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MIDDLE GRADE
SAMPLER



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RUNNING PRESS KIDS

Middle Grade | **SAMPLER**

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THE BATTLE OF JUNK MOUNTAIN *by Lauren Abbey Greenberg* (April 2018)

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CALEB and KIT

He's her only friend.
She's his biggest secret.

Beth Vrabel

Author of the Pack of Dorks series



CHAPTER ONE

Kit said we were destined to meet, but I really was just going for a walk.

I had to get out of the house and away from my brother, who was sawing on his violin so hard that the noise seemed to vibrate up through my chest and out of my ears. Maybe he was just practicing, but then again, maybe my perfect brother was showcasing yet another way he was better than me. Back went the bow. *Look at what I'm doing while you just sit there!* Forward. *When I was twelve, I'd already performed concertos.* Back. *I'm captain of the cross-country team, but you can't even run a mile.* Forward, entering the cadenza. *Pathetic!* Back. *Loser!* Forward. *Lazy!*

Not that Patrick would actually say any of those things. He was too polite, too considerate, too *perfect* for that.

I had to leave. I grabbed my backpack and shouted over my shoulder, “Going for a walk!”

I thought Patrick wouldn’t be able to hear me, but I suppose I had to add super-hearing to my big brother’s long, long, *long* list of skills.

“Some exercise is a good idea, Caleb!” he hollered, now easing back into the concerto’s slow ending. “Don’t overdo it. Bring your—”

The door slammed behind me before he could finish. Patrick always acted like he was my parent just because he’s five years older than me. The music stopped before I got to the end of the driveway, and the door flew open again with a bang.

Patrick stood there with his violin in hand. “Wait! Caleb, I’ll go—”

Before Patrick could finish his offer to come along, I quickened my pace and ducked from the driveway, even though that meant plunging right into the woods that border our house. I knew Patrick would put away his violin carefully and exactly before following me, but that only gave me a couple seconds’ head start, so I had to act fast. I jumped over a fallen log. Briars scraped the sliver of skin between my socks and my pant leg, but I plunged ahead anyway.

I hardly ever went into the woods surrounding our house. Brad, my best friend, usually came by on his bike, and we’d stick to the cul-de-sac, playing pickup when I felt up to it, H.O.R.S.E. when I didn’t. We used to race in electric go-karts. Mom still kept them charging in the garage, just in case Brad decided they weren’t too babyish anymore now that we were twelve. Part of me thought he said they were

babyish because I was so much better at drifting than he was, and he didn't know how to handle being slower than me.

But Brad wasn't around much now that he had both baseball and football practices.

Once the woods were thick around me, I figured Patrick would have given up on finding me and retreated back into the house. I looked up to the branches of the huge trees above me. Two long, thick trunks soared straight to the sky and then curved away from each other. I had heard once about trees that do that—live side by side but bend away to share the sun. They are buddies. They could stick close, but if they do, eventually one will struggle to tower over the other, keeping the weaker, unluckier one in the shade. Instead, if they are *really* friends, they'll bend apart. I wondered if it hurt, twisting away from your friend like that.

I squinted, and for a second the branches looked like the inside of a pair of lungs, stretching in all directions from the trunk, always reaching for more, more, more.

My own lungs ballooned as a breeze rustled through the trees' leaves. Hoping I wouldn't get lost, I went deeper into the thicket. Here's the thing: I live in a small neighborhood. It wasn't like these woods would stretch for miles. A couple acres, maybe, tops. Other people's houses bordered the thick circle of trees like mine, so the worst that could happen was that I'd end up across the woods in someone's backyard.

That was what I told myself anyway. I yanked the backpack strap up my shoulder and unzipped the front compartment, making sure my inhaler was there. It wouldn't buy me a lot of time, but it was better than nothing.

I decided the best direction to head was straight back. If I stayed on the path I'd forged, then all I'd have to do to find my way home was turn around, right? Yeah, I guess that's why I'd never make it as a Boy Scout. Of course as soon as I couldn't see my house anymore, that's when the trees got all squished together like bullies, totally zapping the chance of my walking in a straight line. I stepped over broken branches, around trunks, through prickly bushes. There was no way I'd find my way back now by just turning around.

Each step I took made my shoes suck deeper into mud with a squelching sound, and each time I lifted my feet it made my chest hurt. A few more yards in and I realized I was in trouble. My chest *burned*. I tried to ignore it. The pain twisted and coiled around my ribs—not like I couldn't breathe but like my body didn't want to. Like I was drowning from the inside out. I tried not to think about how fast my heart was beating and only that totally freaking out was useless. I tried not to croak out a cry or anything babyish like that. This wasn't my first panic attack; I knew I wasn't really dying. But every time it happened, I had to convince myself all over again. And the attacks had been happening more and more.

I tried to focus on what was going on around me. Sunlight trickled

through the thick woods. Maybe there was a clearing? The opening was also the reason for the gross mud I was plodding through. Just inside the clearing there was a stream that cut through the woods. The stream was shallow, only a couple inches deep, but wide, stretching as far as my yard. Sunshine glinted off the water, where it trickled over stones the size of my fist and around large boulders.

I'm not dying, I told myself over and over. *I'm not dying*. It was just a panic attack.

I'm okay. I fell to my knees, not caring when they sank into the mud, drenching my pant legs with thick dark muck. Leaning forward, I plunged my palms into the cool water. *I'm okay*. The smooth, cold rocks seemed to be pressing back as much as my hands pushed against them. *I'm okay*.

The slow lap of water over my skin helped me focus. I concentrated on what Mom had told me to do when I got like this—count out my breaths, make sure the exhales matched the inhales, try to make each last a count of three, then four, then five. *Five is fine*, she always said. *When you get to five, you know you're okay*. What she meant was: if I could stretch out each breath to five seconds, then it was just my head that was convinced I was dying. Not my lungs. Still, I thought about my inhaler, zipped in the front pocket of my backpack. Was it time to grab it?

I held off, breathing in and out instead, counting. Like usual, Mom was right. I flexed my fingers in the water, noticing for the first

time the minnows racing around the stones and the sudden flush of swirling mud when a crawfish hid beneath a loose rock.

Even though I felt better (relief over not actually dying sort of washed away the whole lost-in-the-woods worry for the moment), I stayed put, searching for the bluish-gray crawfish in the settling water. It only took a few seconds for me to spot it creeping along, its oversize pinchers outstretched. Quick as I could, I plunged my fingers into the stream to catch it. Its tail sent a swish of water between my fingers as it dashed away.

“You’ve got to be a lot faster than that.”

The voice above made me jerk, sending my already drenched knees slipping into the water. This time the voice laughed—a tinkling sound.

I rose to my feet, face burning, and squinted into the sunlit clearing to see who was talking. A huge boulder sat in the middle of the stream. And on top of it, her legs folded neatly beside her, perched an angel.

Stupid thought, right? But I swear, the sun shone straight on her, making the top of her dark brown hair glimmer like a halo and the yellowish boulder upon which she sat shine like gold. Oh, man. Had I been wrong? Maybe it hadn’t been a panic attack. Maybe *I had* died!

The girl laughed again and slid down to land barefoot in the water with a quick splash. She walked toward me with a wide smile and her hands folded behind her back. “I’ve gotten really good at catching

them,” she said. “You’ve got to put one hand behind them, and then, with your other hand, splash the water in front of them. They’ll fly right back into your first hand.”

“Oh,” I mumbled, my face flaming. “How—how long have you been here?”

The girl’s bottom lip jutted out for a moment and she looked up toward the sun as if doing math in her head. Her eyes were pale blue like a patch of sky behind puffy clouds. Freckles sprinkled across her nose and cheeks. “Maybe an hour or so,” she said. “I’m trying to catch a bird, but they all keep ignoring me, even when I whistle at them.”

“A bird? Why?”

“Well,” the girl said as she smoothed her hands on her ratty white sundress, “I’ve figured out how to catch the crawfish and the minnows. Seems like birds would be next.”

The corner of my mouth jerked upward. “Quit messing around.” But even as I said it a dark crow swooped overhead.

The girl shrugged her narrow shoulders, and I knew she hadn’t been joking.

“You really want to catch a bird?”

The girl nodded.

“Why?”

“Why not?” She smiled again. I guess I was still making sure she was real, because my brain seemed to pick up on things about her that I don’t usually notice with other people. Things like how her

chin was small but pointed, how one of her front teeth slanted over the other, how her eyelashes captured sunlight as much as her hair. It made remembering to talk take longer than it should have.

“Because . . .,” I managed because I was apparently an amazing conversationalist.

“Because . . .,” she repeated.

“Because . . . what would you do with it once you had it?”

The girl’s smile stretched wider. “I haven’t thought that far ahead yet.” She jerked out her hand to shake like we were parents meeting in the school parking lot instead of two kids standing in a stream. “I’m Kit. I live here.”

“Here? In the water?”

She laughed again, but not in a mean way. “Of course not, silly. I live in a house that way.” She jerked her thumb over her shoulder toward the other side of the stream. “And you?”

“Oh.” I smoothed my wet palm against a dry part of my pants and shook her hand. It was warm, probably from the sun-drenched rock she had been sitting on. “I’m Caleb. I live that way.” I nodded my head backward. “At least I think I do. I’m sort of lost.”

“Awesome,” Kit said. You know how people talk about eyes sparkling? I always thought that was just a stupid thing people said when they meant someone looked happy. But it’s not, because Kit’s eyes could do that. They sparkled. If she were a comic book character, a little *ding* would be written in curly letters over her eyes. “Getting

lost means you get to have an adventure.” She stepped backward into the stream, her eyes steady on mine like a dare. “Are you ready?”

I didn’t normally do this kind of thing—follow random girls deep into the woods, I mean. But I didn’t even have to think this time. I just kicked off my sneakers and tossed them onto the bank. “Ready.” I followed her across the stream.



Kit led me along a narrow trail deeper into the woods. She stopped suddenly, and I bumped into her. “Look!” She pointed to long, skinny blossoms hanging from weeds growing along the path. The flowers looked like tiny trumpets. “Honeysuckles!” She plucked a blossom and peeled back the petals. Then she popped the middle into her mouth.

“Try one.” She handed me a blossom. Her fingernails were brown, probably from catching so many crawfish in the mud.

“Are you sure you know what these are?”

Kit didn’t answer, just peeled another flower. I sniffed at the blossom. It smelled like honey but, when I put the edge on my tongue, it tasted more like perfume.

“How old are you, anyway?” Kit asked, an eyebrow raised as she studied my face.

I lifted my chin, threw my chest out. “I’m twelve.”

That eyebrow popped up a smidge higher. I knew why. I didn’t

look like a twelve-year-old. I was sort of like Chris Evans at the beginning of the first Captain America movie—the part before the scientist gave Steve Rogers the elixir of super serum and he was just frail looking and scrawny. I’m too short and way too skinny for my age. I’m so used to the air fighting its way out of me that sometimes I forget to close my mouth when I breathe; Patrick says it makes me look like a toddler with my stomach puffed out and mouth hanging open. My brown hair is long, I guess, and it flops on my head instead of lying flat and smooth like Brad’s or waving back over my head like Captain America’s. Also not helping me in the looking-my-age department are my huge brown eyes; they’re the reason Patrick used to call me Bambi—that is, until Mom grounded him from playing his violin for a weekend when I made a huge fuss about it.

I braced myself for Kit to do what everyone else did when they found out how old I was—saying something like, “What? I thought you were nine!” or “No way! My baby sister is bigger than you!”

But Kit didn’t say any of that. Her grin widened, and her eyebrow lowered. “Cool. Me, too.”



Kit’s house was about as opposite of my own plain red brick home as it could get. The house stood at least three stories, and I counted just as many chimneys poking up from the dark green roof. Tons of narrow windows with swirling thin wood trim at the top, like icing on a

cupcake, marched up the sides of the white structure. At least, it had been white once. Now it was mostly gray, with long strips of peeling paint curling on the sides. The ceilings of the three balconies that popped out of the sides of the Victorian mansion were painted green to match the roof. It looked like a regular boxy house that someone had added on to, with rooms and porches jutting out in angles. The twisting spokes of the balcony rails were painted in pink and blue, making me think of the gingerbread house Hansel and Gretel had stumbled upon in the woods. Once, I could tell, it had looked amazing. It still did, but in a faded sort of way. “You live here?” I asked.

“Yeah,” said Kit, shielding her face from the sun with her hand as we looked up at a turret with windows all around that jutted out from the top. Kit pointed to it. “That’s my room.”

“Isn’t it too bright?” I asked.

“I like the sun.”

“Of course,” I said without thinking.

“What do you mean?” Kit lowered her eyes to meet mine, and my face flamed again.

I shrugged instead of answering. How was I supposed to say *Of course you like the sun, you are a sun* without feeling like a dork? But when Kit’s mouth twitched into a smile I somehow knew she had read my mind.

“So how come I haven’t seen you at school?” I asked.

“Because I’ve never been to school.”

“Ever?”

“Well, not since kindergarten, anyway. It just didn’t work out. You know, teachers telling me what to do, how to behave, how to share and take turns.” Kit rolled her eyes. I laughed.

“Yeah,” I said, “the whole standing-in-line thing about did me in, too.”

Kit raised her fist. “I had to take a stand! Mom homeschools me.”

I shuddered. For a while, back when I was in fourth grade, my mom had to homeschool me after I was in the hospital for a long time. We both hated it. Her voice would go all hard and fake-happy when I didn’t understand something or when she did a math problem in a confusing way. “That stinks.”

“Not really.” Kit shrugged. “I can study whatever I want. Or nothing at all.”

My head jerked back at the thought. Every day that Mom homeschooled me, she had a plan and *so many lists*. Thinking about Mom made me wonder how long I had been gone. I went up on my tiptoes, trying to figure out which direction led to my house.

Kit’s house’s dirt driveway led to a wooded road, and woods surrounded the house in all directions. I couldn’t figure out which way led to the main drag back toward my house. “Do you mind if I use your phone? I left my cell at home, and my brother’s going to go nuts if he doesn’t hear from me soon.”

“Yes,” Kit said.

“Excuse me?”

“Yes, I mind.” She sat down on the wide front-porch steps and hummed a little.

“Why?”

“We don’t have a phone,” she said serenely.

“No phone?”

“No phone.” A skinny cat crawled out from under the porch and curled between my legs. It climbed the porch steps and darted around Kit to disappear into the house. Kit hummed. “Not yet, anyway. We just moved in a couple weeks ago. This was Grandmom Ophelia’s house, but she died last month. Mom and I are living here, taking over the estate.”

“But you don’t have a phone?”

“Not yet,” Kit said, still humming.

“How do you keep in touch with people?”

Kit shrugged. “Mom has a phone but she keeps it with her.”

My mouth opened and closed a couple times. “What if you need help?”

“Why would I need help?” she asked.

For just a second my chest caught fire again. I swallowed it back so I could think. “What if something happened?”

“Then I’d deal with it.”

I shook my head. “Can I borrow your mom’s phone, then?”

Kit leaned back on her elbows. “She isn’t here.”

“When is she getting back?”

“I have no idea.” Kit stood and brushed the peeled paint flecks from the porch stoop off her dress. She sighed and rolled her eyes. “Listen, if it’s a big deal, I’ll show you how to get home.”

“I’m sorry,” I muttered. But the simmering in my chest settled.

“Next time, bring your phone so you can stay longer. This doesn’t even count as an adventure.” Kit skipped a little as she turned back toward the woods.

“I will,” I said, feeling stupid as I trailed behind her but also kind of happy since she had said “next time.”

“Can you come here tomorrow?”

