



THE  
*list* OF  
THINGS  
THAT WILL  
*not*  
CHANGE

Winner of the Newbery Medal

REBECCA STEAD

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*List* OF  
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First Light  
Goodbye Stranger  
Liar & Spy  
When You Reach Me

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**REBECCA STEAD**



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*For every kid who sees two moons*

## PROLOGUE

# The Sound of CORN

**J**ust last weekend, my dad told me a story that explained one or two things about his wedding day. Not his first wedding day, the second one. The story was about him and Uncle Frank, when they were little.

They grew up in Minnesota, across from a cornfield where, every summer, the corn grew very quickly. Dad says the corn had no choice, because summers are short in Minnesota. It was either grow fast or don't bother.

Every year, Dad and Uncle Frank would stand together in the corn, listening to it grow. No one ever believed them, but they could hear the leaves squeaking, stretching for sun. They both heard the corn growing, Dad said, and no one else did.

"You never told me that before," I said. I liked thinking of them standing in the corn like that.

"I didn't?" Dad was flipping pancakes. We have this new

pancake griddle that covers two stove burners, so now he can make four at once. It's great.

"Did you hold hands?"

"Who?"

"You and Uncle Frank. In the corn. So you wouldn't lose each other."

Dad snorted. "No. Have you ever seen Uncle Frank holding hands with anyone?"

You'd probably never guess they're brothers. Uncle Frank is reddish-white, and my dad has a ton of brown freckles that give him a year-round face tan. Dad is a talker, and Uncle Frank . . . isn't. Dad loves food, every kind of it, and Uncle Frank says if he could live on one hard-boiled egg a day, he would be happy.

If you want to know what the sound of corn growing explains about my dad's second wedding day, I'll have to tell a longer story, about a lot of things that happened two years ago, when I was ten.

It's a story about me, but a *different* me, a person who doesn't exist anymore.

I have seen Uncle Frank holding hands with someone exactly one time that I can remember.

# Angelica

The summer I turned ten, my cousin Angelica fell from the sleeping loft at our family's lake cabin. Uncle Frank says her head missed the woodstove by four inches.

She hit the floor with a bad sound, a *whump*. Then we didn't hear anything. No crying. No yelling. Nothing.

Until, finally, there was the sound of Angelica trying to breathe.

Dad got to her first. Aunt Ess, Angelica's mom, called from her room. "What was that? Dan? What *was* that?"

He answered, "It's Angelica—she fell, but she's okay. She got the wind knocked out of her, but I think she's okay."

From the loft, I saw Angelica sit up, slowly. Dad was rubbing her back in circles. Uncle Frank and Aunt Ess came crashing in from their bedroom, and then Angelica started crying these short, jagged cries.

The next morning, Uncle Frank said that if her head had

hit the woodstove, Angelica could have died. By that time, she looked normal. She was wearing her turquoise two-piece bathing suit and chewing her eggs with her lips sealed tight. No bruises, even—she landed on her back, Dad said, which is what knocked her wind out.

That summer, my parents had been divorced for two years already, but I still thought about when Mom used to come to the lake cabin with us. I could picture her red bathing suit on the clothesline. I remembered which end of the table she sat at for dinner. I remembered her, sitting on the dock with Aunt Ess, talking.

Mom and Dad told me about the divorce at a “family meeting.” I had just turned eight. We’d never had a family meeting before. I sat on the couch, between them. They didn’t look happy, and I suddenly got worried that something was wrong with our cat, Red. That they were going to tell me he was dying. A boy in my class that year had a cat who died. But that wasn’t it.

Dad put his arm around me and said that some big things were going to change. Mom squeezed my hand. Then Dad said they were getting divorced. Soon he was going to move out of our apartment, into a different one.

I said, “But I’m staying here, right?” I looked at Mom.

Dad said I was going to have *two* homes, and *two* rooms, instead of one. I was going to live in both places.

