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AIDEN TYLER,
QUARAN-TEEN

BY REX OGLE

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CHAPTER ONE, Wash Your Hands
Aiden Tyler liked riding the bus to and from school. It was kinda his favorite part of the day. In the mornings, he got to chat and laugh with his friends and not think about his annoying family. In the afternoons, he got to chat and laugh with his friends and not think about doing homework just yet. Plus, the bus driver always played really good music.

“Mrs. Quinn, turn this song up!” yelled Bella.

“The volume is just fine the way it is,” said Mrs. Quinn the bus driver.

Bella Patel leaned across the aisle and said, “I love Selena Gomez.”

“She’s not as good as Dua Lipa,” said Aiden.

“No one’s better than Taylor Swift!” Jacob shouted. He stood up on his seat and shouted, “I love you, Taylor Swift!”

“Sit down, Jacob Montgomery,” Mrs. Quinn said.

Jacob pretended to melt down into his seat next to Aiden. He put his hand over his heart and said, “Isn’t Taylor Swift just the best thing in the entire world?”

Aiden rolled his eyes. “No. Comic books are the best thing in the entire world.”

“Wrong again,” Bella said. “The best thing in the entire world is cupcakes. Or cookies. Well, cupcakes and cookies.”

That started an argument. But Aiden, Jacob, and Bella were smiling and laughing the whole time.

When Aiden got off at his stop, he turned around and waved. Bella and Jacob waved back. He took a deep breath and sighed. Now he had to deal with his homework and his family—his least two favorite things in the world.

* * *

“Honey, I’m home!” Aiden shouted when he walked in the door. He kicked off his shoes, then dropped his backpack on the floor. Jackson, Aiden’s little brother, was sitting on the couch
watching cartoons. His foot was in his mouth again. Aiden said, “You’re disgusting.”

“You’re disgusting,” Jackson repeated.

Aiden walked into the kitchen to get a snack. Mom and his sister Sophia were in the corner whispering. Aiden rolled his eyes. He opened the fridge, saying, “Look at us, we have secrets. Whisper-whisper-whisper.”

Mom stood up straight and put her hands on her hips. “Not everything concerns you, Aiden.”


“I am minding my own business,” Aiden said. The fridge had eggs, butter, hot dogs, yogurt, milk, cranberry juice, a bunch of condiments, and a jar of olives. Yuck. He ducked into the pantry. In the back of the bottom shelf, a bag of potato chips was hiding behind a box of cereal. Score. He shoveled a handful into his mouth.

“Ew! You are such a pig,” Sophia said.

“Aiden,” Mom moaned. “How many times have I told you? When you come home, you need to wash your hands. And you should always wash your hands before you eat. Now stop putting your filthy hand inside that bag of chips. You’ll contaminate everything. Pour a small helping out into a bowl or a napkin. Manners please.”

Mom turned her back to grab a bowl from the cabinet. Sophia took the opportunity to stick her tongue out at Aiden. Aiden stuck his tongue out back. Of course, Mom saw Aiden do it. “Aiden, come on. Don’t start pestering your sister as soon as you walk in the door.”

“She started it!”

As Mom pushed Aiden toward the sink to wash his hands, Sophia laughed. “You got in trouble.”

“You are legit the worst.”

“Not in comparison to you, little brother.”

“I’m older than you.”

“But shorter,” Sophia said.

Aiden felt his face flush red. Sophia was annoying but she was right. He was two years older than her—yet two inches shorter.

“Whatch’all doing?” asked Jackson. He waddled into the kitchen, holding one of Aiden’s shoes.
"Washing our hands," Mom said. "Do you want to wash your hands too?"

Jackson shook his head. Then he licked Aiden's shoe.

"Moommmmm! Make him stop!" Sophia whined.

"Jackson, no!" Mom snapped. "Aiden stop laughing at your brother. That's why he does this sort of thing—because you laugh and make him think it's funny."

"Oh, it is funny," Aiden said. "Cuz you're worried about me spreading germs."

"We do not lick shoes in this house, young man," Mom said to Jackson. But Jackson was watching Aiden, who couldn't stop laughing. Jackson giggled.

"You three are going to be the death of me. What time is it? Great. Now I'm going to be late for work," Mom said. She turned in a full circle, searching the kitchen for her purse, her keys, and her waitress apron.