Man, I was glad I was behind Kit so she didn’t see the huge grin that spread across my face. “Yeah, after school.”

“Or . . . you could skip school and meet me on the golden boulder. It’s a perfect breakfast spot.” Kit held back a stray branch so it wouldn’t smack me in the face. “The fairies sweep it clean every morning at dawn.” I fake-laughed, but Kit just stared at me like the fairy thing wasn’t a joke at all.

I coughed into my elbow. “Wouldn’t your mom get a little suspicious if she suddenly had another student to homeschool?”

Kit’s eyebrows sunk but she just shrugged. “I think I’m going to take tomorrow off.”

“You can do that?” I asked. “Just decide to take the day off?”

“I can do whatever I want,” she said.

“Well, we only have two more days of school,” I said, but Kit didn’t answer. Not that I was super excited about school ending or anything. This summer was going to be the worst ever, thanks to the stupid day camp Mom was forcing me to go to. “Do you stop school for the summer?”

Kit shrugged. “I guess we will.”

At the edge of the stream, I paused before stepping in, not sure if the rocks would be slippery. Kit leaped from smooth rock to smooth rock. The beams of sunlight through the breaks in the trees’ canopies were like a spotlight on her steps, like I was following a yellow brick road. *Where would it lead?* I wondered as I placed one foot into the stream.

SUPERFAIL

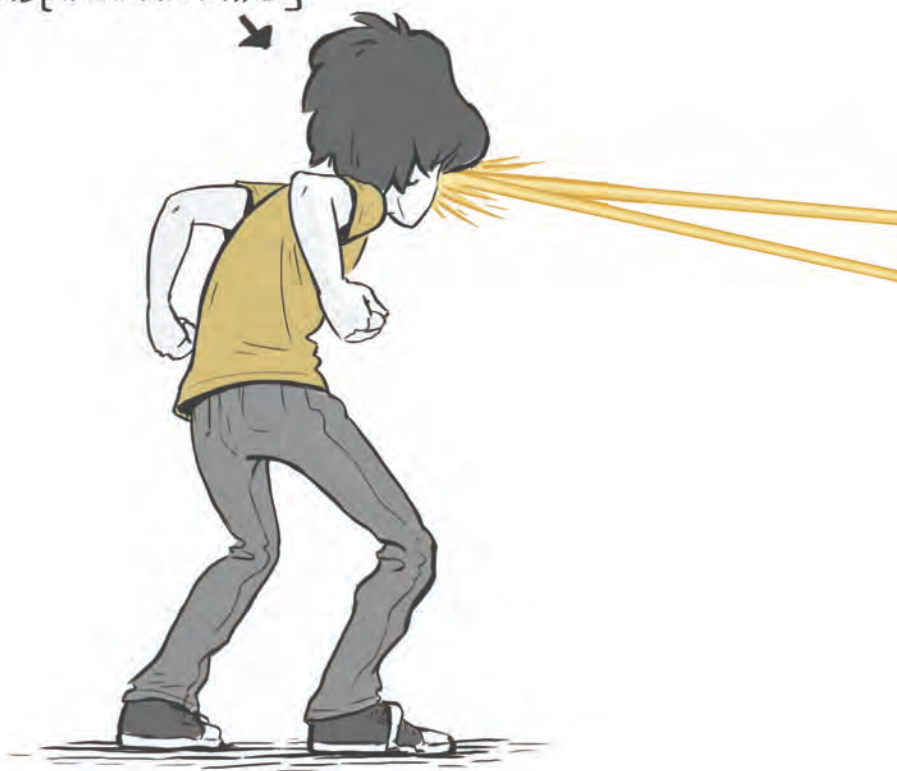
BY MAX BRUNNER



ILLUSTRATED BY DUSTIN MACKAY

CHAPTER ONE

ME [A.K.A. MARSHALL]



I hate my super powers.

Flying at high speed over a city and shooting lasers out of your eyes might sound pretty awesome, but trust me, it's not. Not for me, at least. My super powers are more like a super curse.

This is me trying to use my laser vision.



Yeah, shooting lasers out of my eyes would be a pretty sweet power ... if I wasn't cross-eyed!

When my parents find out that I fried the neighbor's cat, they'll probably sentence me to fifteen to life in my room. At least I'll have some muscles when I get out—everyone knows the only thing to do in prison is to lift weights. I'll probably grow a sweet beard, too.



You might be thinking, why don't you just close one eye and fire your good laser? That'll work, right?



Wrong!

Turns out eyelids can't stop a high-powered laser. Who knew?

What's worse is even if I don't use my powers, I'm still cross-eyed. I have a pair of sunglasses I wear, and those help hide my eyes, but my teachers won't let me wear them in class.



I'm not going to lie—if they'd let me wear my glasses, I'd totally sleep through history class. But that's not the point.

And my crossed eye is just the start of my problems. About a year ago, I figured out how to fly. Pretty cool, huh? Not for me. The day I learned how to fly was also the day I learned that I get severe motion sickness.

I really can't fly anywhere unless I want to lose my lunch, which means I don't fly anywhere. Ever. I want to be famous for saving the city, not for dropping barf bombs all over it.



My mom isn't a big fan of that power.



It's not my favorite, either.

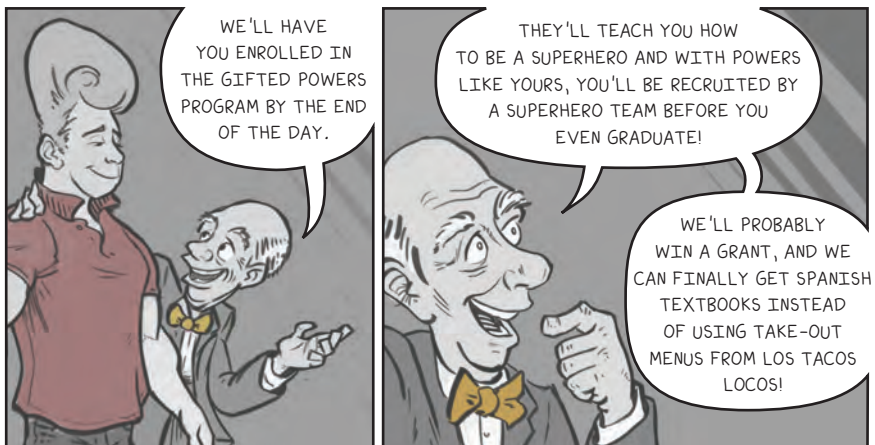


At least *their* power works the way it's supposed to. I'm jealous of my two-year-old sister/sisters. How sad is that?

But I'm way more jealous of the kids at school. Trevor Bretton's a year older than me and he got some sweet powers after a meteor hit his house.



So, his first day back at school was pretty awesome.



A week later, Trevor saved our town from a hurricane created by a mad scientist and was recruited on the spot by the most awesome heroes our city has ever seen—the Superteam. Newscasters called him Superteen and acted like they didn't know his true identity. Seriously? All he did was take off his glasses and put on a cape. Even my sisters knew it was Trevor, and they're only two years old!

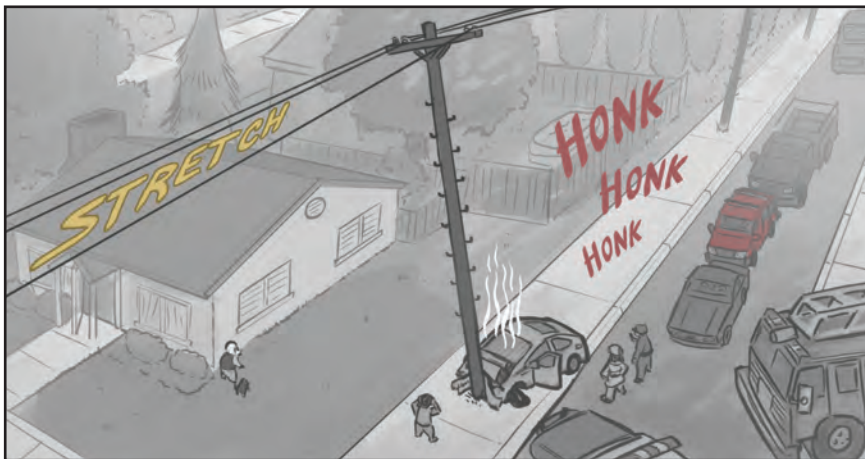


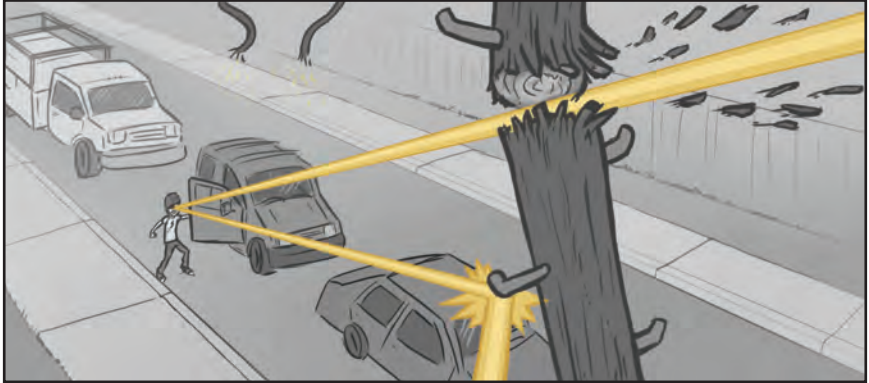
That's been my dream for basically my entire life: to save the city, get my picture in the paper, and be recruited to a superhero team. Then I could move into my own place so my sisters couldn't chew all my stuff, and I could finally kill zombies in peace.

But how would I stop a criminal? By barfing on him? Besides, the closest thing to a crime I'd ever seen in our town was my Uncle Doug stealing his neighbor's newspaper.



And the few times I tried to step in to help with something small,
I made things worse.





There are only so many pets you can fry before you decide to hang up your cape. That's why I had pretty much given up on the whole becoming-a-superhero dream.

CHAPTER TWO

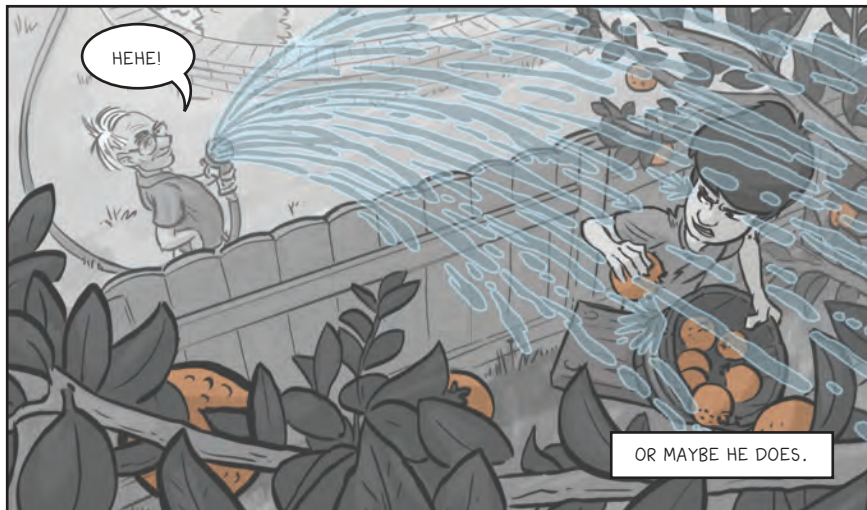


My parents make me pull weeds at my grandma's house every Friday. Most grandmas are sweet old ladies who give candy and silver dollars. All kids have to do to earn treats is let them pinch their cheeks.

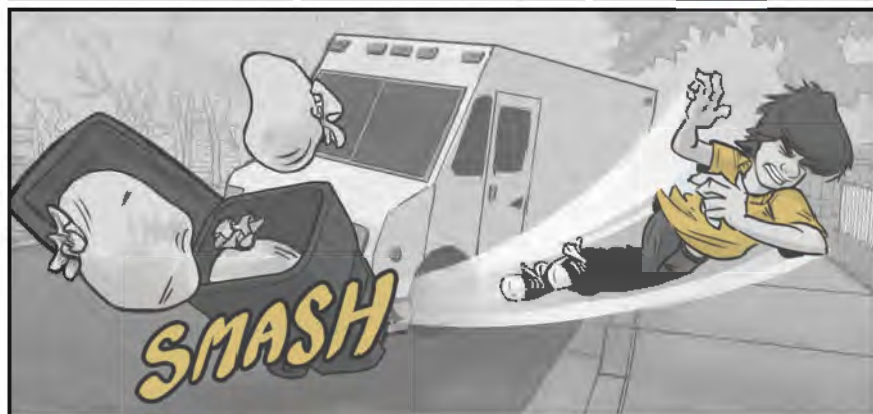
Not my grandma.

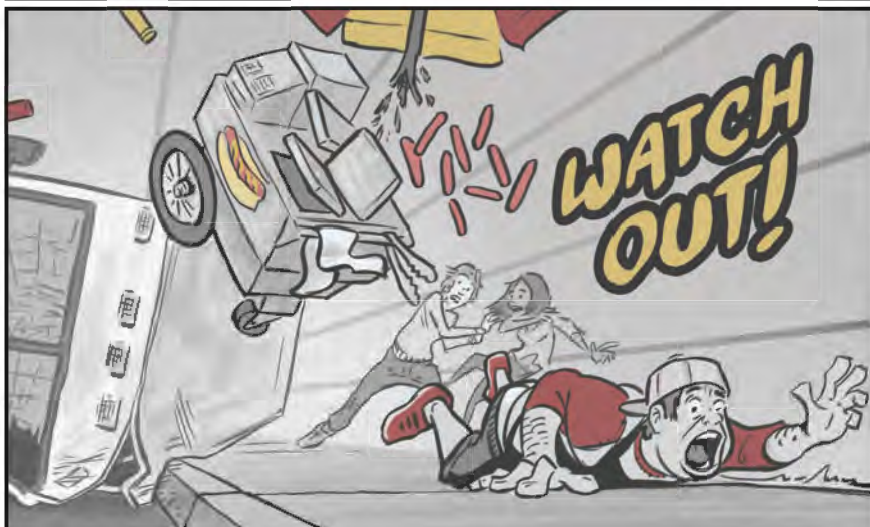


The old man next door is just as bad. He's always outside watering his garden, but doesn't pay attention to where he's spraying.



Anyway, last Friday I was hauling my grandma's trash cans out to the curb when it happened.







A bunch of guys jumped out of the van. I knew if I tried to blast them, I'd probably end up frying another pet, so I took off in the other direction. Or at least I tried to. Joey, the biggest tattler in school, ratted me out.









ARE YOU
KIDDING ME
RIGHT NOW?!

Just to rub it in, the jerks in black jumped the fence right next to me.



The cops tried to follow them, but...

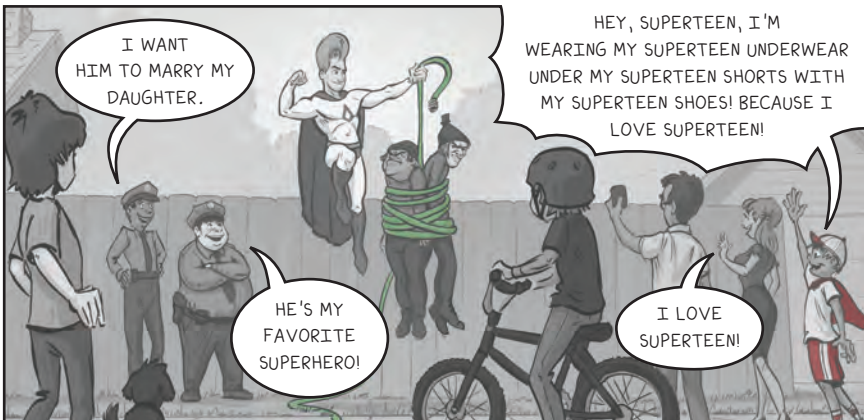


Guess who showed up to save the day?



