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Sick Girl

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Introduction

The story you are about to read is one written out of necessity—a fiction born from the ache of long hours in quiet rooms, from the persistent questions that illness brings, and from the resilience that emerges unexpectedly in the face of uncertainty. "Sick Girl" is not a memoir, nor is it a clinical account. It is, at its core, a chronicle of the spaces illness creates: between a girl and her world, between expectation and reality, between the person she was and the person she must become.

In these pages, you will meet Leigh, who learns too young the language of hospitals, the rhythm of interrupted childhood, and the quiet negotiable line between wellness and unwellness. Leigh's journey is not simply about what she loses, but about the people she draws close—some old, some new—who teach her that even in isolation, there is connection. Her story unfolds in the confines of sickrooms, narrow corridors, and the open-ended possibilities of imagination.

Fiction allows us to slip into lives not our own, to feel the weight of struggles we may never personally face, or to find our own pains echoed in another's voice. This book was written for anyone who has felt unseen in their struggle, for those whose stories are so often told in terms of heroism or tragedy, but are, in truth, something messier and far more ordinary. Leigh's world is colored by moments of loneliness and fear, yes, but also by rebellion, laughter, anger, and hope.

Throughout the chapters, you may notice that illness is neither villain nor guiding force; it is simply there, a constant, at times quiet and at times overwhelming. What interests me most is not the drama of sickness but what it reveals—the cracks in relationships, the silent resilience of a tired heart, and the thousand tiny decisions that make a life, even in the midst of fatigue and uncertainty.

"Sick Girl" is, ultimately, a celebration of endurance—not of triumph over illness, but of living fully and truthfully alongside it. It is an invitation to look closely at what is often overlooked: the gray spaces, the side effects, the half-finished sentences, and the stubborn spark that persists no matter the diagnosis.

Thank you for opening these pages. Leigh's journey is only beginning, but perhaps you will find echoes of your own story here too.

CHAPTER ONE: The First Fever

Leigh first noticed the peculiar chill that May. It wasn't the kind of chill that a sweater fixed, nor the kind that lingered after a spring rain. This was a deep, bone-hugging cold that seemed to originate from within, radiating outwards regardless of the temperature outside. It was insistent, like a tiny drummer tapping out a rhythm in her marrow. At twelve, her body was a largely unexplored country, a place of expected growth spurts and occasional scraped knees. Illness, for Leigh, had been the common cold, a fleeting flu, a snuffle that vanished with a dose of cherry-flavored syrup. This was different.

The first fever arrived unannounced, a stealthy heat that began in the back of her neck and crept across her scalp. She was in history class, staring blankly at a diagram of the Roman Empire, when the words on the page began to swim. Her vision blurred, then sharpened, then blurred again, as if her eyes were struggling to focus on something just beyond their reach. The classroom, usually a cacophony of hushed whispers and rustling papers, became a muffled hum, a distant, indecipherable buzz. A tremor ran through her, making her teeth chatter, despite the rising warmth.

"Leigh? Are you alright?" Mrs. Davison's voice, typically crisp and commanding, sounded strangely soft, like she was speaking from underwater. Leigh tried to respond, but her tongue felt thick, glued to the roof of her mouth. She managed a weak nod, which probably looked more like a spasm. The bell, when it finally shrieked, felt like a physical blow, a jarring vibration that reverberated through her already overstimulated senses.

Walking home was an exercise in staggered locomotion. The familiar sidewalk seemed to undulate beneath her feet, the houses on either side leaning in like curious, slightly menacing giants. The air, usually fresh with the scent of blossoming honeysuckle, tasted metallic and stale. Each breath felt like an effort, as if her lungs were pushing against a hidden resistance. She remembered her mother's advice: *if you feel sick, just get home*. Simple enough, except for the feeling that home was miles away, across an invisible desert.

Her front door, a familiar rectangle of chipped green paint, seemed to loom. She fumbled with the key, her fingers clumsy and unresponsive. Inside, the house was quiet, filled with the scent of dust and the faint perfume of the lilies her mother kept in the living room. She dropped her backpack by the door, the thud resonating loudly in the sudden stillness. Her head throbbed, a steady drumbeat behind her eyes.

She stumbled into the kitchen, drawn by an instinct for water, and found the world

tilting. The countertops slanted, the refrigerator hummed like a restless beast, and the floor threatened to rise up and meet her. Her knees buckled. The next thing she knew, she was on the cool linoleum, the ceramic tile pressing against her cheek, offering a small, welcome relief from the inferno within.

