

Diary of a Scoliosis Kid

Aliya's Official Diary of DOOM



Aliya Gupta





This book was written & illustrated by 2 scoliosis patients who has traveled through their own bracing and surgery journey. While the names, characters, and places are inspired loosely by the author's experiences, this story is a work of fiction meant for encouragement and entertainment only.

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Diary of a Scoliosis Kid

Aliya's Official Diary of DOOM

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Diya Baldawa

*I dedicated this book to
my parents for being there through every step,
this story is just as much yours as it is mine.*

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CHAPTER 1

Breaking News: My Spine is Crooked

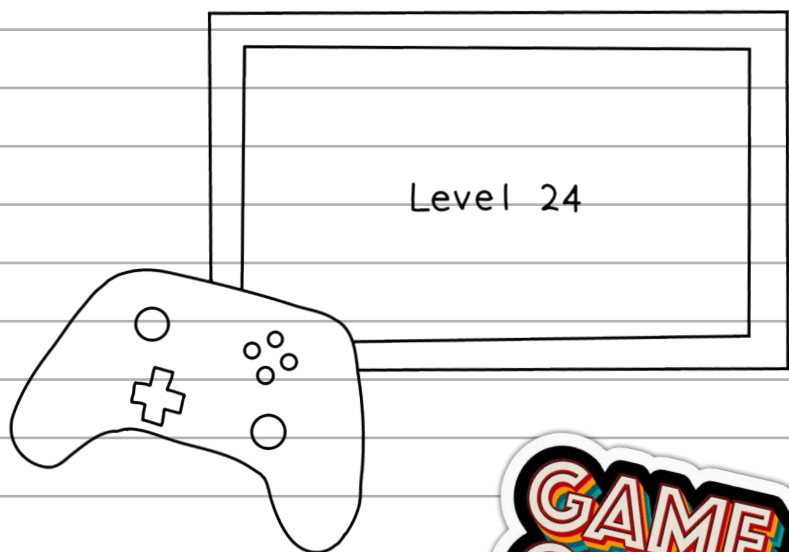
At ten years old, this was the first time anyone had actually said the word "SCOLIOSIS" out loud to me.

But this story didn't actually start when I was ten.

It started when I was four.

That was when doctors first noticed something slightly off: a possible curve in my back. After that, I went in every six months for routine checkups. As long as the curve stayed under 25 degrees, there was no official diagnosis.

I like to think of it like a video game. My spine had been slowly unlocking new levels, but as long as it didn't hit Level 25, there was no diagnosis.



Level 24? Safe.



Level 25? GAME OVER. Diagnosis unlocked.

And for years, I stayed at Level 24.

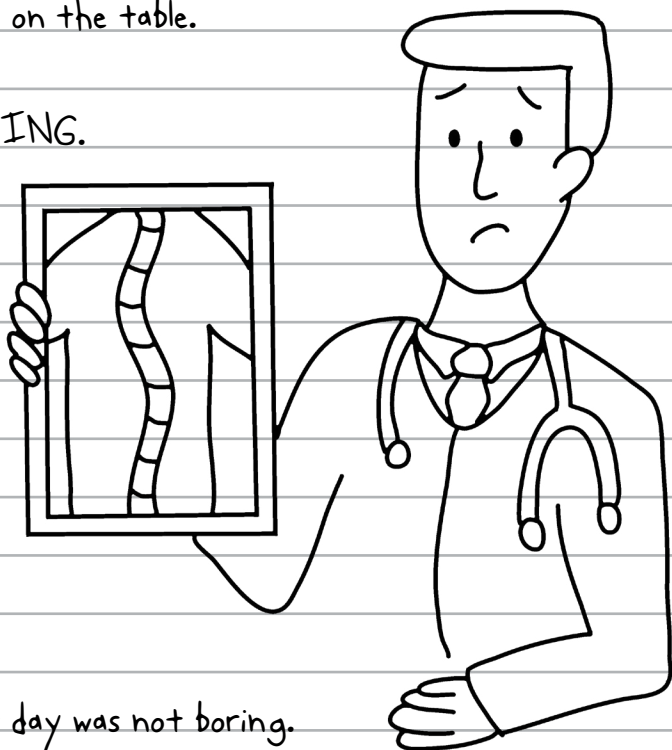
Then, COVID happened.

Checkups stopped. The world shut down. Time didn't just fly, it blasted into outer space, came back with a tan, and left us missing appointments left and right. While we were baking banana bread and arguing over toilet paper, my spine was doing its quiet little evil dance.

A year and a half (and about 3 missed doctors appointments) later, we finally went back to the doctor.

If you had asked me the day before that appointment what the most boring thing in the world was, I would've said doctor's visits. The smell of hand sanitizer. The crinkly paper on the table.

BORING.



That day was not boring.

"Aliya," the doctor said, holding up my X-ray,

"YOU HAVE SCOLIOSIS."

I blinked at the glowing picture of my skeleton. My spine wasn't straight. It had decided to do the cha-cha instead of standing at attention.

"Scolio... WHAT?" I asked.

"The spine curves sideways. See? It's shaped more like an S than the straight vertical line it's meant to be."

I tilted my head. "So... my back is trying to spell things?"

Arman, my younger brother, who was only there because Mom forced him to be, burst out laughing.

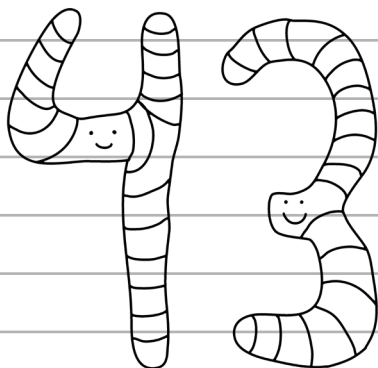
"Your BACK can write the ALPHABET!
That's hilarious."

Mom shot him her
EYEBROW-OF-DOOME
and turned back to the doctor.

"What does this mean? Is it serious?"



"Your spine is currently at
forty-three degrees,"
the doctor said.



FORTY-THREE

Mom gasped. Dad stared in shock. And me?

I just stared at the number.
Arman, of course, made it worse.



"Does that mean Aliya's gonna turn into a PRETZEL?!"
he shouted.



"ARMAN!" Mom hissed.

"Or a question mark!
Or a human S shape.
Like SUPER ALIYA:

The Curvy
Wonder!"

He thought it was hilarious.

I did NOT.

"At this degree," the doctor said carefully, "monitoring isn't enough anymore."

Mom squeezed my hand.

"We're going to need to start treatment."



I swallowed.

"What kind of TREATMENT?" Mom asked.

The doctor looked directly at me this time.

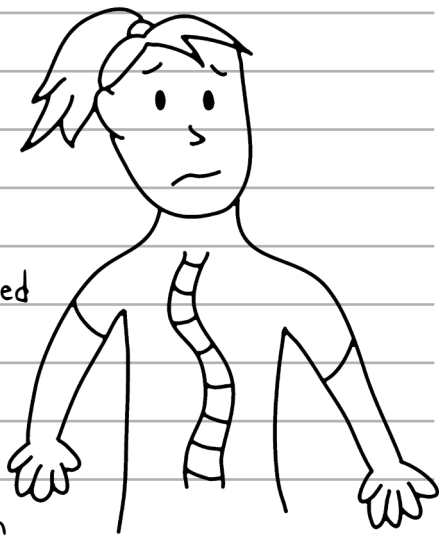
"Aliya is going to need to wear a BRACE."

CHAPTER 2

The Day Everything Changed

Back home, I tried to process everything.

Processing, by the way, involved raiding the snack drawer and hiding in my room with Laila; our fluffy golden retriever who thinks she's a lapdog even though she weighs more than a small elephant.



"SCOLIOSIS," I said out loud, testing the word.

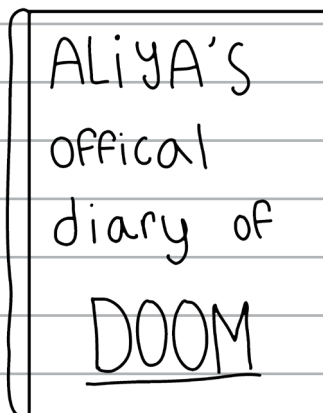
Laila



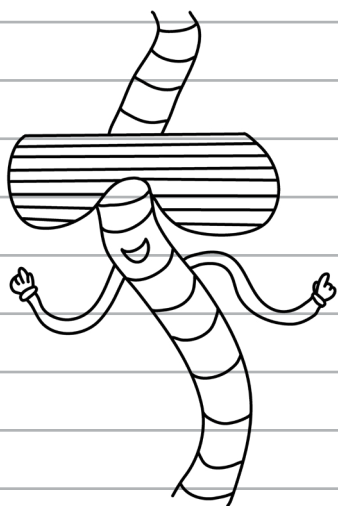
"It sounds like a Harry Potter spell. Like if I yelled 'SCOLIOSIS!' my enemy's back would twist into a pretzel."

Laila licked my face, which I decided meant she agreed.