I could think of only one person in my class whose parents were divorced: Carolyn Shattuck. Carolyn had a navy-blue

sweatshirt with one big pocket in front. Until the family meeting, I had wanted one just like it.

I said, "What about Red?"

Mom said Red would be staying with her. "With *us*—you and me."

*You and me.* That made me feel awful. Because back then I couldn't think of Mom and me without Dad.

Dad said, "Things are changing, Bea. But there's still a lot you can count on. Okay? Things that won't *ever* change."

This was when they gave me the green spiral notebook and the green pen. (My favorite color is green.) In the notebook, they had made a list. The list was called Things That Will Not Change.

I started reading:

1. Mom loves you more than anything, always.
2. Dad loves you more than anything, always.

I skipped to the end, uncapped the green pen, and wrote:

7. Red will stay with me and Mom.

I said, "I want my rainbow to stay here, too. Over my bed." Dad painted that rainbow, right on the wall, when I was really little.

Mom said, "Yes, of course, sweetie. Your rainbow will stay right where it is."

I wrote that down, too. Number 8.

\* \* \*

Dad moved into a different apartment a month later.

I go back and forth between them.

Here's how it works:

MONDAY is a DAD day.

TUESDAY is a MOM day.

WEDNESDAY is a DAD day.

THURSDAY is a MOM day.

FRIDAY is part of THE WEEKEND.

THE WEEKEND is FRIDAY and SATURDAY.

THE WEEKEND alternates.

SUNDAY is SUNDAY.

SUNDAY is its OWN DAY.

SUNDAY alternates.

Before Dad moved out, I thought of the weekend as Saturday and Sunday. Now I think of the weekend as Friday and Saturday. And I think of Sunday as SUNDAY.

Right after the family meeting, I found Red asleep in the laundry basket and carried him to my room, where I opened my new notebook. I looked at the list of Things That Will Not Change.

My parents had written:

1. Mom loves you more than anything, always.
2. Dad loves you more than anything, always.

3. Mom and Dad love each other, but in a different way.
4. You will always have a home with each of us.
5. Your homes will never be far apart.
6. We are still a family, but in a different way.

After that, I carried the green spiral notebook everywhere. I asked a lot of questions. I used the green pen.

Our first summer at the lake cabin without Mom, there were Mom-shaped reminders everywhere, like her blue Sorry! pieces and the chipped yellow bowl she always used for tomato salad. The Mom-reminders were all over the place, but I was the only one who saw them.

That summer, Dad explained to everyone at the cabin—Uncle Frank and Aunt Ess, and my cousins, James, Angelica, and Jojo—that he is gay. I already knew. My parents had told me at the one and only family meeting, when they gave me the notebook.

“Will you be gay forever now?” I asked Dad at the meeting.

Yes, he told me. He would always be attracted to some men the same way that some men were attracted to some women. It’s the way he’s felt since he was little. I uncapped my green pen and wrote it down right away on the list of Things That Will Not Change. It’s number nine: *Dad is gay.*

After Dad explained about being gay to everyone at the lake cabin, he asked if anyone had questions. No one did. Then Dad and Uncle Frank walked down to the dock and sat with their

feet in the water. I watched from the porch, where I was sitting on the edge of Uncle Frank's favorite chair. After a while, they stood up and jumped in the lake. They were splashing each other like little kids, laughing. I remember being surprised, because Uncle Frank never swims. He always says the water in that lake is too cold. Most of the time, he just sits on the porch, in his chair, in the sun.

"So, you live with your mom now?" my cousin James asked me that night in the sleeping loft. James is four years older than I am. I was eight that first summer without Mom, so he was twelve.

I explained to him about the days of the week. When I was done, we got into our beds, and Angelica tickled my arm for a while. (Usually, I tickled her arm, and then she would say she was too tired to do mine.)

Right around then, James started calling me "Ping-Pong."

