

Mom sighed and leaned back against her large yellow chair, the smell of her overcooked beef stew filling the living room. Standing next to her, Dad removed his glasses and wiped them against his lint-covered blue polo shirt.

“Aiden, we’re so disappointed,” Mom said.

Oh God, here they go again. Fulfilling their parental duties by ruining my life.

Dad plopped down in the chair next to Mom with a muffled thump. “I can’t believe this is happening,” he moaned. “Don’t you understand what we’ve been through?”

“I know,” I replied.

The moment my parents stopped blabbering, I’d probably dash up to my room and lock the door behind me. I’d scribble out diagrams for the projective geometry problem that they’d freaked about, and throw open the window to let the evening breeze take away the horrid stew smell. Artwork painted by my sister, Catherine, would look at me from the walls. Perhaps if everyone had a space they could call their own, there’d be fewer people who’d end up like her.

“From now on, you may only work on homework from school, nothing more,” Mom said. “Got it? And if we catch you again, we’re going to send you to that nine-week culinary arts program we’ve talked about.”

I cringed at the thought of spending 17% of a year cooking flesh in a pan. Ugh. Disgusting. My focus shifted to a photo album sitting on the mantle, which stood open to a picture of the five of us in front of the blue waters of the San Francisco Bay. My brother has his arm around my sister, who’s smiling with that cheeky grin of hers. She’s wearing her favorite t-shirt, the one filled with numbers and math symbols, forever frozen with her brown eyes and short hair at age 15.

“Aiden, you can’t spend your time doing this,” Dad growled. “Can’t you see what you’re doing to yourself?”

“There’s nothing dangerous about what I’m doing,” I said. “Aren’t you ever curious about the underlying rules for why things happen? The hidden logic?”

Dad turned towards Mom. “Are you hearing him? You’re the one who gave him and Catherine all those terrible ideas!”

“Don’t say her name!” Mom yelled.

“Hey, both of you listen,” I said. “What if it’s possible to use math to explain everything, like even how people behave? What if everything could be derived from a single set of mathematical guidelines?” I don’t know where I was going with this but I thought in some weird way that it’d help if I could explain what Catherine did to herself.

Mom began to cry.

“I will not have it! It’s dangerous! It’s torn apart this family, and if it takes you, too, your mother’s heart will shatter!” Dad said. “Now go to your room!”

Upstairs, the math and the sudoku books under my bed were missing. But no matter. I stood on my chair, pushed open the attic trapdoor, and pulled out my spare copies from the attic.