I pulled out my brand-new green notebook and wrote at the top of the first page:



If my spine was going to be DRAMATIC, I might as well be dramatic too.



I doodled a picture of my skeleton, curvy spine and all, wearing sunglasses. If my spine was going to be curvy, at least I could make it look cool.

At dinner, Dad casually said,

"I read that scoliosis sometimes means SURGERY."

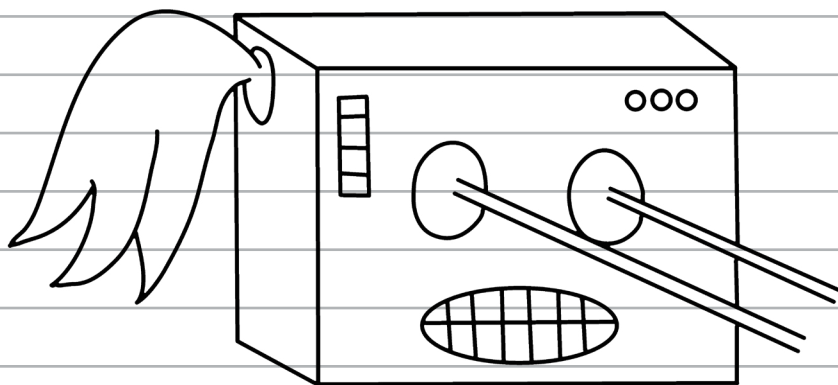
"Not always," Mom cut in quickly.

"The doctor said we'll start with treatment. We just have to take it one step at a time."

Arman smirked.



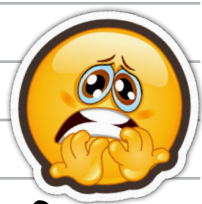
"They're gonna turn you into a ROBOT.
Half human, half metal."



Everyone laughed.

I didn't.

Inside, I was petrified.



SURGERY? BRACES? A twisty, bendy spine?

This was not part of my ten-year-old life plan.

My plan was to survive school, convince Mom to let me get a phone, and teach Laila to high-five, not become ROBOT ALIYA with the alphabet spine.

"Can I still do P.E.?" I asked quietly.

Mom hesitated. Dad opened his mouth, then shut it when Mom glared at him.

"We'll see," she said.

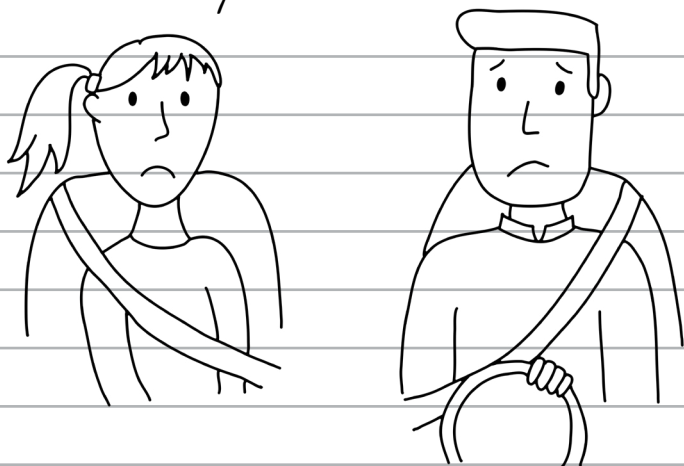
Not exactly reassuring.

That night, I wrote everything down, angry and funny all at once. If my spine was going to tell a dramatic story, at least I could control the narration. And I made a quiet promise to stay positive. Even if my back wasn't.

CHAPTER 3

Meeting the Brace

Before going straight to bracing, my parents had tried everything they could to avoid it. Surgery was terrifying, and living inside a PLASTIC SHELL didn't sound much better. So we tried a chiropractor first. Four early-morning drives a week, Dad buying gas-station hot chocolate and singing off-key Bollywood songs, only to arrive at a clinic where the adjustments sounded like bubble wrap on Black Friday.



Three months later, we both knew it wasn't working. "I don't think this is helping, Aliya," Dad admitted one morning on the drive home. I nodded, trying not to cry.

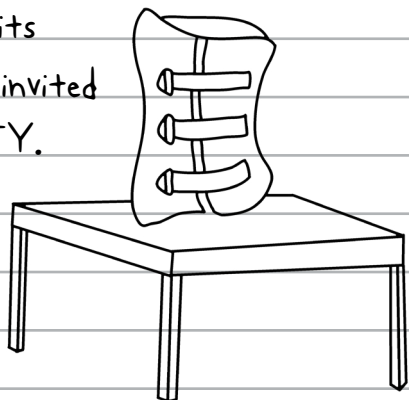
I didn't want a brace. I didn't want surgery. I just wanted my spine to be NORMAL, but that's not how some spines work.

So back to the doctor we went.



The second the doctor said the word brace, my brain went full fantasy mode. I pictured armor. IRON MAN-level armor. I'd stomp into school with a metallic shine and a glowing chest piece. Kids would whisper, Whoa, Aliya's basically part robot now. I'd save the world sometime between math and science.

That fantasy was CRUSHED about five seconds later when the nurse wheeled in a white, bulky plastic torso SHELL with ZERO glow and ZERO cool. If Iron Man's suit was iconic, this thing was its awkward cousin who never got invited to parties. It looked SWEATY. It looked STIFF. It looked like it could double as TUPPERWARE.

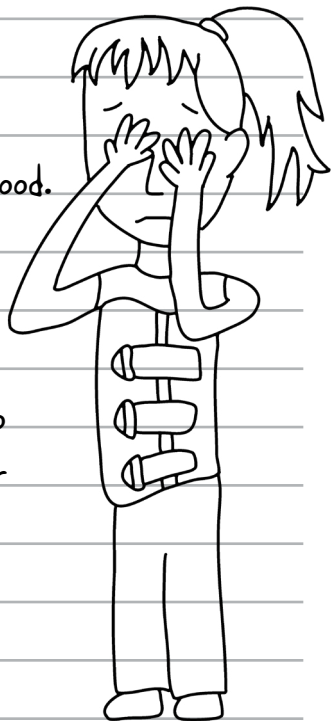


The first time they strapped it on, I almost cried, not because it hurt, but because it felt overwhelming in a way I didn't know how to explain. They wrapped the plastic around me and told me to "STAND TALL" and then "SUCK IN," which somehow made me feel even more self-conscious. The Velcro ripped loudly as they tightened it, then tightened it again, pulling the straps until the plastic hugged my ribs in a way that felt completely foreign.

They adjusted pads, shifted edges, checked alignment, and kept asking, "How does that feel?"

I had no idea how it was supposed to feel, but it definitely DIDN'T feel good.

It pushed against my ribs, made my shirts puff out in weird places, and bending or twisting felt like trying to move inside a shell that wasn't made for me yet. It wasn't pain, more like an eyelash stuck in your eye, constantly reminding you it's there.



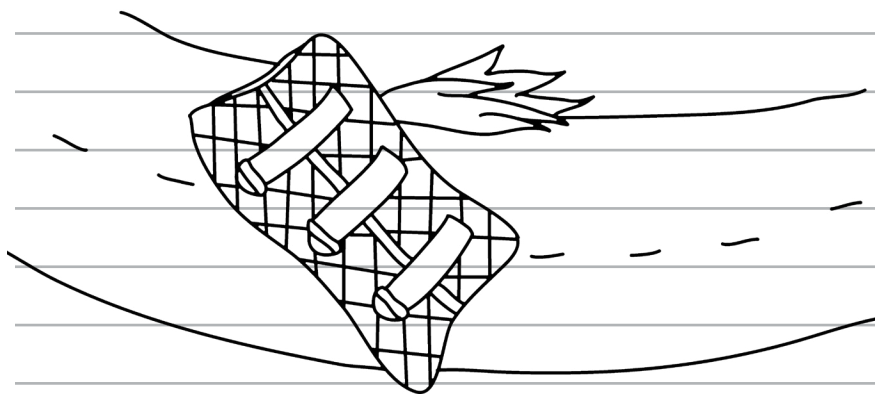
Mom said, "You'll get used to it."

Dad said, "This is going to help. We're proud of you."

The nurse added some tips, her voice gentle: "Take it slow at first. Wear it for a little while each day and gradually build up. Keep a notebook of any spots that rub or hurt, and we'll adjust them. And remember, your brace doesn't define you. YOU DO."

Arman asked, "Can I draw racing stripes on it so you look like a RACE CAR?"

"NO!" I yelled.



(Secretly, I pictured it zooming around a racetrack with flames painted on the sides.)

I was told to wear it TWENTY HOURS a day.

