

# COUNTING THYME

Melanie Conklin



G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS

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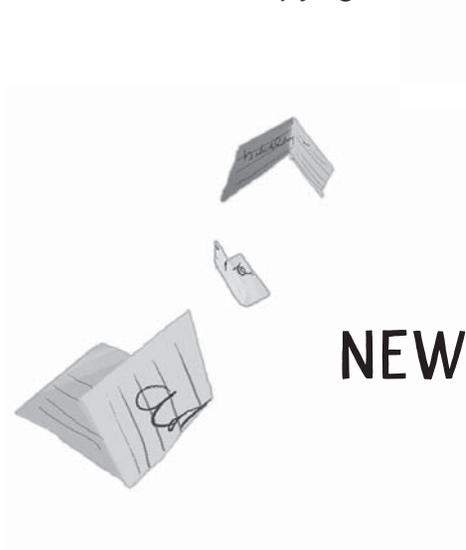
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*For my mother, the truth-teller*





# 1

## NEW YORK CITY

WHEN SOMEONE TELLS YOU YOUR LITTLE BROTHER MIGHT DIE, you're quick to agree to anything. You give up after-school activities because no one can take you to practice. You start eating kale chips instead of regular sour cream 'n' onion because your mom says kale is rich in antioxidants, which means healthy. You even agree to move across the country, if that's what it takes.

That's how I ended up in New York City.

We came for my brother, Val, and the drug trial that might save his life. I didn't know if the treatment would work or when we would go home again. All I knew was that Val needed to be in New York and we had to go with him. So I came.

It was November. Thanksgiving Day, nine months since we'd found out that Val was sick. Dad met us at the airport. He'd flown ahead to meet the movers while we spent our last week in San Diego with Grandma Kay. When I spotted him at the baggage claim, he looked older—his beard grayer, his face thinner than just a week before. But he was still tall as a tree and he smiled like he was glad to see me.

Which was nice, considering Mom had hardly looked at me all day. She'd been too busy taking care of Val, making sure he washed his hands to avoid germs and ate granola to keep his energy up. When our bags arrived, she didn't notice that I took Val's suitcase, too, or that I almost got lost in the crowd on the way to the taxi stand. I guess I should've been used to it by then, but something about being in a strange airport in a strange city made me wish the old Mom would come back just long enough to give me a squeeze, like she used to before Val got sick.

Instead, when our turn came, she just said, "Hurry up, Thyme," like I was the one slowing us down, when in fact I was being way more helpful than my big sister Cori, who was so busy reading her city guide that she almost got left on the sidewalk.

Sitting in the back of the taxi, I tried to remember the order of the flowers Grandma Kay and I had planted before we left. Sugar-bush, hummingbird sage, and thyme, of course, tucked right up against the fence where Mom would see them from the kitchen. It was supposed to be a surprise for the spring. Something to look forward to. Only now, the thought of leaving all of those plants behind just made my stomach twist, so I put them out of my mind.

Val was curled up against my side. He had to be tired of sitting, but he'd barely complained all day. He was actually pretty tough for a five-year-old.

I tapped his shoulder and he looked at me, his little blue eyes curious. "Back rub?"

He nodded eagerly, laying his skinny body across my legs so I could run my fingers over the back of his Batman costume. His hair was finally starting to grow back again. Brown and fuzzy, like baby's hair. And over each ear, a plastic loop connected to a pale blue battery pack—the hearing aids he'd started wearing a few weeks earlier. He still wasn't used to them. Mom was always checking his volume to make sure he didn't crank them up too high or turn them off completely.

Next to us, Mom had her checklists out again. She frowned and marked something off, her eyes never leaving the page even when Cori shouted, "Look! It's the Empire State Building!"

Dad was up front with the taxi driver. They were talking about construction on East River Drive, wherever that was. It was hard to believe we were actually in New York. It had only been a few weeks since Val got into the drug trial and Mom and Dad told us we were moving. The plane had crossed the country with no problem, but my mind was having trouble catching up.

"Tell me about the trains again," I said, and Val's eyes brightened.