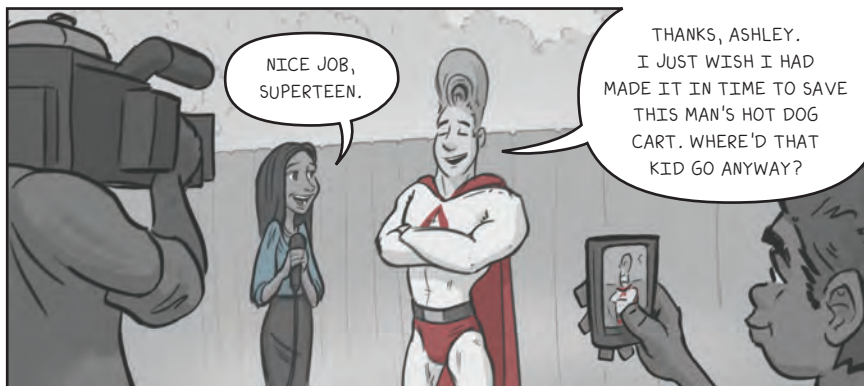
I felt even worse after that.

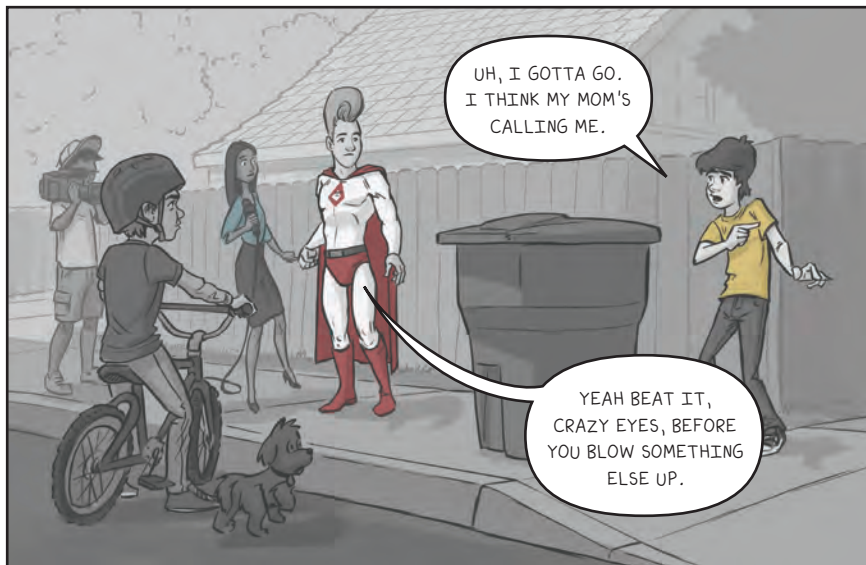
Trevor rounded up the bad guys in about four seconds, and, of course, everybody cheered.



I should have been the one capturing those criminals. And if my stupid lasers had gone straight, I would have. Then everyone would have cheered for me.

Once the cops finished taking pictures with Superteen, they put the bad guys in the back of their squad cars.





As if it wasn't bad enough that my lasers blew up a hot dog cart, Trevor had to show up and embarrass me in front of the whole crowd. That was the last time I was going to use my powers. Ever.

Or so I thought.

THE BATTLE OF JUNK MOUNTAIN

by Lauren Abbey Greenberg





THIS IS MY HAPPY PLACE

I didn't expect my summer sister to ditch me the first minute of vacation. She could've at least waited until I emptied my suitcase.

"But . . . but . . ." I sputter like the last seconds of microwave popcorn. "What about going to Lolli's?"

Poppy sighs. "I'm sorry. I wish I could, but the last time I didn't show up for a shift, my dad totally freaked out."

I sink onto what will be my bed for the next month. "But we always go to Lolli's for milkshakes first thing. It's tradition."

"It sucks, I know, but . . ." She shrugs. "Our tradition will have to change."

Change? What's she talking about? The best thing about Thomas Cove is that nothing ever changes.

I stare at the stack of neatly folded T-shirts on my lap. "Couldn't your dad wait for you to start working at the store until you're older? Nobody I know back home works full-time when they're twelve."

She sits next to me cross-legged and examines the bottoms of her bare feet. “It’s different here. Kids start hauling lobster traps by the time they’re eight years old. Consider me lucky.”

Poppy’s parents own Quayle’s Market, the only grocery store on Cedar Island. Her two older sisters have worked there for years. I guess it was only a matter of time before she got roped in. But why did it have to be *this* summer, the first one without my parents?

Sunlight streams through the window, making Poppy’s auburn hair glow like a maple tree in fall. “You could come with me. I have to stock the shelves and stuff, and it’s kind of boring, but at least it’s not the fish counter.”

“Thanks, but I guess I should stay here. I’m ready to get this project going, if you know what I mean.” I tug on the top drawer of the pine dresser in an attempt to put my clothes away, but it’s stuck shut. The one under it opens easily, but it’s full of miniature glass ducks, piles of old comic books, and several cat calendars. Looks like my grandmother’s been trolling the yard sales . . . again.

My cheeks puff out. This is going to be a bigger job than I thought.

I catch my reflection in the cracked floor-length mirror. The damp Maine air has wreaked havoc on my curly hair

already. I pat down the puffed-out ponytail at the base of my neck. Ugh, I look like a beaver.

Poppy rolls onto her stomach, smooshing the ruffled blue throw pillows beneath her. Together we peer out the window. The view outside is postcard pretty, the kind parents pay top dollar for at a hotel. A lobster boat cuts through the water; its motor drones steadily as it passes anchored skiffs that rock gently back and forth in its wake. Next door to us, a hulk of a man wearing a camouflage baseball cap chops firewood. Sweat darkens the back of his dingy gray tank.

“Is that the new neighbor?” I ask.

“Yup, that’s Cranky.”

“Cranky?”

“His real name is Mr. Holbrook, but I call him Cranky, because that’s what he is. Every time I see him, he has this look on his face like he just bit into a vomit burger. He’s so mean, Shayne. He’ll yell at you if you cut through his yard. You can’t use his dock—”

I gasp. “No dock jumping?”

“Nope. All his property is off-limits.”

Drat. The old neighbors, the Krafts, used to let us have full run of their place like it was our own private playground.

“When he moved in, my mom made me bring over a plate of cookies. As soon as I stepped into his yard, he appeared from

behind a tree, clutching a great big ax, his eyes wild and crazy. I screamed and took off, dropped the cookies and everything. He started yelling at me, and his voice was so gravelly, like he ate pebbles for breakfast.”

“Hold on. Important question. What kind of cookies were they?”

“White chocolate chunk.”

I press my hand over my heart. “Tragic waste.”

“You know what else?” Poppy lowers her voice. “Mona said that when he moved in, there was no moving truck, nothing. He has no furniture and he sleeps alone on the bare wood floor with nothing but a hunting knife beside him.”

Goose bumps cover my arms, even though I’m not sure if I should believe her. Poppy always says that her sister is a big fat liar.

I reach for the tin box where I keep all my supplies for making friendship bracelets. Last year, Poppy and I cranked them out like crazy, and I’m happy to see she still has the blue-and-green one I made her wrapped around her wrist.

“I brought a whole bunch of colors,” I say, showing her my new pack of embroidery thread.

“Oooh, I like the neon green,” she says before twitching her nose. “No offense, but you need to air out this room. It smells like old people.”

I open the window, and the scents of salt, fish, and pine needles blow in at once. “Don’t worry. When I’m through with this place, you won’t even recognize it.”

“I can’t believe your mom’s making you clean up your grandmother’s house,” she says.

“She didn’t make me. I offered to come. Anyhow, it’s not so much about cleaning up as getting her ready to sell her stuff at the Cedar Island Flea Market.”

I place my bracelet tin on top of a tower of *National Geographic* magazines so old and worn they’ve practically molded into a small table.

Poppy glances at her watch, then hops off the bed. “I better go. Don’t want the boss to ground me.” She rolls her eyes.

I walk her down the stairs to the front door. Wooden signs of various shapes and sizes decorate the walls, some with beach themes (LIFE IS BETTER IN FLIP-FLOPS), some spouting puns (GARDENERS KNOW ALL THE DIRT), and others offering warm fuzzies (THIS IS MY HAPPY PLACE).

Poppy shouts over the sound of a blaring TV. “Bye, Bea!”

Everyone calls my grandmother by her first name. Even me.

“Bye, Poppy!” Bea yells from the family room.

Poppy squeezes my shoulders and gives me a friendly shake before she leaves. “Don’t worry. We still can have the Best. Summer. Ever. You’ll see.”

Doubt prickles my skin. The best summer ever means morning swims in the cove, searching for sea glass, riding bikes to Lolli's, gorging on lobster rolls—stuff we've been doing for years. Now she's *sort of* available. What am I supposed to do when she's sort of not?



After Poppy leaves, I join Bea in the family room. She sits at what I like to call Junk Mountain, the epicenter of all her worldly possessions. When it comes to stuff, my grandmother's a keeper. She keeps everything.

Everything.

Some kind of table supports Junk Mountain, but I have no idea what it looks like because it has always been buried under an avalanche of old books, cracked dishes, stuffed Beanie Babies, and a gazillion other things. A mothball smell hovers like a rain cloud over the pile.

Whenever we visit, my parents note that Junk Mountain has expanded in height and width, and my mother practically breaks out in hives at the sight of it. You would never guess she and Bea were related. Mom calls my grandmother names behind her back like “pack rat,” “Dumpster diver,” and “eBay explosion.” But Bea sees it differently. She calls herself a “collector of everything.”

“Sit with me. I need to talk to you.” Bea writes a number on a piece of masking tape and sticks it to the bottom of a pumpkin candle.

I turn down the volume on the TV and pull up a folding chair beside her. A furry key chain dyed grapey purple catches my eye. “Is this a real rabbit’s foot?” When I touch the bottom, I feel pointy toenails.

Bea examines it. “I’m not sure, although, they say if it’s real, then it’s good luck.” She passes me a shoebox with the words GOOD LUCK written in her shaky scrawl. “Here, add it to the rest of my charms.”

I sift through a jumble of dream catchers, four-leaf clover pins, and tiny Buddha figurines. “So, how long do we have to get ready for the flea market?”

“One week,” she says.

My eyes grow wide. I hadn’t realized it was so soon. “And all this needs to be sorted and priced, right?”

She waves her hands over the merchandise. “So many memories, my treasures. Not only do I remember where I found each item, but I could tell you how much I paid for it and who I was with.”

Please, don’t.

I inch my chair closer and pull a yellowed teacup from the mound. “This looks ancient. How much should we sell it for?”

“Ah, ah, gentle.” She removes it from my hand and inspects it through the wire-rimmed glasses perched on the end of her nose. “Mark that as twenty-five cents.”

I frown. “What, only a quarter? I thought it was special.”

She hands me a Sharpie. “It *is* special. This teacup may not look like much, but it represents history, memories. It’s—” Her brown eyes enlarge. “Now, what’s this doing here?” She reaches for a beak poking out from under a cowboy hat and pulls out a silver bird statue.

“Nice chicken,” I say.

Her forehead creases. “It’s a pheasant. Look at this workmanship, the detail in the feathers.”

I stifle a yawn. “Mmm-hmm.”

“Your grandpa gave it to me years ago when I was in my bird phase. I remember he paid a couple hundred dollars for it. I could have killed him. We didn’t have that kind of money to spare. But I did some research and found out it was made by a famous Russian artist. I believe it’s worth *a lot*. Do me a favor, dear, put this on the mantel. It’s not for sale. Not yet, anyway.”

I set it down over the fireplace, next to my favorite picture of Grandpa. He squints at the camera from the helm of his lobster boat. His face is sunbaked and lined like an alligator’s skin. I really miss him.

I dust off my hands on the back of my white shorts. “So . . . is that what you wanted to talk to me about?”

Her face falls. “Well, not exactly. I have some news.” She stands and I notice a black apron stamped with a fish print tied around her waist. “Surprise,” she says, sounding as excited as if it were Meatloaf Monday. “I went back to work.”

“What? I thought you retired years ago.”

Bea retrieves a tube of lipstick out of her apron pocket and paints her thin lips bright pink. “The truth is when Grandpa died, he didn’t leave me with much. You would be surprised how much everything costs—the house, utilities, you know, other stuff.”

I eye the buried table, the couch strewn with magazines and newspapers, the kitchen counter littered with boxes and cans. Yeah, I know “stuff.”

Bea coughs into her fist and catches a glimpse of her watch. “Darn it, I’m late.”

I follow her to the kitchen. “You’re leaving *now*?”

She grabs her enormous sack of a purse off the counter. “I’m sorry, horrible timing, but it’s just the lunch shift. I’ll be back in a jiffy.”

First Poppy’s news and now this. *Are you kidding me?* I cross my arms in a huff. “Aren’t you too old to be a waitress?”

“I beg your pardon.” Bea tries to swat me with a dish towel,

and I jump out of the way. “I’ve waitressed for more than thirty years. Of course, I was nervous at first, going back and all, but then I had forgotten how much I missed the Cod Café.”

Aside from a few roadside takeout shacks, the Cod Café is the only full-service restaurant on the island, known for its enormous lobster platters and famous potato salad tossed in Secret Sauce. The servers are usually college kids from the mainland. I want to remind Bea of this, but from the insulted look on her face, I know I have said enough.

Bea finds a leftover tuna sandwich in the fridge and takes two nibbles before putting it back. “Do me a favor, don’t tell your mother.” She grabs an industrial-sized can of hairspray from her purse and fumigates her frosted mass of curls along with the entire room.

I cough. “How come?”

Bea sighs like she’s already answered this question a thousand times. “Let’s just say she gets . . . funny about money.”

Her pace quickens, and I follow her to her beat-up Subaru wagon.

“Wait, what about our project?” I motion behind me. “I can’t tackle that all by myself.”

She reaches for the door handle but pauses before turning to me. “You don’t need to touch a thing. We’ll sort through my treasures later this afternoon, okay?”

The slam of the door makes quick tears sting the back of my eyeballs. Why is everyone leaving me?

She drives away. A hush falls over the cove except for the occasional tinkling of a distant wind chime. The windswept grass tickles my calves as I cut across Bea's yard. A thick rock wall separates her lawn from the sea, and the still water has a copper color to it, like an old penny. Maybe I'll jump in and swim five hundred miles home to Maryland. I'll say to my mom, "I couldn't do it. I failed."

Ha! Never.

Arnie B.,

MADE FOR

TV



AMY DIXON

CHAPTER 1

“Jefferson, Jefferson, Home of the Quail!

Jefferson, Jefferson, we never fail!

Our school is the best, better than the rest.

We’ll shout it loud and clear,

Jefferson, Jefferson, Home of the Quail,

Show us how you CHEER!”

I know as a fifth grader I’m supposed to roll my eyes and *pretend* to say the words to our school fight song instead of actually saying them. It’s the little kids that get excited and belt out the lyrics and cheer their heads off at the end. The fifth graders,

the rulers of the school, are supposed to cross their arms over their chest and act bored. Usually I play along, but today is our last day at Jefferson Elementary, and I can't help but sing and scream like a maniac at the end. I've been at this school since I was four years old, which means I've probably sung the phrase "Jefferson, Jefferson, Home of the Quail" seven thousand times.

