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Rae, Baby

Whitney Call

A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

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March 2013

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## ABSTRACT

Rae, Baby

Whitney Call

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Master of Fine Arts

This thesis is a young adult fictional novel from the perspective of Rachel Jackson, or Rae, a seventeen year-old girl with Williams Syndrome, a rare developmental disorder caused by missing genes on chromosome 7 that causes those with it to lack logical connections, yet possess very gregarious, social, and musical personalities. Think of it as an inverted form of autism.

At the genesis of the novel, Rae becomes pregnant. Upon misunderstanding her mother's sugar-coated reasoning for giving the baby up for adoption, Rae spends the novel trying to find a man to marry so that, in her understanding, she may keep her child.

Along her journey, Rae meets Theo, a well-meaning Christian boy, who appears to be a possible match. Rae falls in love with Theo and gets into various kinds of trouble as she discovers how to take care of herself as well as how to accept herself, disorder and all. Along with her hardworking mother, her feisty grandmother, and her sassy little sister, Rae endeavors this bildungsroman to discover who she is and how she fits into society.

Keywords: Young adult fiction, contemporary, mental disorder, pregnancy, Williams syndrome

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*The Sun is Made of People's Laughs: Perspectives and Humor in Rae, Baby*

I have developed several identities in my life: I am a woman, a woman of faith, a woman of art, a woman of humor.

It might seem strange to pair comedy with faith and art, but I've found that humor thrives on these two other principles. Gene Perret, a writer for *The Carol Burnett Show*, says,

I define a sense of humor as the ability to:

- *see* things as they are
- *recognize* things as they are
- *accept* things as they are. (16)

This ability, of course, requires a shift in perspectives sometimes. The moments we do not feel particularly humorous are the moments we see through the narrow lens of circumstance thickly clouded with emotion. Yet, when we step back and *see* things as they are, we can recognize *why* they are that way, and then *accept* them enough to appreciate and even laugh at what really constitutes life.

Rae found me when I was in need of some humor. In my junior year of college, after finishing my first novel—a rather depressing YA piece about a female Holden Caulfield-esque character who falls in love with her therapist—I craved a narrator who would enlighten my perspective as I wrote him/her. I needed to create someone full of hope.

Hope came to me that summer after I finished reading Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* for the third time. I have always been drawn to books with characters that, while initially un-relatable, require me to stretch my perspective to understand them. It struck me while researching for this new novel that the most logical characteristic of a

perpetually hopeful narrator would be an altered mind. Laughing to myself, I Googled, “Cheerful developmental disorders” and was immediately directed to a Wikipedia article on Williams syndrome.

To fill you in, Williams syndrome (or WS, as it is called) is a developmental disorder caused by 25 missing genes in the strand of chromosome 7. Those with WS generally have elfin-like facial features: small upturned noses, pointed teeth, wide lips and puffy skin under the eyes (“What is Williams Syndrome?”). The behaviors in those with WS can be described as being the inverse of those with autism. Generally, those with WS are gregarious and social. They have large vocabularies and often possess great talents for speaking and storytelling (Dobbs 45). People with WS crave human interaction, yet they lack the mental faculties for abstract and spatial reasoning, thus, preventing them from having deep conversations with others. This is a frustration for many people with WS and their families when they attempt to create friendships because, while “cocktail chatter” is fun, it cannot result in genuine human connectivity (Dobbs 45).

Lastly, some with WS possess great musical abilities. While most with WS cannot read music, many have perfect pitch. Gloria Lenhoff is one representative of the WS community known for her musical abilities. Her father, Howard Lenhoff, described in his book, *The (Strangest) Song: One Father’s Quest to Help His Daughter Find Her Voice*, a scenario where Gloria was tested on her perfect pitch:

He struck a B; Gloria said ‘B.’ He played dyads--two notes at the same time, like C and G--and she named them both. He played triads--three notes at the

same--and she named those as well. It went on and on like that, with Gloria getting virtually every answer right.

Then Ole gave her a much more difficult test. He asked her to sing a simple song like “Happy Birthday” in the key of C major, substituting notes for words. That meant “Happy Birthday to you” became “C, C, D, C, F, E,” and so on... Gloria obliged. Ole was astonished. (191)

More commonly, those with WS have an innate sense of rhythm. Lenhoff also relates an account from a mother describing her WS son’s affinity for rhythm:

A troupe of clog dancers thundered in percussive time on stage, keeping the fiddler's tricky rhythms with their heels on the down-beat... when [John] rushed the stage and stomped alongside the dancers, Sharon was mortified. Her first instinct was to drag him back to his seat and reprimand him, until she saw, to her utter astonishment, that he could actually *do* it. He stomped his heels in time, keeping the beat right alongside the professional dancers....

John obviously had a deep attraction to music and rhythm. His body tended to bop, even in perfect silence, as if keeping time to a song only he could hear. (112-113)

This was a fascinating discovery! As I continued studying the condition, Rae began to take shape in my mind—a teenage girl who was cheerfully quirky, musical, and vivacious but also deeply sensitive to the connections she made with others. Now, I don’t mean to say that writing the mindset of a developmentally dysfunctional individual came easily to me after this secondary research. I knew that such a drastic shift in perspectives would be a difficult leap, but I wanted to

take on the challenge because, after making the necessary shift in perspectives, the common struggle for those with WS parallels an idea that every YA reader—or adult reader, for that matter—can relate to: the search for identity and acceptance.

And then I sat down and pounded out the entire first draft of an entertaining yet inspiring literary opus, right?

No, not at all.

After initially stumbling into this narrator and dabbling in two or three chapters, I stopped. I put *Rae, Baby* on the backburner (or took it off the stove altogether in my mind). I thought the venture would probably be fruitless as I had nowhere to go with a character that was so two-dimensional. Who would want to read about a perpetually happy narrator when I could barely write her without getting bored? No, I moved on from Rae and pursued some meatier characters who were more relatable and far more depressing.

It wasn't until two years later that I returned to the story. I'd again found myself in desperate need of some hope and humor. I'd wearily ended my undergraduate studies, involuntarily ended a romantic relationship, and was quite certain I'd ended a very deep friendship that had spanned over fifteen years and was almost gone in three months. Then one day, while fishing through some old files on my laptop, I came across *Rae*. I read through the few chapters I'd written and found myself wondering, "What's gonna happen to this girl?" I became desperate to know, to see her struggle, to see her discover, to see her win. It was at this point that I'd realized how very complex this narrator was. She wanted what I wanted. She wanted to know what she meant to others and what she meant to herself. I commenced writing



this story and found Rae to be a truly unique character whose journey brightened my uncertain life.

This shift in perspective was exactly what I needed in order to write a character so unrelatable as Rae. As soon as I saw Rae as she really was, instead of through my own lens of misunderstanding and boredom, I found in her a sense of humanity, hope, and humor.

There are more books that require readers to shift perspectives in order to understand the narrator/protagonist. Mark Haddon's *Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, as I have already mentioned, as well as John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, and Francisco X. Stork's *Marcelo in the Real World* are favorite pieces of mine that illustrate this concept. The concept I'm referring to is a subcategory of the unreliable narrator. We define unreliable narrators as those who break the rules of their world and have an audience that is not completely "in the know" about the narrator's motives (Heyd 223-25). *Un-relatable* narrators, however, require more than character exposition or plot development for those of us reading to understand and sympathize with them. They require us to take some accountability and shift our perspectives in order to understand the narrator and the story. If we do this, then by the end of the story, the narrator's language and reasoning seems more logical than at the beginning. We're ultimately fascinated by this change *we've* undergone because we've come to know a character with whom we initially thought we could not identify—not because of information withheld but because of a completely foreign set of logical or moral parameters by which this character operates. I love these stories most of all because the process requires a change in the readers as much as the protagonist, and the change we undergo requires us to step back from our scopes of reasoning and to see, recognize, and accept truth in a fuller meaning.

My favorite encounter with an un-relatable narrator in literature is Christopher Boone, the narrator in Haddon's *Curious Incident*. Christopher is a fifteen year-old boy with Asperger's syndrome. Christopher's perception of concrete reality differs greatly from the general readers'. He rationalizes, "The next day I saw 4 yellow cars in a row on the way to school which made it a **Black Day** so I didn't eat anything at lunch and I sat in the corner of the room all day and read my A level Maths course book" (Haddon 68). This method of reasoning does not translate to rational-minded readers and is thus un-relatable.

After spending time immersed in Christopher's mode of communication, however, readers begin to identify more with him. When he embarks on a journey in search of his mother, Christopher suffers a panic attack in the crowded, London train station. He and readers' tension mounts as he states,

And then I couldn't see the walls any more and the back of someone's jacket touched my knee and I felt sick and I started groaning really loudly and the lady on the bench stood up and no one else sat down. And I felt like I felt like when I had flu and I had to stay in bed all day and all of me hurt and I couldn't walk or eat or go to sleep or do maths. (216)

At this point in the story, the readers have adapted to the mindset of the narrator so that they understand the gravity of a loud, crowded train station. Readers expanded their perspective to lessen the gap between themselves and the narrator.

By the end of his journey, the readers fully allow themselves to understand and even relate to Christopher. He has solved a great mystery, traveled long distances, and renewed familial relationships. He ends contentedly, saying,

...I am going to pass *Further Maths for A Level* and get an A grade....

And then, when I've done that, I am going to go to university in another town....

And then I will get a First Class Honours Degree and I will become a scientist.

And I know I can do this because I went to London on my own, and because I solved the mystery of Who Killed Wellington? and I found my mother and I was brave and I wrote a book and that means I can do anything. (Haddon 267-8)

Because of the readers' shift in perspectives throughout the narrative, this line of reasoning seems more logical than it would have at the start of the story. Readers finish the book with a relationship that has developed between themselves and the narrator with whom the readers initially assumed they could not identify.

One instance in *Rae, Baby* that invites readers to shift perspectives occurs in the car after a particularly awkward encounter at church. Rae's unique outlook is communicated in her own childlike way, yet it comes at a time when readers begin to speak her language and can understand the ultimately human sentiment being conveyed in this thought:

I think God laughs a lot. Laughing makes me feel so warm in my face and in my heart. Sometimes I think the sun is made of people's laughs. It's so big and so bright, I'll bet it's full of people's laughs and smiles that float up through the air and get caught in it. That's why it's so big and warm. Whenever Momma talks about my dad and how he's in heaven, she'll tell me a funny story about him and she'll usually laugh a lot when she talks about my dad and so I think heaven and God must be full of laughing. When people laugh, I don't have to wonder if

they're happy and I can laugh, too, and I can hug someone when they're laughing and I feel like we're closer than after anything we've ever said to each other in a conversation. (83)

If laughter innately comes from an understanding of situations, people, and concepts, this scenario with Rae—which consists of a release of confusion and tension—demonstrates the benefits of understanding reality. Simultaneously, the reader understands the benefits of understanding Rae. Thus, Rae connects with readers through her sense of humor and observance.