"There are twenty-four subway lines," he recited from memory. "Each line has a different letter or number, and there are ten different colors."

"Which one is your favorite?"

He thought for a moment. "The A train."

"Why?"

"Because it's the longest ride."

I made a face, and Val giggled. He knew I wasn't super excited about riding the subway.

"I want to ride them all," he said, the way other kids said they wanted to fly.

I rubbed his back some more, and he relaxed against me. After a minute, he said, "The hospital's on the green line. It's two stops from 86th Street. I counted."

"I guess that doesn't sound too bad, then."

He shut his eyes, and I looked out the window. Streetlights glinted off cars and buildings. Signs flashed and people hurried by in heavy coats. The city was alive.

As the taxi bumped down the street, I tried not to think about what I was missing at home. Grandma Kay had made us an early turkey dinner, but it still didn't seem right to leave her alone on Thanksgiving Day. My best friend, Shani, had a soccer game on Saturday. Plus, we were right in the middle of our big social studies project. Shani said she was fine finishing it on her own, but I wasn't fine. Not at all. I felt like I'd left my own skin behind.

According to Mom, they didn't know how long we had to stay in New York. Which meant either she really didn't know, or she wasn't telling me the truth.

Val's new treatment would last a week out of every month—but for how many months? What about Christmas? Would we get to see Grandma Kay? Would Shani and I celebrate our birthdays together, like we always did? Or would I still be gone?

That's when Mom said she didn't have all the answers and

could I please stop giving her the third degree. I'd wanted to know why she wouldn't talk to me, but I was pretty sure that if I asked one more question, she'd explode.

"I think the doctor said three months," Dad had said, before Mom gave him a look. "But it's a drug trial, so we don't know for sure," he added quickly.

Three months meant December, January, and February in New York.

"So we'll be back by March?" Shani's birthday was March sixth. Mine was March twelfth.

Dad had rubbed at his beard, thinking. "Well . . . the thing is—"

"You don't need to worry about that," Mom said. "What matters is that your brother has this opportunity. Just because he's stable now doesn't mean we're done. The cancer could come back."

We all got quiet then. That word is so loud, it's hard to talk over it.

After a minute, Dad took my hand. His fingers were long and thin, but strong, like the rest of him.

"Our family is like a printing press," he said. "You remember how complicated they are?"

I nodded. Dad was in advertising. He worked at a company that made special handmade posters on big machines that gave the colors just the right look.

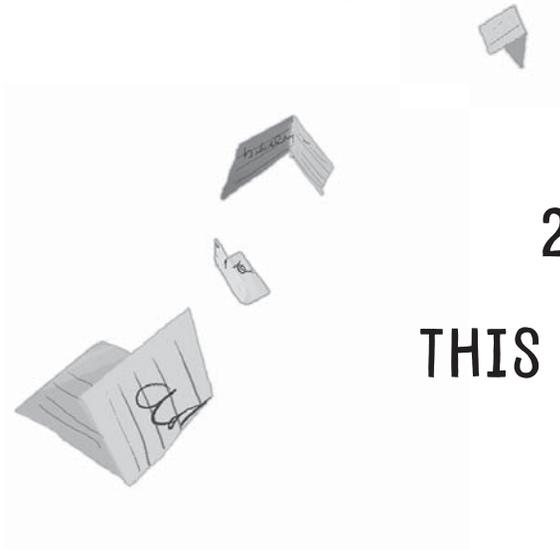
"There are lots of parts that make a press work," he said. "Rollers, wheels, clamps. If one of the wheels is broken, the whole operation stops. You've got to fix the broken part

before you get the print you want.” He looked at me like he’d made all the sense in the world, instead of talking about the machines at his office like they were people.

But the truth was, I knew what he meant.

Val was the broken wheel.

He was the one who counted.



## 2

# THIS IS IT

DAD SAID OUR APARTMENT BUILDING WAS PREWAR AND IN A good part of town, but I was skeptical. After eight months of Val being sick and getting better, then worse, then better, then worse again, I knew how to be skeptical.