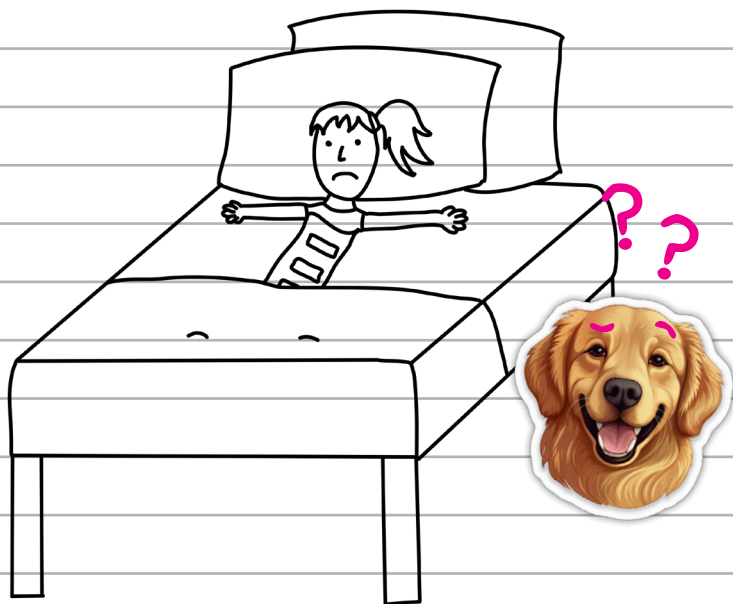
That meant school, dinner, brushing my teeth, basically everything except showering. They told me I'd get a week to ease into it, starting with a few hours and slowly adding more. Instead of feeling more normal, every extra hour made it worse.

At home, things quickly turned funny
(maybe a bit tragic, actually).

Mom handed me my backpack and said, "See if you can walk with it." The straps slipped off the edges of the brace, and the weight nearly TOPPLED me backward. Arman laughed so hard he SNORTED milk out of his nose.

I couldn't find a single comfortable position. I SLID off chairs. I CLUNKED when I tried to lie down. Carrying books felt like an instant WORKOUT. At least it was summer, so I had a little time to get used to all of this before school started again.

That night, lying awake and unable to twist or curl into any comfortable position.



Even Laila gave me a confused look when I tried to cuddle her: What's with the PLASTIC SHELL, human?

Then it hit me: the brace was both a PRISON and a new normal. Whether I liked it or not, I was going to have to learn how to live inside it.

CHAPTER 4

Bracing vs. School

The FIRST DAY of school was the real showdown: me, my brace, and an entire MIDDLE SCHOOL full of kids with sharp eyes and sharper mouths. I'd tried to prepare, walking around the house with my backpack, lugging a stack of books, practicing sitting and standing, but nothing could really prepare me for what it was actually like.

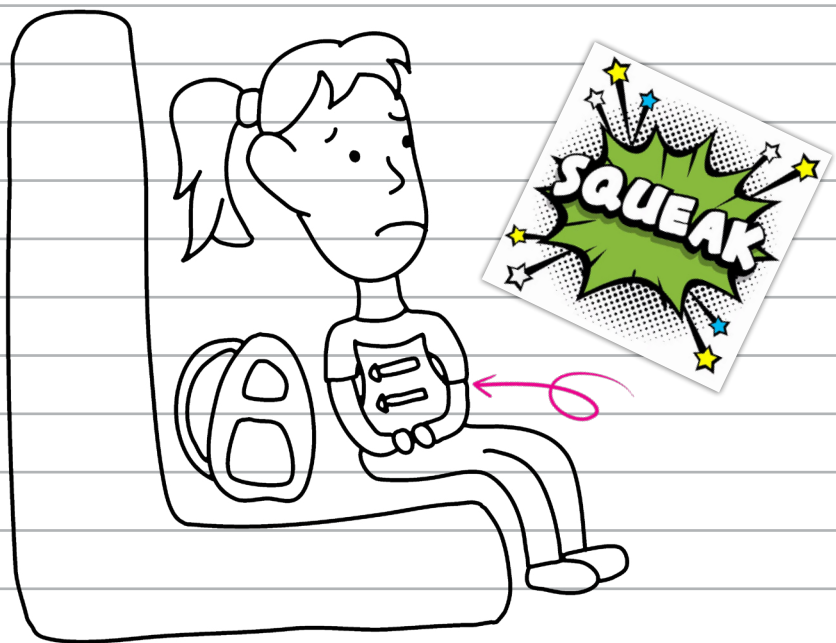
I couldn't tie my shoes. Again.
Every time I bent down, the brace dug into my ribs, forcing me back up like a JACK-IN-THE-BOX.

Mom knelt down, tied them for me, and said, "See? Easy!"

I felt like a KINDERGARTNER.
By the time I made it to the bus stop, my day already felt DOOMED.



On the bus, the brace squeaked against the vinyl seat. A boy in the row ahead twisted around and asked, smirking, "Was that you?"



"Nope. The bus is just... HAUNTED," I said quickly, cheeks flaming. Riya, my best friend, tried to cover it with a fake cough, but the damage was done. Kids started whispering. Some looked curious, like I was an EXOTIC ANIMAL at the zoo; others looked amused, like I'd handed them free entertainment for the semester.

Lunch was worse. Carrying my tray felt like balancing a circus act. The brace forced me stiff and upright, so I WADDLED through the cafeteria like a penguin carrying soup. When I finally sat, the brace CREAKED so loudly it sounded like I was sitting on a broken rocking chair.

"What's that thing under your shirt?" one boy asked, pointing with his pizza crust. "It's... a brace. For my back," I replied.

"Ohhh," he said, like I'd just admitted I was from MARS. "Does it hurt?"



"Not really," I lied. The truth was a million small waves of pain every second, but there was no time for a medical lecture at a lunch table.

"Can you FIGHT in it? Like a ROBOT suit?" another kid asked.

Laughter erupted, and I managed a weak smile, but inside I was burning. Half the time I wished people wouldn't notice me at all; the other half, I wished they'd understand without me having to explain.

Even just switching classes was difficult. My backpack slid awkwardly against the brace, straps slipping, books tilting.

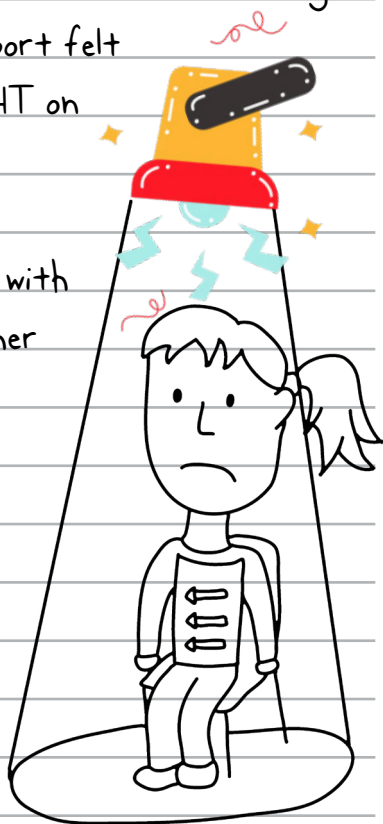
By the time I got to English I was sweaty, red-faced, and frustrated enough to throw my entire schedule in the trash.

I needed help. The brace made it almost impossible to bend down to pick up dropped pencils or to twist around and grab supplies. Asking teachers for support felt like sticking a giant SPOTLIGHT on myself,

"Hi, yes, NOTICE ME! The girl with the brace who can't even pick up her own eraser!"

So instead I stayed quiet and fumbled through everything, pretending I was fine.

My stomach knotted tighter every period.



Mom tried to help with new backpack styles, stretches, and study positions. "You just have to stay POSITIVE!" she said, like positivity could magically erase plastic digging into my ribs. Arman suggested I add sound effects to my squeaks.

"You could be like a HUMAN SOUNDBOARD," he said, making cartoon noises every time I sat down. Hilarious. NOT.

One night I finally snapped.

"STOP!"



I yelled louder than I meant to. My throat burned. "You don't get it! None of you do! You don't know what it's like to wear this thing TWENTY HOURS a day! To have everyone staring, laughing, asking questions, treating me like I'm BROKEN! I can't do it anymore!"

TEARS came fast and hot. I stomped upstairs, slammed my door, and curled up on my bed as much as the brace would let me. The plastic dug into my ribs, even then. It felt like I couldn't escape it, like I was TRAPPED inside my own body.

Mom's voice cracked the silence. "Aliya?"

She sat on the edge of my bed anyway.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly.

"You're right. We don't know what it feels like. Not really. And it's hard for us, too, because we see you hurting and we don't know how to make it better. We're trying, even if we mess it up."