He had really weird nicknames for his little sisters—he called Angelica "BD," which was for "bottom drawer," because she'd once stepped into an open dresser drawer to reach something on a shelf and fallen over, cutting her lip. And James called Jojo "Speaker," short for "speakerphone," because when she was a baby she used to cry if she heard Uncle Frank's voice but couldn't see him anywhere. The names were kind of mean, but I had secretly wanted a James nickname for a long time.

I couldn't remember doing anything Ping-Pong-related that James might be making fun of me for, but I didn't care. I actually *liked* the name Ping-Pong, until Aunt Ess heard him

down at our dock and told him to march himself up to the porch so they could “have a chat.”

“Aunt Ess, I don’t mind it!” I called after them. But she ignored me.

“You mean you *like* being a Ping-Pong ball?” Angelica said. Angelica is a year and a half older than me. We were trying to teach Jojo, even though she was only five, to play volleyball on the little beach where we kept the boats pulled up next to our dock. Now Angelica was tapping the dirty volleyball with the tips of her fingers. She had it trapped between a hip and an elbow.

“What?” I felt my eyes narrowing. I hated it when I didn’t understand something right away.

“You go back and forth, right? From your mom’s to your dad’s? Like a Ping-Pong ball.” She smiled.

I was on top of her in three steps. First, I yanked her ponytail, and then I smacked that ball off her hip, down to the dirt.

“*Bea!*” Aunt Ess shouted down from the porch. I guess she’d been yelling at James and watching over us at the same time.

Angelica just stood there smiling.

I stomped to the water and floated on my back with my ears under the water so that I couldn’t hear. Angelica was stuck waiting for me to get out because we were swim buddies. James didn’t call me Ping-Pong again. Or anything else.

When my parents were together, two weeks at the lake with my cousins was never enough for me. After the divorce, it felt about a week too long.

It felt too long the summer I was eight, when my cousin Jojo was finally old enough to stay up and play Sorry! with us after dinner. Green is Jojo's favorite color, too, so I let her have my pieces, and I took Mom's blue ones.

It felt too long the summer I was nine. That was the summer the chipped yellow bowl broke. I don't know how it happened; I just saw the pieces in the garbage.

It felt especially too long the summer I was ten. The summer Angelica fell. When those two weeks were finally over, I was in the back seat of our car even before Rocco, our dog, could hurl himself in there. And Rocco loves the car.

## News

I like to dance. Not “dance” dance, with mirrors and leotards, but secret dancing in my room with my earbuds in. I don’t know how it looks, but I know how it feels. It feels like I know exactly what to do. I know when to turn or sidestep, when to take it easy and when to go a little crazy. It doesn’t matter whether I’m at my mom’s or at my dad’s. I keep my eyes closed, and I’m wherever I’m supposed to be.

But when I’m dancing, I’d rather be at my dad’s, because my mom doesn’t believe in bedroom-door locks. And she has a way of flinging my door open as if she’s trying to catch me at something.

“Bea, you have a fever. You should be *resting*.” This was at the beginning of fifth grade, when I was ten. Right after Jesse moved in with Dad and me.

“Mom!” I was breathing hard from dancing.

“What?”

“Privacy?”

She made a face. That’s what Mom thinks of privacy.

“Dad just called,” Mom said. “Sheila’s on her way.”

This is all part of the story about the sound of corn growing. Believe it or not.

I’d stayed home sick, so my babysitter, Sheila, was picking me up from Mom’s apartment, instead of at school. Sheila picked me up on my “Dad days”—Mondays and Wednesdays and every other Friday. She also used to clean Dad’s apartment. And she walked our dog, Rocco.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays and every other Friday, Mom picked me up at school. Mom cleans our apartment herself because she doesn’t believe in paying someone else to pick up your mess. Or your dog’s.

Dad doesn’t believe in ten-year-olds going to PG-13 movies, and Mom doesn’t believe in cereal with more than three grams of sugar per serving. Dad doesn’t believe in curse words, and Mom doesn’t believe in going to school with a temperature above 98.6.

