

Chapter One

Cyrus

Cool fact about Cyrus Abraham Doyle: I am a collector of facts. Lots of facts. As in the fact that there is a shopping mall in the basement of the Louvre,¹ and that chocolate is poisonous in large doses.² By my own estimate, I know over three thousand bits of fascinating and questionably useful information, which I've been cataloging since the age of six. My parents, who consider this proof of some sort of genius on my part, encourage me with an endless supply of books on subjects such as science, math and the history of the world. Which brings me to another cool fact about Cyrus Abraham Doyle: I really am a genius.

When I was fifteen, my parents had me tested and they discovered I had an IQ of one hundred and fifty-eight. Unfortunately, this wasn't much help in the popularity department. By then, my status as a nerd was well established, enhanced, no doubt, by dubious fashion choices and the fact that I still showed no appreciable signs of puberty. I also suffer from a nervous stomach and frequent asthma attacks. According to my parents, though, I'm the luckiest kid

¹ Complete with McDonald's, Starbucks and an Apple Computer store. Enter through the glass pyramid.

² Like forty-four dark chocolate bars in one sitting.

alive.

Actually, I'm lucky just to *be* alive. As the story goes, my parents, Frank and Doris, met late in life. Because they were both highly dedicated and gifted NASA scientists—Dad planned space shuttle missions and Mom was a microbiologist—they had never had the time or inclination for much of a personal life. Then one day they passed each other for the umpteenth time in the hallway at work, glanced up, and bada bing! It was love at hundredth sight. They were married six months later and immediately commenced starting a family.

However, a couple of problems soon surfaced. Dad, who'd never imagined he'd want children, had undergone a vasectomy many years before he met Mom. And Mom, to put it delicately, was no longer a spring chicken.³ After several painful and humiliating medical procedures and many months of trying, the two of them were no closer to success than they'd been at the beginning.

Finally, in a drama befitting a made-for-TV movie, I was conceived in a Petri dish, implanted inside of Mom, and delivered two months prematurely by cesarean section. It was touch and go for a while, but I made it in the end. Doris became a mother at the age of fifty. Frank was fifty-six.

Despite my inauspicious beginning, my early years were happy. According to Mom, I spent the first three of them in the care of an elderly woman named Mrs. Peach, while my parents pursued their respective careers at NASA. I have no memory of this woman, which is strange because I can remember lots of other things, going clear back to when I was two years old (like digging tunnels in my sandbox, soiling my diapers, and wailing whenever someone outside the

³ i.e., her eggs had dried up.

immediate family approached me). Apparently, I didn't wail when Mrs. Peach approached, which makes it all the weirder that I can't remember her. Anyway, around the age of four I realized there was life outside the backyard and quickly made up for lost time.

According to my parents, I developed an amazing vocabulary for my age, taught myself to read, and commenced reading everything in the house, including an entire leather-bound, 1974 edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica.⁴

Thus encouraged, Mom and Dad spared no expense in the quest to make me well rounded. By the time I reached middle school, my schedule was packed with activities ranging from computer programming classes and science bowl competition to violin lessons and art appreciation workshops with a group of teenage geniuses known as the Junior Perspicacity Society.

Which leads me to a third cool fact about Cyrus Abraham Doyle: At the age of ten, I became the youngest violin player ever inducted into the Silicon Valley Youth Philharmonic Matinee Orchestra. For the past two years, I've been a featured soloist. Whenever I'm scheduled to play, my parents get together with their closest friends, the Petersons and the Maddens, to make an afternoon of the symphony. Afterward, we have dinner at Chez Monaco or Augustine's Italian and everyone oohs and aahs over my performance.

I look forward to these evenings about as much as I look forward to getting my annual flu

⁴ Dad bought it on an installment plan when he was in grad school and can't bear to throw it out, even though he hasn't used it in years. Never mind that the Soviet Union no longer exists and Pluto is no longer a regular planet. It looks good on his bookshelf and he paid good money for it back in the day.

shot. Don't get me wrong. I love performing. It's eating in front of people I can't stand. Mom says I have an anxiety disorder. All I know is that when I have to eat in front of anybody besides my parents, it makes me nauseous. Because of this, we rarely eat out.

However, on symphony nights Mom and Dad like to show me off to their friends, so I'm expected to just deal with it. As a result, I've developed what Mom calls coping mechanisms.

These include:

1. Pushing my food around without actually eating it. I figure if I pile it up compactly and arrange it differently than how it's served to me, it may fool people into thinking I've eaten some of it. It rarely does.
2. Tearing off pieces of my napkin and rolling the pieces into little balls. This tactic isn't meant to fool anybody. It merely serves as a distraction to burn off stress.
3. Filling up on milk.
4. Going to the bathroom as many times as my parents allow.

Worse than the actual eating, however, is the storytelling that takes place during these meals, where Mom tells everyone about my health issues and nervous disposition (problems she attributes to my difficult birth). Her friends have heard these stories many times, but they never tire of them. As if on cue, Mrs. Madden will lean forward, peer into my eyes, and ask, "Are you okay?" I nod my head, too nauseous to answer, and then Mrs. Peterson will say something along the lines of, "You're so thin. You need to eat more." I want to say something sarcastic like, "So you think you can fatten me up right here, during this one meal?" but instead I make a run for the bathroom, throw up all the milk and hang out until Mom sends Dad in to find me.