This understanding of truth has been a journey of understanding for me. I once bitterly told a friend of mine that labeling people in real life was acceptable because I thrived on stereotypes for my writing. I said it helped develop characters and construct types of humans that readers would immediately relate to. Besides the glaring fact that I'd mentioned this to justify my own propensity for judging/labeling/objectifying others, this simply isn't true. In the process of constructing *Rae*, I began to understand that writing requires precisely the opposite of bland generalizations. It is the realistic specificities that connect people in reality to people in fiction. It was when I delved into Rae's complex habits and idiosyncrasies that I realized how truly connected we were. Aristotle himself said that it is "natural for all to delight in works of imitation. The truth of this second point is shown by experience: though the objects themselves may be painful to see, we delight to view the most realistic representations of them in art" (90). I think this delight emerges from a shift in perspective as our minds are opened to seeing, recognizing, and accepting much more than we'd initially done.

This process is what I've tried to recreate in readers who encounter *Rae, Baby*, who will initially be confused by, though perhaps rather endeared to, Rae and her foreign set of rules,

habits, and principles. However, as readers learn to shift themselves, as the entire process of creating this story has forced me to, so that their frame of reference is a little wider and more encompassing, they will hopefully come to know Rae as I have and grant her the greatest desire of her heart—connection. Though, I expect that both the readers and the narrator will benefit from this outcome.

At the risk of beating a dead horse on such a seemingly organic matter, I wish to conclude with where I started on humor and truth. In my studies of comedy, I've come to realize that when I'm performing in front of an audience, I can hear the empty groan embedded in a laugh that has resulted from a cynical jab. I've mistook some of these jabs as truth—most cynics do—and have wondered why our audiences can't seem to see the humor in these roasts and laugh at the follies of life. In actuality, however, these downtrodden jokes have no truth at all. They merely reflect what *I* see sometimes in my own myopic view of a small, bitter perspective. In contrast, I have also heard the sweet release of a laugh inspired by a celebratory joke, a joke that exposes the truth of humanity and simply says, "Isn't that wonderful?" They laugh wholeheartedly, or in other words, with their whole hearts. We give our whole hearts to matters of truth, which inspires hope, and, as Brian Doyle says in his introduction to *Grace Notes*, "Hope... is the great song of the human being... inside each of us is the extraordinary key to the substance of things hoped for" (14).

*Rae, Baby* is my tribute to hope and truth. To humor.

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*Rae, Baby*

By Whitney Call

## THE CHAPTER IN THE HARDWARE STORE

Pulling up my corduroy pants, I lose my balance a little so I lean against a freezer that doesn't work anymore. I don't feel any different. I thought I would because my friend Daphne always talks about it, but I feel just the same. Robby's already gone to the front of the store because Mrs. Fink came to pick up her espresso machine and he told me he had to go. I hear Robby tell Mrs. Fink, "Let's plug this in, here" and the espresso machine turns on and hums like Grammy Joanne does when she has something in her throat.

I shouldn't have done this. I shouldn't have had sex with Robby Sandberg. When I was thirteen, Momma told me about sex and she said I shouldn't do it. Daphne has sex a lot, though. She talks about it so much, I just wanted to see what it was like. And it's been four years since Momma told me not to have sex. I'm a lot older now and it just seems like so much fun from how Daphne talks about it. I probably shouldn't have had sex with Robby, though. But it doesn't matter anyway because nothing even happened.

I take my glasses off and wipe them on my shirt because the lenses are dirty. When I put them back on, I see Robby's apron on the floor and I pick it up because he might have forgotten to put it back on when he went to help Mrs. Fink with her espresso machine. I don't know why I had sex with *Robby*. I just saw him fixing up a bike on the sidewalk and he was all sweaty and they get all sweaty in the movies too, so I walked up to Robby and asked him if he'd ever had sex before. He laughed and told me he'd had sex four times with a girl from YMCA. I asked him, "Do you want to have sex with me?" His mouth dropped open and he just asked me if I was messing with him and I said no because I really wanted to know what it was like, so he said



okay, and then he took me back here in this closet where they keep all the blenders and vacuums that don't work anymore.

The door to the back room squeaks a little when I open it and it hurts my ears, but the door's heavy, so I can't cover my ears because I need both of my hands to push it open.

"What are you doing back there, Rae?" Mrs. Fink asks me. She has an apron on too, like Robby's, but it's black and says *Scoggins Creek* on it.

"I just wanted to see what it was like," I say to Mrs. Fink. She leans forward with her hands on her knees and asks me what what's like, but Robby talks before I do and says Mrs. Fink's espresso machine will be twenty dollars.

Robby has a mustache like my dad used to have, but it's not as big as my dad's was. Robby's mustache is blond and it tickled my face when he kissed me so I laughed and he asked why I was laughing, but he didn't stop kissing me. I don't even like Robby very much. I probably could have found someone better to see what sex was like, but it wasn't even a big deal. Still, I don't think I should have done it. Maybe Momma will be mad at me even though I'm a lot older now. I don't want Momma to be mad at me but I'll have to tell her that nothing happened when we had sex so everything's okay.

Then Grammy Joanne opens the door to the store, fanning her face with her hands.

"Rachel," Grammy says, "we didn't know where you'd run off to." Her shirt is soaked through with sweat. It's my favorite shirt that Grammy wears because it has lots of fish on it that are all different colors and it looks like they're swimming in circles around Grammy's stomach.

Mrs. Fink says hi to Grammy and takes her espresso machine with her out the door. Grammy reaches for my hand so I drop Robby's apron on the counter and say bye to him. I don't

think I'll have sex with anyone again. I didn't like it as much as I thought I would. Grammy opens up her arms and I hug her tight and sink my head into the ocean on her shirt.

"Let's go, baby." Grammy kisses me on the forehead and puts her arm around my shoulders. When she opens the door, all the hot air folds over my face like a big pillow.

Grammy squeezes my arm and asks me what the hell I was doing in the hardware store. We start to cross the street and all the tar on the road feels soft under my sandals like black gummy bears. I picked a piece of tar from the road once when I was little and put it in my mouth, but Momma made me take it back out because she said I'd get sick from all the poison in it. The poison doesn't hurt the cars though, or my feet, because it's only poisonous when you eat it.

I hold Grammy's hand and tell her, "Now don't be mad, Grammy." Because I know I wasn't supposed to have sex with Robby even though I'm okay and nothing happened.

"What is it?"

"Don't be mad."

"Rae."

"I had sex with Robby in the back of the store." I hold my hands out, looking at Grammy's face, but she doesn't smile or frown or do anything, so I stay as still as I can.

Then, Grammy grabs hold of my shoulders real hard and it hurts, but I don't say anything because Grammy's face hasn't changed. Grammy looks closer at me and says, "What did you say?" So I tell her again. Grammy's eyes get big and she lets go of my shoulders so I rub them because they hurt a little. Grammy runs back to the store and just says son of a bitch over and over. We're not supposed to say bitch. I get up and follow Grammy into the store because I don't

want her to be mad and she swears when she's mad and we're not supposed to say all those words Grammy says, but she can because she's old.

“Stupid son of a bitch!” Grammy swings open the door and I run to keep it open so I can go inside and tell her it's okay, but when I go inside, I see Grammy behind the counter and she's holding Robby by his shirt.

“I'm sorry!” Robby says and his voice cracks and he's covering his face.

Robby starts to cry. He wails loudly and it hurts my ears. I crouch down against the door and I feel the beats of my heart in my chest getting bigger and I feel my heart jumping up from my chest and into my neck.

“I'm sorry!” Robby's tears run down into his wispy mustache. I feel hot behind my eyes, they burn and then all the tears come down so that Robby and Grammy and the fishes on Grammy's back all blur together.

“Grammy!” I start to feel sick in my stomach and my mouth tastes like grapes and chocolate all at once. My hands shake a little and the beating in my throat hurts my head and makes me feel all dizzy. I don't like when people yell at each other and this is my fault because I asked Robby to have sex with me and Grammy's really mad at him.

Grammy throws Robby against the counter and says, “You sick bastard,” and the fish on her shirt shake as she breathes in and out. The door pushes behind me and I move out of the way. Mrs. Fink has come back inside and stands next to me, but she doesn't look at me. She says Joanne over and over with her espresso machine in her hands, but she doesn't move. Joanne, Joanne, Joanne! Grammy brings her hand up above her head and whirls it across Robby's face, smacking his cheek with a loud cracking sound that makes me jump and I curl my arms around

my legs and rock back and forth, tasting grapes and chocolate and hearing Robby cry and Grammy yell sick bastard, sick, sick bastard. I'm sorry, Grammy. I'm sorry, Robby. I shouldn't have done it. I'm so sorry.

## THE PEEING CHAPTER

When Momma comes home today, I'm going to tell her it's okay. Everything's okay. I'm glad I had sex with Robby because everything's going to be great. It all happened just right. See, if I hadn't seen Robby Sandberg on the way home, I wouldn't have gone with him to the back room in the hardware store. And if he hadn't taken my pants off and had sex with me, I wouldn't have thrown up a lot these past few weeks and Mama wouldn't have gotten these tests from the store. I wouldn't be here on the toilet with a stick I peed on and the stick wouldn't have said +, which means I'm having a BABY! See? Everything's gonna be okay! Dear baby, everything's gonna be okay. Oh baby! I'm so excited you're in my tummy! I didn't think that having sex with Robby would give me a beautiful baby and let me be a mommy so I feel so happy right now and I'm so glad you're in my tummy.

I still have to make sure Momma's not mad at me. I can't exactly say what made me have sex with Robby, except that Daphne says it's great. But Mom hasn't let me see Daphne for a while.

I accidentally get pee in my mouth when I put the e.p.t. test on the counter because there's pee on my hands and I just touched my mouth. I hope I don't get sick. Or worse, I hope my baby doesn't get sick. What if you get sick, baby? Can babies get sick inside the mom's tummy? Baby, I'm sorry if I get you sick. But I don't know if you can eat anything right now so you might be okay. I'll have to ask my mom about it later. She'll know what to do. Oh, but first I have to tell her I have a baby in my tummy.

