

## Chapter One

In his frustration Evan pulled the garbage bag out of the can with such force that it broke, spilling its pungent contents all over the kitchen floor. “Gross! That’s *all* I need. As if I don’t have enough stuff to do!” Evan muttered.

He reluctantly grabbed the dust pan and broom from its hook, and started to pick up the smelly stuff and put it into another bag. He couldn’t believe what his mom had just told him. In all his fourteen years he’d never been so mad at his mom!

That night, right after dinner, his mother had sent his three younger siblings upstairs to watch a movie. This was a rare occurrence in their house, not just because she limited watching TV, but because it was still light outside, and warm enough to go out and play. August would end in a couple of days, and the kids loved to play on the neighborhood playground, which happened to be right across the street. It was so close that they thought it belonged to them. But, Evan grumbled, they seem to think *everything* belonged to them! He would occasionally find something of his in the twin’s room. Even his little sister Danielle would sometimes take one of his school notebooks, or even his private journal, draw in it, and then put it back in his room!

Evan knew that whenever his mom wanted to talk to him alone without the kids, something must be going on. All the way up the stairs, Dani had chanted in a singsongy voice, “Evan’s in trouble, Evan’s in trouble!”

“Evan, you’re not in trouble, but I’ll get right to the point,” his mom had said. “I need you to babysit the kids more often, now that I’ll be going to nursing classes three nights a week. And you know my classes start next week, like yours do. I need you to sit on Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday, starting with meeting Dani off the bus from school at three-thirty, so I can have time to make supper and get ready for my classes without having to rush. And I want to thank you for being so patient with all the babysitting you’ve already been doing for me on Saturdays. But now Hillbrook needs me to work more hours,” she explained, referring to the nursing home where she worked on weekends as a nurses’ aide. “So I’ll need you to sit for the kids on Sundays too, also starting next week. God knows we need the money.”

Evan couldn't believe it. And on top of it all he had chores, and, since school was starting next week, homework! He stepped outside and deposited the garbage bag in the can outside the door. He slammed the lid down hard on the can.

"When am I gonna be able to go anywhere?" he fumed under his breath. "Don't I do enough around here already? I've been babysitting on Saturdays since like forever. Isn't that enough? These kids aren't even my real brothers and sister. When will I be able to go anywhere? When will I do homework? When will I *breathe*?" His jealousy towards his siblings, and the way his mother gave into their needs and totally ignored his, smoldered like hot coals beneath his anger.

Evan's own dad had died when he was five. A couple of years later his mother had married again to a man named Josh and had three more kids: Dani, who was five and a real brat, plus his three year old twin half-brothers, Casey and Cory.

Only a year after the twins were born, just as Evan had been really starting to like his stepdad, his mom and Josh got a divorce. Now Evan was stuck staying home with all these dumb kids. Well, he didn't really think they were totally dumb. It was just that most other fourteen-year-old boys he knew didn't have to stay home and take care of babies.

Evan wiped his moist eyes with the back of his hand, and brushed a stray curl of his wavy brown hair out of his face. Evan liked keeping his hair long, and his mom didn't mind or complain about it. She seemed to understand that it was one of the few things that Evan felt he had control over.

He stomped back into the house and started to put the dishes in the dishwasher. "It's sorta her fault anyway that Dad is gone!" he mumbled to himself. From what his mom had told him, his Dad had smoked a lot and ended up with lung cancer. Maybe she could have made him stop. Why didn't she stop him from smoking? Evan almost dropped a dish, but caught it just before it hit the floor. He put soap in the dishwasher and started the machine, wiped the counter, and threw the sponge in the sink. He opened the closet to get the broom and dustpan, but instead of sweeping he tossed the broom roughly back in. "Forget it," he said aloud, although quietly, to himself. "I'm done with chores tonight! She won't notice that I didn't sweep."

An old picture of his dad on the wall caught his eye. Why did his mom have to get married again, and have all these little kids, Evan wondered. And why did she have to divorce Josh? Josh hadn't been his real dad, but he had treated Evan well, and had always found time to talk with him. But after the divorce Josh had moved to a different town. Now when he came to see the kids, once a month and on holidays, he never had time for Evan.

Evan went to the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of green tea to take up to his room. He closed the fridge door hard. As he did, a piece of

paper with little-kid handwriting on it fell to the floor. He picked it up. It was a poem he had written for his mom when he was younger.

*I love you, Mom  
I think you're cool.  
I think of you a lot when I'm at school.*

At the bottom, Evan had drawn a picture of himself giving his mom a flower. He had forgotten that she had kept the poem. He still liked writing poems, but not for her lately. Inventing rhymes was something he enjoyed doing. He was good at it, and it often came in handy for entertaining the kids, or getting them to do things he needed them to do, like taking a bath, or a nap. They were always begging him to make up poems using their names, and in return they would usually comply with his request without too much arguing.

His mom came into the room carrying a basket of dirty laundry. She looked exhausted. "Whew! The kids are finally asleep," she said. "Thanks for cleaning up, Evan." She started to put the clothes in the washing machine. Evan turned his back on her and slumped out of the room and up the stairs.

In his own room, Evan flopped down onto his beanbag chair. His summer reading book and the half-finished essay that he was supposed to write over the summer lay on the floor where he had left them. He picked them up, but he didn't really feel like working on either right now, although he knew that he was running out of time.

Evan balanced the book and notebook on his lap, closed his eyes, and stretched his legs out. He could barely remember his own father. He had been only five when Dad died. He did recall that a lot of people had stayed at their house then, and that his mom had helped him through his loss, but he had been so young then. Somehow now it seemed worse.

While his father lived, he used to make up poems for Evan. Evan could vaguely remember sitting on his dad's lap. His dad always had a cigarette, or sometimes a pipe, in one hand. The smoke hadn't seemed to bother Evan then, but now whenever he was around anyone smoking, the smell made him feel sick to his stomach. Evan used to point to something in the room, and his dad would make up a poem on the spot! Evan guessed that's where his talent came from. Right now he could think of a poem about his situation, though not particularly a nice one. He wrote in his notebook:

*These kids are stupid!  
These kids are a pain!  
If I babysit more  
I'll go insane!*