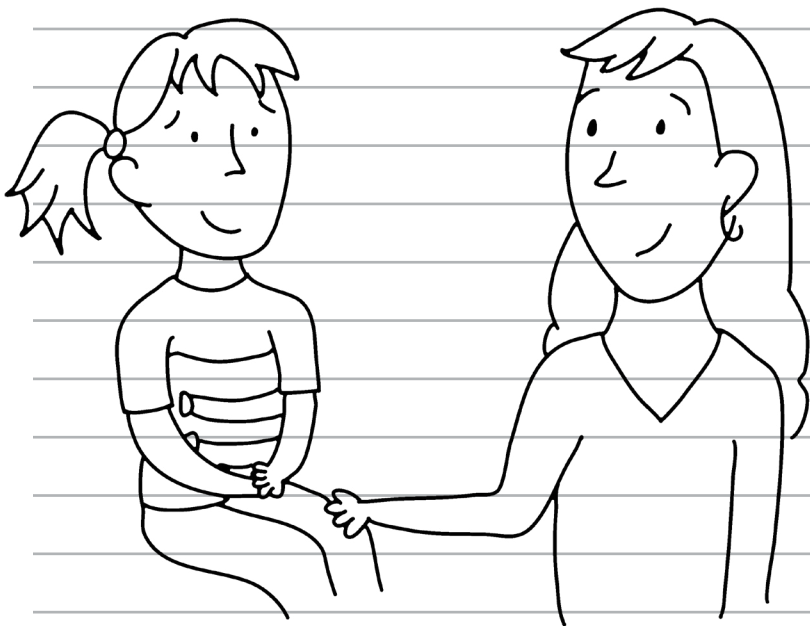


I sniffled, wanted to stay mad, but her cracked voice broke me too. Slowly I leaned against her shoulder, brace and all.

"It's just... so hard," I whispered.

"I know," she said, kissing the top of my head.

"But you're stronger than you think. And we'll figure it out together."



Months later, the doctor said my curve had improved. The brace was actually working. For the first time in a while, something inside me felt lighter. Not fixed, not perfect, but lighter. The hours and bruises didn't feel completely pointless.

The brace was still there, but now it felt less like an enemy and more like a tool I was learning to live with.

CHAPTER 5

The Bad News

Just when I thought I was finally figuring out the brace, the universe pulled a fast one.

We were back in Dr. Patel's office for a routine check up, hoping for good news. Mom squeezed my hand as we waited for him to pull up my new X-rays. I stared at the screen, half-proud, half-terrified. I'd been so good, twenty hours

a day, every single day. That had to pay off, RIGHT?



Dr. Patel FROWNED. Not the kind of frown you can mistake for concentration. A BAD frown. My stomach dropped.

"Well," he started slowly, "the brace has helped stabilize things for a while... but your curve has progressed. It's more SEVERE now."

"WHAT?" My voice cracked.

"But I WORE it! I did EVERYTHING you said!"

"I know you did," he said gently. "Sometimes, even with perfect compliance, the curve still worsens. At this point... surgery may be the next step."

SURGERY. The word rattled in my head like a thunderclap.

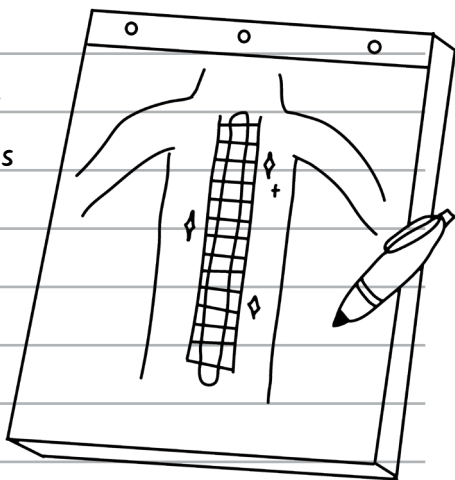
Mom stiffened beside me. Dad rubbed his forehead. I just... froze.

I tried to joke because that's what I do when I'm spiraling. "So, what, you put rods in? Like metal ones?" My voice shook. "I mean, when I was little I was obsessed with robots. I used to build Lego ones and pretend they were my army. Maybe now I'll actually have robot parts." I laughed, but it came out choked and hollow.

I grabbed the notepad from the counter and sketched a quick doodle of myself with a shiny silver spine, tiny bolts and all. It wasn't funny. Not really. But it was the only way I could keep from bursting into tears right there in the office.

Mom didn't laugh. She blinked quickly, like she might cry. Dad squeezed my shoulder like he was trying to keep me anchored.

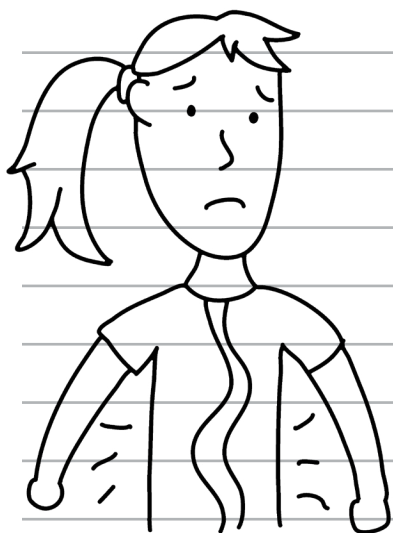
Dr. Patel nodded calmly. "We'll go over the details. It's not immediate, we'll schedule and prepare. For now, you can stop wearing the brace."



STOP wearing the brace. My heart JOLTED. I should've been happy, right? No more squeaks, no more bruises, no more plastic prison. Instead I felt a weird, hollow ache. Suddenly I wasn't sure who I was without it.

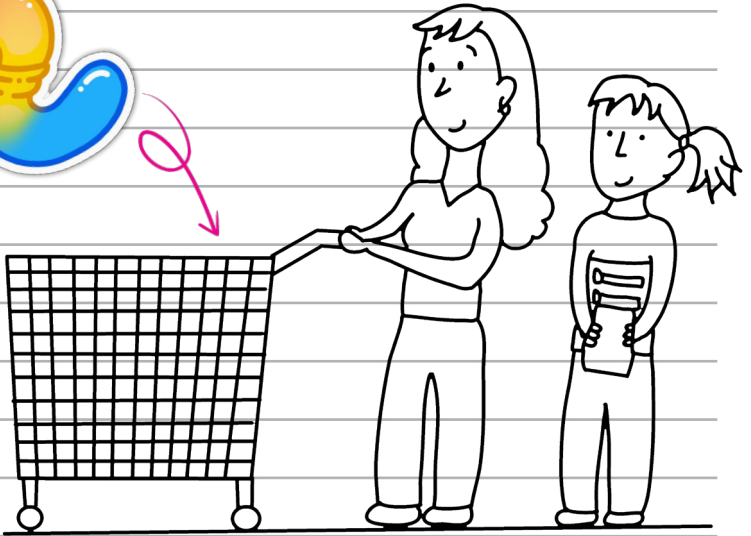
The next week felt surreal. For the first time in over a year I could pick out clothes without thinking, "Will this hide the brace?" At first it felt amazing. I wore my favorite fitted shirt to school and actually sat down without a single creak. People didn't stare. No whispers.

No questions. I looked... NORMAL.



But then I'd catch myself reaching for the straps at night, like my body forgot the brace was gone. Sleep felt strange without it pressing against me. I should've felt FREE, but instead I felt untethered, HELPLESS even, like the thing I'd hated for so long had been the only thing keeping my spine in check. Now it was gone, and all I could think about was whether my back was starting to curve again. There was nothing I could do but lie there and hope it didn't get too much worse.

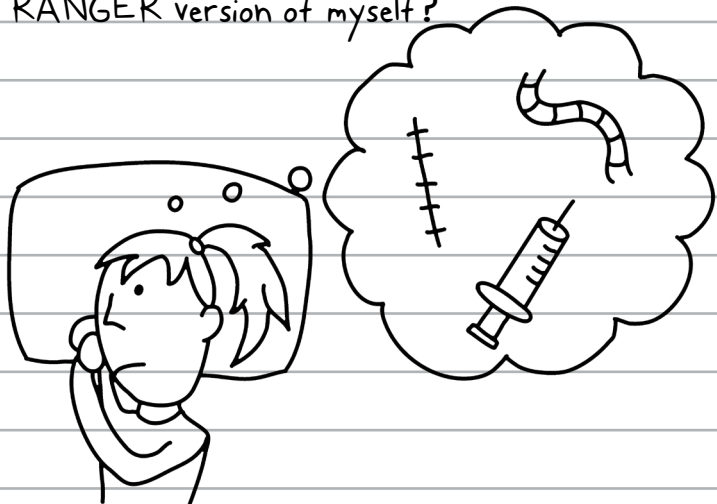
Mom tried to cheer me up with a grocery trip. "You can pick out all your favorite SNACKS," she said, as if chips and Oreos would fix my spine. Arman snuck GUMMY WORMS into the cart when Mom wasn't looking, and I laughed so hard my stomach hurt. For a few minutes we were just a regular family doing boring Saturday shopping. NO BRACES. NO X-RAYS. No scary words like SURGERY.



Later that week, my friend Riya invited me to hang out at her house. We sprawled on her bedroom floor, painting our nails, watching dumb YouTube videos. She didn't ask about my back. She didn't even mention the brace being gone. For the first time in days I wasn't thinking about hospitals. I was just thinking about how terrible neon-green nail polish looked on my thumb.

At school people noticed the brace was gone but didn't ask much. I caught myself walking confidently in the hallways, testing out the new FREEDOM. At lunch a kid slid into the seat next to me and said, "You look different. Like... taller?" I laughed awkwardly, unsure what to say. If only they knew.