Dear baby, I don't know if you know my name yet since you'll probably just call me Mommy, but my name is Rae. My whole name is Rachel Charley Jackson. I am seventeen years old and I love macaroni and cheese even though I can't have too much milk in it and I love going to the zoo. My favorite animal is the mandrill because he looks like he dipped his face into a tray full of rainbow paint so even when he shouts and opens his mouth really big, he still looks like a big, hairy clown. I love to play the guitar and I want to get an accordion for Christmas and there are a lot of nice people in our town. We live by a lake and it's always full of boats and pretty people on picnics. If I ever move, I'd like to live by another lake.

Grammy knocks on the bathroom door. "Can I come in, Rae?"

I open the door and see Grammy standing there with her arms folded. I tell Grammy the pee stick has a plus sign. Just one of her eyebrows goes up like the other one might've forgotten, but then the second one follows and her forehead folds over itself a couple times like layers of icing poured over a sheet cake. Grammy takes the stick and looks at it closer, and I tell her there's pee on the stick but she doesn't seem to hear me.

After looking at the plus sign, Grammy just sighs. "Good gracious, Rachel," she says. "You're in a heap of shit."

Mom says we shouldn't repeat what Grammy says but that Grammy's old and old people swear all the time. When I'm old, I'll say shit like Grammy Joanne because it's just so fun to say. I'll be nicer than Grammy, though. I'll be the best, nicest old person in town. I've only heard Grammy say the F word twice. I might be too scared to say that one when I'm old. It's a really bad one.

Grammy whistles a lot, too. Right through her teeth. It makes me jump because my ears hurt when I hear such a high noise. But she whistles right now and I still smile really really big and I tell Grammy I think I'm going to be a mom, but Grammy doesn't smile back. Momma tells me that I shouldn't smile when other people aren't smiling because they probably don't want to smile, so when Grammy doesn't smile back at me I just let my mouth go down into one line.

I hear Gracie laugh outside through the window and I hear water from the hose shooting and splashing. Gracie's nine but she doesn't look nine because she's so little and her bright orange hair goes past her bottom when it's brushed a lot and she's missing her two front teeth. Sometimes kids at school make fun of her because she just lost her front teeth, but I tell her she shouldn't feel bad. I think George Washington had teeth made of wood and he was a grownup.

"Pay attention, Rae." Grammy holds my hands, so I don't think about Gracie outside with the hose. Grammy takes me to her room down the hall and we sit on Grammy's bed. The blanket looks like something you'd see through a kaleidoscope with lots of little shapes. Grammy takes my hands and holds them on her lap. She keeps quiet so I sing to myself. I sing the first verse of Shenandoah and then I look at Grammy again, but she just stares at the kaleidoscope blanket and all she says is ah shit, Rae.

"What?" I ask. "Do you not want me to sing?" Sometimes Grammy tells me to quit singing, but I like to sing. I'd sing all day if I could, but I tried to once and my voice got all scratchy by the time I went to bed and my throat hurt too so I don't do that anymore.

Grammy drops my hands back on the bed. "Well, Rae, I don't think you can be a mom. You know with your Williams, you know how hard it would be."

Okay, baby, I have to tell you about Williams syndrome. It means I can't tell time or do math really well or drink very much milk and Grammy tells me I'm slower than other people. I told her I'm not slow and I tried to race her but that's the other thing with Williams is that my heart isn't really good. So I can't run *all* the time. But when I do run, I can run super fast. Anyway, Grammy thinks I can't have you because she says I can't be a mom. But I've seen those talk shows Momma watches when she gets home from work and I know I'd be a better mom than those girls. They shout and curse a lot, talking about leaving the child and calling it names. I bet they don't sing to their babies or buy them kiddie cones from McDonald's or push them on the swings or tuck them into bed or bake them cookies or anything. I could do all that. I'm really good at it. So don't tell Grammy, but I think she's wrong and it makes me want to cry right now on this kaleidoscope bed when she keeps saying I can't be a good mom.

Grammy says that babies need a mom and a dad, but I don't want Robby Sandberg to be your dad. And I definitely don't want to marry Robby Sandberg. His face looks like a squashed loaf of bread. I hope that's not what Grammy's talking about. I remind Grammy that Momma wasn't married when she had Gracie and Daphne said all of Gaston wasn't going to let her forget it, either.

There are these wind chimes on our front porch that I love to listen to when it gets windy. Right now they're clanging together and I can hear them through the window. Each ring buzzes off the chimes, up the air and through the thin, glass to me. I hum along with it. Together, it sounds something like Happy Birthday played on doorbells.

Then I hear the front door open downstairs. Momma's home, so Grammy doesn't say anything else to me. She just pushes off the bed and grunts a little to stand up, then she reaches



out for my hand so I get off the bed too and we both go down stairs to tell my mom that I have a baby in my tummy.

I hear Mom whisper to Grammy in the living room. “I’m gonna kill that Robby Sandberg kid. I swear to God I’m gonna kill him.” Momma never talks about killing anybody so I stop walking down the stairs for a second in case she gets any madder, but then Mom calls my name and says to come downstairs, so I jump down each step like a game of hopscotch. I stop on one stair to look at a family portrait of my mom, my dad and me as a baby. Mom’s red hair was big and curly with poofy bangs and Dad’s glasses took up almost his whole face, right down to his black mustache—kind of like my glasses, only I don’t have a mustache so they just take up all my cheeks. I can barely see without my glasses and Gracie says they make my eyes look huge like golf balls which I think is pretty neat because all the Disney princesses have eyes that are really big, too. This family picture was taken a few weeks before Dad died cooking burgers for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July social. Mom says when those Piccolo Pete’s went off, his heart just got scared and stopped working. Grammy says my dad would kill Robby Sandberg if he was still here.

“*Rae.*” Mom’s voice sounds strained and tired.

I pick my feet up again and I tell her I’m coming.

The round ball that sits at the end of the railing always falls off if you swing down the stairs too rough, so I let my fingers glide along the glossy white paint without putting much of my weight on it. Mom’s on the brown couch near the window and the piano untucking her baggy Kramer’s T-shirt she wears to the vineyards.

With the sun almost down, I can’t see one side of Momma’s face too well. I go to the edge of the couch and turn on the lamp that sits on the end table. The bumpy chain clicks in my

fingers and the light bulb flicks on with a buzz and brightens the room. Seeing all of Mom's face together now, she looks tired, like her eyebrows have been running stairs all day and her cheeks have been carrying loads of laundry.

I give Mom a big hug. She pulls me in close and tight and the smell of dirt and sweat and grapes all mix together in her dusty red hair. That's how Mom always smells. I like it. In fact, I think I like it more than the perfumes and lotions she uses for church on Sunday.

Grammy opens the back door and tells Gracie to come in. Gracie's wet footsteps squish across the kitchen and into the living room. She walks around the couch and stops in front of Mom and me with her suit dripping and her hands on her hips just like Peter Pan. Gracie would've been Peter Pan in her school play this year if she'd cut her hair, but Gracie doesn't ever let scissors near her big orange mane. She likes to tie it to tree branches and pretend she's Rapunzel or put wire in it so it'll stick straight up above her head. I like Gracie's hair a lot, but I think she could've been a good Peter Pan. And, baby, you wouldn't believe it, but they were going to make her fly! She was going to get hooked up to a rope and soar over the audience just like the real Peter Pan. But she just told me Rae, I can fly any time I want, but nobody's touching my *hair*. So I didn't bother her about it again. I would've shaved my head bald if it meant flying like Peter Pan, but Gracie's not me.

Mom runs her hands up and down Gracie's wet arms to warm her up and tells her to get her jammies on. Gracie gallops up the stairs and then I pull the stick out of my shirt pocket and hand it to Momma, looking at the plus sign as I give it to her because it's got the best news ever on it. But Momma isn't smiling so I don't smile because I'm not supposed to smile when other people aren't smiling even though I really really want to.

Baby, I don't understand Grammy and Momma sometimes. I remember they got so excited when Momma got a job at the vineyard and when we got a new president, but I don't know why. Sometimes they get excited about babies, and I understand that. I get excited about babies, too. They're so little and soft and you can teach them to make sounds with their mouths and let them rest their head on your shoulder like a small sack of potatoes that spits bubbles on your neck. Ever since I can remember, I've loved babies. They look like little old men with big potbellies that stick out farther than their arms, but they smell a lot better than old men.

This one time, I went to the store with Grammy Joanne and while we were in the vegetable aisle, a little baby boy waved to me from the cart he was sitting in. I hid behind my hands and played peek-a-boo with him and he had the sweetest laugh you'll ever hear. It sounded like big water drops on a xylophone. I just can't get enough of little babies, especially ones that laugh.

That's why I don't understand Momma and Grammy. Here I am, with a baby of my own on the way, and all they can say is I'm in a heap of shit.

"Don't you have any sense, Rae?" Momma asks me. "Why did you ever fool around with that Robby Sandberg?"

I hold my hands against my stomach. "I already told you, I don't know why I let Robby take my pants off and have sex with me." I wanted to tell Robby sorry for asking him to have sex, but Grammy says I can't see him anymore.

Momma touches my chin. "You're not married, Rae," she says, "so you shouldn't have sex."

I pull away from Momma's hands. "But, you weren't married when you had sex with Phil," I say. "And then you had Gracie! And so now *I'm* having a baby." Grammy tells me not to argue with my mom, but Momma doesn't seem mad. She looks down at her hands, her chin dropping into her neck, and heaving a big, long sigh.

"It's different when you're older," Momma says.

I don't really know what changes about having babies when you get older. Do you have more money? Because I've been saving my allowance for years and I've got a lot of money in my money jar upstairs. Grammy wrote it out for me once. \$356.89. She said that's enough to buy groceries for months and I've heard of some grownups who don't have enough money to buy any groceries.

Momma points a finger at me. "Don't you ever have sex with a boy again." But she doesn't need to worry about that because I thought having sex with Robby Sandberg would be better, but I didn't have much fun. Daphne says it's not always fun for girls, but I think she's lying because she always says how good it feels. She said once that she felt like her body was still on the bed but she was floating around the ceiling like a skeeter eater. I thought that sounded so nice, but I didn't feel like that. Anyway, I have a baby now, so I don't need to have sex again.

"So you're pregnant." Momma's voice doesn't go up at the end, so I'm not sure whether I should answer because it might not be a question and she's still not smiling so I keep my smile to myself.