"Leigh? What are you doing down there?" Her mother's voice, startled and then concerned, cut through the haze. Leigh opened her eyes, and her mother's face, usually a picture of calm, was etched with worry. Her brow was furrowed, her lips pressed into a thin line. "Good heavens, you're burning up!"

And she was. Her mother's hand, cool and steady on her forehead, confirmed it. The thermometer, when it was finally retrieved from the medicine cabinet, showed a number that seemed impossibly high: 103.7. It was a number that immediately stripped away the remnants of childhood invincibility. This wasn't just a cold. This was an event.

Her mother, typically a woman of calm rationality, moved with a controlled urgency. Wet washcloths appeared, cool against her blazing skin. Liquids were offered, spoonfuls of sickly sweet cough syrup administered, despite the lack of a cough. Leigh was tucked into bed, her favorite faded quilt pulled up to her chin, but the chill persisted, a relentless presence beneath the heat.

The first night was a blur of fragmented sleep and waking disorientation. Shadows danced on the walls, morphing into strange shapes. The air hummed with a low, oppressive drone. Every now and then, her mother would appear, a soft hand on her forehead, a hushed question about how she felt. Leigh could only manage a groan or a weak shake of her head. Sleep offered no escape; her dreams were vivid, unsettling tapestries woven from feverish thoughts and distorted fears. She was running through an endless hallway, the walls closing in, the air thick and heavy. She was searching for something she couldn't name, a sense of well-being that had slipped away.

Days bled into each other. The routine became: wake, attempt to eat a few bites of toast, drift back to sleep, wake again, the fever still present, a stubborn, uninvited guest. Her father, usually jovial and loud, spoke in hushed tones. Her older brother, Mark, usually a whirlwind of teenage energy, was unusually quiet, peering into her room with a concerned expression. Even the family dog, Buster, a scruffy terrier mix, seemed to sense the shift, lying patiently at the foot of her bed, his soft snores a comforting rhythm.

The doctor came to the house – a rare occurrence these days. Dr. Albright, a man with kind eyes and a perpetually worried frown, poked and prodded, listened to her chest with a cold stethoscope, and peered down her throat. He asked questions, too many questions, about where it hurt, when it started, if she'd been around anyone sick. Leigh tried her best to answer, but her words were slurred, her thoughts like smoke.

He muttered about a "viral infection," a common enough diagnosis that usually brought reassurance. But this time, it didn't feel right. The fever persisted. The aches deepened. The fatigue was a heavy cloak she couldn't shed.

After a week, her mother looked increasingly frayed. The initial concern had deepened into something akin to quiet desperation. Leigh heard snippets of conversations from the kitchen, hushed and urgent. Words like "persistent," "unusual," and "tests" floated through the thin walls, catching in the air like dust motes. She knew, even in her fog, that this wasn't normal. This wasn't just a bad flu. This was something else entirely, something that had settled into her bones and refused to leave.

Her appetite vanished, replaced by a constant nausea that made the thought of food repulsive. She felt like a foreign object had taken root inside her, slowly consuming her energy, leaving her hollowed out and weak. She became a spectator in her own body, watching it betray her, unable to exert any control. The world outside her window, once so vibrant with the promise of summer, now seemed distant and irrelevant. Her friends called, their voices tinny and far away through the phone. She could only manage a few mumbled words before exhaustion claimed her again.

One afternoon, her mother sat on the edge of her bed, her hand gently stroking Leigh's hair. Her eyes were red-rimmed, but her voice was steady. "We're going to the hospital, sweetheart," she said, her voice softer than usual. "Just to get some more tests, to figure out what's going on."

Leigh didn't protest. She was too tired to argue, too weak to care. The idea of leaving the confines of her bed, of facing the glare of the outside world, felt monumental. But the promise of answers, however distant, offered a sliver of hope. She was ready for anything that might break this relentless cycle, this unending, suffocating unwellness. She felt a profound shift, an almost imperceptible reordering of her personal universe. Her childhood, a brightly colored tapestry woven with school days, playground laughter, and carefree summers, was fraying at the edges. A new, unfamiliar thread was being introduced, dark and uncertain, and she knew, with a chill that had nothing to do with fever, that her life was about to change.

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