Aiden plopped onto the couch. "Your purse is on the coffee table. Your keys are next to the toaster. And your apron is on the coat hook by the door."

Mom rushed around the apartment collecting the items. She rubbed the top of Jackson's head, hugged Sophia (whispering, "We'll talk later"), then kissed Aiden on the forehead. "Take care of your brother and sister until—"

Aiden finished her sentence, "—until Mike comes home. I know the schedule. We only do this every night." Aiden started flipping channels.

Mom snatched the remote, holding it hostage in the air. "No Netflix until you finish your homework. That goes for you too Sophia. Aiden, you're—"

Aiden finished Mom's sentence again. "—in charge of making dinner, Sophia cleans up. Then we both need to bath Jackson and read to him before bed. Mike will be working late 'cause he'll pick up some Uber rides on the way home. Mom, none of this is new. I've got this. Go to work."

"You're the best," Mom said. She kissed him again on the forehead and handed him the remote. She disappeared out the front door.

Jackson crawled up next to Aiden. Sophia took a running leap and tumbled over the couch. "What are we going to watch?"

"One episode of Friends, then we get on with homework and chores."

"Three episodes," Sophia argued.

"One," Aiden said.
“Three!” Jackson squealed.

“Okay, two. Final offer,” Aiden said.

Jackson gave a thumbs up. Sophia nodded in agreement. Aiden pressed play.

* * *

Aiden cracked open six eggs into the bowl. He added some salt and a dash of pepper, then some milk. He stirred it with a fork. On a plate, he cut up three cold hot dogs into a bunch of fat meaty coins. When the pan was heated to medium, he added butter. Once the pan was all coated, he added the scrambled eggs and the hot dog slices. A few minutes later, he scooped the meal onto three plates. “Dinner is served!”

Jackson ignored his fork. He dove in with his fingers and started eating.

“Eggs’n’weiners again?” Sophia moaned. “Is this the only thing you know how to cook?”

“Not even. Last week I made Hamburger Helper one night and Mac’n’cheese the next. And I made a salad for you on Saturday.”

“That was not a salad,” Sophia argued. “It was some lettuce and an apple.”

“Sounds like a salad to me,” Aiden said. “For the record, I can only make dinner with what we have ingredients for. In case you forgot, it’s the end of the month. Mom and Mike always skip groceries the last week of every month.”

“Why do you call him Mike?” Sophia asked. “His name is Dad.”

“First, his name is not Dad. His name is Mike Miller. Second, you call him Dad because he’s your Dad. And Jackson’s Dad. He’s not my Dad.”

“But he’s your stepdad.”

“Technically, him and Mom aren’t even married. So that makes him Mom’s boyfriend.”

Sophia groaned. “They’ve been together for, like, ten years. That means they’re legally married.”

Aiden shook his head. “I don’t think that’s how it works.”

Sophia crossed her arms. “You act like we’re not related. We are. Mom is all our moms. We just have different dads. So why can’t you just call Mike ‘Dad’?”

Aiden shrugged. “Cause he’s not my dad.”

“Why are you like this?” Sophia grunted.
"Like what?"

"Argumentative!"

"I’m not arguing, you’re arguing. And you’re not eating the scrumptious meal I made for you. You need to eat it while it’s hot. It’s not good cold."

Sophia used her fork to pick at the food.

“How can you not like the salty goodness of eggs’n’weiners?” Aiden asked.

“Why can’t you just call him Dad?” Sophia whispered.

“Why is it so important to you?”

Sophia didn’t say anything. Aiden nudged her. “Come on. Tell me.”

“Because, when you call Mike Mike instead of Dad, it makes me feel like I’m not your sister. And I am your sister. Say it!”

Aiden’s gut reaction was to tell Sophia to stop being stupid. But that would just lead to a fight. Instead, he stopped eating and put his fork down. He reached over and took his sister’s hand. “Hey. You are my sister. And Jackson is my brother. Nothing can change that, okay? I just... I don’t know. Mike is cool, but I don’t want to call him dad. I have a dad.”

“But your dad’s not even around,” Sophia said.

Aiden nodded. “Trust me. I am very aware of that.” The three siblings sat at the table for a minute. Then Aiden raised his chin. “Are you really mad at me, or is something else going on?”