Grammy clears her throat so that all the scratch from her voice disappears. Then she says, "Annie, how about we nip this in the bud." She says there's a clinic out in McMinnville, but I

see Mom's face get even madder than it was before. I don't know what this clinic out in McMinnville is, but I don't want to go if it makes my mom so mad.

"The clinic is not an option."

Momma folds her arms and her mouth tightens like she's clenching her teeth together real hard. Grammy puts her hands up in front of her and says okay, so I relax a little. I've been to a clinic before. They ran me through an x-ray where it was really tight and dark and I got really scared but I couldn't move and they put a light in my ear and stuck a needle in my arm that felt like a sword made of fire. I hate clinics a lot.

The ticking on the clock in the kitchen clicks a little louder. It always does right before it chimes. Then the thin, tinny beeping noise plays the tune I hear from every doorbell of every fancy house in Gaston. I don't like the chimes on that clock. They're not real like the ones outside our door. But the wind's not blowing, so those stay quiet right now.

Momma scoots closer to me on the couch, so I hold her hands and lean my head on her shoulder because I don't like Momma looking upset and with her mouth so tight in her face because Momma can't smile when her mouth looks that tight and I'm not supposed to smile when other people aren't smiling.

"We have to get to an adoption center to find someone who'll want the baby when it gets here," Momma says. I look up into her eyes and my head rumbles inside like a tea kettle. I don't know if I heard what Momma said so I ask what and she says the same thing. My heart feels close to popping.

“I have to give the baby to someone else?” Those words don’t sound good. I didn’t think of letting someone else have you, baby. I mean, you’re mine, you’re in *my* tummy. Right now, my bones seem to grow bigger in my chest, pushing on my lungs, making it hard to breathe.

“Rae, baby.” Momma scoots closer to me. “These families are mommies and daddies who don’t have children of their own yet.” She rubs my back. “You’d make them so happy.”

I look at the pee stick, staring hard at the pink plus sign. “*I’d* be happy with a child of my own.” My voice garbles through the big lump I’ve got in my throat.

“But you’re—You just can’t, Rae.”

“Why?”

“Rae, honey—”

“Why can’t I?”

“Because you *can’t!*” Momma hits the couch with her fist and I cup my hands around my ears because I don’t like loud noises.

“You don’t have to shout.” My own voice sounds loud with my hands over my ears.

“Baby, I’m sorry,” Momma says, “but it’d be hard for you to raise a baby by yourself.”

“Because I’m not married?” I peek sideways at Mom. “That’s why I can’t keep the baby?” She looks at Grammy and so I do, too.

Grammy looks at both of us. “That’s it, Rae.” She rocks back and forth in the chair. “Babies aren’t meant to grow up in homes without daddies if they can help it.” Grammy’s voice catches as she talks, like ice skates. “Oh sure, you and Gracie don’t see your dads, but your momma tried to raise you right. Besides, Grandpa Bill was here with all of us for years and years, God rest his soul.”

That's true. Grandpa Bill died when Gracie started second grade, but he helped me with tying my shoes and how to tell time and doing my math homework even though I'm still not real good at it. My mom never did that kind of stuff. Or Grammy.

"It'd be smart to have a dad around," I say. As long as it's not Robby Sandberg. Grammy always says Robby's dumber than a bag of nails with nothing but that tiny shop to look forward to.

The light in the room gets less orange and more silver and blue. In one corner of the bay window, the sun's going down, and in the corner diagonal from it, I see the moon. Most of it's hidden so it only looks like a sliver of a thumbnail picking at the sky. I look back down at my hands. This child can't go to just a mom. Daphne has a single mom, but Daphne gets in a lot of trouble so I'm sure she'd be in less trouble if her dad were around. I guess it's smart to have a dad. I tell Momma and Grammy if my baby needs a dad, then we should do that.

Mom tucks my hair behind my ears and asks me if I'm sure I understand and I say yes I do, because my baby has to go to a mom and dad that will love it and can take care of it and will give it kiddie cones at McDonald's.

Momma smiles and so I smile. "You're such a big girl from making such a grownup choice," she says, kissing my forehead.

Gracie skips in wearing her big baseball jersey and carrying two glasses of Ovaltine. Mom takes a glass and walks over to the rocker where Grammy's sitting. They whisper while Gracie chatters away about that darn Jordan Fisher from across the street, but I don't pay attention to any of it because if I find a man to marry before I have you, baby, then I get to keep you all to myself.

## THE DAPHNE CHAPTER

My friend Daphne lives by the church, but Daphne hates going to church. She doesn't go very much anyway because she always has to work at Doris's Cutting Corner. I don't know if Daphne actually cuts people's hair, but she works at the front and she answers phones and tells you to wait until they can get to you and gives you magazines to look at different hairstyles of famous people. She's a lot taller than me, but she wears clothes that look too short for her. I always see her belly button, and whenever I tell her that she just laughs.

One time Daphne wanted to sneak into a movie so we both went into the back door where some people were leaving. I felt like we shouldn't do that but Daphne said they steal money from people when they give them candy and popcorn. I've never seen a clerk steal money from someone at the candy counter in the movie theater, but I went into the movies with her anyway and we both watched a really funny movie where the girl and the boy fall in love at the end. I liked the end the best. Daphne says she doesn't ever want to get married. I can't believe that because being married seems like the best thing in the whole wide world. Maybe Daphne will change her mind when she gets out of high school. She's stayed in school longer than you're supposed to because she doesn't go to class so she got held back.

Anyway, I think you'll like Daphne, baby. She laughs a lot and she listens to really fun music and she is always excited to see me and she gives me a stick of Extra gum every time she sees me which is my favorite because it's bright green.

Today I decide to sneak over to Daphne's work to tell her I'm having a baby. I have to sneak over there because Mom doesn't want me to see Daphne right now. I don't know why.



I look down at my belly on the way to the salon, pushing it out and covering it with my hands. I can't wait till my stomach sticks out like a big four square ball. Some ladies look so beautiful when they're pregnant. Momma says that's because they're glowing. I used to have a Troll nightlight that glowed in the dark, but it broke, anyway, every time I think of a pregnant lady glowing, I think of a Troll with purple hair sticking straight up and I smile. I love pregnant ladies.

Nobody else around town can notice my belly yet, but I guess it takes a while before you start showing. Baby, you must be so teeny tiny right now. I stop sticking out my belly. Baby, I hope you don't move too much while I'm walking to Doris's Cutting Corner.

The first thing Daphne says to me when I get in the salon is, "Bout time you showed up, bitch." I said bitch once at home and my mom got really mad at me so I don't say it out loud anymore. But it's kind of exciting to whisper it to myself sometimes. I feel wild, like Daphne.

Daphne's hair is different from the last time I saw her. It's black and orangey red and all the ends come to points like her head's full of a bunch of red, swinging knives. She's chewing Extra gum and her breath smells like mint and cigarettes. She can pop her gum really loud. Sometimes it hurts my ears, but I don't tell her to stop anymore because she always forgets.

She talks about Dirk, her boyfriend. Nobody else is in the salon or else she'd have to talk quieter. She asks me what's new with me and I tell her that I'm pregnant. She laughs and says she doesn't believe me.

"No. I'm really pregnant, Daphne."

"Get out. No you're not."

"Yes, I am."

“No.”

“I used a pee stick and it said I was.”

Then Daphne’s face looks like a little bomb exploded in the middle of her face. Her eyes go wide and her forehead goes up and her mouth opens as big as a watermelon. I don’t really know what that face means though, because she’s not smiling and she’s not frowning.

“What does that face mean, Daphne?”

Then she laughs and doesn’t stop for a long time. She pounds the desk and her red-knife hair flies from left to right like the edge of a dress when I spin around in it. I think Daphne might be just as happy as me that I’m having a baby.

“I need to find a husband, though, so I can keep the baby.”

“Is that what your mom said?”

“Yeah.”

“Well shit, we’ve gotta find your husband then!” Daphne laughs a little bit more, wiping her face like she’s been crying. Sometimes people cry when they’re happy, too. Grammy Joanne cried when Gracie was born, and she sometimes cries when she watches TV shows.

Daphne and I make plans to meet up tomorrow after she gets off work. She has this idea to go door to door asking to see any eligible bachelors of the house. I told her that seemed like a silly way to look for a husband, but she said it would work. Sometimes we get Avon ladies or guys selling sharp scissors that can cut through pennies. They knock on our doors and are real friendly, so maybe if I’m real friendly, I could talk to any single men in the house and see if they’d like to go on any dates with me. If he likes me enough, then maybe we can get married.

Daphne's gonna borrow her mom's car and we'll drive over to Forest Grove. She says it's better to look for a husband in another town because all the men in Gaston are douche bags.

I sneak back into my house before Grammy Joanne gets back from the grocery store. I pull out my guitar and sit on the porch, strumming made up songs to myself. The wind chimes pick up. They start playing something low and soft, echoing just a few steps higher so they harmonize together and make a buzz in my ears. It sounds like the first few notes of Clair de Lune.

Hmm-*mmm*, I pick along with the tune, closing my eyes. The chimes on the second note jump up. They still sound the same, just higher. Then the tune goes back down but not as low. Hmm. I smile, picking the rest of the notes to play with the chimes. Clair de Lune is such a beautiful song. Especially when it sounds all thick and warm, like honey dripping through a beehive.

I play until my grammy comes home and she and Gracie get out of the car with lots of groceries in their arms. Grammy tells me to give them a hand, so I put the guitar down softly 'cause Mom tells me not to be rough with it, and I help them bring the food inside. Grammy asks what I've been doing all day and I don't know if I should tell her about Daphne because I'm not supposed to see her, but I tell her anyway because I don't want to lie. I don't think she hears me though because she's putting bags of chips and crackers in our pantry.

Daphne told me to meet her at the Gaston Market and we'd drive on to Forest Grove. I tell my mom I'm going to the nursing home because sometimes I go there to talk to the old

people. I feel a little bad about lying, but I make a note to go to the nursing home today before I come back home so it's still true. Daphne gave me the idea. She's real smart about telling little lies that turn out to be true so you're never actually lying.

Okay, baby. I don't really know who I want to be your dad right now, but I know I want him to be tall, and I want him to smell good. Robby Sandberg didn't smell very good when I had sex with him and I really didn't like that. He smelled like sweat and metal and oil. I'd rather my husband smell like laundry and bread and leather like my grandpa. I always loved the way he smelled.

When I get to Gaston Market, Daphne's leaning against the hood of her car blowing a bubble with her gum like they do in movies sometimes.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

I don't know what's so different about Forest Grove that makes all the guys not be douche bags. The trees all look the same. The houses look like houses on my street, except there are a few more stop lights. Daphne says Forest Grove's a lot bigger, though, so there's more room for good guys.