But at night the FEAR always came back. I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, thinking about what "SURGERY" meant: needles, scars, recovery, metal rods holding my spine straight. Would I still be ME after? Or would I feel like some STRANGER version of myself?



I pulled out my journal and doodled again. Not robots this time, just me, me with a scar down my back, me standing a little taller, me surrounded by people who didn't notice the difference. Sometimes the sketches made me feel BRAVER. Sometimes they made me CRY.

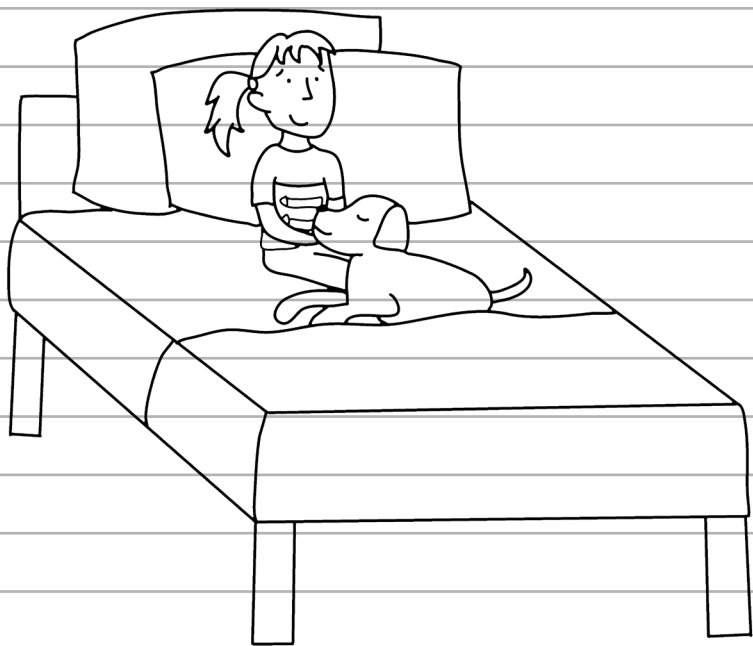
I wasn't sure what came next. All I knew was that my story wasn't ending with the brace. It was just... changing. And that was TERRIFYING.

CHAPTER 6

Countdown to Operation Back Fix

Scheduling the surgery felt difficult. Picking a date wasn't just about when the doctors were free, it was also about me, my school, and making sure my life didn't completely fall apart. After a lot of back-and-forth, we decided on winter break. That way, I'd miss just one week of school before break started in eighth grade. I'd have two full weeks to recover at home, and the week I went back, everyone would be getting back from vacation, so it shouldn't be too difficult to ease back into class.

The weeks between the doctor's visit and my scheduled surgery felt like someone had pressed PAUSE on my life, but also FAST-FORWARD on my anxiety. I woke up every day thinking about needles, metal rods, and the long hospital hallway that smelled like antiseptic and old carpeting. Laila slept at the foot of my bed most nights, her warm body a comforting reminder that some things stayed the same.



Mom and Dad tried their best to help, offering advice: "Pack your bag now, it'll be easier later," Mom said. "Make a list of questions for the doctor," Dad added. Their advice felt like an echo in a room I couldn't hear. I wasn't mad at them; I just needed space to feel my own feelings.

One afternoon, my parents suggested I talk to someone who had surgery like mine through an organization they'd found. I ROLLED my eyes at first. Did I really need to talk to a stranger about my back? I wasn't sure I wanted anyone seeing me like that. But after a little nagging, I agreed, more to get them off my case than anything else.

We met at a quiet café, somewhere public but calm, with soft music playing in the background. Emily was already there, sitting with a cup of hot chocolate, her backpack leaning casually against the chair. She was wearing a top that showed a little bit of her back and at first, I couldn't stop staring at her scar. It ran down her back in a neat line, but she carried it like it was nothing, like it didn't make her WEIRD or BROKEN. My chest tightened.

She noticed me staring and gave a little laugh. "It looks scary at first," she said, "but it healed, and now it's just part of me." Her words were simple, but the way she said them, confident, easy, and unapologetic, made me feel so MUCH BETTER.

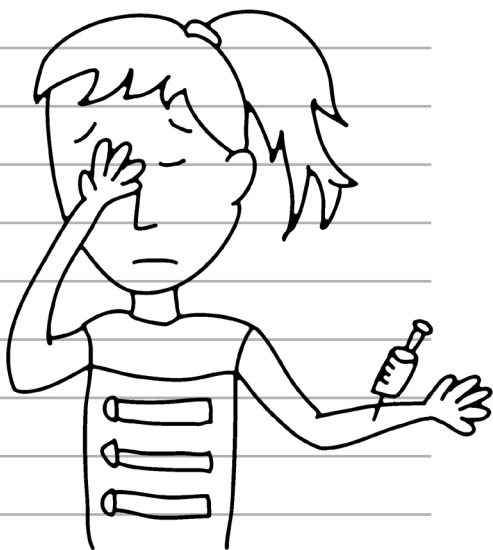


Emily told me about her own surgery, how nervous she had been, and how she'd worried she wouldn't be able to do all the things she loved. She talked about the brace, the first days at school, the awkward stares, and the fear that her spine might curve again. But she also shared the funny stuff, how she and her friends drew smiley faces on the brace, how she made up silly games to keep herself distracted during long appointments. She laughed as she told me about it, and I laughed too, even though my stomach still felt tight.

By the time we left, I realized something important: maybe surgery WOULDN'T erase me. Maybe I could still be me, brave and awkward and silly, and have a scar that told a story of strength. Emily had been through the same fears I had, and seeing her, not perfect, not fearless, just real, made me feel like I would also come out on the other end of all of this.

The weeks leading up to surgery felt like living in a weird in-between world. Every appointment and test reminded me something big was coming, but also gave me tiny moments to get used to the idea.

I had to go in for multiple BLOOD draws before surgery. Each one made my stomach twist in knots. I kept imagining the blood leaving my body, like it might escape for good instead of staying inside me. The thought of ANESTHESIA and needing my blood to keep flowing during surgery made my heart pound in a very real way.



Therapy helped, too. At first, I didn't want to go. Sitting in a room and talking about my spine felt awkward, like I should just deal with it on my own. It reminded me of how I'd rolled my eyes when my parents suggested I meet Emily. But once I started, I realized it was actually really HELPFUL.



My therapist gave me a SAFE SPACE to say the things I was too scared to say out loud, things like how TERRIFIED I was of rods and screws, how the idea of being under anesthesia made me freak out, and how even small hospital procedures felt overwhelming. Some sessions ended with tears, some with laughter at the weird hospital pamphlets or funny exercises she gave me. She taught me ways to breathe through panic and think about each step as something I COULD handle.

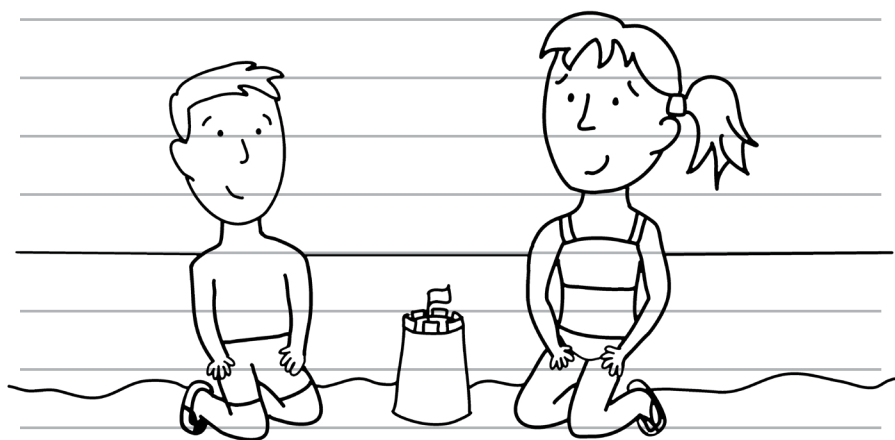
It didn't make my fears disappear, but it helped. I started feeling a little more in control about my situation, a little more confident, and reminded that being scared didn't mean I was weak, just that I was human.

Thanksgiving break came, and my family surprised me with a trip to Orlando. Roller coasters had always been my thing.



If I could survive a 100-foot drop, maybe I could survive surgery too, right?

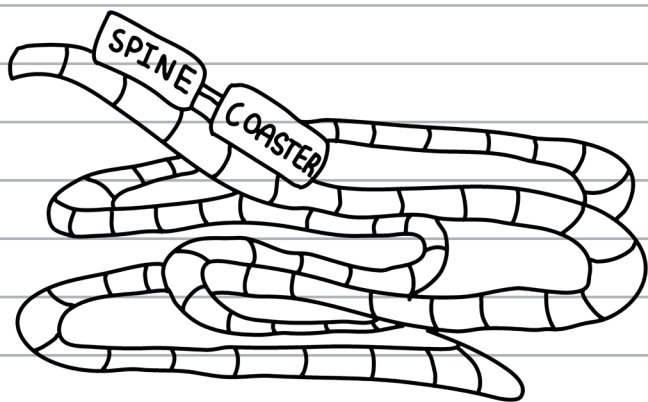
We spent three whole days at the parks. The loops, the twisting tracks, the free-fall drops, I screamed and laughed until my cheeks hurt. I even dared the rides that went upside down, gripping the safety bar so hard my knuckles turned white. Each ride reminded me of FREEDOM and my body's strength.