Sophia shrugged. Then she muttered, “Something else.”

“Wanna talk about it?”

Sophia shook her head.

“Wanna watch another episode of Friends while we eat dinner?”

Sophia nodded, yes.

“Let’s do that then.”

* * *

After dinner, Aiden and Sophia cleaned up, gave Jackson a bath, then tucked him in. Sophia read Jackson his favorite Dr. Seuss book, Go, Dog, Go. Then Aiden read Where the Wild Things Are, which was Aiden’s favorite book when he was little.
“Okay, that’s two stories. Time to go night-night.”

“Turn on the nightlight!” Jackson squealed.

Sophia turned it on.

"Leave the door open!"

Aiden smiled. “I know, I know.”

“One more episode of Friends?” Sophia asked, as she and Aiden crossed into the living room.

“No way. I have to finish my homework or I’ll fail science and then Mom will ground me forever. Don’t you have homework?”

“Just social studies,” Sophia shrugged. “I have to read about something in the news, then write a paragraph about it.”

“You should write about that smell.”

“What smell?” Sophia sniffed. “Ew! Was that you?! What is wrong with you?!”

Aiden laughed. “Eggs’n’weiner farts!”

“You are so gross.”

“Yes, I am,” Aiden said proudly. As he opened his backpack to get out his science book, he recalled something he heard about in school. “Hey, you should write about Coronavirus.”

“What’s that?”

Aiden shrugged. “Some kind of flu in China.”

Sophia shook her head. “Nah. We have to write about stuff that will affect us.”

“Oh,” Aiden said. He thought about it. “Yeah, you’re probably right. China is way far away. We’re not gonna have to deal with that.”
“Jacob, please tell me you read the new Jonathan Hickman X-Men comics I loaned you. They are life-changing.”

Jacob sat down at the school cafeteria lunch table across from Aiden. He shrugged. “Maybe?”

“You didn’t!” Aiden said. “Why not? I loaned them to you like a week ago! You have to read them.”

“Reading is too much work. Can’t they just make movies like Marvel does?”

“X-Men is Marvel!” Aiden said. “And X-Men has movies, but they’re not technically Marvel Cinematic Universe. So they’re not part of the big picture. Not yet anyway. But seriously, you have to read them.”

“You’re as bad as my teachers. Friends aren’t supposed to give friends homework you know.”

“If you’re not going to read them, give them back. I spent my whole allowance and my savings on them. Plus, I wanna read that Moira issue of House of X again. It might be the best comic ever written.”

“Incorrect,” Lily Chang said. She sat down next to Jacob. “The best comic book ever written is Lumberjanes.”

“Let’s not start this again, Lily,” Aiden said. “Those don’t count as superhero comics. I’m talking about Marvel.”

“Fine. If we’re talking about Marvel, then the best comic series is The Mighty Thor, starring Jane Foster as the hammer-wielding god of thunder.”

“Come on, guys,” Jacob whined. “I don’t want to talk comics. Can’t we discuss football or soccer or hockey or—

Lily interrupted. “Not to mention Kamala Khan as Ms. Marvel, or The Unbeatable Squirrel Girl.”
“You just like girl books,” Aiden countered. “And X-Men has plenty of awesome women. Jean Grey, Storm, Kitty Pryde, Illyana Rasputin—”

“I’m going to start banging my head on the table if you two don’t stop,” Jacob said.

“Coronavirus is everywhere!” Bella shouted as she dropped her red lunch tray onto the table.

Everyone in the cafeteria looked at Aiden’s table. “She doesn’t mean here,” he announced. The other students went back to their own conversations. “Way to be dramatic, Bella.”

“I’m not being dramatic. The virus is spreading at an exponential rate.”

“Exponential,” Lily corrected, “meaning increasingly rapid.”

Aiden, Jacob, and Bella stared at Lily. “What?” she said. “It’s on our vocab test this week.”

“But it’s not coming to the United States, right?” Aiden asked.

“Don’t you even watch the news? It’s already here,” Bella said. “In Washington.”

“Washington state or Washington DC?” Jacob asked.

“State,” Bella answered.

Jacob gulped. “That’s only an hour away from us!”

“No, it isn’t,” Lily said. “Washington is an 18 hour drive north of Los Angeles.”

“That’s still close!” Jacob said.

“It’s all over Italy too,” Bella added.