We stop in front of a house that's bright purple. As purple as a gum ball. The whole house looks like cotton candy.

“First stop, preppers.”

“Why does it look like cotton candy?” The witch from *Hansel and Gretel* lived in a candy house and Grammy says bright-colored houses look trashy so I don't know if nice people live in a house that looks like candy.

“I dunno. Just get out and check.”

“Are you coming?”

Daphne puts her arm around my shoulder. “Rae-gae, I’m the driver. I’ll keep a look out to make sure your mom doesn’t see us.”

I nod and get out of the car. That’s probably a good idea.

The front door is purple, too. But it’s a darker purple so it looks like a bruise in the middle of all the candy wood. I knock using the stopper because it’s more fun than knocking on the door. It makes a flat sound that leaves a sort of ringing in my ears.

The door opens and I see a woman who looks a little older than my mom. She’s wearing a t-shirt, shorts, and slippers. Normally people wear slippers when they’re about to go to bed, but it’s the middle of the day right now.

“Were you taking a nap?” I ask.

The woman stares at me without moving her face. I don’t know what that face means exactly. It’s not a smile or a frown. It’s just a straight line. So I make my mouth into a straight line.

“What can I do for you?” she asks me.

I’m still not sure if this is a good idea, but Daphne said I wouldn’t be able to go into bars to meet people because I’m only 17 and I don’t have a fake I.D. When I told her I didn’t want to meet anybody in a bar, she laughed and said we’d have to go door to door then. I straighten up and smile, then I tell the woman I’m going around town today to see if there are any eligible men who would date me because I need a husband so I can keep my baby. I tell her I know I’d be a great mom because I’m really nice to kids and I love babies and I’d buy them ice cream and

make them dinner and Grammy's teaching me how to sew even though it's really hard, but I'll learn soon and get really good at it and then I can make clothes for my baby, too.

Oh, baby! I'm just so excited that you're coming! I'll sing to you and play the guitar for you and when you're old enough I'll get you your own little guitar and we can play together and you'll have the sweetest laugh. I'll tell you my favorite story about the princess who cries tears made of orange juice or the story about the old man who flies around in his bed at night. I know lots of stories in my head and my mom and Grammy love to hear them so I think you'll like them, too.

When I finally stop talking, the woman in the doorway with the slippers scrunches her eyebrows a little bit, but the rest of her face looks the same.

"Is your mom around, honey?"

That's not what I was asking. I was asking about any eligible bachelors in this lady's house that could be a husband for me and a dad for my baby. I'm not sure why she didn't answer my question so I ask again. This time she kind of smiles so I smile, too.

"Go home, honey." She lets the bruised, purple door shut. She didn't even check to see if there were any eligible bachelors home. She didn't even check.

Daphne says to screw the old bitch and we keep driving, but every house we come to doesn't have any single men.

Baby, I have this feeling that Forest Grove isn't where your daddy lives. My chest hurts because I've been running back and forth from the car to all the houses. There was one old lady who lived in a peach-colored house. She let me come in and showed me a picture of her son in front of a flag with a uniform on, but she told me he died so I can't marry him.

Daphne sings as much as I do. She turns the radio on in the car and sings as loud as she can with the windows rolled down. I tell her not to sing so loud, but she can't hear me, so I cover my ears and listen to her voice push through my hands so it sounds quieter in my ears. Daphne slows down at an intersection and honks at a boy walking across the street.

"Hey! Are you single?" Daphne shouts out her window. I lean out my window too so I can get a better look at the boy.

The boy doesn't say anything. He just shows us his middle finger. That's like saying the F word with your fingers. I don't want to marry anyone who says the F word, even if it is with their fingers.

"Okay, so Forest Grove didn't turn out so good." Daphne's blowing bubbles while laying on the hood of her car. My bare feet swish around the edge of the lake. It's really cold, but the air is so hot that I don't mind my feet feeling like ice.

Daphne mentions that maybe we could try Cherry Grove next week. Or even Yamhill if we have time.

"So what was it like?"

"What?"

"Bangin' Robby Sandberg."

I shrug, tearing out pieces of grass from the ground. "I didn't like it very much."

"Did you make any noises?"

"Noises?"

Daphne laughs, hitting the hood of her car. She says it's kind of sick that Robby did it with me and I ask her why. But she just keeps looking at the sky and blows another bubble with her bright green gum.



## THE CHAPTER AFTER THE DAPHNE CHAPTER

Dear baby, my belly's getting big enough to see it sticking out a little in front of me! I can't eat cereal in a bowl on my stomach yet, but I saw my mom do that when she was pregnant with Gracie. I was still pretty little, but I remember going to school and seeing Momma on the couch with a bowl of cereal and she didn't need to hold anything except the spoon. I'll balance tons of things on my stomach when you get a little bigger. Like cereal or books or my accordion if I get one this Christmas. I hope it doesn't hurt you if I put anything on my belly, though. I'll make sure I don't put anything too heavy on you. We have a dictionary in our house that's hard to carry and it tells the definition of every word in the world. I wouldn't put that on you, baby.

I dream about you too, baby. Right now, I'm dreaming that I'm sitting on the porch outside our house, listening to the wind chimes while you're playing in the yard. You have brown hair, which I think is strange because mine's red. But you're the most beautiful little girl I've ever seen. That's right, I think you're gonna be a girl.

And then, in the dream, my husband comes home from work and gives me a kiss on the cheek like they do on TV. I can't see his face but he's big and tall and speaks real sweet to me. Then we all go into the kitchen and eat macaroni and cheese because it's my favorite. I think you'll like it, too.

Gracie's little hands hold my shoulders and shake me back and forth trying to wake me up. I don't want to open my eyes because my dream felt so nice, but Gracie won't let me sleep a moment longer. I groan and she tells me if I don't get up this minute that she'll leave me and Mom will be mad that I didn't help her clean Mrs. Parmley's garage.

So I decide to get up because I don't want my mom to be mad at me for not helping Gracie clean Mrs. Parmley's garage. When I open my eyes, I see Gracie's got her hands on her hips and she's raised up on her knees, kneeling between my legs on my bed. She would've made a good Peter Pan. She twists her mouth to one side and scrunches her eyebrows. We always call that her Grinch face.

Gracie asks me if I know what time it is and I look at the clock. It says 9:08, but I'm not sure what that means. I know it's morning because that's when you wake up. Mom says I can't tell time well because I don't think about time the same way as everyone else and that that's a good thing. "'Cause the minute you start living by the clock," she always says nodding like she's agreeing with herself, "you stop living, baby."

I loop my fingers together and stretch my hands far in front of me, almost hitting Gracie in the face. She jumps off my bed and folds her arms, tapping her foot on the floor, then she asks who she looks like and I have to get my glasses off the nightstand to see her better. She purses her lips and rolls her eyes. I start giggling because she looks like Grammy Joanne whenever she taps her foot and rolls her eyes. She does that a lot. I don't always understand what Grammy's doing when she rolls her eyes because she doesn't look mad, but she doesn't look happy either. Sometimes I've just kept talking when she rolls her eyes and then she really does get mad, so I know that when she rolls her eyes, I have to wait for her to say something and then I can tell if she's mad or not.

Grammy Joanne walks through my door and leans against the wall. Grammy's already dressed in her old lady slacks and silky blouse. The kind that has boats on it. Grammy likes to put on a sailor voice sometimes when she wears that blouse. She and Grandpa Bill would both

pretend to be ship captains in the backyard when I was little. Gracie probably doesn't remember, but we'd sit on the porch and Grammy'd go, "Hoist the sails, you scurvy dog!" And we couldn't touch the grass because it had sharks in it and they'd bite your legs off so you'd bleed to death. Grammy says she's too old to be a captain now. I try to get Gracie to play sometimes, but she never listens and she jumps right into the sharks without even thinking.

"You wanna eat before we go to Mrs. Parmley's?" Gracie asks.

I don't answer right away. My stomach feels sick. Like I might throw up my pasta from the night before. I swallow real big and the feeling goes away. I've been sick a lot after I wake up ever since I got pregnant, but usually it goes away in the middle of the day.

"C'mon, we gotta go to Mrs. Parmley's before Grammy chases us out with her stinky mop."

"That's right." Grammy nods, shooing me out of bed.

Mrs. Parmley lives three blocks down from our house. She used to be Grammy Joanne's bingo buddy before she slipped and broke her hip two years ago. Now she just stays in the house with her son Neil and tons of parakeets. That's right. Gracie counted once and she's got *thirteen* little birds that fly around in a big old cage in the back room of the house. They make an awful lot of noise because when one's done chirping, another three will pick up right where it stopped. I don't mind, though. I kinda like all the songs going on at once.

I don't have time to eat breakfast, so on the way out the door I take a Fruit Roll-Up, unwrap it, and shove the whole thing in my mouth. Gracie stares at me and her mouth is sort of frowned, so I stop.

"That's so gross." Gracie walks in front of me faster than I can walk.

I run to catch up with her. “What’s so gross about it, Gracie?” I spit a little bit of fruity juice onto my shirt and wipe it off.

Gracie doesn’t answer, though. She just shakes her head and keeps walking.

“Hey, slow down,” I yell after Gracie. “If I run too fast, this baby’s gonna slip right out of me.”

Gracie snaps her head around to look at me. Her eyes are real wide. She asks me if they can really fall out and I shrug, saying I bet they can if you shake them out, so Gracie slows down a little bit for me.

We pass the post office. Mr. Frasier stops right in the middle of licking a stamp when he sees me and Gracie walk by.

“Hey, Rae,” Mr. Frasier calls. The stamp sits on his thumb, covered in spit. I wonder why he doesn’t stick it on the envelope before the spit dries up. When the spit dries up, you can’t put a stamp on an envelope anymore because all the sticky stuff’s gone. It happened to me once.

I stop walking and so does Gracie, but she bounces on her toes like she’s gotta pee. Gracie always rushes everywhere. She runs to school and to church. She just never sits still.

I say hi to Mr. Frasier and give him my friendliest smile. Mom told us kids to be extra nice to Mr. Frasier. His wife’s got cancer and his son shacked up with some floozy from Eugene.” That’s what Grammy says.

“I hear you’re knocked up,” Mr Frasier says.

I straighten up real tall and stick my belly out. I can tell my stomach’s getting bigger, but Mom says you’re probably only as big as a strawberry right now, baby.

Mr. Frasier doesn't smile or laugh or anything. His mouth is frowning, so I let my belly go back to normal.