Quail are the worst mascots ever. The quail is our state bird in California, so I'm pretty sure that's why it's our school mascot. I once did a report on quail and discovered they get scared easily and run away and hide when anyone comes close to them. So I'm not sure why you would want your school to be represented by a bird like that. If you're going to be a bird, at least pick a strong and brave bird, like an eagle or a hawk. When you play another school in basketball, you don't want to be the bird that gets eaten. You want to be the bird that eats the other birds!

The only mascot that's possibly worse is a troubadour. That was my mom's school mascot when she was my age. The first problem with a troubadour is that they don't even exist anymore. They're from way back in the time of knights and castles and damsels in distress. The second problem is that a troubadour is a wandering minstrel—someone who frolics around the countryside playing music and spouting love poetry. I'll never understand who thought that would make a good mascot. A mascot should be something you're scared to compete against. Troubadours just stand on the sidelines in their tights and funky hats, singing and waving to the real warriors. They're like the cheerleaders of the Middle Ages. What's scary about that? Oh, mighty troubadour, with your flute and tiny guitar, your inspiring poetry has me shaking in my boots! How will I handle all of your encouragement? The only chance you have with that one is to hope that no one knows what a troubadour is. Then you

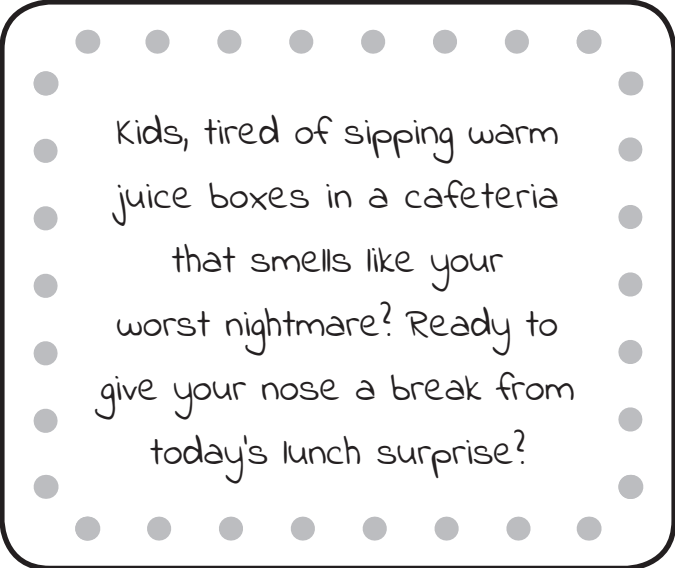
can pretend it's something fierce, like a rare type of jungle cat or a ferocious dinosaur species. But there's no pretending with a quail. Everyone knows what a quail is, and no one is afraid of it.

My best friend, Savannah, doesn't agree. She adores quail and was super upset when she saw them on the menu at Chez Jacques, a fancy-pants restaurant downtown. Which really just proves my point, since you would never see sautéed eagle or poached hawk on someone's dinner plate. But Savannah thinks quail are beautiful. Personally, I think they look a bit like a miniature soccer ball. Something you'd like to kick, which, again, makes them not the greatest mascot. But today, on the last day of fifth grade at "Jefferson, Jefferson, Home of the Quail," every student in the room wants to have the heart of a quail.

The Heart of a Quail Award is the biggest and best award you can get at our school. It is given to one fifth grader each year who represents

“Outstanding scholarship, active participation, dedicated school service, and positive leadership.” The teachers like to call it the “school spirit” award, but I call it the “I’m good at everything” award. And even though I’m hardly ever the best at anything, there’s a tiny part of me that thinks there’s a chance my name could be called up to that stage. So my entire class is sitting here, actually holding it together pretty well for the last day of school, waiting for the awards to be announced. It’s first thing in the morning, which helps because we haven’t been here long enough to get antsy yet. We’re sitting on the floor of the MPR, and it’s super gross. The school calls it the multipurpose room because they use it for everything. It’s the auditorium, but it’s also the cafeteria and the gym, which means that this floor has been splattered on a regular basis with both taco sauce and wrestling sweat. Somehow, even when it’s a hundred degrees outside, they manage to make the MPR absolutely freezing. Which feels

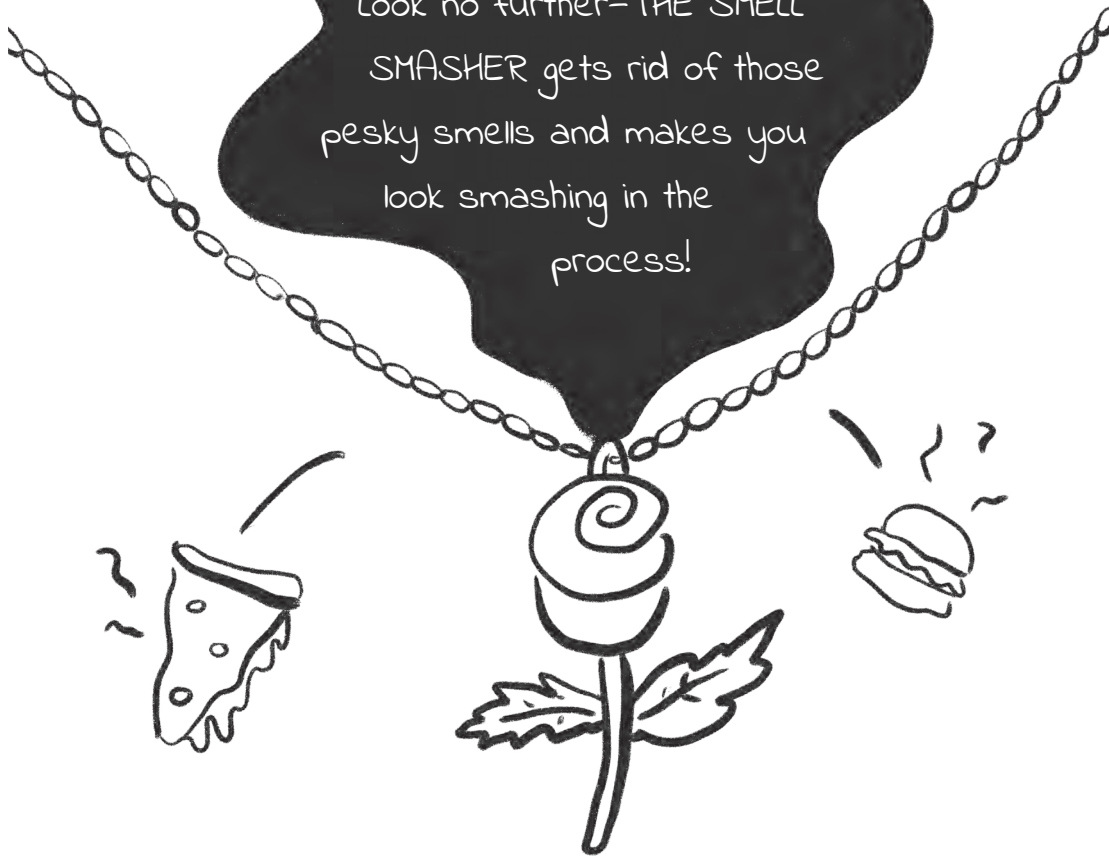
great when you first walk in, but after thirty seconds it feels like you're inside an igloo. Thank goodness today I remembered my soccer hoodie. Now if they could only get it to smell like something other than dirty socks and tater tots in here, it might be bearable. Wait! That gives me a really good idea.



Kids, tired of sipping warm
juice boxes in a cafeteria
that smells like your
worst nightmare? Ready to
give your nose a break from
today's lunch surprise?

INTRODUCING THE
smell SMASHER

the air freshener you wear like a fashion accessory! Earrings that smell like root beer? we've got 'em. Pins that give off the scent of your favorite bubble gum? Right here. our necklaces are not only shaped like roses; they smell like roses, too! Look no further—THE SMELL SMASHER gets rid of those pesky smells and makes you look smashing in the process!



I love writing commercials. It's a talent that I discovered a few years ago when I used to watch cartoons. The cartoons were okay, but the made-for-TV commercials were so much more interesting. Pillow Pal—is it a pillow or a stuffed animal? Brilliant! Moon Munch—do you play with it or eat it? So creative! It was then that I realized writing was my passion in life. My dad's a writer, too, so I get my writing gene from him. Except I mostly like to write about my inventions, so Dad calls me a *wrinventor*. A writer-inventor.

A familiar voice calls out from the side of the auditorium. “Annie!”

I turn and see my mom and dad leaning forward out of their folding chairs. Dad has both hands in the air, giving me a giant double thumbs-up. “Go get ’em, honeykin!” I wish he wouldn't call me that at school. *Honeykin* is some mishmash of nicknames he has for me. First it was *honeypie*, followed by *pumpkin*, which now has become *honeykin*. Making up words is Dad's specialty. He said things like *fantabulous*

and *ginormous* for years before they became actual words other people used. So he is a wrinventor, too. A wrinventor of words.

My teacher, Mr. Lombardi, is on the microphone now, which means it's time for awards. "Welcome, everyone, to our end-of-the-year awards ceremony!" A screech echoes through the auditorium, and some of the parents cover their ears. The sound system in here is terrible, so us kids are used to the piercing noise the mic makes. It doesn't help that Mr. Lombardi is super loud. I never really understood what it meant to have a "booming" voice until I was in his class. He booms way more than he talks. At first I was kind of scared of him, but then I discovered how goofy he really is. He likes to wear costumes when we study historical figures, and some days, to mix it up, he wears funny hats. It's pretty impossible to be afraid of someone in a hat.

Today, because it's a special day, he has on a black fedora with a red feather sticking out of

it. “Thanks especially to all the parents who have taken the time to come out and support your children. We couldn’t do it without you!” Then he calls out the names of the kids who made the honor roll, followed by sports awards, and then special academic awards. Savannah, who is sitting right next to me, has straight As, is the track team MVP, and wins a plaque for reading the most words in the entire school. She keeps having to get up and then squeeze back into her tiny space between me and Jake Ramirez. Meanwhile, I’m getting a cramp in my leg from sitting cross-legged on the floor for so long.

Finally, my name is called and I go up front to get a certificate for reaching my reading goal. Mom and Dad are super loud as I walk up, and all grins and flailing arms when I walk back to my spot on the floor. As I sit down, Savannah grabs my hand. “Heart of a Quail is up next!” she squeals. I turn to face her and squeal along, when I see that somehow, between getting up for MVP and Reading Champ,

she managed to get a huge smear of ketchup on the front of her white ruffled shirt.

“What happened?” I ask, pointing to the giant red blob on her chest.

Mr. Lombardi is back on the mic. “And now, the moment you’ve all been waiting for. . . .”

Savannah’s eyes follow my finger down to the ketchup, and get wide. She looks at her hand, which also has ketchup on it, and traces it down to a spot on the floor where, clearly, someone went condiment crazy at breakfast.

“. . . It’s time for the very special Heart of a Quail Award.”

Savannah is rubbing frantically at the red on her shirt, trying to make it go away, but it’s only making the spot bigger. It used to be a tiny puddle, but now it’s a lake.

I’m trying to focus on Mr. Lombardi, because this is the moment. I know it’s a long shot, but until he says something different, there’s still a chance

the name “Annie Brown” might come out of his mouth.

“This year’s Heart of a Quail Award recipient is . . .”

Mr. Lombardi is trying to be dramatic, and drags out the “is” for way too long. The little kids are into it, and they start pounding the ground, creating a drumroll effect. I’m holding my breath, and wishing he would just say the name already. Finally, the drumroll dies down, and Mr. Lombardi booms once again into the microphone. “Savannah Summerlyn!”

Savannah stays seated, and for a second I can’t figure out why she isn’t popping up like she did for all the other awards. She’s holding a hand over her heart like she’s about to pledge her allegiance. I’m clapping and nudging her, not sure why she isn’t moving, until I see the red peeking out from between her fingers. Oh, right. I quickly unzip my hoodie and hold it out to her. She doesn’t seem to understand at first, so I help her put one arm

through and something finally clicks into place. She zips it up over the mess and hugs me before she moves toward the stage. “You’re the best, Annie!”

The words play in my head as I watch her skip up the stage steps. I certainly don’t feel like the best when it comes to grades or sports or anything else that seems to matter at this school.

Savannah’s pop is back, and before taking the award from Mr. Lombardi, she dips down into a dramatic curtsy. Everyone laughs and claps even louder. Savannah wins. I hardly have time to feel proud or disappointed, because Savannah is back with her arm around me, and our parents are taking pictures. Savannah can’t even hold up all of her awards. She has to rest the Heart of a Quail Award, a heavy glass trophy in the shape of a bird, in the fold of her elbow. I hold up my single reading certificate and say, “Cheese!”

“Wait!” Mr. Lombardi says, running over and pulling the certificate out of my hand. “It’s covering

up the quail,” he explains. “That’s better,” he says, moving the paper to my other hand. “I need to get a quick shot for our website. Annie, can you scooch a little that way?” I move a step farther away from Savannah and hear the click of the camera.

“Perfect!” Mr. Lombardi says, showing us the picture on the back of his camera. Savannah’s right in the middle, smiling big and proud. But I was moving when he took it, so you can’t even tell it’s me. I’m just a blur near the edge. I think Mr. Lombardi sees me looking funny at it, because he says, “We can fix it up once we get it on the computer. A little of this, a little of that, a crop here and there. . . . It’ll be great! We wouldn’t want a picture of Savannah without her sidekick!”

Everyone keeps coming over to congratulate Savannah, which forces me to keep moving farther away to make room for them. Finally, Mom and Dad ask if they can walk me back to class, and I’m tired of waiting, so I agree. I give Savannah a little wave

as we leave the MPR. She's chatting with people and passing around her award, so she doesn't see me.

My parents gush over my reading certificate as we walk to my classroom, where I'll waste away the rest of the last day of school. They tell me they're proud of me, but I can't help but wonder what it is exactly that they're proud of. Because as far as I can tell, the only thing I'm best at is being the friend of someone who is always the best at everything. Savannah's sidekick. There to clap for her and cover up her ketchup stains. A blur at the edge of the photo. And as I hug my parents good-bye and head back into my fifth-grade classroom for one last afternoon, I'm thinking it might be time to brush up on my poetry skills. Because I may not have the heart of a quail, but I'm shaping up to be a fabulous troubadour.

JUST BREATHE

MEDITATION, MINDFULNESS,
MOVEMENT, AND MORE



MALLIKA CHOPRA

Foreword by Deepak Chopra, MD | Illustrated by Brenna Vaughan

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FOREWORD

Dear Kids:

This book is written by Mallika Chopra, my daughter, who learned to meditate at the age of nine.

As you approach your teenage years, you may experience turbulence in your mind and emotions because your body will be changing rapidly. Teenage years are some of the most important years preparing you for adulthood and the life you want to create. This book will help you get through some of the turbulent times feeling less overwhelmed, more in control, and, generally, happier.

Why should you learn meditation, mindfulness, breathing, and movement? These are simple techniques that go back thousands of years in wisdom traditions all over the world. These skills have allowed people to get in touch with their own inner beings. You are more than your body and your mind. Your body and mind help you take in information and experience it as the physical world. Your innermost being is the part of you that can control your body and can choose how you interpret experiences. By getting in touch with your true self, you will harness the powers of intuition, insight, imagination, creativity, and intention. These are the qualities of your soul.

There is nothing more important for human beings than to know themselves and to have self-love. If you have these two things, you will enjoy a life without much chaos or stress; you will experience the best friendships and relationships; and you will be able to fulfill all your dreams.

