

# Best Friend

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# Contents

Chapter 1	Fragile	5
Chapter 2	No One Home	9
Chapter 3	Principal's Office	13
Chapter 4	Waiting for the Storm to Pass	18
Chapter 5	Bandit	23
Chapter 6	Dogs Are the Best	28
Chapter 7	A Surprise	33
Chapter 8	Honey	40
Chapter 9	Birthday Cake	44

## Chapter 1

# Fragile

“I wish I could help,” Mum sighed, shifting on the couch. A magazine with another half-finished crossword puzzle slipped to the floor beside her.

Jet instantly dived to retrieve it for her. “I’ll be okay,” he said. He then repeated what Aunty Lisa always said. “You just need to concentrate on getting well.”

He taped up another cardboard box, and with a black marker scrawled: *bowls and plates*.

The first time they had moved, Jet had turned each packing box into a gigantic cartoon, drawing stick figures on skateboards and marking all the boxes with his own tag, *JKB*, in bubbly lettering. Back then, it had been an adventure. And Dad had still been in their lives.



Now Dad's time was taken up with his new girlfriend, Tamara, and their baby. The "see you every other day" thing had become a weekly visit, which had turned into a weekly phone call. A call that became increasingly silent and awkward with all the things Jet couldn't say. *Why did you leave us, Dad? How could you do that when Mum is so sick? Did you really think that buying me this expensive phone was going to make it all okay?*

So, Jet stopped answering Dad's calls.

The truth was, even though Jet said he'd be okay, that was just something he *had* to say. From the start, no one had asked Jet what he truly thought. How he felt about Dad going. Or, the first time they'd moved, how he felt about leaving the house he'd known and lived in all his life. A house with a bike track that ran along the back and friends who lived on the same street.



Instead, he and Mum had moved into a tiny apartment with a single balcony, choked with traffic fumes from the busy street below.

And now they were moving again – to one of those half-houses, joined in a row to others that all looked the same. A "townhouse", Auntie Lisa called it.

Auntie Lisa had explained to Jet that Mum needed to live near the hospital. It was too expensive for her to keep relying on taxis. And because the area was all newly built, he'd go to a great new school and make great new friends.

Jet didn't want to go to another new school. This would be his third in less than a year. He didn't want to make new friends. He already had friends – friends who knew about Mum. How was he going to explain to anyone new about her? The reasons why she was always lying on the couch, or suddenly having to be rushed to the hospital.

Instead of saying any of this, Jet pretended to be okay. He didn't have a choice.

Feeling a surge of guilt, he asked, "Do you need anything, Mum?"

Mum was roused from where she had started to doze. She smiled and shook her head.

“What did I do to deserve you?” Mum asked. Her voice sounded cracked and weak. “I’m the luckiest woman in the world.”

Jet checked to see that there were still tablets in the pack next to her glass of water.

Lucky? Living like this! While Dad got to live near the beach with someone who still laughed at his silly jokes. Someone who didn’t need looking after. Someone who wasn’t sick.

On the side of the packing box, Jet savagely scrawled: *FRAGILE*.



## Chapter 2

# No One Home

“And this is the library,” Oliver said, winding up the whirlwind tour before bringing Jet back to class.

Jet nodded, barely bothering to look. He was scanning for a quieter place, somewhere hidden away, where he’d be able to spend his lunch-time.

The teacher had sat Jet next to Oliver and asked Oliver to be his buddy over the next week or so.

Although Oliver had agreed cheerfully enough, Jet didn’t want to talk. Or, at least, it wasn’t so much that he didn’t want to talk, it was more that he had nothing to say.

If he started talking, Oliver would ask questions. That’s just what people did. And it was the last thing Jet wanted. He didn’t want anyone knowing about Mum. He had made Aunty Lisa promise she wouldn’t say anything when she dropped him at his new school that morning.

“Jet?” Ms Pinta was right next to his desk. She waved her hand in front of his eyes. “Is anyone at home?”

Startled, Jet jumped and knocked his pencils off the table. As they went skittering across the floor, the class erupted into laughter. He scrambled to collect them.

The teacher's voice became softer. "Jet, I asked if you could please get your maths workbook out. We're moving on."

He searched through the things on his desk for the right workbook.



The night before, Mum had watched him from the couch as he'd sat and covered each workbook with clear sticky paper.

"I used to do that for you," she'd said with a sad smile.

Jet had done his best to smile back as he held up a crinkled cover, complete with bumps and air bubbles. "Way better than when I do it!" he said.



They were still surrounded by boxes. Aunty Lisa had promised she'd be over on the weekend to help sort where things should go. The TV still had to be connected, so there wasn't even the comforting sound of voices in the background.

That night, after hardly touching the Thai curry Jet had microwaved for her, Mum dozed on the couch.