"If you'll *excuse* us, Mr. Frasier." Gracie grabs my wrist. "We've got an appointment with Mrs. Parmley." Gracie's pulling so hard, my arm nearly jolts right out of my socket. She just hates being late to things.

I tell Mr. Frasier to have a nice day as we run away. He doesn't say a word. Just goes back to his soggy stamp without even a wave.

I say to Gracie that Mr. Frasier must be real sad and she stares at me for a second. She doesn't talk while we round the corner onto Oak Street. Mrs. Parmley lives near Rocket Motors. Which I think is funny because Mrs. Parmley was my kindergarten teacher. She doesn't seem like the type to like motorcycles. Although Mom says she drives like a maniac.

We reach Mrs. Parmley's driveway, which goes to her old, giant house. The green paint on the outside has faded into a kind of gray. Tall weeds cover the walkway to the porch and the fallen tree still lays where it dropped in the yard from the windstorm last January. If I didn't know Mrs. Parmley, I'd be scared to go inside such a spooky place, but I've been here a lot and I know there's nothing to be afraid of.

We're allowed to walk right into Mrs. Parmley's house without knocking or anything. Grammy said she doesn't hear too well and would take too long to answer the door anyway. But I ring the doorbell all the same. A long rope hanging by the front window is covered in dust and dirt. The stale knot at the bottom feels rough inside my hand. When I pull down, I feel the catch of the giant bell above the doorframe. It warbles a warm sound first like a gong. Then the bell

swings backward and lets out something like a tinny cough. It makes me laugh. I pull it one more time.

“Come *on*, Rae.” Gracie nudges my arm, opening the giant oak door and pulling me inside with her.

Right as I walk into the front room, the musty smell of old books and chalk swims through my nose. I’ll bet I could eat the air in Mrs. Parmley’s house if I tried.

“What do you think, Gracie?” I say after a second. She says what, and I ask her if she thinks we could eat the air in the house. I lift my palms up in front of my chest like I’m checking for rain. “Just take a big bite with your teeth and roll it around on your tongue.” I jut my tongue out of my mouth, trying to lick the air. I don’t feel anything, though.

Gracie’s mouth and eyebrows scrunch into the middle of her face like she doesn’t know whether to laugh or roll her eyes. Then she licks the air, too.

I giggle. “Try to eat it.”

She opens her mouth real big and gulps down a big chunk of air. She swishes it from one cheek to the other like a cup of mouthwash. Then she swallows. But she says she can’t taste anything.

“Hello, Rae.”

My breath catches in the back of my throat before I can think to yell. I whirl around to see Neil standing at the front door. I let out all the air in my chest.

“Neil!” I laugh. “Where’d you come from?”

Neil points his index finger up without saying a word.

“Upstairs?” Gracie asks.

He nods.

Gracie shakes her head. “Nearly scared the shit outta me, Neil.”

“Gracie!” I put my hand over Gracie’s mouth. If Momma caught her saying that, she’d scrub her tongue up and down with soap.

Neil curls a lock of wispy blonde hair on top of his head around his finger, wringing it like a wet rag. His other hand cups his cheek like he’s been slapped. I think Neil’s almost as old as my mom, but he always seems so scared around me and Gracie, like a little kid. Mom says it’s because he doesn’t see many people except his own mother. She told Gracie not to make fun of him for acting jumpy. I don’t like to make fun of people anyway, so Mom didn’t have to tell me that.

Gracie’s muffled voice yells at me from under my hand. Then I feel her wet tongue against my palm.

“Ew!” I wipe the spit off onto my pants.

Neil lets out a quiet chuckle. “She licked you!” Then he laughs harder, scrunching up his eyes real tight.

I laugh, too. “Like she was gonna *eat* me!”

Neil bends over, hooting and hollering at the floorboards with his arms wrapped around his stomach.

“Where’s your momma, Neil?” Gracie puts her hands on her hips and taps her foot. Sort of like how Grammy looks when she rolls her eyes.

Neil looks at me, then at Gracie, then at me again. He points down the hallway, then he bounds up the stairs, pumping his arms and leaping a few steps at a time. He runs around the corner and back into the hall where we can't see him anymore.

Gracie frowns and says that Neil really creeps her out, but I don't really know why. Sometimes I don't understand Gracie. She's so nice babies and grandparents, but when it comes to nice people like Neil Parmley, she's meaner than Grammy when she doesn't take her medicine.

The back room that Mrs. Parmley spends most of her time in has a weird smell to it. I'm not sure what it is exactly. It's like going in a pet store and smelling all the dog food and cat food and bird food and fish food rolled into one. It's like that, but with old lady perfume, too. She never did smell that way when she was my teacher. Maybe it got that way when she got older. But Grammy Joanne doesn't smell like that. Actually, Grammy Joanne doesn't smell like anything unless she's slicing onions.

When me and Gracie reach the back room, Mrs. Parmley's sitting in her big padded chair. The chair's covered in rips and tears and one of the legs is busted. I remember Neil tried fixing that chair before, but it just won't stay and so Mrs. Parmley sits on the chair crooked like she could fall out any minute. But she never does.

She's doing something with her needlepoint now, and humming to herself. Loch Lomond. I think Mrs. Parmley likes that song. She sings it a lot.

Gracie puts her hand on Mrs. Parmley's shoulder. "We're here, Mrs. P!"

Mrs. Parmley jumps, dropping her needle. I almost laugh but then I bite my lip because Momma told me not to laugh at old people, even if they do funny things.



When Mrs. Parmley lets us into the garage, we start moving boxes from one side of the room to the other. I don't really know what we're supposed to do, but Gracie says we just need to make it look cleaner and then we can leave.

"Oh, I already cleaned the garage, Rae." Neil's voice runs up my back and into my ears.

I squeal. "Neil, that's the second time you sneaked up on us!" I laugh a little nervously, then I give him a little push on the shoulder. I don't like getting scared, but Neil isn't a scary person, so I don't mind.

Neil giggles and says he's good at being sneaky. We both laugh but Gracie doesn't laugh with us. She just asks if we need to do any cleaning since he already cleaned the garage and Neil says he cleaned it all yesterday. Then his face lights up like a 4<sup>th</sup> of July sparkler. "We can play hide and seek instead."

Oh, baby, you should know I'm really good at hide and go seek. There's a place in our bathroom that I can fit in and nobody checks it and I never tell anyone because it's a secret place, but I'll show you where it's at when you get here and we can both hide there when you're old enough to play hide and go seek.

Gracie says we should go but thanks anyway and when we reach the street again, I ask her why she didn't want to play hide and go seek. I know for a fact that Gracie loves to play hide and go seek, too.

"I told you, I don't wanna spend any time with creepy Neil."

Gracie doesn't look backwards. She walks ahead of me down the street back to our house. I try and run after her, holding my belly so the baby doesn't fall out and calling after Gracie, but this time she doesn't slow down for me.

## THE DOCTOR CHAPTER

The last time I went to the doctor, they stuck needles in my arm and told me not to move, but I couldn't help it because the needles were so sharp. Later there was a big purple spot on my arm. Mom said it was blood, but because it was under the skin, it stayed purple instead of red. It scares me to think of all that blood right under my skin like a big purple puddle.

Besides the blood and needles, I don't like hospitals because a lot of doctors wear masks over their faces so I can never tell if they're smiling or frowning. I ask them what they did that day and tell them all about Gracie and Grammy Joanne and Mom and sometimes I tell them about my dad and what we do on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, but they never talk to me for very long. They just say yes or no and a lot of uh-huh's. Then they go away and I have to sit on crinkly paper and stare at pictures of lungs or cartoon bodies with just muscle and no skin. Momma says doctors just like to make you wait so you can feel like you've got your money's worth. I don't understand what that means, but I never see anyone smile at the doctor's and people in the waiting room are usually coughing and they don't talk back.

I'm really scared to go today. I stay in my room until my mom knocks on the door. She asks if I want any food but I don't feel hungry but she says I need to at least drink some orange juice. Orange juice is my favorite, so I come out of my room and go downstairs.

Mom's got her hair down on her shoulders and she's wearing a button-blouse instead of her Kramer's T-shirt. She looks fancy, like she might go to church when we get back.

"There's nothing to be scared of, Rae."

That's what Momma says to me. She takes my hand and squeezes it and I squeeze her hand back so she squeezes it twice. It makes me smile.

“The doctor isn’t going to put any needles in me, is he?” The orange juice almost hisses down my throat, but then what’s left of it tastes real sweet in my mouth.

Momma shakes her head and tells me there won’t be any needles at this doctor. And guess what else Momma said, baby? I get to see a picture of YOU today! The doctor can show me what you look like right inside my belly! Ooh! I wonder what you look like. And I just know you’re gonna be a girl.

The doctor’s office doesn’t have a bunch of people coughing in it like last time I came. Instead, there are other moms with big bellies. Some have little babies in their arms and some don’t look any different from normal ladies.

“You’re going to have a baby, too?” I ask the woman that we sit next to. She smiles and pats her huge stomach.

“We’re having twins.”

My eyes go wide. *Twins?* “That means your baby will have a friend he can always play with and never get bored. And you’ll have *two* babies you can dress up and sing to and buy two kiddie cones for at McDonald’s!” I smile real big and hug my stomach. “That must be really exciting.”

The woman laughs. “We’re a little nervous. They might be quite a handful.”

“I could help you take care of them if you need any help. I’m real good at that.”

Mom puts her arm around my shoulder and tells me, “Okay, Rae.” I sit back in my chair and watch Mom fill out a bunch of papers on a clipboard.

“When are you due?” the woman asks.

“I don’t know yet,” I say. “We’ll probably find out today, though.”

The woman looks at my mom and then back at me.

“*You’re pregnant?*”

I nod. “Mm-hmm.”

She goes back to her magazine without saying anything back.

“I was really surprised, but I’m glad because having sex wasn’t very much fun, so at least I get to have a baby.”

“Rachel.” Mom’s voice tightens like a violin string. She grabs my hand. “Help me fill out these papers, will you?”

I look back at the woman next to us. She smiles and puts the magazine in front of her face. I don’t want to bother her, so I look at Momma’s clipboard and she asks me questions about my age and what color my hair is and I tell her everything while thinking about my baby and how I get to see a picture of her soon.