The world we live in is full of tremendous opportunity. If you watch the news or hear your parents and teachers talk, you will realize that our world right now also seems confused, violent, chaotic, and self-destructive. You are the hope for the future of this world. If you are joyful, the world will be joyful. If you are at peace, the world will be at peace. If you experience love, the world will be loving. You will be the role model and leader for your families, communities, and nations.

Read the simple steps outlined in this book. Do not stress if what you are doing is right or wrong; just follow the instructions and the exercises and have fun.

Deepak Chopra, M.D.



Mom, Tara & Leela



My nephew Krishan meditating



Dad, me, and my brother



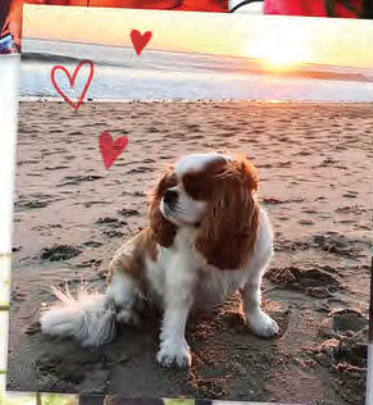
Dad & me



me and my girls



our dog, Yoda



My family



INTRODUCTION

Do you have a place where you feel safe, happy, and quiet? Perhaps it's a physical space—somewhere in your home, a hidden corner that no one else knows about, or a place outside where you can run, twirl, and laugh without any worries.

Perhaps it's not a physical space, but instead is the time you spend with a friend, a sibling, or a parent? Maybe it's those moments you chat with your sister before you both fall asleep, or when you throw a baseball with a friend and the time flies by.

Or, perhaps it is when you are by yourself, reading, drawing, or daydreaming about nothing in particular—moments when your mind and body feel rested, when you're not thinking about the past or worried about the future.

Maybe you are thinking that you don't have that place in your life . . .

And you are wondering if you even need it.

Research shows that when you find that quiet place, your body and brain are healthier, you feel more in control, and you are happier. And for many people, being able to feel that peace inside of themselves helps them worry less and deal better with tough situations.

The intent of this book is to help you find an anchor, inside yourself, that is safe, happy, and quiet—and to help you tap into it, and find it, whenever you need it.

Who Am I, and Why Am I Writing This Book?

• • • • •

My name is Mallika.

I am a mom of two girls named Tara and Leela. While I am writing this book, Tara is fifteen years old and Leela is twelve. Everything in this book is from our personal experience.

When I was nine years old, my parents taught my younger brother and me how to meditate. I will explain meditation more in the following pages, but basically it was a way that I could quiet my mind, feel less stressed, and feel more in control of my life. There are lots of other practices in this book that have helped me and my girls deal with stress, sleep better, manage friendships, be more in control, and feel confident about expressing what we want.

I feel grateful for the wisdom that my parents passed on to me and that I can pass on those ideas to my kids, their friends, their parents, and others who may be interested. I hope you find them helpful, too. I hope as you read and practice them that you share your experiences with the people closest to you. In fact, you may find that you can help others in ways you didn't know you could before!

What Are We Talking about Here?

• • • • •



There are certain techniques that can help you feel better. The four main techniques are called meditation, mindfulness, yoga, and motivation.

You may have heard these words from your parents, from a teacher at school, or from people in the media, but you may not be exactly sure what they really are. Here are some super quick descriptions for you:

- Meditation helps you quiet your mind.
- Mindfulness helps you become more aware of your body, thoughts, and surrounding environment.
- Yoga moves your body to let go of tension, breathe, relax, be more connected, and get more energy.
- Motivation is using positive thoughts to feel happier and to achieve your goals.

Intents are also an important part of meditation and mindfulness. An intent expresses what you want in your life. It's different from the material things you may want, like new clothes or video games or tickets to an event. Rather, it is the qualities you want to experience every day—like being healthy, happy, and connected to friends and family.

Perhaps you have tried some of these techniques without even knowing it! Maybe your teacher has you breathe in and out before a test. Maybe your sports coach asks you to close your eyes and envision winning a game before you play. Perhaps your mom asks you to notice how you feel after you are mean to your younger sibling or friend. Perhaps you twist and stretch, turn and balance, and then lie down at the end of a dance class to relax your muscles. Maybe you say a prayer during your religious holidays where you ask for health and happiness for your friends and family.

Just because it's easy to do these things doesn't mean they aren't powerful.

Believe it or not, sometimes just taking a deep breath or thinking about what you are grateful for can change your whole day (and improve your whole life)!

What Is Stress?

• • • • •

Stress is when your mind and body don't feel good.

Stress comes in lots of forms:

- Fear
- Worry
- Anxiety

When you are stressed, different things happen to you:

- You may have trouble breathing.
- Your heart beats faster.
- Your hands and body begin to sweat.
- Your body tenses up.
- Your mind gets foggy.

And if you are stressed a lot, your body reacts by getting tired, overwhelmed, and sometimes sick. Perhaps you get headaches or have trouble sleeping. Or, you can get sad and depressed and feel hopeless at times.

If, as a kid, you can learn to manage your stress early on, not only can you get through your days better, but you will set the stage to be healthier and happier when you grow up!

Understanding Your Brain and Your Body

• • • • •

Let's take a moment and understand how your brain and body react to stress.

Thousands of years ago, humans had to survive with little shelter and to protect themselves against wild animals and extreme weather. When early humans were confronted with dangerous situations, their bodies and brains went into survival mode.

So, say you, as an early human, came across an angry tiger! Your body would immediately get ready to fight or run away! This is called the *fight-or-flight* response.

Your brain, sensing danger, would make your heart beat faster, send more blood to your muscles, and tell you to breathe faster so that you would have the strength and energy to escape or fight! Once you had dealt with the situation, your body and brain would return to normal, and you then would rest to recover.

Or, if you were really scared, perhaps you would just *freeze*, and well then, you would really be in trouble. You would hold your breath and your body would shake with fear.

Fast-forward to today. Most of us are not in the wild, fighting angry tigers. Danger may not seem as dramatic, but your body and brain still react in this same way. When someone is mean to you on the playground, when you don't know how to solve a math problem, or when your parents are fighting, you still may feel vulnerable. And so your brain may react by sending the chemicals to the body to fight off the situation or to just freeze. This creates a sense of stress and tension, and even though inside you may feel that it's dangerous, it is not as real as fighting a wild tiger. But your body doesn't realize that! It reacts the same way as it would in that situation. And often you don't take the time to let your body and brain recover after the "danger" has gone away.

Instead of just letting your brain react automatically to a situation—like that fight-or-flight or freeze reaction—you can help your brain take a pause and react smarter and calmer, and then come up with better solutions to handling difficult situations.

If you know how to deal with stress, then when someone calls you a bad name,

or when you feel you have too much homework, or when you are left out of a group situation, you won't automatically get upset or depressed. You know, instead, that you can access that safe, happy place to make a better plan. And you don't let the stress build up! Instead, you give your brain and body time to rest and recover, and to stay strong.

How Meditation Can Help You

• • • • •

Meditation teaches your brain how to stay calm in stressful situations. It helps you find that quiet, safe, and happy place inside yourself and to get to it whenever you need it.

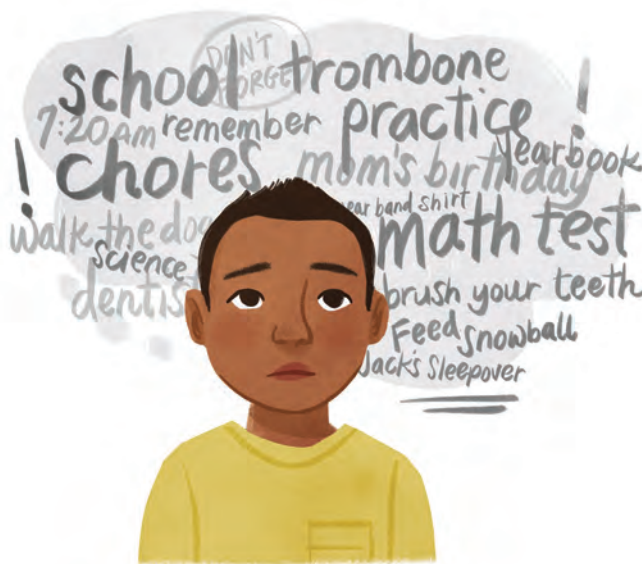
This is how meditation works: Your mind is usually racing with thoughts. One thought makes you think another thought, which makes you think another thought. When you meditate, you slow down racing thoughts. You create more peace inside. You realize that you can control your reactions or choose your next thoughts.

Meditation helps you pause.

So when you are in a panicked situation, as long as you don't have to escape a wild tiger, you can take a moment to think if there is a better solution.

Meditation also gives your brain rest.

When you rest your brain, like when you rest your body when you sleep, your brain works better. When your brain is rested, you can make better decisions.



So meditation can help you feel more in control of immediate stressful situations, but, more importantly it can make you stronger for longer-term challenges.

Building a Habit

• • • • •

When you do something over and over again, it becomes easier to do. That's why when you try new things, you have to practice to get better and soon things become easier. Like when you are learning to ride a bike, it may take a while to figure out how to balance—and how you can move and balance at the same time. With more practice, you find that you can easily ride a bike.

With the exercises in this book, you need to have practice and have patience. The more you do the exercises, the easier they will become.

Think of a peaceful forest that no one has ever visited. At first there is no clear path for you to walk down. You need to clear the way, and it may be difficult to make it through the bushes, the mud, and other things. But with each walk down the same way, the path becomes clearer and easier to walk on.

Your body and mind are similar to a path in the woods. Your mind can be full of stress and worries. Your body can feel tension that builds up. The first time you try some of these exercises it may even feel a bit weird. But if you find it helpful at all, know that the more you do it, the easier it gets.

How to Do the Exercises in This Book

• • • • •

One of the most important lessons of this book is to learn how to relax.

While doing the exercises to come, remember: don't get nervous about doing them in any exact way. Your body will always make sure you breathe. Your mind will always have racing thoughts. You can't really be bad at breathing, meditating, or moving!

The point of this book is to give you some exercises and tips on how you can use your breath to calm down and to feel more in control of your thoughts.

Think of this book as a map. It will help guide you to different places, but sometimes you may choose a different path. That is okay.

In fact, it's great!

Part of the goal of this book is to help you find your own voice and your own



path—to know how your body and mind react to situations and to know how you can manage your own situations better.

For the exercises in this book, choose one at a time. Read the exercise first. Then, put the book aside and try it by yourself.

Or . . .

You may want to ask a parent, caretaker, sibling, or friend to read the exercise to you and then do it with them.

Don't worry if you do it a different way. And if you forget how to do it, even in the middle of doing it, you can just look at the book again!

When you want to time yourself, you can use a clock or alarm with a sound that is soothing to you. If the exercise says to do it for five minutes, and you decide you are done after two minutes, that's perfectly fine. Or you may find you want to do it for fifteen minutes. That's okay, too!

You may also find it helpful to write notes or draw how you feel after doing an exercise or jot down what you learned about while doing it. It may be helpful to keep a journal of your reflections and to set intents (what you want) for the future. It can always be fun and enlightening to look back at these, remembering some of your struggles and what practices helped you on your journey. It is empowering to know that you have grown, overcome challenges, and solved problems.

Some exercises may be helpful, and some you may want to skip. That, too, is okay. Do whatever feels most comfortable for you.





THAT SAFE, HAPPY PLACE

Let's do an exercise to think about when you feel happy and safe. Read through the exercise first, and then try it by yourself. It's all right if you don't remember the exact sequence, as you can adjust it to do what's most comfortable for you. (Note: this is one of the longest exercises in the book!)

Time Needed: 15 MINUTES

Location: A QUIET PLACE

It may be helpful to close your eyes.

Take a deep breath.

Breathe in. Pause for a second. And now breathe out.

Notice how you are sitting. Is your body relaxed or tense?

Breathe in and think RELAX.

And breathe out again.

Imagine a time when you felt really happy. When you felt loved, full of energy, excited, but also peaceful. Perhaps it was at a birthday party or on the sports field or watching a movie with your family. Or maybe it was just a time when you were hanging out with friends. If it is hard for you to

think of any time, then create a time. Think about where you would be and what kind of people would surround you.

Now, choose just one time. SEE where you are. Are you inside or outside? Who is around you? Do you remember what you were wearing? Or simply make up your outfit. Just see it in your head.

HEAR where you are. What sounds can you hear? Is there music on? Or is it quiet? Even in the quiet, can you hear sounds in nature or the everyday sounds of your school or house? Are people talking?

SMELL where you are. It may sound funny but try to focus on what it smells like. Maybe you remember the unique perfume your grandmother wears or you can smell the trees that surround you.

TASTE where you are. If you are eating something, imagine the taste of what makes you feel good. You may want to make up something that you love to eat if you can't taste anything right away.

Take another deep breath. In and out.

Now . . .

FEEL. How do you feel inside?

Put your attention on your heart and breathe in the feeling of PEACE.

Breathe in and out.

Take another breath, in and out, and tell yourself to remember this feeling.

Open your eyes if they were closed.

If you feel like it, you may want to write notes about or draw your feelings. What does your happy place feel like? If you had to draw the feelings, what would they look like? Sometimes it is helpful to look at these notes or drawings once a day. And, in those moments when you feel stressed, you can look at your notes or drawing or just close your eyes and see the images again.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

STORIES FOR BOYS Who DARE —TO BE— DIFFERENT

TRUE TALES OF AMAZING BOYS WHO CHANGED
THE WORLD WITHOUT KILLING DRAGONS

Ben Brooks

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PATCH ADAMS

(BORN 1945)

Patch was bullied at school for being different and for standing up to the racism that he saw around him. Because of the bullying, he ended up in the hospital three times. On his third visit, when Patch was eighteen, he decided that, after he got out, he'd start a revolution to spread happiness.

For a while, he found it difficult to be around people, so he set out to do experiments in friendliness. He would call random numbers on his phone and speak to the people on the other end until they'd become friends. He would start up conversations with strangers in the street. And he would ride elevators up as many floors as it took for the people inside to introduce themselves and start laughing together.

Patch became a clown and a doctor. He started his own hospital called the Gesundheit! Institute, where his goal wasn't just to make his patients less sick, but to make them happier, too.

These days, he flies all over the world, giving talks and performances as a clown and as a doctor. Patch doesn't think the two jobs have to be separate.

To him, laughter is one of the best medicines. It can get the blood flowing, strengthen your heart, and even help your body fight off diseases.

If you want to help make the world a better place, Patch has some suggestions: be silly in public, wear funny clothes, be friendly to everyone you meet, and pick up all the garbage that you see in your town.

"Anyone can do something," he says. "It's about deciding to do it—to dive into work for peace and justice and care for everybody on the planet."







EDDIE AIKAU

(1946–1978)

Eddie surfed whenever he could. Before school, after school, and sometimes even during school, if he could get away.

He lived on Oahu, the third largest Hawaiian island, and the ocean meant everything to him.

Working at a pineapple factory was how Eddie saved up enough money for his first surfboard. After that, he got a job as a lifeguard and was given the task of covering all the beaches on the North Shore of the island.

Even though the waves could sometimes rise as tall as utility poles, not a single person was lost on Eddie's patch while he was lifeguard. He would venture out into waves that no one else would dare go near. Eddie never let the sea take anyone away. For that, they made him Lifeguard of the Year.

One day, Eddie joined a crew on a wooden boat to re-enact the historic journey taken by Polynesian migrants between the Hawaiian and Tahitian islands. They would travel using traditional methods and navigate only by the sun and stars.