“I love Italian food!” Jacob moaned. He looked down at his lunch pizza. He slowly pushed his lunch tray away, his mouth turning into a frown.

“I think you’re all being ridiculous,” Aiden said. “We’re safe. America is, like, a modern country with modern things, like TV and medicine and video games.”

“So are China and Italy,” Bella said.

“But I mean, we’re fine. We have hospitals and doctors and all that stuff. And the government will take care of everything, right?”

The four friends looked at each other. None of them were 100% sure.

“What’s that smell?” Lily asked.

Aiden’s face turned red.

“Aiden! You are so disgusting.”
"I can't help it! I get gassy when I'm nervous."

* * *

The class bell rang. "Okay, everyone. Cut the chatter," Mr. Moscowitz said. “Today, we're skipping our usual science lesson to talk about something a lot of you are probably hearing about in the news. COVID-19. Also known as Coronavirus.”

Olivia Hall’s hand shot into the air, but she didn’t wait to be called on. “My sister said people get it from drinking Corona beer, so people shouldn’t drink Corona beer. Tell your parents.”

“That is not correct, Ms. Hall,” Mr. Moscowitz said, “which is exactly why I wanted to take this time to talk with you and stop the spread of mis-information. Today, we’re going to talk facts. First, the Coronavirus is a newly discovered virus. And it is making some people around the world sick.

“A virus is an infective agent. The flu is an example of a virus. How many of you have had the flu?”

Aiden raised his hand. Most of the class had their hand raised, including the science teacher himself.

“A lot of the symptoms for the coronavirus are similar to the flu. Dry, itchy coughs, wheezing, fever. None of those things are life-threatening, which is good. Most people who get the Coronavirus have a mild case. And more good news is, there are not a lot of cases with kids. And if kids do catch it, there immune systems are strong enough to fight it off easily. The same goes for most teenagers and young adults.

“People who are much older, or already have serious health problems, are more likely to get sick. But just because someone is sick, it doesn’t necessarily mean they have COVID-19. They might be having allergies or fighting off a cold or the regular flu. If anyone isn’t feeling well, they should call their doctor before they do anything else.”

Olivia Hall’s hand shot into the air again, and again, she didn’t wait to be called on. “Why not just go to the hospital?”

“That’s an excellent question. If everyone rushed to the hospital every time they sneezed, the doctors would be overwhelmed. We don’t want that. We want everyone to stay
calm, and think about things first. Calling your doctor is easier than rushing to the emergency room, right? So call your doctor first.

“Now, if there’s anything you’re confused about, you should ask questions. Ask your parents, or someone you trust. Or me. I’m happy to answer questions. But do not, I repeat, do not make up stuff, or start rumors. That will only scare people.”

Olivia didn’t even bother to raise her hand this time. She just started talking. Aiden rolled his eyes. “Should we all be wearing those face masks?”

“If you’re sick, then absolutely. By wearing a mask, you prevent others from catching whatever you have. But if you’re not, you shouldn’t worry right now. Face masks are a good preventative measure, but right now they aren’t necessary.

“Okay, let’s go over some bullet points on what you can do to protect yourself, your loved ones, and your friends.” Mr. Moscowitz pointed to the board, where he’d already written some things down.

“#1. Wash your hands with soap and water, and do so for at least 30 seconds. I like to say the alphabet backwards when I do this.

“#2. Avoid touching your face. That’s how most people get sick, by germs entering the body through your nose, mouth, ears, or eyes. So for all you nose-pickers out there, cut it out. Use a tissue.

“#3. If you’re going to sneeze or cough, please cover your mouth. If you don’t have a tissue, sneeze into your elbow.

“#4, and this one is the most important, STAY CALM, and don’t worry. There are lots of adults who are already working to help. Doctors, scientists, teachers, even your parents. So let us worry. But what you can do to help us, is...” Mr. Moscowitz pointed at the board. You can help by doing these things.”

“Any other questions?”

Everyone looked at Olivia, but she didn’t say anything.

Mr. Moscowitz smiled. “One more thing. Just because someone looks different or talks different, or their parents are from another country—none of that means they are more or less likely to get it or spread it. So be nice to each other. Okay?”

Everyone nodded their heads.