Dad thinks anything below 100 is fine.

Mom doesn’t believe in wasting money, but Dad says it’s fine to splurge once in a while. When he bought me a puffy purple swivel chair for my room at his apartment, Mom muttered about it, and I went online and found out it cost almost 200 dollars, and after that I felt weird.

Dad believes in allowance for chores. Mom believes in free

allowance and doing chores for nothing. But Dad's allowance is a dollar higher. Confused? Welcome to my life.

Sometimes when I'm dancing at Dad's with the door locked tight, I slam myself into that puffy purple swivel chair and just *spin*. Everything is a blur, and my feet kick off the floor, shooting me around, and around, and around.

At Mom's, I do my spinning on my feet, with my arms stretched out.

The doorbell rang, and I heard Mom let Sheila in. My temperature was only 99.3. Even after a lot of dancing, I couldn't get it up to Dad-sick, so I knew I was going to school the next day. Thursday. Spelling-test day. I looked on my desk for my word sheet.

I picked up my backpack and started throwing stuff in: word sheet, math workbook, planner, colonial-breakfast folder (with butter recipe), and the only barrette I had that actually stayed in my hair. Most of them fall straight down.

Sheila knocked on my bedroom door, and I yelled "Come!" which is what Captain Picard always says on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Sheila and I used to watch that show together at Dad's. (Eventually, we streamed all seven seasons. That's a lot of *Star Trek*.)

Anyone would like Sheila—she has pink glasses and big hair, and she wears a lot of bracelets. And cowboy boots, even in summertime.

"You're sick?" Sheila said.

*"Mom-sick."*

She nodded. Sheila got it, even though her parents were never divorced. They stayed married until they died.

"Got your medicine?" Sheila said.

"Yep." I patted my bag.

"Shall I set a course for Ninety-Ninth Street, Captain?"

I tugged down the front of my shirt with both hands.  
"Make it so!"

Sheila was the one who noticed that Captain Picard was always tugging on his uniform, pulling it down in front like he was trying to cover his stomach. She heard the actor being interviewed on TV, and he said it was because they made the costumes a little too short.

I hugged Mom goodbye.

"I'll see you after school tomorrow," she said, squeezing me. My face was mashed against her, so one ear heard the regular way, and the other one heard through her body. When we let go, I saw her see the rash on my neck, which itched.

"Got your medicine?"

"Yes!" I hated being asked things twice. Even by two different people.

"Don't shout at me, Bea."

"I'm not."

And Sheila said, "Let's go, Captain."

The medicine is for my skin. I have eczema, which you probably haven't heard of. Eczema is where your skin itches in a lot

of different places, and when you scratch, you get these sore, rashy patches that people look at and wonder if they're catching. Sometimes people *ask* if they're catching, which is better than whispering about it.

Eczema is not something that you get for a week and then it goes away, like a cold. It's something you have until maybe you grow out of it, like my cousin Angelica's stutter. Also, eczema hurts.

At Dad's, Sheila and I walked Rocco and made grilled cheese sandwiches for dinner. We were about to start an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* when Dad came home.

"You're early!" I told him. Because he doesn't usually get back from the restaurant until later.

Dad came right over to the couch and put his palm flat on my forehead like he was checking for a fever. I waited. Sheila waited. We both knew what he was going to do.

When he took his hand away, he pressed it against his own forehead and looked shocked. "Oh *no*," he said. "I think I have a fever!"

"Dad!"

He kicked off his shoes. "Kidding. But you don't seem hot. Tomorrow's Thursday. Did you guys do spelling?"

Sheila nodded. "I quizzed her."

She did quiz me. I didn't get all the words right, even the third time, but she quizzed me.

"Great." Sometimes Sheila hung out with me and Dad until Jesse got home. But that night she blew me a kiss and left.

In fifth grade, I had a spelling test every Thursday. My teacher, Mr. Home, was a good teacher. Mom said his head was on right. Mom remembers all the teachers she's ever had, starting in first grade. She especially remembers the one who told her she didn't have "a mind for math." Mom became a math teacher. Now she teaches *other* teachers how to teach math.