In this case, I wondered exactly what *prewar* meant. Was the building so old that everything was peeling and crumbling and falling apart? Or was it super old-fashioned, with a pull string overhead for the toilet? Mrs. Bellweather had shown us pictures of bathrooms like that in social studies, to illustrate how far civilization had come so we would be grateful for our high-efficiency toilets with their push buttons and clean porcelain bowls.

We turned onto 87th Street, where the buildings were sandwiched together like books on a shelf. The trees were bare, the sidewalks slushy and gray. There wasn't a scrap of green in sight.

Our taxi stopped in front of a four-story brick building with a windowless black door and a row of trash cans out front, behind a wrought-iron fence. Up above, a rusty

metal fire escape clung to the red-and-brown bricks, leading nowhere.

*This can't be it*, I thought just as Dad clapped his hands and announced, "This is it!"

Dad was our Official Family Cheerleader. He was the opposite of skeptical. He even had a sign over his desk that said "Open for Possibilities." Before he left San Diego, he'd been selling me hard on New York with slogans on sticky notes in my lunch:

*Take a Bite Out of the Big Apple!*

*The City So Nice They Named It Twice!*

Standing on the sidewalk, I was still skeptical. The air was so cold we could see our breath, and the light was fading fast. Thanks to the time zone difference, it was already six o'clock. Which meant it was three o'clock back at home, the exact time we would have started Thanksgiving dinner at Grandma's. It had always been my job to snap the green beans.

Mom watched the cabbie unload our bags, counting to make sure nothing got left behind. She made him check the trunk twice just to be sure, even though the rest of us were chattering with cold. Grandma Kay had warned me that New York would be chilly, but she didn't say it would be *freezing*.

"Let's get you inside," Dad said, swooping Val into his arms. He rubbed his beard against Val's cheeks, making him laugh. I wished he would hug me, too, but I was eleven and I was supposed to be tougher than that, so I grabbed my suitcase and followed them through the front door.

Cori and Val and I waited in the foyer while Dad went

back out to help Mom with the rest of the luggage. Next to me, Val eyed the shadowy staircase. “It looks spooky,” he said.

“That’s no big deal for Batman, right?” Cori flapped Val’s cape, and he smiled a little.

When Mom and Dad came back, we grabbed our bags and Mom and Cori took the lead. Dad asked Val if he needed a lift, but Val shook his head. “I’m not tired. I can do it myself.” He stood up straighter, like a soldier reporting for duty. He did the same thing every time we pulled up to the hospital.

“Let’s count the steps together,” I said, and he smiled and slipped his hand into mine.

We followed Mom and Cori while Dad brought up the rear, dragging the rest of the bags like a cart horse trailing a royal procession.

“One, two, three,” Val counted as I bumped my roller case up the steps.

Step, *thump*. Step, *thump*.

The sound was like a heartbeat, with Val counting out the time as we climbed. There were two apartments on each floor. Ours was all the way at the top. Apartment 4B. “The penthouse,” Dad joked. I nodded, but it wouldn’t have mattered if we were in a fancy New York building like the ones I’d seen in the movies. The only house I wanted to sleep in was three thousand miles away.

“Four B,” Val said. “That’s like the green train and the orange train put together. That would make it . . .” His brow furrowed.

“The *brown train*,” Dad said, and Val cracked up. I didn’t know how they could be making jokes about the subway. We were about to see the place we had to live in for the very first time, the place we were supposed to call home. An impossible idea.

On the third-floor landing, I heard a creak and looked around. A pair of hard gray eyes stared back at me from the door to apartment 3B.

I jerked Val to a stop, and Dad ran into us from behind. “What is it?” he said.

“There’s a man.” I pointed at the crack in the door, at the guy watching us. What kind of a person spied on other people like that? He had to be a weirdo of the highest order.

Dad looked, and the door clicked shut.

“Was that the boogiemán?” Val asked.

“No, buddy. That’s just Mr. Lipinsky. He’s a little particular, but he’s completely harmless. Promise.”

“What’s wrong with him?” I asked.

“He looks sad,” Val said.