“Achoo!” Logan Darwinkle sneezed.
Everyone, including Aiden, pushed their desks away from Logan at the same time. Mr. Moscowitz sighed. “Logan. Did you sneeze into your elbow?”

“No,” Logan said, “but I sneezed into my hands. See? Check out all this snot.”

Mr. Moscowitz pointed to the hall. “Go wash your hands please.”

* * *

Outside, Aiden walked with Jacob towards their bus when someone started honking their car horn. HONK! HONK! “Aiden, over here!”

“Mom, what are you doing here?” Aiden asked. Jackson was in his car seat in the back, and Sophia was in the front.

“We need to go to the grocery store,” Mom said. “Hurry, get in. We want to beat the rush.”

“What do you need me for grocery shopping?” Aiden groaned. “Come on, let me just catch the bus with my friends.”

“Aiden, please don’t argue. Just get in. I might need your help.”

Aiden sighed. He waved to Jacob. “See you tomorrow. And bring my comics!” He walked around the car to the passenger side. “Scoot, Sophia, hop in the backseat. I’m older.”

“Yeah, but my legs are longer. I need the extra room. Plus, I was here first.”

“Sophia! Move it!”

“Aiden, just get in the back,” Mom said. “Hurry now.”

Aiden grunted as he took the back seat. He hated the back seat and he hated grocery shopping. And now he had to do both and he didn’t even get to ride the bus with his friends. Why was Mom being so weird? They were just going to the grocery store. It wasn’t the end of the world.

Five minutes later, Aiden said, “Holy moly, it’s the end of the world.”

The grocery store parking lot was packed with cars and trucks and SUV’s. People were honking and shouting out of their windows. There was a line at the front door of the grocery store. “What is going on?” Aiden asked.

“See?” Mom said. “The news said stores were starting to run out of food and household supplies.”
"Why?" Sophia asked, her face glued to the window.

"People are starting to panic," Mom said.

"Mr. Moscowitz said we should stay calm," Aiden noted.

"We should. Everyone should," Mom said. "But in times of crisis, it's easier said than done. Oooh! Look, we got lucky! A parking space."

Aiden helped get Jackson out of his car seat, then joined Mom and his sister in the line. The man in front of them turned back and Aiden almost jumped. The man was wearing a large, black plastic gas mask, like in the movies. He looked freaky.

Mom smiled politely. When the man turned away, Mom bent over and whispered to her kids, "That's a bit much."

Aiden wondered if the man was already sick, or maybe was just trying to be extra cautious, like his science teacher said. When they got to the front of the line, there were no more carts. So Mom, Sophia, and Aiden each took a hand basket.

Once they were inside, Aiden was even more surprised. He'd never seen the store so chaotic. It was packed with people. Some were shopping like normal, but other people were grabbing as much as they could off the shelves and putting it in their carts, already overflowing with items. The lines to check-out were so long they went to the end of the aisles. One woman's cart slammed into a man's cart. Both were on their cell phones, but both of them gave the other a nasty look.

"Yikes, this place has gone wild!" Sophia said. "Mom, we need to hurry and make sure there's still ice cream left."

"Ice cream is not on the shopping list," Mom said, holding up a piece of paper. "We need the usual stuff, but we should also stock up on some soups and canned goods and food that'll last a long time, like crackers and pasta."

But when they walked into the canned goods aisle, Aiden had to do a double-take. There were only a handful of cans left on the whole row. Those left behind included a dented can of black olives, a half opened can of green beans, and a bunch of sardines and Spam. Other than the stuff no one wanted, the whole aisle was completely empty except for the cardboard boxes flattened on the floor. Mom's face paled. "Looks like we won't be getting any soup after all."

"How about that ice cream?" Sophia asked.
Mom shook her head. “Aiden, you go get a 12-roll pack of toilet paper. Sophia, you go to the chips aisle. I want you to get one large bag of potato chips, one large bag of pretzels, and some popcorn. Jackson and I are going to see if we can find any milk or yogurt. We’ll meet at the bakery in five minutes, okay?”

When Aiden got to the paper goods aisle, it was as bad as the canned goods aisle. Actually, it was worse. A lot of the shelves had been taken down, replaced by big wooden pallets, all of which were empty. At the end of the aisle, there were two men arguing over the last single roll of paper towels. The store manager tried to calm them both down, but they started yelling.