They ran into terrible weather. The water was so rough that it capsized the ship, tossing everyone overboard. Desperately, they clung to the sides of the boat, trying to stay afloat.

"Don't worry," Eddie told the crew. "I'll go and get help."

He swam away, into the dark, rolling sea.

The crew was eventually rescued. Nobody ever saw or heard from Eddie again.

To this day, when faced with tall waves or stormy weather, Hawaiian surfers say to each other, "Eddie would go." Every year, they hold a surfing competition in his honor. They cancel frequently because they only go ahead if the waves are huge.



DR. NAIF AL-MUTAWA

In 1979, Naif spent his summer at Camp Robin Hood, on the edge of a giant lake in America. That was where he first opened a comic book and lost himself in a world of superheroes.

Back home in Kuwait, Naif realized that there were no Muslim characters in any of the comic books he was reading. He decided that he would grow up to be a writer, so he could create them, but his father told him to study a more practical subject. Naif agreed, but he never forgot his dream.

In 2007, he made it a reality.

The 99 are a team of superheroes from all around the world, each named after one of the different ninety-nine qualities of Allah, which is the Muslim name for God.

They get their powers after finding magic stones that have been secretly scattered around the world hundreds of years earlier. The stones were created by the librarians of Baghdad, to preserve the city's wisdom after it was destroyed by invaders.

One character, Mujiba the Responder, has answers to everything, and wears a headscarf like a lot of Muslim girls.

Another character, Darr the Afflicter, uses a wheelchair and can manipulate people's nerves.

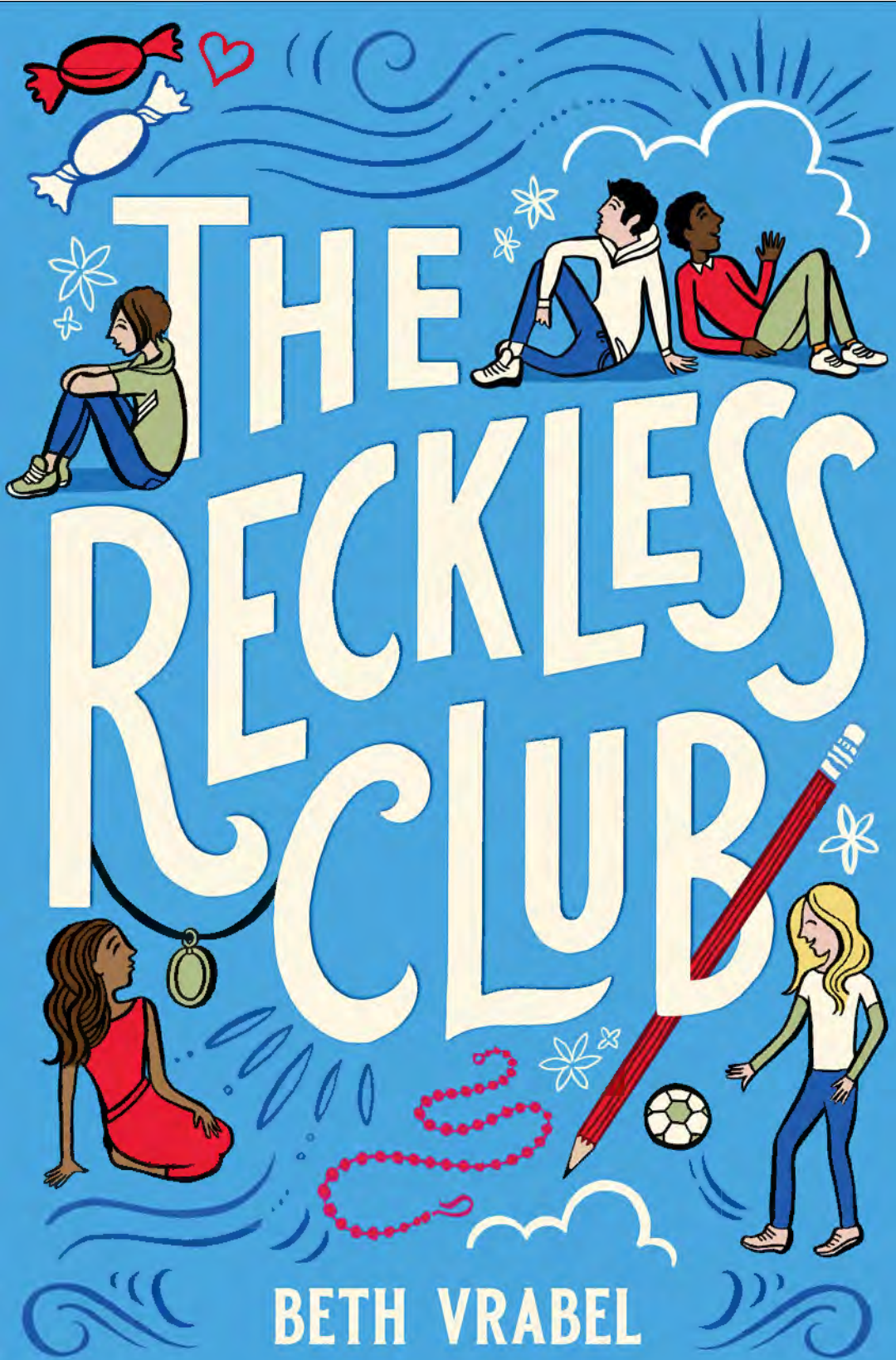
The 99 battle their enemies without violence. Like their religion, they teach peace.

Naif wanted to give Muslim boys and girls their own superheroes. He also wanted the world to have a deeper understanding of Islam than what is sometimes shown on the news.

The comics have sold thousands of copies, been turned into a TV show, and are handed out to children at refugee camps.

Naif has received death threats because of the 99. But he's also been praised. President Obama thanked him for inspiring so many young Muslims and for letting them know that they can be superheroes, too.





BETH VRABEL

Dear Student,

You know why I'm contacting you.

You decided to mar your last day of middle school with a reckless decision, one that ordinarily would land you in a day of in-school suspension. Perhaps you thought being a freshman and moving up to the high school would mean you're exempt from that punishment. You are not.

However, you are hereby offered an opportunity to begin your next year on a better foot than you ended the last. I am willing to allow you to spend the last day of summer vacation at Northbrook Retirement Village for a day of service. You will be expected to care for the needs of residents as well as spend a significant portion of the day reflecting on your poor decisions and what you have learned by helping others in need. This will be demonstrated in the form of an essay to me, due at the end of the day.

This invitation will be extended to several other students who also behaved regretfully. It is my hope that each of you will spend this time not only gaining a greater understanding of your own autonomy but also reflecting on what might have led to—and prevented—the decisions of your classmates.

Enjoy your summer,
Principal Hardy

AUGUST
23

8:00 a.m.

JASON “The Nobody”

Jason sits on the grass lawn outside the Northbrook Retirement Village, curled over the sketchbook on his lap and putting off the inevitable as long as possible. A mud-colored Volvo pulls to a stop in front of him; all of the windows are down but even if they weren't, he'd be able to hear the high-pitched squeals from inside.

“I can't believe you couldn't get me out of this!” a girl screeches. Jason doesn't bother looking up. He'd know Lilith Bhat's voice anywhere. It had always echoed through the halls of Northbrook Middle School.

“Lily, you need to be held accountable for your actions.” The

woman in the driver's seat sounds distracted. Jason peeks up; sure enough, he can see through the window that her mom's thumbing through screens on her phone.

"Lilith. My name is *Lilith*. You gave it to me. Why can't you use it?"

Her mom sighs, and Jason hears the car shift into park. "Your father gave you that name. I wanted to give you a traditional Indian name—Bharati, another name for Saraswati, the goddess of wisdom."

"You're an atheist," Lilith snaps. Jason bends further over the sketchbook to hide his chuckle, while keeping his eyes on the car. "And, seriously? You would've named me Bharati? I'd be Bharati Bhat! That name is awful."

"It's your grandmother's name."

"Like I said. Even Dida wouldn't want that for me."

"You could use a little wisdom."

Lilith crosses her arms and slams her back against the seat.

Her mother sighs again. "Stop being so dramatic."

Lilith throws her arms in the air, then whips open the car door. "Don't be dramatic?" She leans into her mother; she's about as opposite of Lilith as a person can get, with a dark suit and her hair carefully combed back into a tight ponytail. "It's like we've never met."

Mrs. Bhat presses her thin lips into a pale line. She slowly closes

her eyes. “Perhaps you could use this time to *learn* something.”

Lilith pauses before stepping out of the car. “I suppose I could.”

She stands outside of the car now, running her hands through her glossy black-brown hair to make sure it’s smooth. She tugs at her dress—it’s bright orange and snug across the top before flaring out. Some girls with Lilith’s soft shape hide under big sweaters or loose T-shirts. But the bright orange is meant to draw attention, Jason knows; everything Lilith does is to get attention. The orange complements her dark skin, and the retro style of the dress makes her look more like a 1950s-era teenager than a thirteen-year-old middle schooler in middle Missouri. “I *could* use this time to study the elderly, in case I’m ever cast in a time-traveling story. They’re back in vogue.”

Jason hears her mother sigh again, then the Volvo is pushed into drive. “That’s not what I meant. I’ll pick you up at four thirty, Lily.” She peels away from the curb, making the passenger side door slam shut as Lilith jumps out of the way.

“It’s *Lilith*!” she yells at the retreating car. Whipping around, she spots him. Her eyes widen like she’s never seen him before, even though they had four classes together last year. Jason feels her eyes drifting across him, taking in his shaggy hair and a beanie. “What are you looking at?”

Jason shrugs and smiles with just the right side of his mouth.

His choppy, long hair hangs across his narrow eyes. He nibbles at a hangnail, and Lilith winces at his painted-black chewed-up fingernails.

“You have abysmal cuticle care.”

“I’ll work on that.”

Lilith crosses her arms and stomps toward the door. After shoving the sketchbook and charcoal pencil into his backpack, Jason trails silently behind her. He gives her a lot of space because drama might be contagious and he doesn’t want anything to do with it. He keeps his hands shoved in his pockets, his head bent low, and his posture as slouched as the canvas backpack slung over his shoulder.

“Hey, Picasso.” A girl with close-cropped pixie hair and eyes heavily lined with black makeup is perched on the cement ledge bordering the building’s porch.

“Rex.” Jason nods hello.

Rex tilts her head toward the doors closing behind Lilith. “Is there, like, a school meeting going on? First Drama Queen—”

“I think she wants to be called Lilith.”

“What? Anyway, inside I spotted the black kid with the”—Rex presses a finger into her cheek like a dimple and makes a sound—*ding*—like a crystal goblet being flicked—“with Principal Hardy, probably sweet-talking the nurses into a giving him a foot massage.”

Jason's eyes crinkle. "Wes is here? He's, like, class president. I wonder what he did wrong to serve time."

"Serve time?"

"You know, suspension? I didn't mean to offend, like if serving time is something you or your fam—"

"Your political correctness is annoying." Rex crosses her arms and juts her pointy chin at Jason, who unconsciously takes a step back. "But what are you talking about?"

"Well, Principal Hardy thinks he's sticking it to us, doesn't he? Making us spend our last Saturday of summer vacation volunteering with old people since we screwed up the last day of school."

Rex squints at him.

"That's why *you're* here, right?" Jason asks.

Both turn as a red convertible screeches to a stop in front of them. Without saying good-bye or looking back at the driver, a girl in running leggings and a zipped-up sweatshirt hops out. Jason's spine seems to straighten on its own when he sees who it is—Ally. His backpack suddenly feels a lot heavier. He never would've risked bringing his sketchbook if he had known Ally was going to be here. The bag drops down his arm and he clutches it in his fist while thinking about the drawings of her midkick at the soccer net. At the finish line of the track. Pitching the softball. It's not that he's a stalker or anything, or even that he has a crush on the

girl. Sports aren't his thing. Girls, either, if he's being honest. In fact, he and Ally have zilch in common.

It's just her face is made for sketching—heart-shaped but with sharp, high cheekbones incredible for shading; thick dark eyelashes framing sea-glass green eyes; even darker eyebrows in fierce straight lines like two slashes across her delicate face; wild hair that moves even more than she does. Drawing her midmovement never truly captures her, so of course he can't stop drawing her. It's an artist thing, he tells himself.

"Great." Rex groans. "Sports Barbie is here, too."

As Ally trots from the car, she shoves her thick hair back to the top of her head, not bothering to pull the hair all the way through the ponytail holder. When she gets to the stairs, she twists her neck, and Rex and Jason both cringe at the popping sound. Her father yells from the car. "Don't forget you're missing practice for this today. You better figure out a way to get in some training!"

The girl scowls, but dutifully sprints up the stairs, still without looking back.

"Ally, right?" Jason says as she passes. Rex's eyes widen. It's not like him to offer up casual conversation.

But Ally barely nods. She shoves through the door and into the building.

"*Ally, right?*" Rex mocks.

"What?" Jason ducks his head, his hair covering his eyes but

not the flush across his face.

“Dude. You can’t call me out on not knowing Wes’s name and then say, ‘*Ally, right?*’ as if everyone and their brother doesn’t know who Sports Barbie is. She’s, like, the most popular girl in school. Maybe in the county.”

“I’m working on my social skills.” He shrugs.

“You hate people. It’s the basis of our friendship.”

“We’re not friends,” Jason says. “I’m just the only person who isn’t scared of you.”

Rex’s eyebrow pops up.

“Okay,” he concedes, “I’m a *little* scared of you.”

The corner of Rex’s mouth tugs back in an almost-smile. “As you should be, Picasso.” The smile disappears altogether when they hear the booming voice of their school principal ordering Ally, Wes, and Lilith to take a seat in the lobby.

“Guess we better get this over with.” Rex groans. She elbows Jason in the ribs. “Maybe you can spend the day with *Ally*, working on your *social skills*.”

“Shut up.”

Principal Hardy is in the middle of the lobby, standing like always with his hands behind him as he gazes with narrowed eyes at Lilith, who’s applying a layer of lip gloss; Ally, who’s sitting on the edge of the couch with her arms crossed; and Wes, who’s grinning straight back into the principal’s face. Rex whistles as

she saunters into the room. One of Hardy's thick gray eyebrows nudges up when he spots her. He curls a finger, indicating her to move toward him.

Rex shoves a hand through her stubby bangs, makes a fist, and tugs, then trudges toward the principal. "What's up?"

Hardy crosses his arms. "It's a positive sign that you're here."

"Wait!" says Wes, the boy with the *ding* smile. "This was optional?" He salutes the rest of the students and moves toward the door.

"Sit down! No, mister. It's not," Mr. Hardy bellows, but keeps his eyes locked with Rex. Wes sits back down.

Rex stares at the principal, but doesn't say anything. The longer the silence stretches, the deeper Hardy's face flushes as he waits for Rex to crack and be the first to speak. Instead, she yawns, wide and deliberate. Hardy's nostrils flare as if he's keeping his own yawn inside.

The principal speaks softly, probably so only Rex can hear, but of course the other students lean in to eavesdrop. "This is a day where you can show me you have a place at our school."

"Sorry, Teach," Rex says. "We're off to the high school this year. New principal."

Hardy smirks. "Actually, you're looking at the new high school principal. But that doesn't mean this isn't a chance for you to kick-off the new year with a clean slate."

Rex slowly blinks.

“I’m going to come down hard on you this year, Rex. No more of your games. I won’t tolerate it, regardless of what you might be dealing with at . . . home.”