During the trip, I got a quiet moment on the beach with Arman. After building sandcastles and burying each other's feet, he looked at me seriously and said, "Aliya, I know it's not fair, but YOU'RE AMAZING. You've handled way more than anyone should have to." His words, delivered without teasing, made my chest feel full. I realized he really understood me in his own little brother way.

Back home, school life continued. I moved class to class, sat at lunch with my friends, and endured awkward stares when people realized the brace was gone but my surgery was coming. Some students asked questions, awkward but genuinely curious, others whispered, and a few made teasing comments. It stung, but humor became my shield. I laughed along when I could, sometimes squeaking jokes about my new "METAL ADVENTURE."

The days leading up to surgery became a mix of preparation and distraction. I shopped for comfortable clothes for recovery, joked with Arman, and doodled roller-coaster tracks in my journal, imagining my spine following every twist safely. Laila never left my side, sometimes resting her head on my lap while I drew.



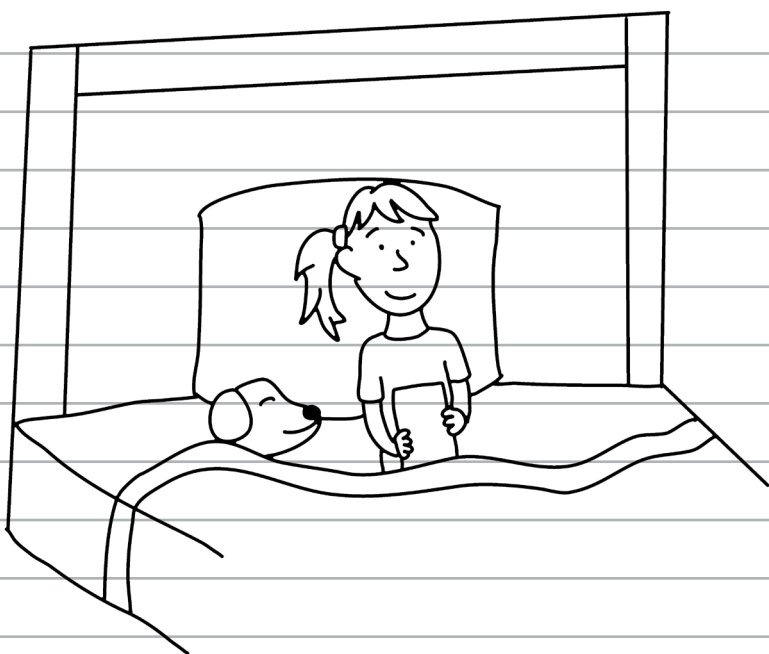
I started a list of things I wanted to do before surgery: have a sleepover with Riya, eat my favorite chocolate-chip cookies, read a new book, and play fetch with Laila until she collapsed in a happy heap. Each small victory felt like a triumph over the worry that constantly loomed.

Some nights ANXIETY crept in. I lay awake, staring at the ceiling, whispering questions into the darkness: "Will it hurt? Will I be taller? Will I be able to ride roller coasters again?" Each time I pictured Emily's scar, reminding me it could all be OKAY.



By the week of surgery I wasn't fearless, but I was READY. I had roller coasters in my heart, Laila at my side, and the knowledge that even if my spine changed, I wouldn't lose myself. If I could survive wearing a brace, awkward stares, family fights, and squeaky plastic prisons, I could survive this too.

The night before surgery I lay in bed and realized something incredible. For the first time in months I wasn't reaching for a brace to feel safe. I found PEACE within myself; my spine might change, but I was staying exactly the same.



CHAPTER 7

Surgery Day

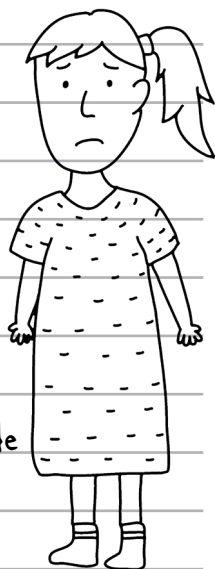
The morning of surgery, I was very NERVOUS. Mom and Dad tried to make it feel normal, joking about breakfast and little routines, but I could see the worry on their faces. Laila nudged my slippers, sensing my nerves. I hugged my Minnie Mouse stuffed animal tightly, feeling its familiar weight, trying to hold onto home before stepping into the unknown. I tried to channel the calmness I had found the night (and weeks) before.

The hospital smelled the same as always, sterile but strange, with a hint of food from the cafeteria. Hallways stretched endlessly, polished and echoing with footsteps. Other kids waited quietly, some staring at walls, some glued to screens, all of us holding onto invisible battles. It was a mix of anxiety and calm that made the place feel alive and foreign at the same time.



I changed into my hospital gown, with stretchy fabric and an open back that left me uncomfortably exposed.

My blood pressure was a little high, as expected. I tried to distract myself by staring at the ceiling lights and counting patterns, but it was hard to forget why I was there. Mom whispered encouragement, Dad tried a small joke, and their LOVE wrapped around me even as it made the day feel heavier.

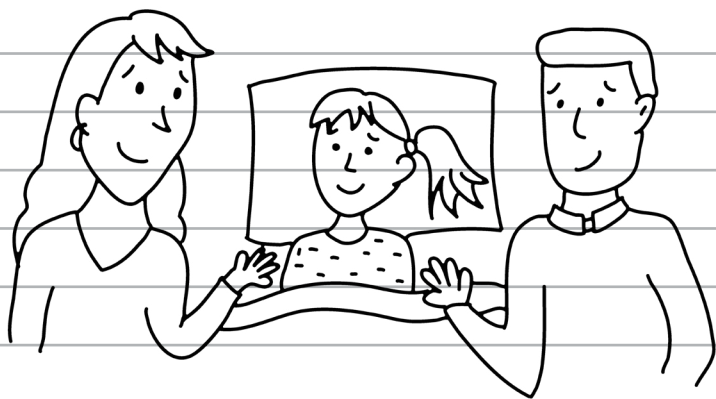


The anesthesiologist came by to chat, asking about flavors I liked, chocolate, vanilla, strawberry. It seemed funny at first, like a random question in a room that felt anything but random. I made a small joke about forgiving the IV if

I got chocolate, and for a moment I laughed. That tiny laugh felt like a victory against fear, a reminder that I was still me, not just a patient.

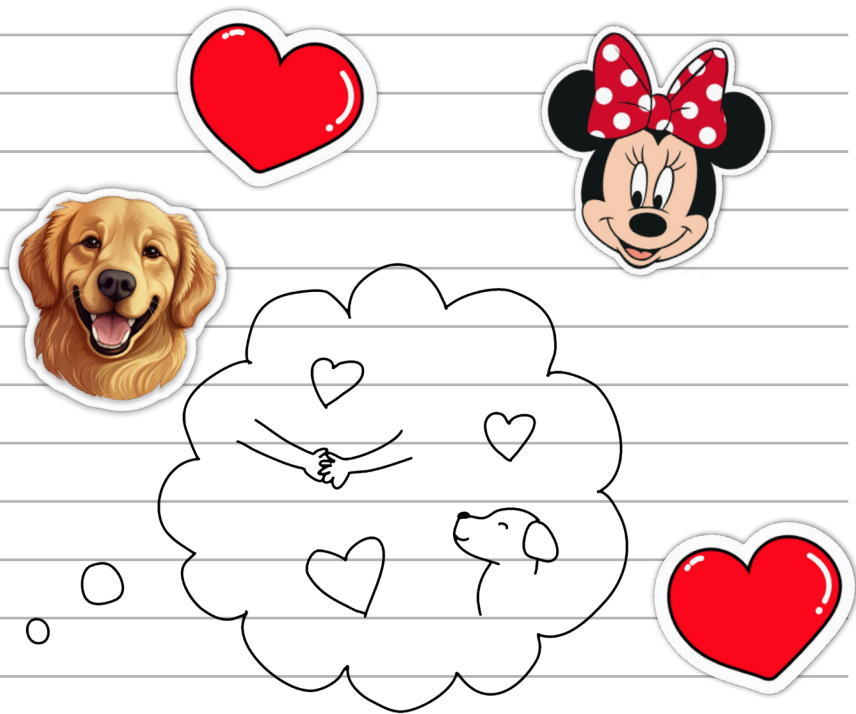


When the doctor came to wheel me into the operating room, Mom hugged him and started crying. Seeing someone I trusted, someone I thought was unshakable, break like that was almost scarier than the surgery itself. His calm words, "It'll all be fine," helped, but the tears reminded me that fear was normal. I nodded, holding back my own tears, clutching Minnie Mouse as we moved down the hallway. The polished floor reflected the lights, streaks of hope guiding me forward.



