book?*—a topic that, for my own

reasons, I really don't want to analyze anyway. But I must have zoned out for a few seconds, or minutes, because I have no idea what she just said.

"Think about what?" I barely have enough breath to get out the words, so I slow to a light jog as Emma pulls ahead of me for the third—or is it fourth?—time. Instead of pushing, I just stop. My heart is thumping hard.

Thump thumpthumpthumpthumpthumpthumpthump. It's all I can hear. *Thumpthumpthumpthumpthump.*

Emma turns around. "Chloe?"

The lane lines ahead of me look wrong. They're not just vibrating, they're rippling. Like those wave graphs in my physics textbook. The whole field around us is rippling. *Are we having an earthquake?* I look toward Emma, also rippling, who has now stopped running too and is staring at me, eyes wide.

"Chloe, are you okay?"

My chest feels like it's being crushed. My ears are on fire. Sweat is running down my face and my back, soaking my shirt.

Not okay, I think.

Definitely not okay. But I can't say the words.

And then the world that's spinning, spinning, spinning like a top gets tipped over, me with it. The last thing I see is the brilliant blue of the October sky overhead.

When I open my eyes, my mom is there, and I can tell immediately that she's been crying. Her face is puffy and red.

Next to her, my dad is pale, like someone drained the blood out of him.

"Mom?"

"Hi, sweetie." She grabs my hand.

Machines whir all around me. A tube is fitted under my nose. Oxygen, I'm assuming. Electrodes are attached to my chest under a thin fabric gown and there's an IV in my right arm. I'm in a hospital, obviously. But not dead. So that's encouraging, at least.

"Mom, what happened?" I whisper. My chest hurts. I still feel like I don't have enough air in my lungs, and it's hard for me to talk. She and my dad look at each other in that way they do sometimes when I ask a question they don't really want to answer. Like when I was five and asked them if they were going to die someday too after we held a backyard funeral for my recently departed hamster, Nugget.

I can tell my mom is holding back tears as she struggles to keep a neutral face. She clutches my hand with both of hers.

"It's your heart, Chloe. There's something wrong with your heart."

My heart?

How can there be something wrong with my heart? Heart problems are for big-bellied old men. For people who eat greasy cheeseburgers and fries all the time and never exercise. For people who smoke. Not for just-turned-seventeen-year-old girls. Not for vegetarians who run five miles almost every day after school. Not for people like me.

I turn from my mom to my dad. Dad's the science teacher of the family; maybe he's the one who should cover this. But he's still as silent as the grave, which is highly unusual for him. And alarming to me.

"Dr. Ahmadi says it's a defect," my mom explains. "One that we didn't know about until now. He will be here shortly to go over everything with us."

"Who's Dr. Ahmadi?" I ask.

Nothing that's happening right now is making any sense. *Why didn't they call Dr. Curtis?* I wonder. She knows me. I know her. She's been my doctor since I was a baby.

"Dr. Ahmadi is a cardiac surgeon," my mom says. "He's a specialist."

The word *surgeon* gets my attention.

Surgery seems serious. *Heart* surgery, extremely serious. But it can't be anything that bad. I was *fine* when I left the house this morning. Wasn't I? Plus, I don't have time for any surgery. Not now. Not in the next-to-last semester of my senior year. Not with midterms coming up in a few weeks and college applications due. I try to take a deep breath to calm myself down, but I just end up inhaling a horrible plastic-y smell from the oxygen tube and it freaks me out even more. Why are they giving me oxygen?

"Do I need surgery?" I ask, my chest already tightening up in anticipation of the answer.

My mom and dad look at each other again, and I really want to shake them this time, because I know they know

I hate it when they treat me like a baby who can't handle uncomfortable information. If there's something important going on, I want to know what it is. I like to have answers.

But before I can ask another question, there's a knock at the door.

"Hello?"

A man wearing green surgical scrubs appears in the doorway and my mom and dad stand up.

"Please come in," my mom says. "She's awake."

A smile spreads across his face as he walks toward me.

"Nice to meet you, Chloe. I'm Dr. Ahmadi."

According to Dr. Ahmadi, here's what (not who) is responsible for breaking my heart:

Arrhythmogenic Right Ventricular Dysplasia. ARVD for short.

It's a rare form of cardiomyopathy—a cellular defect—and it's been slowly killing the muscle tissue of my right ventricle, probably for years. Maybe since I was born. The resulting scars are now making it hard for my heart to do what it's supposed to do. Like beat hard enough to oxygenate my blood. Which is not exactly something a pint of Ben & Jerry's and an ugly cry is going to fix.

ARVD is why I collapsed on my high school's track. Why I have been feeling so tired and out of breath recently.

Why I'm going to need a new heart.

And it's why, if I don't get one soon, I'm going to die.

I'm going to die before I turn eighteen. I'm going to die before I graduate high school. Before I get to go to college, visit Tokyo, climb the Eiffel Tower, fall in love, own a dog, and become the first scientist to confirm the existence of life on another planet. *Oh my god*, I think. *What else?* I don't even know all the things that I want to do, to see, to taste, hear, and touch, because I assumed I had plenty of time to figure it out. A lifetime of it.

Dr. Ahmadi tells us that, based on my condition and my age, the chances are good that I'll be given a priority position on the transplant waiting list.

And then we will be in the very awkward, awful situation of hoping that someone who is not me might die instead.

So I can live.

SHANNON TAKAOKA has worked as a writer, editor, and public relations consultant in the fields of technology and life sciences. In addition to books, she is a lover of all things nerdy—from time travel to weird science and dragons. *Everything I Thought I Knew* is her first novel. Shannon Takaoka lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband and two children.