It's not so bad at school. For one thing, nobody cares how I feel or how little I consume. For another, I have an arrangement with Mrs. Klein, the librarian. Mrs. Klein is a great

marshmallow of a woman, with fluffy blond hair and a wide smile, who lets me spend my lunch hours doing research in the library. Of course, what I'm actually doing is eating my sandwich behind the mobile shelves in the back of the room, but since she's busy eating her own lunch in her office, she never bothers to check on me. Because I'm the only person who ever goes in there during lunch, she feels no need to make her regular patrols and I'm left to eat in peace.

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Given my lack of physical development, propensity for anxiety and overall general geekiness, you'd think I'd be singled out for bullying. But it's never happened. Not even once. For one thing, I live in Serrita, California, an exclusive enclave of private vineyards and sprawling mini-mansions just west of San Jose. Inhabited by retirees and techno-millionaires, there is practically no crime, street gangs are non-existent and the biggest conflicts at my high school are over who looked at whose girlfriend and who dissed whom on which social networking site. Since I'm not competing with anybody for dates and my mom won't allow me to participate in social networking, I live in peace.

It also doesn't hurt that I'm friends with Mike Crabtree. Actually, friends is a bit of an overstatement. Mike Crabtree is this cool guy who lives down the road from me. His parents are friends with my parents. Although we don't have much in common, we've known each other our entire lives and are forced to hang out whenever our parents get together, which is often. Mike is a grade ahead of me in school, which means he's bigger than me and he's been driving for over a year. He's also good-looking, popular and athletic, and on top of all that, he's a really nice guy. Even though we don't talk much at school, I know that Mike would come to my rescue if anyone ever hassled me. Everyone else knows it too.

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It's Saturday night and we're having dinner at the Crabtrees' house. I am not looking forward to it. We arrive twenty minutes late, which is Dad's custom, and Mrs. Crabtree gives me a big, perfumed hug, which is hers. We make our way to the living room where we join the Maddens and the Petersons, who are starting in on the first of several rounds of cocktails.

Mrs. Madden pats the sofa cushion next to her and says in her loud smoker's voice, "Hello, Cyrus. I hope you brought your appetite tonight. Todd is barbecuing venison."

Todd is Mike's dad. I remain standing, shifting my weight nervously back and forth.

"Have you ever had venison?" she presses.

I shake my head.

"Then you are in for a treat. It's very easy on sensitive stomachs."

I turn to Mrs. Crabtree. "Where's Mike?"

"Right behind you." Mike walks into the room, barefoot, his spiky hair still wet from the shower. "Hey, Cyrus."

"Hey, Mike."

"Come here a minute. I've got something I wanna show you."

He bounds out the front door and I follow him around the house to a detached garage bay.

"Check out my birthday present."

I forgot it was his birthday. "Congratulations," I say. "Happy Birthday."

"Thanks."

He explains how his parents surprised him with a new car this morning, and how he's been dying to show it off to somebody all day. I'm not that interested in cars, but when he suggests we pick up a few burgers and drive out to the beach, I say yes. I don't mind eating in front of Mike.

My love of trivia does not extend to cars. I climb in without noticing the make or the model. All I know is that it's big, and it's blue and it's loud.

“Jeez, Mike, ever hear of a muffler?”

He laughs. “Isn't it awesome? Check out the speakers.” He punches a button. “You like classic punk?”

I'm not sure whether I do or not, since I rarely listen to anything trendier than the *1812 Overture*. Okay, maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration, but at home we mostly listen to classical music. The traditional kind. It's as much a part of our environment as the paint on the walls and the carpet on the floors—so familiar it's no longer noticed. Every morning when Dad gets up, he inserts a stack of CDs into the player on his stereo. The CDs play on an endless loop throughout the day. Sometimes he chooses classical, sometimes easy listening, sometimes a mixture of both.⁵

I nod politely and tell him I'll listen to anything he wants. On the way to the beach, he plays music by bands with names like The Sex Pistols and Black Flag. Then he plays a recording of a local band called Rottenstone. On the way home he plays it again. At first, I'm overwhelmed by the power and intensity of the sound, but by the end of the night I am hooked.

When I get home I listen to the same bands online, and then I grab my violin and try a few riffs. Not bad. I find an online video of Rottenstone performing their hit song, “Crunching Glass,” crank up the speakers, and play along. During the parts where the lead guitarist, Johnny Wolf, takes a solo, I solo too.

⁵ Except at Christmas, when he adds holiday favorites by artists such as Burl Ives, Bing Crosby and Alvin and the Chipmunks.

Within minutes, Mom is pounding on my bedroom door. Unfortunately, I can't hear her over the music, and the next thing I know she's standing right behind me shouting to be heard. This scares the hell out of me because I didn't hear her come in, and it's also embarrassing because I'm going all out, pretending to be Johnny Wolf.

"What's going on in here?" she yells.

"Jeez, Mom!"

"Turn it down!"

I mute the speakers. "Sorry."

"What is that awful stuff?" she asks.

"Punk. Check it out."

"No thanks, I've heard enough."

"Sorry about the volume. I'll keep it down."

"Keep it *way* down."

After she leaves, I search online for Rottenstone sheet music, thinking I'll download some songs to play on my violin. To my surprise, it doesn't exist. And that's when I have the epiphany: I will write my own licks and then I will record them. Because all of a sudden, I want to be a punk violin player more than I've ever wanted anything in my life.

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