The operating room had bright lights, humming machines, monitors blinking steadily, and nurses moving like a coordinated dance. I whispered a joke about being a "living spine exhibit," and one of the nurses smiled. That smile was a tiny lifeline, a reminder that I was still present, still myself, even in the middle of chaos.

I focused on what the anesthesiologist said: pick something comforting to think about. I thought about Laila, and squeezed my eyes shut tightly, trying to picture her clearly. Laila distracted me until the anesthesia took over.



My last thoughts were fragments of LOVE and CONNECTION, Mom's hand, Dad's nod, Arman's hug, Laila's soft fur, Minnie Mouse pressed to my chest. I reminded myself that even as I changed physically, I would carry the core of myself into recovery: scared, resilient, and loved.

CHAPTER 8

Hospital Recovery Popsicles, Therapy Dogs, and finding myself

The first few hours after surgery were a blur of lights, machines, and groggy awakenings. I remember slowly waking up, my chest feeling heavy, my back sore, and a popsicle in my hand. The nurses were kind, constantly checking my vitals, adjusting blankets, and explaining what was happening. But every time I fell asleep, someone came back in, blood pressure checks, IV adjustments, routine visits. I tried to rest in short bursts, but the constant interruptions made me a little grumpy. Still, they were gentle and reassuring, smiling and joking as they helped me navigate something that felt completely unfamiliar.

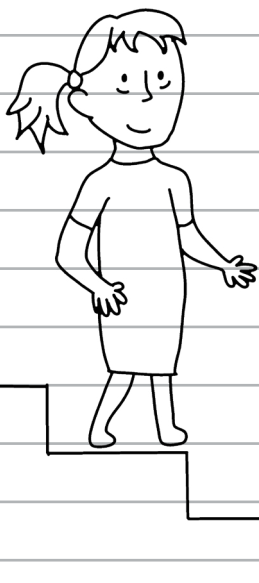


It didn't take long for me to realize how much I couldn't do on my own. My mom had to help me get up just to go to the bathroom, and even though I knew I needed it, I hated it. My independence felt trapped behind the soreness in my back and the stiffness in my body. Every small movement reminded me how FRAGILE I was, and I didn't like that feeling at all. I also couldn't see Arman during my hospital stay, and thinking about him at home, building Legos and laughing at cartoons, made my chest ache. Laila wasn't allowed in either, which made everything feel even emptier. So when a therapy dog came into my room, I hugged it like it was her. It was a little silly and a little sad, but it gave me a sense of comfort I didn't realize I needed.



Not Laila,
but still cute





NEVER
GIVE
UP

PUSH
THROUGH

The first time I had to walk was TERRIFYING. My legs felt wobbly, my back screamed with every step, and the hallway stretched endlessly in front of me. Nurses held my arms and guided me to a chair just a few feet away, but even that felt like miles. The next day, they made me walk again, this time farther, even up a small set of stairs. Every inch felt MOMUMENTAL, and suddenly the world outside my hospital bed felt huge and difficult. On top of that, the food was bland and unappetizing, and eating felt like a chore. The only thing I could actually enjoy were the kettle-cooked potato chips my dad brought from the cafeteria, which somehow became my tiny lifeline to NORMALCY.

Nights were the hardest. My body ached constantly, and the frequent checks made it nearly impossible to sleep for long. My mom stayed by my side the entire time, insisting she would be there if I needed anything. Her presence was comforting, but also a little frustrating. I wanted to prove that I could do things on my own, but my body kept reminding me that I wasn't ready yet. Visitors came in and out, bringing flowers, cards, and small conversations that made the sterile hospital room feel warmer. Slowly, that room became more than just a place of pain - it became a space filled with progress, frustration, support, and the beginning of healing.

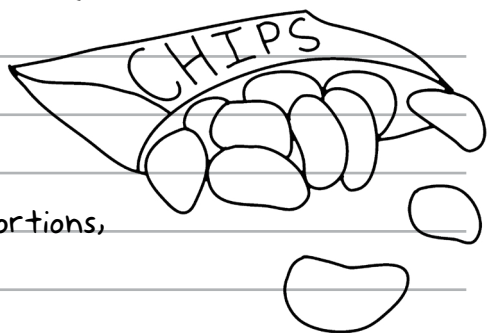


By the time I left the hospital, I felt EXHAUSTED but also slightly TRIUMPHANT. The car ride home was uncomfortable, every bump in the road sending small jolts through my spine as I lay propped up with pillows. But when we pulled into the driveway, something shifted. Laila ran to the car, her tail wagging uncontrollably, and the moment she climbed in next to me, I felt a wave of relief. I wasn't alone anymore.

Being home was comforting, but it also came with its own challenges. My mom insisted on sleeping in the same room as me for the first few nights, helping me get to the bathroom, bringing me water, and checking on me constantly. I hated how dependent I felt—not because of her, but because I couldn't do those things myself. The first few days were especially difficult. Every movement hurt more than I expected, and even something as simple as coughing or laughing felt like my spine was reminding me of what it had just been through. Sleep was still interrupted, but now it was because of pain instead of nurses, and I found myself wishing for just one full night of rest.

Eating continued to be a challenge.

The kettle-cooked chips remained my comfort food, but slowly I started trying small bites of other things, simple foods, small portions, little victories each time.



The first week, I spent most of my time in bed, frustrated by how limited I was. But gradually, small victories began to appear. I could roll over with less pain,

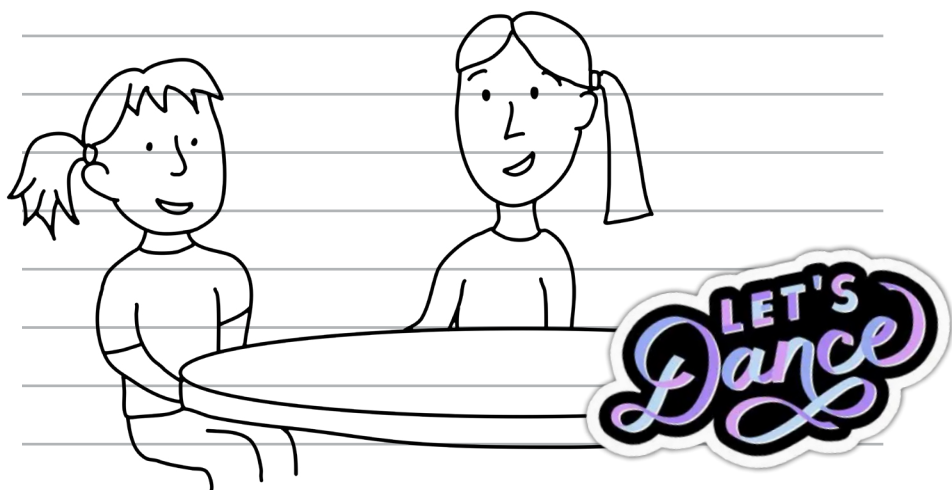


stand with help, and eventually take a few steps on my own. Each of those moments felt huge. By the second week, I started leaving my room more, sitting in the living room with my family, eating a little

more, and walking a little farther each day. The progress wasn't dramatic, but it was real, and for the first time, I could feel myself getting stronger **PHYSICALLY** and **MENTALLY**.

Returning to school was another step forward, even though it was slow. I started with half days, carefully walking through the hallways, avoiding heavy backpacks, and relying on friends to help with notes. At first, I was **NERVOUS** about how people would react, about the scar, the attention, the questions, but it wasn't as bad as I had imagined. My friends joked with me, talked to me normally, and made me feel like myself again. That's when I began to realize that my identity wasn't defined by my scar, but by how I chose to handle everything that came after it.

When the 8th-grade dance started getting closer, I didn't think I would go. The idea of standing, dancing, and being surrounded by people felt OVERWHELMING.



But with Riya's encouragement, I decided to try. We picked out a "recovery-friendly" outfit, curled my hair, and did my makeup, and even getting ready felt like an accomplishment. When I looked in the mirror, I felt something I hadn't felt in weeks, it was confidence. The scar was still there, but it didn't feel like something I needed to hide anymore. It felt like something I had SURVIVED.

That night, I walked into the dance slowly, leaning on a friend. At first, everything felt overwhelming, the lights, the music, the crowd but as I stood there, something shifted. I felt PROUD. I had gone through surgery, learned how to walk again, and pushed through pain and fear to get to that moment. And now, I was there, laughing, smiling, and living. For the first time since surgery, I felt fully PRESENT.



In the weeks that followed, progress continued in small but meaningful ways. I walked farther, ate more, and even started laughing at the little setbacks, like a slight trip or a random twinge of pain. Laila and Arman stayed by my side through it all. Slowly, life began to feel familiar again, but not in the same way as before.

It was a STRONGER kind of normal.