But even Mr. Home made mistakes. For one thing, he always called my best friend Angus "College Boy," which Angus hated. For another thing, Mr. Home had lunch parties for spelling experts. If you were not a spelling expert, you were not invited.

On the last Friday of every month, Mr. Home invited every kid who got a ten-out-of-ten on all of that month's spelling tests to eat lunch in our classroom instead of the lunchroom. They played the radio, Angus told me, but I wouldn't know about that because I have never gotten a ten-out-of-ten on even *one* spelling test. I told Mom I didn't have "a mind for spelling," but she looked mad and said that I should never say what my mind is not for.

At the beginning of that year, Mom bought these cards that we looked at together, with the rules of spelling on them, like *When two vowels go walking, the first one does the talking*. That means when two vowels are right next to each other, you usually say them like the *first* vowel.

But after I spelled *relief* r-e-l-e-i-f and got another seven-out-of-ten, I told Mom to forget me ever looking at those cards again.

I thought Mr. Home should let *everyone* listen to the radio and eat lunch in the classroom on the last Friday of every month. I had written him a long letter about it, in the lunchroom, while everyone was having their first spelling party in September. But it had some bad words, and I didn't give it to him.

After Sheila left, Dad and I watched *Star Trek*.

Then Angus called.

"Are you better now?" Angus hated it when I wasn't in school. We'd been in the same class every year since kindergarten, and he had never missed a day.

"I'm probably better," I said.

"Good." He still sounded annoyed. I smiled.

"We just watched a really good *Star Trek*," I told him. "Captain Picard gets hit by this light beam from a mysterious probe, and it magically transports him to a little planet. He gets totally stuck there. No one from his ship ever comes to get him, and there's no way to get off the planet. After a while, he just has to deal with it. Luckily, it's a really good planet to be on. Everyone is nice. He has this great life there. He's married, and he has kids, and then he gets old and everything. And he learns to play the flute."

"The *flute*?"

"Yeah. But in the end, Captain Picard finds out that he was never on that planet at *all*. The whole thing was happening in his mind. The light beam had some kind of *brain virus* inside it. The people on the planet made the probe and sent it into space because their world was about to explode, and they wanted

someone in the universe to know who they were. The planet was already gone. But in his head, Captain Picard lived there for half his *life*. He had grandchildren!”

“So he was on his ship the whole time?” Angus said. “Let me guess—for Captain Picard, in his head, decades went by, but in real life it was only like ten minutes.”

Angus really *is* smart enough to go to college.

“Yes!” I said. “He wakes up on the ship and he’s in complete shock. When they investigate the probe that hit him with the light beam, all they find is a little box, and inside is a flute. The very end of the episode is Captain Picard, alone, playing the flute while he looks out into space. Missing everyone he thought he knew.”

“Wow,” Angus said. “That kind of makes me want to cry.”

“Yeah.” I *did* cry. So you can see why Angus is my best friend.

“See you tomorrow.” Angus waited, and then said, “*Right?*”

“Right.” I was still thinking about how Captain Picard’s brain had grandchildren and learned to play that flute in ten minutes.

It turned out I was lying about seeing Angus at school the next day, but I didn’t know it at the time.

After I hung up, Dad sang “Happy Birthday” twice while I brushed my teeth. It wasn’t my birthday, but he likes to do that because once, a long time ago, the dentist told me that I should always brush for two rounds of “Happy Birthday,” and I told

the dentist that it's impossible to sing and brush your teeth at the same time. Dad laughed really hard.

When I was in bed, Dad sat in my purple chair and rolled himself over to me.

"Bea," he said. "I have something to tell you. I hope it'll feel like good news."

"Okay," I said.

"Jesse and I are going to get married."

"Married?"

"Yes." He smiled. "What do you think? I wanted to tell you before he gets home, so you can say whatever you feel like saying."