The doctor’s name is Dr. Lennon. I like that because it sounds like Lemon. He asks me to sit on a crinkly paper bed, but I don’t mind because he’s not wearing a mask and he’s going to show me a picture of my baby. I lie down and a nurse comes in and pulls my shirt up. She rubs some cold jelly over my stomach, which kind of tickles, but it’s cold so I don’t laugh. Momma’s next to me in a chair, holding my hand. She’s smiling so I know I can smile because a lot of times now when I bring up having a baby she doesn’t smile and she tells me not to get so excited about it, so I have to not smile when I talk about the baby in front of Momma.

The nurse pulls out a plastic thing that looks like a remote control except she rubs it over my belly instead of pointing it to the TV. She twists it around for a second and then she stops.

“Here it is.”

There you are, baby! I can see your head. It’s a really big head. But Momma says it’ll get smaller when you get bigger. Oh, you’re so beautiful, baby! And you’re here, right inside my tummy, and I’m so glad I can talk to you anytime I want because you’re right there. The monitor says you’re right there. You have a little tail that the nurse shows us which makes me laugh because I wonder if you’ll come out looking like a dog, but she says that goes away, too. I think it might be fun if you had a little tail. Then I could know when you’re happy or sad without having to look at your face because you’d just wag your tail when you’re happy. Sometimes people smile when they’re not happy. Grammy Joanne told me that. It makes it hard for me to know whether I should be smiling or not when I’m talking to some people. But if you had a tail, I’d always know whether to smile or frown. I think you’ll be a happy baby, though, so you don’t need to have a tail.

Momma tells me to remember that I can’t keep you because you have to go to a mom and a dad. But I’m working on it, baby. I’ll make sure and find a great daddy so you can stay with me and talk to me and play guitar with me and I’ll tell you stories and you’ll always be smiling so I don’t ever have to pretend like I’m not.

On the way home, Momma stops at a gas station because we had to drive all the way out to Hillsboro for my appointment and her gas tank’s almost empty. She gets out of the car to pay and I ask her if I can get something from inside and she says yes.

I go inside and look around at the candy on the shelves. I wonder what kind of candy you’ll like, baby. I like Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups because I love peanut butter.

“Have you ever tried to roast one of those things in a campfire?”

I turn around. A boy with a dark beard and tons of little curls on his head smiles at me. I tell him I’ve never tried to roast one of these things in a campfire. Normally we just roast marshmallows and sometimes popcorn.

“The peanut butter never melts.” His mouth forms a grin, hiding in his beard.

“Something’s not right about that.”

I look at the Reese’s package, squeezing it in my hands. “Is peanut butter supposed to melt?”

The boy looks at me and smiles. “Haven’t you ever had a toasted peanut butter sandwich?”

I tell him no and he shakes his head, putting a hand on my shoulder, and tells me that as soon as I get home I have *got* to try a toasted peanut butter sandwich. But I can only eat it if I have milk because it makes you really thirsty. I tell him I can’t drink a lot of milk because I have Williams.

“You have what?”

“Williams. It means I can’t have a lot of milk and I can’t tell time and I’m really good at music and I tell great stories.”

His eyes crinkle in the corners which is what Grammy’s eyes do sometimes when she pretends to be mad about something. He tells me his name is Theodore but that I shouldn’t call him that because everyone calls his grandpa Theodore, so I can just call him Theo. Or Door. I laugh because I’ve never heard anybody called Door before. I tell him my name’s Rachel Charley Jackson and that I’m seventeen years old and that he can call me Rae.

“That’s a cool name,” Theo says. He looks outside and then back at me. “Is that your mom?”

I tell him yes. We just came up here for an ultrasound because Gaston doesn’t have any baby doctors. Theo’s eyes get smaller and he purses his lips.

“What does that face mean?”

Theo’s eyes open back up again. “What?”

I ask him again what that face means because I’m not sure how I’m supposed to react to that and he laughs and says I can react however I want and it doesn’t matter what kind of face he’s making. I ask him if it’s okay for me to smile even though he’s not smiling because I’m really excited to have a baby and he laughs and all his teeth look like shiny white buttons in the middle of his dark brown beard.

“Do you live here?” I ask.

“In the gas station?” Theo squints his eyes and smiles.

I laugh and shake my head. “No, here. In this town.”

He says that he’s from Yamhill. Yamhill’s really close to Gaston. I know because sometimes Momma goes to Yamhill to go shopping and it doesn’t take very long to drive there. Theo tells me he comes to Hillsboro for flight school because Hillsboro has a little airport where they teach you how to fly planes.

My eyes go big. “You know how to fly?”

Theo nods and salutes at me. “Soon to be certified, ma’am.”

“Could you take me flying sometime? I’ve always wanted to fly and my little sister was gonna be Peter Pan this year but she didn’t do it because she’d have to chop off all her hair.”

Theo puts both his hands on his curly head. “That’s awful.”

“Could you take me flying sometime?”

He laughs again and says sure. I tell him he’s got a lot of hair on his face. I don’t know anyone who has a beard except my dentist and he’s older than my mom. Theo puts one hand on his hairy chin like he’s thinking hard about something and then he says that my dentist must be really cool. I don’t really know why he’d think my dentist was cool since he doesn’t know him at all, but I can’t ask him why because my mom comes in and says we’ve got to go.

“You’re from Gaston, then?” Theo asks. And I say yes.

He grabs my hand with both of his hands and says, “Well maybe one day I’ll see you in Gaston, Rae Charley Jackson. And we can go flying flying.”

Momma looks behind us in the store windows when we go outside. She asks who that was and I tell her that’s Theo and he knows how to fly.

I remember in the car that I forgot to get candy in the store, but I don’t mind because I got to meet Theo and I can’t stop putting my hand to my nose because it smells a little bit like bread and leather and I remember that I have to have a toasted peanut butter sandwich when I get home.



## THE 4<sup>TH</sup> OF JULY CHAPTER

I FELT YOU MOVE THIS MORNING, BABY! I felt you move! I'm sure of it! I was so excited when I woke up this morning and just laid in bed and then it felt like a bunch of little bugs were walking around in my tummy. I put my hand to my belly but I couldn't feel it anymore. When I told my mom, she wasn't quite sure if it was actually you that was moving, but I think it was. I'm so glad you moved for me, baby. I'm so so glad you moved because now I know you're really there. You're more than just a picture in a see-through tummy at the doctor's office. You're a little baby.

And baby, I had another dream about you last night. It was wonderful. You were sitting at the piano and I came behind you and helped you play O Schöne Nacht. You were so good, baby. You played better than I can play, and I can play Schöne Nacht really good. We went into the backyard and had a picnic, just you and me. And then we went back into the house but the house turned into the zoo 'cause you can do that in dreams. And we went and looked at all the animals. I showed you the mandrills because those are my favorite. You laughed at their painted faces and your laugh sounded like little bells playing a song just for me.

Today it's the 4<sup>th</sup> of July, which is the day my dad's heart stopped from a firework. Momma, Grammy, Gracie and I go to the cemetery in the morning to put some flowers on Daddy's grave. The flowers are called lilacs and they're purple and smell like white gummy bears. One time I made a cinnamon and sugar sandwich and I tried to put lilacs in the middle to make it taste like gummy bears, but the lilacs just tasted like grass.

Momma doesn't cry very much. I've only seen her cry three times. Once when she first held Gracie at the hospital, once when she dropped the tip of a hot iron on her foot and it took off most of her pinky toe, and then at my dad's funeral. I look now to see if she's crying but she's not. Just frowning a little bit and smelling the flowers before she drops them on his tombstone. Grammy picks Gracie up and rests Gracie on her hip, hugging her close. Grammy's tears look like little rhinestones falling down her wrinkled face before they crack into little pieces on the ground.

I cry a lot. I cried when my dad died because I saw my mom crying. I cried when Sam Dunley told me there wasn't such a thing as Santa Claus. I cry every time I see a puppy tied up outside Gaston Market. I asked my mom once if it was okay to cry and she said I laugh three times as much as I cry so it's all right.

After we visit Daddy, we go back into town and get our food for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July at Hagg Lake. I love going to Hagg Lake. It's nice and big and the water's freezing but the sun always warms me right up. Mr. Knox from the fire department owns a boat and he takes people out on tubes if they want. I've been on the tubes a couple times and I'm a little scared of them, but I love riding on the boat and feeling like I could fly right on top of the water.

When we get there, people have already set up a table for hot dogs, hamburgers, cookies, and all sorts of jello. I love jello almost as much as I love macaroni and cheese. There's this one type of jello Mrs. Wade always makes that has lots of different layers so it looks like a rainbow when I bite into it. Sometimes I pretend like I really am eating a rainbow and that a leprechaun will come out from the bushes and hop on my shoulder and show me where all his gold coins are.

“Hello, Rae!”

I hear Neil’s voice before I turn around and I smile because Neil’s very nice to me and he laughs at all my jokes and I’m happy that he’s here to have fun with me on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. I turn and see Neil in his swimming trunks with a big white stripe down his nose. I heard once that sometimes bats have a white nose because of some kind of fungus that grows on their face. They spread it to other bats and then they all get white noses. But I know Neil’s just got sunscreen on his face. He has some wrinkles by his eyes and his mouth that have sunscreen showing in them, too. Momma already put lots of sunscreen on me before we got to the lake, so I don’t have to worry about getting a sunburn.

“Have you tried this jello, Neil?” I show him my plate. “It looks like I’m eating a rainbow.”

Neil laughs low in his throat like a big dog. I’m not sure he knows that it’s just jello so I tell him it’s just jello and it’s not actually a rainbow and he laughs harder, almost falling onto the grass behind him.

“Neil, come help me set up the umbrella.” Mrs. Parmley’s bending over like she’s going to sit down next to the shore. She holds out a giant umbrella in front of her and Neil walks over and gets it from her to help her open it.

I look around for Gracie and Momma and Grammy. They’re waiting with empty buns on their plates in the line to get hot dogs and hamburgers. Gracie’s shirt is already off on the ground so her freckled shoulders are showing from under her tie-dyed swimsuit. I go over to the line and hug Grammy around the waist and she pats me on the back. The smoke from the barbecue is

thick and sweet and reminds me of camping. I look up at the sky and think about all the fireworks everyone's brought and I smile with all my teeth.

When we're done eating, Mr. Knox tells everyone he's starting rides on his boat. Gracie and I grab hands and run out with the other kids and sit on the corner of one of the benches on the back by the inner tubes. We dip our feet in the water and it's cold but it feels good, but Mr. Knox tells us to be careful because there are these big fans underneath the boat that spin really fast so the boat will go forward and if we're too close, the fans could cut our feet right off. So we keep our feet tucked up against our rear ends and rock back and forth with the boat when Mr. Knox drives it around the edge of the lake. I can't keep my eyes open very big because the air's hitting my face really hard, but I open my mouth and feel cold right at the back of my throat. I like that feeling. It's like drinking a big glass of kool-aid without actually drinking it. You can't spill it because it's just air. But you can swallow all the air you want on Mr. Knox's boat. Someday I'll take you on Mr. Knox's boat, baby. Maybe you'll want to ride the inner tubes and if you do, I'll ride with you.