Dad smiled. “Let’s just say he’s set in his ways. He leaves the occasional note. Sometimes he thumps on his ceiling. But it’s fine, really. He just might take some time to get used to us.”

I wasn’t convinced. “But what about—”

“Thyme,” Dad said. “It’s going to be all right. Let’s just focus on getting settled in, okay? How about I show you your new room when we get inside?”

The last thing I wanted was to settle in, but I said okay.

Dad liked to believe that things would get better. He'd said the same thing about our middle school bus driver back home. Charles was as old as the bus, and extra cranky in the mornings. If you didn't sit down within 2.5 seconds, he'd shout, "I haven't got all day here!" I know because Shani and I timed him with her new watch, which had a very reliable second hand. The funny thing was, it's not like there was anywhere else Charles had to be. He was the *bus driver*. Dad thought things would get better with him, too, but Charles never got any nicer.

Mr. Lipinsky wasn't happy about us moving in? Fine. That made two of us.

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The apartment was even smaller than I'd expected. There was no living room or dining room, just a single narrow space with windows at one end that overlooked the street. Our old brown couch and Val's Lego table were in front of the windows, opposite the TV. The rest of the room was full of moving boxes, with our dining table buried in the middle of the pile. Past that, a big square cutout looked into the kitchen and a dimly lit hall led back to the bedrooms. I squeezed the handle of my roller case, wondering how many people had lived in this place before us.

Cori went straight to the windows to look for more landmarks from her tourist guide. Mom set her bags down and got out her list and her phone. Dad started helping Val take his boots off, a process that involved goofy voices and could take well over ten minutes.

“Help! I’m under attack,” Dad exclaimed as Val giggled.

“We don’t have time for this,” Mom said, looking at her list. “We need to order dinner.”

“There’s always time for . . . Captain Stinky Toes!” Dad said, dancing Val’s feet through the air. Dad was already caught up playing with Val. Clearly, he’d forgotten about showing me my room. Mom said his brain liked to go on vacation, but I think he just liked to take a break from all the lists sometimes.

I rolled my suitcase down the hall, trying not to think about how much I loved my room at home. How the walls were the perfect shade of blue, with pictures of sea horses and waves and me and Shani . . . Anyway, those pictures weren’t there anymore. They were in storage with the rest of our stuff. Dad had said they needed to rent our house while we were gone, to help pay for things, but Mom had cut him off before he could explain what things. She didn’t want me to worry about it. But worries have a way of finding you, no matter how much you try to avoid them.

I passed a tiny kitchen, which looked like something you would have on a boat rather than a house. Next came a bathroom with black and white tiles on the floor. Then a room that wasn’t much bigger than a closet, with Val’s Lightning McQueen bed taking up most of the space. That left two more doors. The one at the end of the hall was open, and I could see the corner of Mom and Dad’s rainbow-colored rag rug on the floor. Which left one door for me and Cori. A knot of worry tugged at my chest.

I pushed the last door open. There were two twin beds inside.

Cori walked up behind me, took one look at the room, and said, “Oh, no. This is *so* not happening.” She shouted for Mom and stood there glaring at me, as though I’d had something to do with the way the rooms were set up. Ever since Cori started high school, she’d done her best to avoid me at all times, like being in middle school was contagious or something. This new Cori didn’t talk to me. She hung out after school at one of her million clubs and wore eyeliner that made her look like an owl—though, thanks to Dad’s genes, a very tall, long-limbed owl.

“I didn’t know, I swear,” I said, but she just rolled her owl eyes like she didn’t believe me. But she should have known better. Of course Mom hadn’t told me.

Mom walked up. “What’s the problem?”

“Duh.” Cori waved at the beds.

“If that’s supposed to be a question regarding sleeping arrangements, yes, you two are sharing a room. Thyme, you’re on the right. Make sure you only use the dresser. Cori’s on the left. She gets the closet, okay?”

I nodded. Cori’s mouth fell open. “You have *got* to be kidding me.”

“No, I’m not kidding,” Mom said. “In fact, you girls should be glad we managed to find a three-bedroom on such short notice. We’re very lucky.”

“Lucky? This is the unluckiest day of my life,” Cori said.

