

CHAPTER 1

The Slowest Tuesday in the World



Milo Finch was ten years old, and he was quite sure that Tuesdays lasted longer than any other day of the week. He had never proven this scientifically, but he felt it in his bones, the same way he felt it in his bones when a storm was coming or when his little sister was about to eat the last cookie on purpose just to annoy him.

On this particular Tuesday, Milo sat in the third row of Mrs. Alden's classroom, watching the big clock above the whiteboard. Its long hand seemed to be moving backward. He was almost certain of it. He stared so hard at the number twelve that his eyes began to water.

"Milo," said Mrs. Alden, not even looking up from the papers she was grading, "the clock will keep moving whether you watch it or not."

A few kids snickered. Milo slumped down in his chair and pretended to be very interested in his math worksheet, which he was not. He was interested in exactly one thing: the moment the final bell would ring and Tuesday would finally, mercifully, be over.

Milo did not like waiting. He did not like waiting for his toast to pop, or for water to boil, or for his shoelaces to be tied by someone else because his own fingers moved too slowly for his liking. He did

not like waiting in line, waiting for his turn, waiting for Saturday, or waiting for his birthday, which was still what felt like a hundred years away, even though it was really only a few weeks.

"Some people are born patient," his mother liked to say, brushing his hair back from his forehead. "And some people are born like you, Milo Finch, already halfway out the door before they've finished their breakfast."

He supposed that was true. Even now, with twenty-two minutes left of the school day (he had counted), Milo's foot bounced under his desk in a fast, restless rhythm, tap tap tap tap, like it was trying to hurry the whole world along by itself.

When the bell finally rang, it felt like the best sound in the universe. Milo shoved his math worksheet into his backpack without folding it and was out the door before most of his class had even stood up.

"Wait up!" called a voice behind him. It was Emma Ruiz, his best friend since the two of them had built a leaning tower out of blocks in kindergarten and refused to let anyone knock it down. Emma had two long braids that swung when she ran, and she was, in Milo's opinion, the most patient person he had ever met. She could sit still for an entire hour drawing the same tree over and over until she got the branches exactly right.

"You walk too fast," Emma said, catching up to him on the sidewalk outside Maple Hollow Elementary. Above them, the oak trees that lined the street

were just beginning to turn orange and gold, and a light wind sent a few early leaves spinning down onto the pavement.

"I don't walk too fast," Milo said. "Everyone else walks too slow."

Emma rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. "Same thing happened at recess. You finished the whole obstacle course before I even started."

"That's because I don't stop in the middle to look at bugs."

"That beetle was interesting, Milo."

"Every beetle is boring until you slow down and stare at it for five minutes," Milo said, and Emma laughed, because that was exactly the kind of thing Milo said, and it was exactly the kind of thing that made her glad he was her best friend, even when he was in a hurry to get everywhere.

They walked together as far as the corner of Willow Street, where Emma turned left toward her house and Milo continued straight toward his. "See you tomorrow," Emma called over her shoulder. "Try not to make Wednesday go by too fast. I still have to finish my tree drawing."

"No promises," Milo called back, grinning.

Milo's house was a blue two-story on Chestnut Avenue, with a porch that creaked in exactly the right spot and a mailbox shaped like a tiny red barn. When he pushed open the front door, he was

greeted immediately by Biscuit, the Finch family's golden retriever, who greeted every arrival — even ones that had only been gone for six hours — as though it were the single greatest reunion in the history of the world.

"Hi, hi, okay, hi," Milo said, laughing as Biscuit's tail thumped against the hallway table.

From the living room came the plunky, careful sound of a piano. That would be Nora, Milo's little sister, six years old and currently very serious about a song called "Für Elise," which she had been practicing for her very first recital. She played the same eight notes, stopped, wrinkled her nose, and played them again.

"That's the fifth time," Milo said, dropping his backpack by the stairs.

"I'm getting it exactly right," Nora said, not looking up from the keys. "Grandma Jo says if you rush a song, everyone can hear it. She says the same thing about pie crust."

"Grandma Jo has a saying for everything," Milo said, and Nora giggled, because that was true too.

Milo's mother, Claire, was at the kitchen table with her laptop open, the way she usually was on weekday afternoons, and she waved a hand without looking up. "Homework first, then screen time," she said, which was what she said every single day, in the exact same tone, as if she were reading it off a card.

Milo trudged upstairs to his room, flopped onto his bed, and stared at the ceiling, where a single glow-in-the-dark star had been stuck since he was six and had refused to come down since. He thought about how slowly the whole day had gone — school, the walk home, dinner still two hours away, homework not yet started, Saturday nowhere in sight.

"Come on," he whispered to no one in particular, to the ceiling, to the star, to whatever part of the universe might be listening. "Just hurry up already."

Of course, nothing hurried up. The evening passed at its usual pace — dinner, dishes, a little bit of homework, a little bit of a show he liked — and when Milo finally climbed into bed that night, Tuesday ended exactly the way every day ended: one slow, ordinary minute after another, whether Milo liked it or not.

He had no way of knowing, as he drifted off to sleep with Biscuit's snoring drifting up faintly from downstairs, that the very next afternoon he would take a shortcut through an alley he had never noticed before, and that everything about the way he waited for things was about to change.