A more CONFIDENT one.

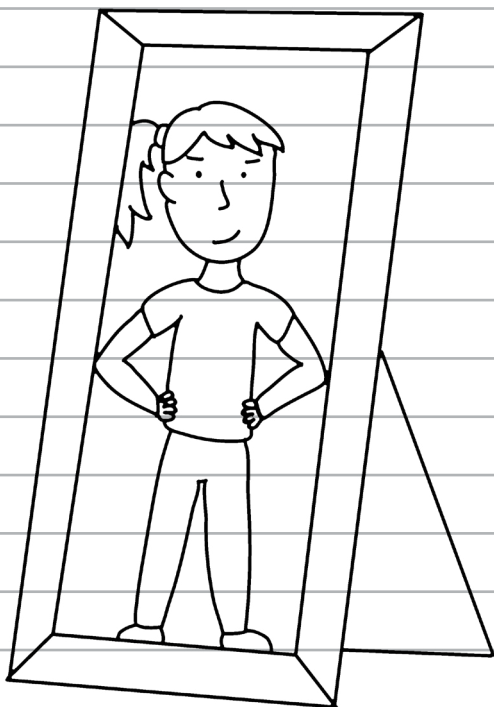


I began to see my scar differently, not as something to hide, but as proof of everything I had been through and everything I had OVERCOME. Climbing stairs, going to school full-time, laughing with friends, things that once felt impossible now felt like VICTORIES. Each one reminded me that while surgery had changed my body, it hadn't taken away who I was. If anything, it showed me just how STRONG I really am.

CHAPTER 9

Two Years Later

It's strange to think it's been two years since my surgery. High school is CHAOTIC in its own way: homework, friends, awkward moments. But I don't dread looking at myself in the mirror anymore. That alone feels like such a big deal.



My SCAR runs straight down my back. It's still there, still visible but now, instead of insecurity, I feel PRIDE. It reminds me of everything I got through. Sometimes I trace it absentmindedly, not because I'm worried, but because it feels like proof. Proof that my body went through something hard and came out STRONGER.

When I was wearing a brace, I always felt slightly off tilted, uncomfortable, hyperaware of myself. I tried to hide my back, hide my body, shrink into the background. Surgery was terrifying, and recovery tested my patience in every possible way. But on the other side of it, I found freedom. Now I stand straight without thinking about it. I run, dance, bend down to tie my shoes, and it all feels natural. I'm not constantly wondering how I look. I JUST EXIST.

High school still comes with pressure, but I carry myself differently now. I don't walk into a room trying to disappear. I wear what I want. I laugh without holding back. There's something powerful about not feeling trapped in your own body anymore.

I think about the dances that used to make me anxious. I felt stiff and unsure, still adjusting to everything. Now, when I get ready curling my hair, putting on a dress I love, I feel EXCITED instead of nervous. Doing every little thing makes me so HAPPY, its unbelievable to think I can go to the pool without feeling insecure. Now no matter the activity I can feel present, and happy.



The biggest change isn't even physical. It's emotional. I'm more patient with myself. I notice the small things more. I let people help me. Arman still teases me in ways that make me laugh, Riya checks in like she always does, and my parents cheer me on in quiet, steady ways. I don't brush that support off anymore. I actually let myself feel it.

I often think about the surgeons, the nurses, everyone who stood around that operating table. They didn't just STRAIGHTEN my spine. They gave me a chance to feel comfortable in my own skin. That's something I'll always carry with me.

There were nights I cried and days I doubted whether I was strong enough. Now, when I look back, I feel proud of the girl who kept going anyway. I didn't just get through it, I GREW because of it.

Even the normal parts of life feel lighter. Getting dressed. Walking through school. Hanging out with friends. I don't think about pain or hiding anymore. I just move. I just live.

Two years ago, I couldn't imagine feeling this whole. Now, when I look in the mirror, I don't just see a scar. I see STRENGTH. I see GROWTH. I see someone who went through something hard and came out BRAVER.

And that feels like a quiet kind of VICTORY.



A Special Message from the Author



Diya Baldawa

Dear Reader,

I want you to know something important: I've been where you are. I know what it feels like to stare at your reflection and see a body that doesn't feel like it belongs to you. I know what it feels like to lie awake at night, your mind running in circles with questions and fears, wondering if life will ever feel normal again. I know what it's like to face doctors, braces, X-rays, needles, surgeries, and everything in between, and to feel like it's too much. I know how it feels when friends don't quite understand, when family tries to help but it still feels lonely, and when your own body feels like it's working against you.

But I also want you to hear this: you are not alone. I see you. I feel your pain. I know the nights when you feel scared, frustrated, or even embarrassed. I know the moments when you just want to hide and wish everything could be different. I felt all of that too. And I'm here to tell you, your feelings are real, valid, and okay. You don't have to pretend to be strong all the time. You don't have to hide your tears, your worries, or your fear. It's normal to be afraid.

Even in the hardest moments, there's a part of you that's already stronger than you think. Every day you wear your brace, every appointment you go to, every time you face the unknown, you are building courage. And it might not feel like it in the moment, but one day you'll look back and see how far you've come. That's the amazing part, you're growing stronger even when it feels impossible. You're learning to trust yourself, to love your body, and to be proud of the journey you're on.

I also want you to know that it's okay to need help. I needed help, too. My parents, friends, even my stuffed animals, were all part of holding me up when I couldn't hold myself. That doesn't make you weak; it makes you human. There's nothing wrong with leaning on someone else, asking for support, or letting someone love you through the hard times.

And here's the thing that's really true: it does get easier. You will face moments of pain, uncertainty, and frustration, but those moments do not last forever. One day you'll wake up and feel your body differently, you'll feel proud of it, you'll feel capable, and you'll feel alive in ways you couldn't imagine right now. Your scar, your brace, your journey, they won't be things you hide or worry about anymore. They'll be badges of courage, reminders of everything you survived and everything you became because of it.

You are brave. You are capable. You are loved, by your family, your friends, and by me, because I know what you're going through, and I am proud of you already. I love you, not in a distant way, but in a way that knows your pain, your fear, your struggles, and your victories. One day you'll stand tall, look in the mirror, and see someone who has fought, survived, and thrived. Someone who is proud of their body, proud of their scar, and proud of themselves. That person is you.

Hold onto that courage. Let yourself feel everything, the fear, the frustration, the sadness, but also the hope, joy, and pride. Every step you take matters, even if it doesn't feel like it right now. Every time you get through a doctor's visit, a brace adjustment, a therapy session, or a scary procedure, you are winning. I promise, one day you'll look back and smile at the strength you didn't even know you had.

You're not just surviving; you're growing, becoming, thriving. I am so, so proud of you for that. Trust yourself. Love yourself. Be gentle with yourself. You are capable of more than you know, and the world is waiting for the brave, strong, amazing person that you already are.

With all my love, understanding, and pride,

Diya Baldawa

A Special Message from the Illustrator



Divya Dow

Dear Reader,

Before you close this book, I want to tell you a little bit about why I was able to illustrate this story.

My name is Divya Dow and I am 15 years old, a sophomore in high school and I live in San Diego, California. This set of drawings was especially meaningful to me since I have scoliosis, had to wear a brace for a long time and underwent a life changing spinal fusion.

When I first got the task of drawing these illustrations, I knew I didn't want it to be just a bunch of facts. Scoliosis is something that can be difficult to explain with just words. There are so many parts that can be hard to describe. I wanted to find a way to show those moments instead of just telling you about them.

For me, drawing is a way to tell stories. While working on this book, I tried to use the drawings to capture the challenging and funny sides of a scoliosis journey.

I also wanted the art style to feel real and not scary. Scoliosis can sometimes feel like a very serious topic, especially when you're learning about it for the first time. I didn't want the pages to feel intimidating.



I hope this book can be meaningful to people who have scoliosis, but I also hope it can help readers who don't understand scoliosis see it from a different perspective. Everyone's experience is different, and one book can't tell every person's story.

Most of all, I hope these illustrations remind you that everything is going to be okay. A diagnosis may become part of someone's story, but it does not have to be the only part of them. I think it is very important to remember that this bump in the road should push you forward, and let it guide you to a better and stronger future.

Creating this book has taught me that illustration is about much more than making something look good. It is about communicating an idea from the inside and giving a deep and accessible point of view.

And most importantly, I hope you remember that every challenge you overcome is making you a stronger and more amazing person.

Thank you for seeing this story through my eyes.

Divya Dow



Setting Scoliosis Straight is a non-profit 501(c)(3) organization devoted to empowering families impacted by scoliosis through education, connection, and research. Our mission is to support discoveries and advance techniques in the treatment of scoliosis in children and adolescents worldwide. By focusing on setting scoliosis straight, we aim to improve the quality of life for affected families.

This book is written by a patient for other patients. Its purpose is to help newly diagnosed kids understand what their scoliosis journey may look like. Every spine is unique and every patient's experience is different, but we hope this story brings comfort, confidence, and a sense of support as you begin your own path forward.

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