“Think before you say that,” Mom warned, and Cori

froze. Mom was small enough to walk right under Dad's arm without ducking, but when she and Cori argued, Mom always seemed like the tallest person in the room. That was one of her superpowers, along with list-making.

"Sorry," Cori said, though she didn't sound very sorry at all.

"You girls should get unpacked," Mom said. "Dinner will be here soon."

"Did you get a turkey for Thanksgiving?" I asked.

Mom sighed and ran her hand through her hair. She'd cut it short over the summer, but it looked good—dark and wavy, unlike my dead straight, boring brown flyaways. "We're ordering in from a pizzeria," she said. "They have whole grain pasta for Val."

Then she left, and Cori fixed her owl eyes on me. "Don't think that just because we have to share, you can put your little-kid junk all over the place." That was the other thing about the new Cori. Avoiding me wasn't enough; when she did talk to me, she had to be mean, too.

While Cori went to get her bags, I unzipped my suitcase and pulled out a calendar. It was a gift from Shani. She called it the Calendar of Us. Inside were pictures: us on her trampoline, us at the pool, us on the first day of middle school with our matching red shoes. We hadn't planned it, but that kind of thing happens when you've known someone your whole life.

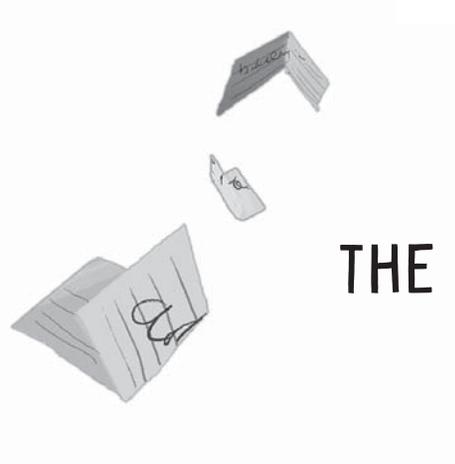
I pulled a roll of tape from my suitcase and stuck the Calendar of Us to the wall above my bed. On the page for March,

Shani had circled our birthdays in bright red marker, just six days apart. We'd always celebrated them together. Our moms had started the tradition because we lived right next door to each other and went to the same preschool. It made perfect sense.

That night, I lay in my bed, in a room that was dull tan instead of robin's egg blue, staring at the calendar while Cori snored and the radiator hissed like it was possessed. Three months of treatment for Val: December, January, February. I counted the days until March first. Ninety-nine days, including today. Just shy of one hundred. The number was big enough to scare me.

Before I left, Shani had told me she was worried I might not make it back in time for our birthdays. I think she was also worried about what might happen if I was gone too long, about whether we would still be best friends by the time I got back.

I was worried, too. I'd never felt so alone in my life. But I also had a plan, and I hoped that if I worked hard enough, I would be back in San Diego sooner rather than later.



### 3

## THE THYME JAR

THE NEXT MORNING, I SEARCHED FOR A BOX WITH THE WORD FRAGILE written on the sides in my own handwriting. But there were so many boxes, too many to find anything quickly.

“What if they lost it?” I asked Dad.

“They didn’t lose it,” he promised.

Soon, Dad found it, buried behind smaller boxes under the dining table. I dragged the box to my room and peeled off the tape, praying that the jar inside was in one piece. Thankfully, Cori was in the bathroom, claiming most of the medicine cabinet for herself. She thought the Thyme Jar was lame. Another stupid kid thing.

But the Thyme Jar wasn’t lame. It was my ticket back to San Diego.

At first, the Thyme Jar was just a paper cup that sat on the dresser next to my bed. I used one of Dad’s Sharpies to draw stars all over the outside and write my name around the middle. The cup sat there for months, and every time I finished a chore, or got a good grade, or helped Mom by

being extra super patient, she gave me a little slip of paper to put in the cup.

The slips were like free passes to do whatever I wanted for a certain amount of time. Sometimes the slips were worth an hour. Sometimes thirty minutes. It depended on what I did to earn the time, and how good of a mood Mom was in. This was bonus time. Time to do special things. *Me time*.