Rex’s eyes narrow. Her chin pops up. But she still doesn’t speak. The two of them glare for another long moment, while behind them the other students stare without breathing.

“My money’s on Rex,” Wes whispers. Jason backs away from the other boy.

Principal Hardy grinds his teeth. “Take a seat,” he finally snaps.

Rex backs up, eyes still on the principal, and sinks into the seat next to Lilith.

“You’re on my dress,” Lilith whines, pulling her skirt from under Rex’s legs.

“Whose is it, your mom’s?” Rex doesn’t budge.

“This is *vintage*,” Lilith says importantly. She yanks on the skirt, pulling it out from under Rex.

Rex hisses like a cat, making two bright red spots flare on Lilith’s cheeks and a laugh escape from Wes. Rex turns her glare on him, but he seems impervious, smiling even wider. Rex claps silently as Lilith, her skirt yanked free, makes a big production of grabbing her satchel—also vintage, plastic with giant peonies—before stomping over to the other vinyl couch in the lobby. She

plops down next to Ally, who sighs out of her nose and angles away from all of them.

“Seriously,” Lilith whispers to Jason too loudly to actually be a whisper. Jason’s eyes widen at being directly addressed. “How can you be *friends* with her?” Ally turns their way, listening in. Jason’s hands fly up like he’s holding back Lilith’s words.

“I’m not!” Jason stumbles to his feet. His head whips between Lilith, Rex, and Ally. Rex stretches out her legs, crossing them at the ankles, and watches Jason squirm. “I mean, Rex, you’re not really friends with anyone, are you? I don’t mean that, either. I mean, you don’t like people. Right? It’s not that I don’t want to be—”

Wes takes a seat next to Rex, rubbing his hands together. “Oooh, this is getting good.” He nudges her. “You’re going to hurt him, aren’t you?”

But Jason’s off the hook as Rex turns on Wes, her lips curling back like she’s about to hiss again.

“Meow,” Wes whispers with another *ding* smile that only stretches when he realizes he’s thrown her. Rex is first to look away.

Three loud claps from Principal Hardy and four out of the five students turn toward him. Rex stays put, staring at a fish tank instead of the principal and the squat woman in scrubs next to him.

“Oh, hi there, Rex!” the woman says suddenly. Still, Rex doesn’t move. Jason’s head swivels between the two of them as if looking for the connection.

The woman bounces a little at them, a smile stretching across her face.

“This is Mrs. Mitchell, head of Northbrook Retirement Village,” Hardy says.

“Jeff and I go way back!” Mrs. Mitchell says with a laugh, not seeing Mr. Hardy’s wince.

“Oh, yeah?” Wes says.

“That’s right,” Mrs. Mitchell says. She clasps her hands behind her back and rocks back on her heels. “Jeff here thinks running a middle school is *so hard*.” She rolls her eyes as she drags out the last two words. “I said, ‘You should try a nursing home sometime if you think you’ve got it rough!’ And that’s how we got here, I guess.”

“That’s one way of looking at it,” Mr. Hardy says without a smile. “Mrs. Mitchell is my sister.”

“And we’re going to join forces today! Jeff and I have so many fun things planned for y’all!”

“You’re not Southern, Trish. We were raised in Pennsylvania. You can’t pull off a Southern accent. How many times do I have to tell you?”

Mrs. Mitchell’s smile stays plastered on her face. “Jeff,” she

drawls to the kids, “might learn today how important it is to be warm and homey when prompting a change in behavior.”

Mr. Hardy shakes his head. “I think I’ll stick with my style.”

“Which is what?” Mrs. Mitchell asks.

Wes’s hand shoots in the air, but Mr. Hardy cuts him off. “Don’t answer that, Wes.” He clears his throat, then continues, “Mrs. Mitchell and I have worked to help coordinate today’s activities.”

“Activities?” Ally asks. “I thought we were helping to clean or something.”

“No, no,” Mrs. Mitchell says, her smile stretching even farther. “We have so many fun activities planned. *I* feel that contributing to society is what brings about change, not *isolating* people for wrongdoing. So we’ll be doing fun things—crafts, preparing meals, maybe even something *artistic*—I just can’t wait!” She claps like a walrus Jason once saw at a zoo.

“You’re going to love it here!” Mrs. Mitchell continues. “It’s so fun and so *well run* that you’ll never want to leave.”

Principal Hardy forces a crack-in-cement smile despite the audible groan from every student. “Mrs. Mitchell says she wouldn’t miss an opportunity to have you interact socially with residents.”

Jason’s eyes flick between Hardy and Rex, who stood up abruptly at Mrs. Mitchell’s words. Hardy shakes his head ever so

slightly, eyes locked with Rex. She slumps back into the seat. No one but Jason seems to have noticed the exchange. Jason's fingers drum on his backpack as he leans against an armchair, a safe place outside of the drama on the two couches.

"Our seniors *love* to talk with young people," says Mrs. Mitchell, bouncing a little more. "First, I'll pair you each with someone who could use a great listening ear." She tugs on her ear and winks. Rex slams her head on the couch back.

"Interview them, ask questions, get to know them," Principal Hardy instructs.

Lilith runs her hands over her dress so the pleats stay smooth. "That's exactly what I was planning to do—approach this as research for future method acting."

"Acting?" Mrs. Mitchell claps her hands together. "You're an actress?"

Lilith nods and says, "I've been the lead in all the community and middle school productions."

"I thought that new kid, the blonde, was going to be the lead last time?" Wes cuts in.

"That was a last-minute casting change," Lilith says primly. *That's one way of putting it*, Jason thinks but keeps his mouth shut. "The point is," she continues, "yes. I am an actress."

"Casting change?" Ally says. "I heard you went all Hulk backstage?"

“Oh,” says Mrs. Mitchell, saving Lilith from replying. “The residents here *love* performances!” More frantic bouncing, this time with claps. “You could put on a skit for them!”

“A what?” Ally and Rex say at the same time, then scowl at each other before turning to glare in different directions.

“A skit.” The smug smile stretching across Principal Hardy’s face is Grinch-like and slow. “I like the sound of that. I’m also going to need a full-page letter—front *and* back—from each of you outlining what you learned throughout the course of the day.”

“Yes!” Mrs. Mitchell cheers again. “At four o’clock, we have a half hour allotted for entertainment. Generally, we play bingo or charades, but I know the residents would much prefer watching an original skit!” She squeals. “Especially if it’s *inspired by their own lives!*” *Clap, clap, clap. Bounce, bounce, bounce.* “Oh, this is fabulous.”

“Fabulous,” Wes echoes, and the dimple disappears from his cheek as he shakes his head. All four turn Rex-like death glares on Lilith, who once again straightens her dress.

“Thanks a lot, Lily,” Ally hisses.

“It’s *Lilith*.”

“Okay,” Mrs. Mitchell says, “let’s meet our seniors! You can get to know them while helping to serve breakfast. If you’ll leave your bags here, I’ll have one of the aides put them in the meeting room where you’ll be having lunch.”

The kids slip their phones into their pockets and drop their bags in front of Mrs. Mitchell, all except for Jason. “I’ll hang on to mine,” he says.

Lilith grabs her satchel back, too.

Mrs. Mitchell claps and bounces again, then turns, making her way past the giant tank full of tropical fish and down a hallway. Principal Hardy sighs and swoops up his arms like a conductor. The students groan and follow her. That is, all except for Rex, whose eyes stay locked on the fish tank, where a fat purple fish glides backward and then rushes forward into its own reflection again and again. Jason pauses beside her.

Hardy clears his throat. Silently, Rex stands and trails behind the rest of the group toward the cafeteria.

“Don’t worry,” Hardy says as Rex passes. “We’re staying off the third floor.”

“As if I care,” Rex snaps, and barrels ahead, elbowing Jason to the side.

“What’s on the third floor?” Jason asks the principal.

But Principal Hardy just shakes his head. Under his breath, he says, “Don’t forget why you’re here, Jason.”

LULU

THE

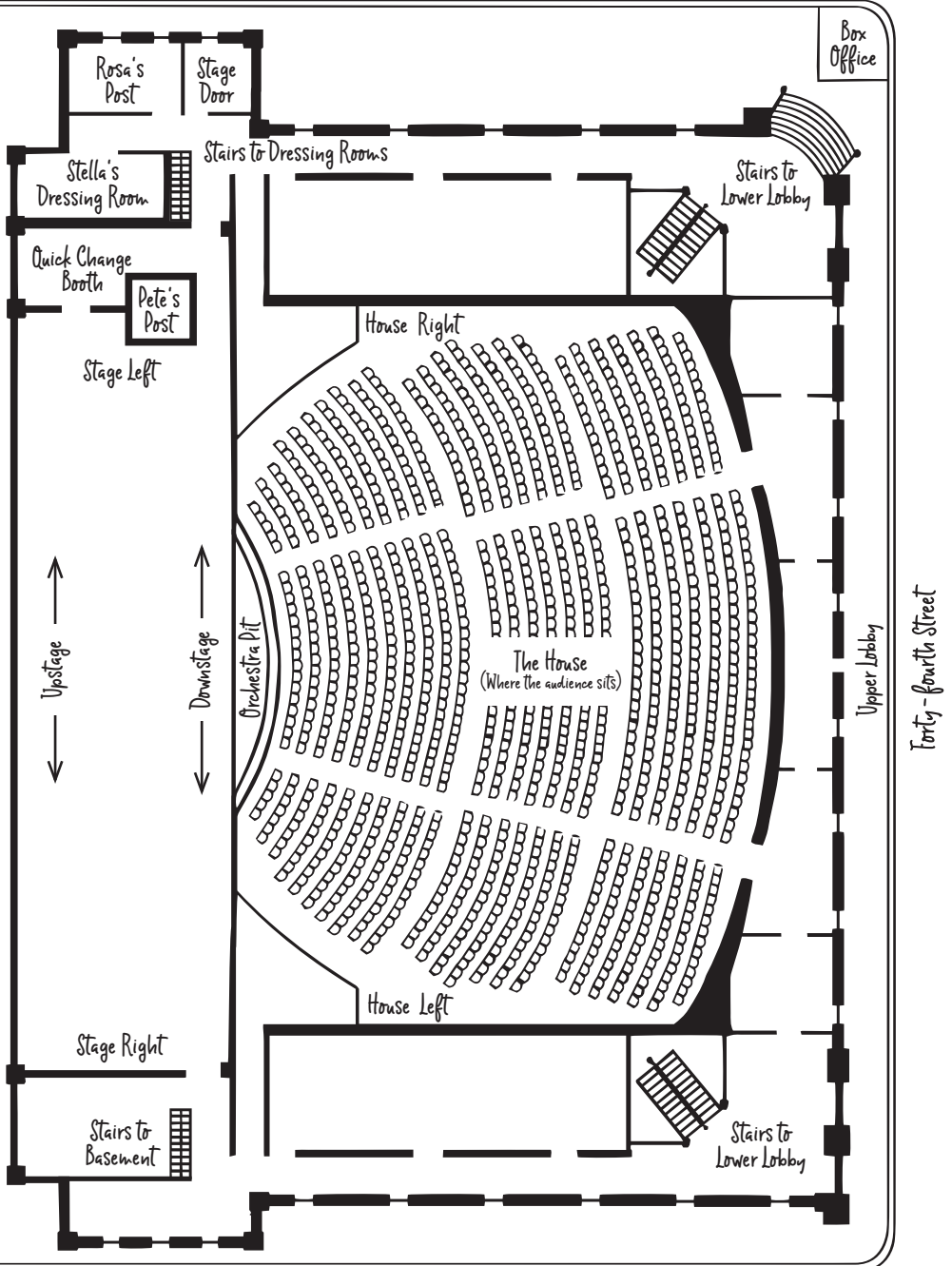
BROADWAY MOUSE



TINY DREAMER. BIG DREAM.

JENNA GAVIGAN

Shubert Alley





HERE'S THE SCOOP

NOT TO BRAG (WELL, THIS IS MY STORY, SO I guess if I'm going to brag, this is the place to do it, right?), but my house is the most beautiful, most magical, most jaw-droppingly fabulous place in the world. (If I'm going to brag, I may as well *full-out* brag, right?)

How do I know these facts, you ask? How am I certain that my house is all these things and more? Sure, it's the only place I've ever lived. Sure, I've never been off Forty-Fourth Street, let alone the island of Manhattan. Sure, you're telling yourself that "my house is the most beautiful, most magical, most jaw-droppingly fabulous

place in the world” should be categorized as an opinion, rather than a fact. A fact needs to be proven, right?

Hold on a second. This is a novel, not some scientific document. It’s a story, *my* story, so if I say something’s true, it’s true. But to appease all you science lovers out there, I’ll give you a bit of information about my house and you can come to your own conclusion—you can *deduce*. (Ugh, I sound like that know-it-all *Amanda*. More on her later . . .)

On my house’s ornate, hand-painted ceiling hang four prizewinning pumpkin-sized crystal chandeliers. In my house’s biggest room there are precisely one thousand four hundred forty-seven blue-green velvet seats. There are more than a dozen rooms full of makeup and wigs and costumes, and the people who inhabit these rooms are the best, most interesting, most loving people you’ll ever meet. Sometimes, it’s so quiet you could hear a pin drop (literally, there are hundreds of pins of different varieties all over the building), but gloriously loud at other times

with the sounds of instruments and singing and (sigh) applause. I mean, really, is there anything more twitter-pating than the sound of applause?

If you've yet to guess what kind of house I live in, then this may not be the story for you. But please keep reading because some grown-up already bought the book for you, and they (and I) will be heartbroken if you don't finish it.

My house? It's a theatre. A *Broadway* theatre. (And yes, it's *theatre* not *theater*. I'm not being fancy, it's just correct.)

I know what you're thinking. This narrator is bluffing. She's a liar. She's a fraud! People don't *live* in Broadway theatres. Sure, they *work* in theatres. They sew costumes, move scenery, or play the trombone. They (big sigh) perform onstage. But *people* certainly don't *live* in Broadway theatres.

Well, dear reader, you are correct. People don't. But mice, mice certainly do. *She's a mouse*, you say? Excellent

powers of deduction, dear reader. 'Tis true. I'm Lulu the Mouse, and the Shubert Theatre at 225 West 44th Street in New York City? It's my house.

Now that you know my address and my name, you really only need to know one more thing about me in order to read my story.

It's the thing I daydream and nightdream about.

The thing I wish for and hope for and practice for.

The thing that makes me . . . well . . . *different* from other mice.

I want to be on Broadway. I want it more than anything in the world.



CHAPTER ONE

LUCY LOUISE!" A BOOMING VOICE YELLS. No microphone necessary; ladies and gentlemen, meet my mother. Unlike most parents, who reserve full-name hollers for when a kid's in trouble, my mother insists on calling me by my full name at all times. It's like all these years later, she's still proud of its adorable alliterativeness (aka the back-to-back *Ls*). I mean, I'm not a baby anymore. Get over it, lady. You know what else is adorable and alliterative? Lulu, my nickname and stage name. Try it sometime. (P.S. I love my mom more than I love cookies, tap shoes, and Stephen Sondheim. P.P.S. Don't tell Stephen Sondheim.)

“Kinda busy, Mom,” I yell back. I’m in my nest stretching: legs in a wide V, arms out in front of me so my stomach is *almost* flat on the ground. So help me, I will be able to do a center split by spring.

“I gave birth to you, young lady!” Mom shouts. See? She’s obsessed. “You have twenty seconds to sit down for dinner!”