I had known Dad's boyfriend Jesse for two years already, and he had been living with us for a couple of months. I loved Jesse. But I'd never thought about my dad being *married* to Jesse. Or anyone, except my mom.

After a minute, I said, "It's good, I think. I never want Jesse to leave."

Dad held my hand. "I don't, either, Bea."

After Dad said good night, I went to my backpack and got out my green spiral notebook. The edges of the pages were all curled and dirty. I still carried it everywhere, but I hadn't looked at my list in a long time.

#### THINGS THAT WILL NOT CHANGE:

1. Mom loves you more than anything, always.
2. Dad loves you more than anything, always.

3. Mom and Dad love each other, but in a different way.
4. You will always have a home with each of us.
5. Your homes will never be far apart.
6. We are still a family, but in a different way.

At the bottom of the list, I added:

23. Jesse is staying.

I got back into bed, not sleepy. After a minute, I jumped up again, leaned into the hallway, and yelled, "Dad! Are we having a *wedding*?"

And Dad yelled back, "You bet we are!"

# Jesse

In the beginning, it was hard for me to sleep at Dad's new apartment. I had only lived in one place before. Now it was: Different room. Different bed. Different sounds. No Mom.

Dad bought plants for every window and painted a new rainbow on the wall above my new bed. He bought my little orange couch (for sleepovers), and my puffy purple chair, and my red rug. He bought me new sheets, a new comforter, and two new pillows. He read to me every night.

But at Dad's, I woke up a lot. Sometimes it was my eczema itching. Eczema feels worse at night. But sometimes it wasn't the eczema, and I didn't know what it was. I'd get up and stand in the hall outside Dad's bedroom, holding my pillows and listening to him snore. I liked his snoring. After a while, I'd go in, find the rolled-up sleeping bag under Dad's bed, and spread it out on the floor. I liked the shadows on the ceiling of Dad's room. As soon as I saw those shadows, I felt all right.

That happened a lot of nights. He always left that sleeping bag under his bed so I'd know where to find it. Those first months at Dad's, it was like I had to build a hundred bridges, from me to every new piece of furniture, every new lamp, every new fork, even the bathroom faucets and the lock on the door, until, slowly, all of Dad's new things stopped feeling wrong.

Jesse moved in with us two years later, at the beginning of fifth grade, right before Dad told me about them getting married. The things Jesse brought never felt wrong. They felt like presents.

Jesse brought three old movie posters, a radio, his big blue coffee mug, and an old-fashioned telephone—the kind you dial by sticking your finger in a hole and dragging it. And he also brought his big sister, Sheila, who had already been my babysitter for two years. Sheila didn't actually live with us, but once Jesse moved in, she came over a lot. (She still does.) Jesse likes to say that Sheila is a true Southern lady, and every time he does, she winks at me. They grew up in Arkansas, so I guess that means they're both Southern.

Jesse wakes up early. He usually has the radio on when I walk into the kitchen. By the time Dad wakes up, Jesse and I are already eating our double-toast. That's what Jesse calls toast that's buttered on both sides.

Jesse knows it's critical to bring a dessert with your school lunch, even if it's just one little cookie wrapped in a napkin. And he agrees with Mom about not having other people clean up your mess. After he moved in, Sheila stopped cleaning Dad's apartment, and Jesse made us a job wheel for chores, just like

the one my all-time favorite teacher, Ms. Adams, had on the wall in second grade. Jesse made one job be “lick floor under table,” and that job is always Rocco’s.

He loves walking Rocco. Rocco made at least four new dog-park friends the first month Jesse lived with us. I can’t even imagine a person (or a dog) who wouldn’t want Jesse around.

I’m too old for a babysitter now, but Sheila is still at our place all the time. She says she comes over just to sit on our couch and look at Jesse’s happiness. He was a happy kid, she says. But he was a worrier.

I’m a worrier, too. So that makes me love Jesse even more.