Aiden met his family in the bakery. Mom’s basket was only half full. Sophia shrugged. “No chips or popcorn. But I got some gluten-free pretzels.”

“Those are the worst,” Aiden said.

“Better than nothing at all,” Mom said. She added them to her basket.

CHAPTER THREE, School is Canceled

The whole cafeteria was buzzing like a hive of bees. Some kids were running from table to table, delivering information, like bees delivering honey. And every single kid was talking, and waving their arms, and yes, some were even dancing victory dances. As Aiden carried his lunch tray toward his usual table, a girl almost ran into him. At the last minute Aiden swooped his tray to the side, saving his lunch from ending up all over his shirt. The girl wore the biggest smile he’d ever seen. She said, “Hi! Sorry! Bye!” Then she continued running.

As Aiden set his lunch tray on the table, he asked his friends, “What is going on?”

“Haven’t you heard?” Jacob said, hopping up and down in his seat, clapping his hands.

“They’re going to cancel school.”

“Yeah, right,” Aiden said.
“Unfortunately, he’s very serious,” Bella moaned.

“Un-fortunately?” Jacob asked. “Don’t you mean, fortunately, as in, we’ll be the luckiest kids ever.”

“Are you kidding?” Bella said. “How are we supposed to learn if we’re stuck at home?”

“We’re not,” Jacob said. “We get to start summer vacation early!”

“That does sound kinda nice,” Lily added.

Bella shook her head. “Some of us happen to like school.”

“Some of us being you. Probably because you’re a straight-A student.”

“I’m a straight-A student because I work hard. Plus, I like beating everyone else,” Bella said. When her friends all looked at her, she added, “What? I’m competitive.”

Lily giggled, “You mean competitive.”

“So this is for real?” Aiden asked. “You really think they’ll cancel school?”

“Maybe. Yesterday, the WHO declared the outbreak a pandemic.”

“Who?” Jacob asked.

“The WHO,” Bella said.

“That’s what I asked,” Jacob said. “Who?”

“No. WHO. W.H.O. As in, the World Health Organization. There the part of the United Nations that monitors public health for the whole world.”

“Ever seen Doctor Who?” Aiden asked.

“Who?” Jacob asked.

Bella nodded her head. “Let’s not start that again.”

“Doctor Who. It’s a BBC show. About an alien who travels through time and space with human companions.” All of Aiden’s friends gazed at him with raised eyebrows. “You haven’t seen it?! It’s so good! Bella, you would love it. They have all this history stuff in it.”

Jacob put his finger on Aiden’s lips and said, “Shhhh. Let’s rewind a second before Aiden started talking sci-fi TV. You said the WHO declared the what a what?”

“They declared the Coronavirus outbreak as a pandemic,” Bella answered.


“It just means a disease that’s worldwide.”

“That is bad!”
“It’s not as bad as it sounds.” Bella took a bite of her lunch. A second later, she raised her head. “At least... I don’t think.”

“This is like living in a scary movie,” Aiden said.

“So is your face,” said a voice from behind him.

Aiden turned around. Randy and Preston were standing behind him. They were both almost six feet tall. Practically giants. And giant jerks.

“That barely made sense,” Bella said. “What do you guys even want?”

“Just wanted to say hi to poor Aiden,” Randy said. He grabbed Aiden’s shirt collar and looked inside. “Nice shirt. Get it from Salvation Army?”

Aiden pulled away, pulling his shirt collar back.

“We heard Aiden’s in the free lunch program,” Preston added.

“So what?” Bella said. “So are a lot of people. Including me.”

Randy and Preston started snickering.

“What’s so funny?” Aiden asked.

“Sucks to be both of you,” Randy said. Preston gave him a high five.

Lily stood up. “Don’t you Neanderthals having anything better to do than be bullies?”

“No, we don’t,” Preston said. “And what are you still doing here? Shouldn’t you be at home with the Coronavirus?”

“You’re from China, right?” Randy said.

“I’m from San Francisco,” Lily said. “And just because I’m Chinese doesn’t mean I have COVID-19.”

“You sure about that?” Preston asked. He punched his fist into his other hand.

Aiden didn’t like that. Even though he was scared, he stood up, so he was between Lily and the two giants. “You two need to apologize. Now.”

“Look. Aiden thinks he’s tough,” Randy said. He stepped forward. So did Preston.