Me time started after my eleventh birthday, also known as the week we found out that Val was sick. The kind of sick that makes you miss your own birthday party, the one you've shared with your best friend every year of your life. Mom felt bad, so she gave me an IOU on a slip of paper and promised to make it up to me, even though I could have cared less about my birthday with Val so sick. That's when the Thyme Jar was born. Earning time didn't make up for everything I missed, but it was something.

Whenever I could, I cashed in my time and spent thirty minutes or an hour doing something special with Shani, or keeping the iPad all to myself . . . as long as Val didn't have a doctor's appointment, or we didn't have to pick Cori up from one of her clubs after school, or there wasn't something else that absolutely had to be done no matter what. Even though those things happened a lot, I always managed to spend my time. My cup never filled up. But that was before I found out we had to move to New York so Val could go to a special hospital.

Since then, the Thyme Jar has been a for-real jar, a thick

glass one like the kind stuffed with eggs or peppers in restaurants. Dad brought it home from work. He was making posters for a candy company, and they had taken pictures of these big jars full of candy in the ads, but the company didn't want them back. Which was fine by me. The jar was perfect. The glass had a hint of green to it, and a thick cork plug.

I'd wanted to carry the jar with me on the plane, but Dad had said it wasn't safe. "Trust me, T. They won't let you bring a big glass jar on the plane." At the time, he was sorting through his endless record collection, deciding which to pack and which to store.

"But what if I say it's really important? Like, that I need it for a medical reason?"

He'd paused with a battered Moody Blues album in his hand. "Is that something you'd say? Even if it's not the truth?"

"I guess not." Although, to be honest, I hadn't thought it was that bad of a lie. Not in those circumstances. Desperate times and all.

In the end, I'd wrapped the Thyme Jar in a ton of blankets, stuffed it in a box, sealed the box with ten loops of tape, and written *FRAGILE* in big black letters all over the sides.

But then the movers had dropped Mom's antique rocking chair on the driveway and scratched the wood. They claimed to have slipped on a toy. Of course Mom sent me and Cori to clean up after Val, who'd left one tiny toy truck in the yard. But I was watching through the window, and saw the whole thing. The movers weren't anywhere near the truck when they dropped Mom's chair. Which meant there was

no guarantee the Thyme Jar would make it safely across the country, either.

Just in case, I'd begged Dad to cut the big brown box open again so I could shake the paper slips out of the Thyme Jar and pack them in my suitcase instead. Then I'd crossed my fingers and my toes that the jar would make it to New York in one piece.

Now, when I finally opened the box in New York, I held my breath and looked inside.

*The glass was fine!*

I pulled the cork free and dropped the paper time slips inside, counting the time as I went. When I pressed the cork back into place, I felt better. Like my feet were finally on the ground, even if the apartment's creaky wooden floors were a sad substitute for our cool, even tiles back home.

All weekend, I added more time to the jar—for unpacking boxes, for lugging laundry to the Super Sudz Laundromat, for loading the tiny, apartment-sized dishwasher after meals. In that first weekend in New York, I saved up six hours of me time, which brought my total to twenty-seven hours.

And I didn't spend a minute of it.

Not one.

I hadn't cashed in for a single reward since Mom and Dad had told us we were moving (and that I had to say good-bye to Shani, and start sixth grade over in the middle of the year at a brand-new school, and leave Grandma Kay to tend our garden by herself, and share a bedroom with my sister who hated me, and risk going back to having no best friend at all)

because I had a plan. Mom and Dad always told me to spend my time on what I wanted most, and I hoped that if I saved up enough, there was a chance I could convince them to let me go home early. I could stay with Grandma Kay, or maybe even Shani, just until Val was done with the trial. I knew it was a long shot and they would probably say no. But I had to try.

That meant I wasn't spending any more of my time. Not until I'd saved up a week, minimum (although a month would have been better). The hours had to count, not just to me, but to them. If I cashed in enough slips, they would have to give me the thing I wanted most—and even though I wanted my brother to get better, the only thing I wanted to spend my time on anymore was going back home.