“Coming!” I practically sing as I dramatically whip around my neck like a scarf the piece of chartreuse ribbon our costumer Bet gave me, careful not to get it caught in my whiskers. I learned this signature move from Heather Huffman, one of our most glamorous cast members. She’s famous for her entrances, exits, and impossibly high heels. When we first met, I looked up at her and said, “Wow, you’re tall,” and she replied, “Honey, it’s the shoes.” Since then, we’ve been as close to best friends as a (human) grown-up and (mouse) kid can be.

I emerge from my nest to find my dad setting our dining room table, which just happens to be a vintage dictionary,

circa 1925. Scurrying around the layers of rusty pipes and old wires that line the ceiling above our dining room table are my four brothers. Yes, you read that correctly: *four brothers*. (Shout-out to any youngest siblings with a big family of mostly boys. We'll get through this together.)

If in the future I mention “the Hooligans” please know I’m referring to my big brothers, whose actual names are Walter Brooks, Matthew, Timothy, and Benjamin—Walt, Matty, Timmy, and Benji for short. (Walt is my parents’ firstborn, so they named him after the Walter Kerr and Brooks Atkinson Theatres, aka my parents’ childhood homes. Don’t ask why they didn’t just give Matthew the name Brooks, unless you want to listen to a very long story about tradition and ancestors and yada blah blah, don’t ask.)

“Boys!” my mother snaps. “I sewed on so many beads today I can barely see straight. Your father went to work at five a.m. and has been cooking for the last hour. Sit. Down. Now.”

The Hooligans dismount their jungle gym of pipes and wires and proceed to fight over seats—even though we’ve been sitting on the same matchboxes since the beginning of time—and then finally settle in.

“Nice scarf, Lulu.” This is Benji. He’s only a tiny bit older than I am and had trouble saying “Lucy Louise” when he was little, so I’ve got him to thank for my *très chic* (that’s French for “very fancy”), marquee-ready nickname. I’ve got Walt and Matty to thank for the little hook at the end of my tail. One of them—we’re still not sure which, as they’re identical twins—stepped on me when I was three weeks old and the end of my tail has looked like a witch’s finger ever since.

“Thanks. It’s silk. Don’t touch it.” They’re forever touching things with their (frankly) filthy feet.

My dad barely has time to get his signature Tuesday night corn soufflé on the table before my brothers are devouring it like the little beasts they are. It’s a good thing I’m small and don’t need much food. Honestly.

“Chew, please!” Mom says. My mother may sound like she’s scolding, but in truth she’s just a loud New Yorker who enjoys nothing more than “watching her loves eat.”

Per usual, my dad made himself a separate soufflé sans salt; he’s got an issue with salt, the issue being, he can’t have any or his ears will explode. No, not *literally*. Long story short, he’s got this inner ear disease and salt makes him dizzy and pukey and he’d far rather eat bland food than be sick all the time, so . . . no salt for him.

“Thank you for this beautiful meal, dear,” my mother says.

“You’re very welcome,” my dad says.

Married forever and my parents still look at each other like they’re teenagers in love. Heather Huffman says this kind of love is “more rare than the Hope Diamond.” She knows *everything*.

“How was work?” my mother asks.

“Oh, fine. Fine. Nothing to report. Cold out today,” Dad says.

I have zero idea what my dad does for work nor do I really care because I'm positive it has nothing to do with the theatre. My mom, on the other hand, works in the wardrobe department with Bet, our head costumer and seamstress. Yes, like the mice in *Cinderella*. We're cool with the comparisons. Those mice did a lot of good for the image of our species.

"Let's 'talk about day,'" my mother says. Apparently when he was tiny, Timmy looked up at my mom from his nest and said, "Talk about day?" in an effort to keep her from leaving. Since then "talk about day" is a dinnertime, pre-bedtime tradition in the Mouse family.

"Not much to tell," Walt says.

"This is true," Matty says, not-so-slyly winking at Walt.

"So, you weren't in the basement of the Broadhurst playing with those boys I told you not to play with?" my mother asks. "That was just a heinous rumor?"

"H-I-E-N-O-U-S," Walt recites.

"H-E-I," Timmy says with a smart smile.

“Oh, like you’re such a saint,” Matty says. “I saw you reading that *Frozen* program. Did it just magically fly across Forty-Fourth Street?”

“That’s enough,” my dad says. “Benji. How about you?”

“I helped stage management with some paperwork,” Benji says. “Audience attendance is up, despite the weather.” The moment they let mice produce a Broadway show, Benji will be ready.

“Lulu?” my mother asks.

“I’ve almost got my center split,” I say. “And I think I finally mastered the tap combination for the Act Two finale.”

“I’m sure you have,” my mother says, in that way mothers do. “And your sewing practice?”

“I’ll get to it,” I say. And I will. I never lie to my mother. “It’s just—”

“Rehearsing the show is more fun,” my mother says.

Just then, a rumble from upstairs. A gentle vibration, a hum, a murmur. I always feel it first, before hearing it.

Activity. Something beginning. If you've ever seen the musical *West Side Story*, think of the song the lead guy, Tony, sings at the beginning about "something coming"—that's how I'm feeling right now.

I look at the clock: 6:30. All this fussing over my silk chartreuse ribbon-scarf and measly portion of corn soufflé and I almost missed it.

"Company, this is your Half-Hour call," Pete's voice booms over the intercom. "Half Hour, please, Half Hour."

"Half Hour already?" my dad says.

"You know we do Tuesdays at seven now, Dad." He knows this.

"Oh, that's right. Well, no daughter of mine can be late for her Half-Hour call. Hurry up, Lulu," Dad says. "I'll keep some soufflé warm for you in case you're hungry later."

"Thank you!" I kiss him on the cheek and scurry off faster than you can say "*Hocus Pocus* should be a Broadway musical."

“But come right down after the first number, miss!” my mom calls after me. “Get that sewing practice done before bed and then you won’t have to worry about it tomorrow.”

I’m running, now. Actually running. If a human walked by, they’d probably mistake me for a whirling ball of flying dust. Being late for Half Hour is a really big deal. Half Hour means that the show will begin in, well . . . a half an hour. If a cast member isn’t in the building and signed in on the sign-in sheet by Half Hour, they can’t perform. And while on paper I’m not an actual cast member, I sure am in my heart.

“Lucy Louise!” she shouts again.

“Yes, Mom, I heard you! Sewing before bed!” I belt.

I get to our living room door (aka the entrance to the basement level of backstage) and weave my way up the rubber-coated, nonslip stairs to the dressing rooms.

LIZZY AND THE GOOD LUCK GIRL

Susan Lubner

CHAPTER 1

I'D BROUGHT HOME STRAYS BEFORE. PLENTY OF cats and a one-eyed poodle. But never a human. And not without my parents knowing.

The day started like a regular fall Saturday: dark and cold. November suns always took their sweet time rising. My cat Fudge had woken me once already when it was still pitch-black. Here he was again, marching across my pillow and pulling my hair. At least now it was light outside.

"Are you kidding me?" I asked. "It's a good thing you're cute." I reached over my head and pulled him close, pressing his nose against mine. He purred and dropped his head against my cheek. I kissed his fuzzy striped face. Then he stared at me with his green eyes and tapped me on the chin with a paw.

Below my bedroom, plates clattered, muffled voices shouted

out orders, and every once in a while I could hear the scuff of feet or the scrape of a chair move across the black-and-white checkboard floor. We live on the west side of East Thumb, Maine, on the corner of Abbott and Greenleaf and right smack on top of our diner, the Thumbs-Up. Dad had long gone downstairs to work. Usually, Mom would have been with him at the diner already, too, and by the time they opened at five thirty, Dad would take charge of the griddle, and she would take charge of pretty much everything else.

“Fill the water glasses before the customers’ butts hit the chair,” she’d tell the servers. “Cut the potatoes into wedges. They look tastier,” she’d tell Dad, even though the little squares cooked faster.

These days, with her belly full of baby again, Mom didn’t get to work until close to ten, and she took Saturdays off altogether. She didn’t freak about half-empty water glasses or the shape of fried potatoes anymore, either. The baby was due to arrive in seven weeks, and Mom smiled at everything because of it—the rain, the bowl of fruit on the kitchen counter, stupid bumper stickers on cars. I hoped her smiley state of mind was a good sign. That we’d be lucky and all would go well this time with this pregnancy.

Fudge wiggled out of my arms and went back to standing on my hair. Life seemed pretty easy for a cat. All you needed was a

half-decent place to sleep and some food. Not like my life, which lately seemed the opposite of easy. Thinking about it, my brain felt snarled and tangled like a sticky ball of spaghetti.

First, I worried about Mom and the baby a lot. A couple of weeks ago, Mom thought she had felt a contraction. It scared the daylights out of all of us that she could have been going into labor way before she was supposed to. Thankfully, it turned out to be a false alarm. But ever since it happened, she'd seemed extra tired and looked kind of pale.

The other thing I couldn't get out of my head was the stray who I'd seen going in and out of the empty apartment house across the street. What if she had kittens? I once read in a book that pregnant cats will seek out shelter. Maybe that's why she liked that apartment? And had she found the small pile of tuna I had left for her yesterday? I guess life wasn't always so easy for cats, after all.

My bed shook when the door to the diner opened and slammed shut. A sign. *Get up! Get going!*

I dressed, brushed my teeth, and then poked my head into my parents' room. Mom snored in her sleep, and I could hear her nose whistle from the doorway.

Our other cat, Reuben, snoozed at the far end of the bed. Waffles, our poodle, had learned the hard way to keep his distance from that cat. He snuggled against Mom in a neat ball. His tail batted against the quilt when he saw me with his one eye.

“Shhhhhh . . .,” I told him, and closed the door gently.

In the kitchen, I pulled a hunk off of last night’s chicken and wrapped it in foil. Then I grabbed my coat and bag from the rack, tossed on a scarf, and scrambled outside into the cold sunshine.

The wind pushed me like it had hands. Was it saying *hurry up*?

I never used to wonder what it meant when the wind blew against my back, or if an acorn dropped from a tree and knocked me on the head. I never studied the shape of a cloud and thought that the sky might be trying to tell me something. But since the car accident two years ago, I had started paying attention to everything.

My BFF Joss waved to me from the top of the alley that ran beside the diner. We were both wrapped up to our noses in identical Joss-knitted scarves.

“Hey, Lizzy,” she said. “Did you bring food?”

“Of course.” I patted the outside of the bag slung across my hip.

“I brought a meatball,” she told me.

“She’ll love it. What about the cat sweater designs?”

“What about them?” Joss whipped a roll of papers out of her back pocket and waved them around.

Joss and I had come up with an idea to knit and sell sweaters for cats. We were doing it to raise money for the Community Lodge for Cats & Dogs (the fancy name for the East Thumb animal

shelter) where we volunteered. Next Saturday, we were having a cat sweater sidewalk sale in front of the diner. Franny, the Lodge director, was helping us out with it. She thought our idea was awesome. But not Phil, who worked with Franny. He said cats were too temperamental to be “keen” on wearing sweaters. And I could tell that Sid from the diner was iffy, too, just by the slow way he had nodded his head and said, “Oh really,” when we first told him about it.

“Dogs wear sweaters all the time, why not cats?” I had told all the haters. And our teacher, Ms. Santorelli, not only wanted a sweater for her cat, but she wanted us to talk about our fundraiser to the class on Monday.

We crossed the street. Abbott Avenue was noisy with traffic and dotted with gas stations and convenience stores, but Greenleaf Lane was quiet and lined with fat trees, chain-link fences, and apartment houses.

Sandwiched between two dirt lots, diagonally across from the Thumbs-Up, a three-story apartment house loomed like a mangled shipwreck in front of us. A huge tree, which still had a lot of faded leaves hanging from its branches, crowned the roof as if it were trying to help pretty up the place.

We stopped on the sidewalk in front of the porch. A rusty number 4 dangled off an even rustier mailbox attached to a piece of siding. A couple of long planks of wood had been nailed across

the door. KEEP OUT was painted on one of the planks in orange paint. If paint could talk, those two words would be screaming at us.

“The last time I saw the cat, she jumped in there.” I pointed to a loose sheet of plastic over a first floor window.

Joss rewrapped her scarf. Even without our matching knit-wear we looked like a pair. Shoulder-length brown hair. Blue eyes. Freckles.

“Come on,” she said, grabbing my hand. We hurried up the rickety steps. “The tuna is gone. She must be here.”

We moved closer to the broken window. I peeked in.

“Wait,” Joss said, taking a step back, “is this like breaking in? I don’t want to go to jail or anything.”

“It’s okay to break the law to save a life. *Lives* if there are kittens, too,” I said. “Plus, they don’t put twelve-year-olds in jail.” Though I wasn’t positive about that.

“What makes you so sure the cat has kittens?” Joss asked me.

“Why else would she keep going in there?”

“How about to get out of the cold?”

“Maybe. But if you were a *hungry* cat,” I said.

“Which I’m not.”

“But if you were, wouldn’t you hang out at the back door of a diner instead of here? That’s just common sense.”

Joss nodded.

The wind grabbed a bunch of dried up leaves that were piled in the corners of the porch and whipped them around our feet. A big fat warning sign? *Trouble is swirling around me?* Or maybe *opportunity at my feet!* Which was it?

Joss watched me watching the leaves. “They’re just leaves. Nothing else,” she said as if she could read my mind, which I really believed she could sometimes.

“Let’s go,” I said.

I checked the rotted windowsill for broken glass that might be sticking up, then I pulled back the tattered plastic and stepped through. Joss followed.

“It’s not so bad in here compared to how dumpy it is on the outside,” I said, looking around.

“I was thinking the same thing. Except for the dead leaves.” There were little mounds of them everywhere.

The room we stood in was round. Sun poured through tall windows, and we both squinted. There was a plaid recliner with the stuffing coming out of one arm next to a massive fireplace that took up half of one wall. A mirror hung over the mantel, with a few cracks zigzagged through its glass—a sign of bad luck for someone—though I didn’t break it, so not me! A pair of doors with fancy glass knobs opened up into a hallway.

“No cat here,” Joss said, checking underneath the chair.

The house turned way darker and a whole lot colder as we

walked down the hallway, away from the sunny round room. There were fewer windows, and most were boarded up or covered in plastic.

In the kitchen, I peeked inside an open cabinet under the sink. One of the doors had fallen off and it looked like a nice hiding spot for a cat. But all I found was a dirty towel and a box of damp matches.

Back in the hall, Joss tapped her cell phone and turned on the flashlight. The floor lit up in front of us, and we stepped inside a bathroom. The tub was full of grime and enough dead leaves to hide under.

“This bath needs a bath,” Joss joked.

Above us, something made a loud *snap*. We both jumped.

“What was that?” Joss grabbed my arm.

We heard it again, but this time it was softer. I pointed to the torn plastic over a broken window just above the toilet. “I think the wind must have caught it,” I said.

We were back in the hallway heading toward another room when Joss stopped suddenly. I smacked into her.

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“I heard a little squeak.”

“Heeeere, kitty, kitty,” I sang in a high-pitched voice. I unwrapped the chicken.

We peered inside a bedroom. “Look!” I pointed to a hole at the

bottom of a closet door. We walked closer, and the gray cat jumped out at my feet. “Hey, you! There you are!”

“She looks hungry,” Joss said, kneeling to pet her. But before Joss or I had a chance to offer it food, the cat scooted back inside the closet.

“See! I bet she has kittens in there!” I opened the door. Joss shined the light inside. Right away I saw the bulging backpack.

Two yellow sneakers that I nearly stepped on.

Two jean-covered knees tucked under a chin.

A small hand with a tiny tattoo.

Joss screamed and dropped her cell phone. I screamed, too. The cat shot out of the room like a rocket.

And the girl in the closet said a single word:

“Impossible.”