Aiden gulped. If one of them punched him—even once—he’d probably get knocked out. He wondered how bad it was going to hurt.

“Oh, hi, Mr. Moscowitz!” Bella practically shouted as the science teacher walked past. “I just wanted to say your lecture today was both informative and inspiring.”

“Thank you, Bella,” Mr. Moscowitz said. He sauntered over.
Bella smiled at the two bullies. “Mr. M, could you remind Preston and Randy what racism is?”

“We’re not racist,” Preston argued. “But that Corona thing is a Chinese virus and Lily is Chinese, so—”

“Not another word!” Mr. Moscowitz said. He turned very red in the face. “Apologize to Ms. Chang, right this instant.”

“What? Why?”

“Apologize.”

“No,” Randy growled. Preston crossed his arms.

“Gentleman, follow me. We need to speak with Principal Vivas.”

Preston and Randy glared back at Bella and Aiden as Mr. Moscowitz escorted them away.

Aiden felt all the strength go out of his muscles when he sat down. Now his heart was just beating like crazy. He really thought he might get beat up.

“Those guys are the worst,” Bella said. “Are you okay, Lily?”

Aiden realized Lily looked like she might cry. “I don’t have the Coronavirus.”

“We know,” Bella said. She hugged her best friend.

Aiden’s heart was in his throat. He hated that those stupid boys made Lily feel bad. He got up and he hugged her too.

“Awww, I want some of this love too,” Jacob said. He wrapped his arms around his three friends.

Lily sniffed, wiping away her tears. She smiled. “Thanks.”


Aiden didn’t understand why, but he did. Not about the COVID stuff. But about him being poor. He hated that they knew he was on the free lunch program. It gave them a reason to think they were better than him. They already had nicer clothes and their parents drove them to schools in nice cars. They probably lived in nice big houses, maybe even mansions, and didn’t have to share a bedroom with their sisters. Their parents probably had good jobs and made loads of money and gave them a huge allowance. They had everything. So why did they feel the need to make Aiden feel like he sucked? He already felt that way sometimes... without their help.
Aiden walked in the front door. Jackson waved, but didn't take his eyes off the TV. Mom and Sophia were in the kitchen, whispering again. As soon as Aiden got close, they both hushed and looked at him. He said, “You two are super annoying.”

“Hey, now,” Mom said. “That's not very nice.”

“Neither is talking about me like I'm not here.”

“No one is talking about you!” Sophia yelled.

“Okay, let's take it down a notch, both of you,” Mom said calmly. “Aiden, we weren’t talking about you.”

“Yeah, right!” Aiden stormed into the living room and threw himself on the couch.

Jackson waved one of his dinosaur toys in Aiden's face. “Grrrrrr.”

“I'm not in the mood, Jackson.”

“You need to be nicer to our little brother,” Sophia said, walking into the living room with her arms crossed.

“Everyone needs to be nicer to me,” Aiden said. That's when he noticed Sophia was wearing a plastic gold crown on her head. “Why are you wearing that?”

“My tiara? It looks like a crown. It'll keep the Coronavirus away.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Corona is Latin for crown. Cause that's what the virus looks like under a microscope. So if I wear a crown, the germs will think I'm one of them and they'll leave me alone. They'll go infect someone else.”

Aiden rolled his eyes. “That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard.”

“Why are you so horrible?!” Sophia shouted. She turned, ran to their room, and slammed the door.

“Aiden, was that really necessary?” Mom asked.

“Why do you always take her side?” Aiden snapped.

“I'm not taking anybody's side,” Mom said. “What has gotten into you? The both of you? Is Mercury in retrograde?”

“What does that even mean?!” Aiden asked.
“Honestly? I don’t know,” Mom said. She sat on the couch next to Aiden, her waitress apron in her hands. “But look, you’re the oldest brother. That means I need you to help me out around here. And that means being nice to your sister—”

“I am nice to her!” Aiden growled.

“Then be nicer,” Mom said. “You don’t have to be her best friend, but you do have to love and respect her, okay?”

“What about me?” Aiden asked. “Did you tell her she needs to be nice to me?”

Mom stared at Aiden. “Did you have a rough day too?”

“No,” Aiden moaned. He crossed his arms over his chest.

“I think you did. And you know what, that’s okay. I had a bad day too. And now I have to go to work, when I rather stay home and hang out with my awesome kids.”

“I am not awesome,” Aiden muttered.

Mom wrapped her arm around him, hugging him in close. “Yes, you are! You’re one of the coolest people I know.”

Aiden snorted. “Then you must not know very many cool people.”

“I know plenty, and you’re the best of the best. You hear me?” Mom pushed Aiden’s chin up, looking him in the eye. “I wish I could stay and talk, but I have to get to work. But let’s talk tomorrow. You can tell me about your sucky day and I’ll tell you about my sucky day, and then we’ll eat some ice cream and everything will be hunky-dory. How does that sound?”

“You’re such a dork,” Aiden said. But he couldn’t help but smile.

“And proud of it,” Mom said. She kissed him on the forehead. “I left a twenty on the counter so you can order a pizza for dinner. And no Netflix until you finish your homework!”

Once Mom left, Aiden took a deep breath. He knocked on the bedroom door. He opened it a few inches. Sophia was lying on her bed, her face buried in her pillow. “Hey Soph... Mom’s gone. Wanna watch some Friends?”

Sophia kicked her mattress. A second later, she mumbled through her pillow, “Yes.”

“Good. Come on. And hey, pizza tonight.”

Sophia got up and walked past him. She left her crown on the floor of the room. He picked it up and brought it out to the living room. He put it on her head. “Sorry about what I said earlier,” he said. “It’s not stupid. It’s actually pretty smart.”

“You’re just saying that,” Sophia grunted.
“Nope. I mean it.” He clicked with the remote to turn on Netflix. “If Coronavirus is coming to town, we need all the help we can get.”

* * *

That night, Aiden woke at midnight. He had to pee. He sat up, and looked around his room. He almost freaked out when he saw a set of scary eyes staring at him from the corner. Then he realized it was just a new drawing his sister had put up.

Sophia was sound asleep in her bed on the other side of the room. Her side of the room had posters of unicorns, ponies, and Beyoncé. His side was mostly comic books posters that he got at the comic store for free. He owned some really rad scary movie posters, but Sophia said they were too frightening so Mom wouldn’t let him put them up. Which sucked, cause they were really cool, and they were gifts from his favorite uncle Josh.

Aiden hated sharing a room with Sophia, but at least he didn’t have to share with Jackson too. Jackson slept on the little sofa in Mom and Mike’s room.

Quietly, Aiden hopped out of bed and tiptoed toward the bathroom. That’s when he heard voices whispering from the kitchen. He stopped walking and listened. It almost sounded like Mom was crying.

“—don’t know what we’re going to do if this gets worse,” Mom said. “The restaurant was empty tonight. No one came in. There’s rumors they’ll close soon if this keeps up.”

“I only had four rides tonight,” Mike said. “A month ago, I would have had twenty. I think people are starting to get freaked out.”

“What do we do?”

“First things first, let’s make sure we’re all stocked up on groceries. Just in case. Put it on the credit card.”

“But what if we can’t pay it off?”

“We’ll worry about that later,” Mike said. “Right now, we need to make sure we have food and water. Luckily, water is free. After that, I’ll start asking around. Maybe there’s some part time work I can get. And if worse comes to worse, I can borrow some money from my parents.”

“We don’t need to do that,” Mom said, sniffling. “Not yet.”
“Whatever happens, we’re going to get through this,” Mike said. “We just have to keep our heads on straight.”

“And what if they cancel school?” Mom asked. “The kids are going to be home all day, every day, and we’ll have to make sure they’re taken care of and fed and keep doing their homework. Will they even have homework? Am I going to have to be their teacher?”

“Shhh. Don’t get ahead of yourself,” Mike said. “We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”

“You’re right,” Mom sniffed. “One day at a time.”

“That’s right, Mike said. “One day at a time.”

* * *

The next morning, Aiden woke up to a high-pitched scream. It sounded like someone was being murdered! He leapt up and ran into the living room. “Is everyone okay?!”

Sophia was jumping up and down on the couch, the biggest smirk plastered across her face. She laughed with excitement. “School’s canceled!”

“No way,” Aiden said.

“Yes way,” Mom said. She was sitting in the kitchen, her head in her hands. Her reaction was the exact opposite of Aiden’s sister. She was worried. And now Aiden was worried too.