When we get back onto the shore, the sky's already gotten a little darker. It's not dark enough for fireworks yet, but it will be soon. Gracie and Jordan Parker and a bunch of the other kids from our neighborhood want to play hide and go seek. I love playing hide and go seek at Hagg Lake because there's this one spot I found once that's inside a big bush except when you open up the branches, the bush is empty inside. I don't know how it got like that, but I remember where the bush is because it's right next to the dock and I always hide in it when we play hide and go seek and nobody ever finds me. Gracie's it, so she puts her head down on the hood of our

car and starts counting and we all run away to find our hiding places. You're not allowed to go past the dock or the picnic tables, but that's still a lot of space to hide.

I run as fast as I can to the bush by the dock, but my chest sort of hurts so I have to slow down a little bit. I used to be able to beat Gracie at running but she's gotten so fast. I don't know why I can't run as fast as her but Grammy says it's because of my Williams. I like that I can play the guitar and sing and all of that, but sometimes I wish I didn't have Williams so I could run as fast as Gracie. She looks like a big lion when she runs fast enough because all of her orange hair just streams behind her all crazy like a wild lion.

I look around to make sure no one sees me hiding in the bush and then I lift the branches to go inside. I move really far into the bush and sit down with my knees curled up against my chest, holding my breath so no one hears me.

A pair of feet walk up to the edge of the bush. I can see the long, bony toes shuffling by the branches.

"Rae, is that you?"

"Neil?"

Neil's face appears like it isn't even attached to his head. He lifts up a branch and asks if he can hide with me and even though I don't want to share my hiding spot with anyone, I also don't want Gracie to see Neil looking in the bush and give away my secret place so I wave Neil into the bush with me. He has to scrunch down real low because he's really tall and he sits right up next to me and hunches his back so that his head doesn't stick out the top of the branches.

"Ready or not, here I come!" Gracie shouts from over by the cars.

I giggle and look at Neil and he giggles back but I tell him to shush because his giggle is a lot louder than mine. We sit for a long time and we see Gracie's feet go back and forth past the bush but she doesn't stop to look inside.

"My mother says you're having a baby." Neil whispers with his head turned to me. I put my hands on my stomach because it's getting bigger and I smile because I could feel you this morning, baby. You felt like the very tip of a feather going up and down my tummy.

"That's right, Neil. I'm gonna have a baby."

Neil's face is smiling real big and I smile real big because I love when people are happy and smiling, especially when I talk about my baby. I tell Neil about how I went door to door trying to find a husband because my mom said I couldn't keep the baby unless I had a daddy to take care of him, too.

"Do you want to be a daddy, Neil?" I ask real quiet so Gracie can't hear if she's by the bush.

Neil looks down at the ground like he doesn't know what kind of face to make. I've never seen Neil with any babies, but he's real nice to his mom. He cooks for her and cleans the house and fixes her clocks and tries to fix her furniture. Momma says that poor Neil was blessed with a tiny brain and a big heart because he just works, works, works for Mrs. Parmley all the time and he doesn't seem to ever get tired.

"I'd like to be a daddy, but Mother says I might never get to."

"Because she needs you around the house?"

Neil looks back up at me and his pale blue eyes look all shiny like he might cry and I don't want Neil to cry because he's so nice and he always smiles. Neil says he might not get to be a daddy because there aren't many girls out there like him who could be a good momma.

"You're kind of like me, aren't you, Rae?" Neil knocks his knee into my elbow making me rock a little. I laugh and knock him back, shushing him because Gracie's come back by the bush and is chasing Hannah Walker back to the base. I can tell it's Hannah because her shoes have little daisies on them and I thought those were so pretty and told her I'd love to have a pair of shoes with daisies on the front just like them.

"Rae."

I turn and see Neil's face a lot closer to mine than it was a second ago and I get a little scared because I didn't know Neil had moved.

"Neil!" I hit his shoulder. "You scared me!" And I laugh because Neil always sneaks up on me and likes to scare me.

Neil doesn't smile this time though so I don't exactly know what face I should make back.

"Rae." He moves in a lot closer so I can smell the sunscreen on his face.

"Found you!"

Gracie ducks her head into the bush and I scream because I didn't hear her coming. Gracie tags my foot so I have to be it for the next game. I feel sad because my hiding spot isn't a secret anymore, but maybe no one else saw it except Gracie.

I climb through the branches and turn back to help Neil. I ask him if he's going to keep playing but he says no thank you and walks back to his momma's big umbrella. I don't know

why he doesn't want to play anymore, but we don't get to start the next round anyway because Mr. Knox is setting up the fireworks and Grammy Joanne wants us to sit by them so she can brush the tangles out of me and Gracie's hair.

Mr. Knox has to get the lighting area all set up before he can light the fireworks, so we all wait and watch him. Hannah Walker and her mom and dad sit next to us. I tell her again that I like her shoes with the daises on them and she laughs. Then she whispers something in Gracie's ear. I can't quite hear what she says but Gracie doesn't seem to like it.

Grammy tells them to hush because Mr. Knox is lighting the first firework. Yellow, blue, and purple sparks shoot out from it, whistling so loud that I have to cover my ears. I love fireworks, but I don't like how loud they get when you're right next to them. My favorite fireworks are the big ones up in the sky because they're so far away I can't hear them whistle or anything like that, but they cover the whole sky like splatters of paint. I love to splatter paint. One time my mom let me and Gracie go into the garage and we put on some of Dad's old work shirts except we put them on backwards so the tag tickled my neck. Then Momma showed us this big sheet stretched across the doors and she gave us some paintbrushes so we could dip them in the paint and splatter them across the sheet. She turned on the radio and we danced and twirled and paint whipped across the sheet and when we were done it looked like a big tangle of colors. That's one of my favorite memories that I can think of. I asked Mom a little while ago if we could do that again, but she said probably not.

Momma taps me on the head, telling me the loud noises are over so I uncover my ears.

“Hey, Rae.”



I look at Hannah and see that she's smiling so I smile back.

"Don't do it, Hannah." Gracie puts her hand over Hannah's mouth and I laugh because I do that to Gracie all the time when she swears.

Hannah gets free for a second and looks at me again. "I just wanted to know—"

Then Gracie does the craziest thing. She straightens up and punches Hannah Walker right in the nose! And blood gets everywhere and the blood is even redder than the star-shaped fireworks in the sky.

Momma grabs Gracie by the shoulders and turns her around so that she's looking straight at Momma. Why did you do that, is all Momma says, but Gracie's eyes are shiny and she looks real sad. Gracie looks at me and I want to give her a hug because she looks so sad, but then Mr. Walker starts yelling and it hurts my ears, so I put my hands on the sides of my head and I can't help but start to cry too because Gracie's crying so hard.

"What the hell did you do?"

"Don't you talk to my daughter that way."

"I think it's broken!"

Grammy stands up quicker than I've ever seen her stand and hugs Gracie real tight and Gracie sits still. But blood's still dripping down Hannah's chin like watercolor paint, except it's darker and it stains her teeth.

Lots of people are around us now. I get scared because everyone's talking so loud, so I stand next to Grammy and Gracie while Momma talks to Mr. Walker. Grammy takes me into her arms and squeezes me tight so Gracie and me are smashed up next to each other. Momma turns around to Gracie and shakes her, asking what the hell did Hannah do to make her punch her in

the nose. Gracie looks down and says something so quiet that Momma asks her to say it again, but I heard it the first time, so I repeat it to Momma. “She said she was surprised Rae even knew how to get herself knocked up.”

I don't really know what Hannah meant by that. I didn't know I was knocked up until I took that pregnancy test because my belly wasn't big like a pregnant lady's until just recently. But then I have to cover my ears again because Hannah yells through all that blood that she heard her mom say it and then everyone around me is yelling at each other. I cry harder because I don't know why everybody's so angry and I can't reach Momma because Grammy's squeezing my arm so tight it hurts. My stomach feels like it's jumping into my throat. I can't breathe because I'm crying so hard and my breaths are too short to breathe. Baby, I wish you were here with me right now. I'm really scared and I just want to hold you and sing to you. I just want to hold you and sing to you. I just want to hold you and sing to you.

Momma says we won't be staying for the rest of the fireworks, but that's okay because I'm really tired anyway. We get in the car and drive home and all the way back, I hold Gracie's hand. Normally she doesn't let me hold her hand because she says she's not a baby, but I'm glad she lets me this time.

## THE CHAPTER AFTER ALL THE YELLING

Dear baby, I woke up this morning feeling really sad and I don't know why because I almost always wake up and want to give Grammy a hug and play my guitar on the porch. I feel like I'm gonna throw up, which makes me worried because what if you come out when I throw up? Do babies come out a mommy's mouth if she throws up? I threw up once after I ate a bag of M&M's and I didn't like that because I could feel all the M&M's coming up my neck and throat and then out my mouth into the toilet. It looked like little white paint chips and I could feel bits of candy stuck in my teeth. I hate throwing up and if I throw you up, you might die because Momma says it's not time to have you yet because you're only the size of a lime and you wouldn't be able to breathe. She says you don't have real lungs yet and I wonder how you can breathe right now if you don't have real lungs. Do you breathe through my lungs?

I really hope I don't throw you up, baby. Then I wouldn't get to be a mommy. Momma showed me some families she's gotten in contact with about adoption, but I still want to find a husband before you're born so I can keep you for myself.

Oh, my stomach. I don't want to lie down. But I don't want to stand up, either. Do you feel sick, baby? The bottom of my belly starts shaking, and I think it might be you kicking, baby, but then the shivers move through my stomach and up my chest. Oh no. Oh no. Oh please don't come out, baby.

I jump off the bed and run down the hall to the bathroom. It feels like an earthquake and a big fire are both in my throat. I kneel in front of the toilet and lift up the seat. Please don't come out, baby. Please, *please* don't come out.

Vomit sizzles through my mouth and I feel like a dragon breathing fire into the toilet. My stomach jerks like a hook is pulling it up through my mouth. I start to cry. I can't close my mouth and I can't take a breath. My nose hurts. Baby, please don't come out.

When my stomach finally settles down, I look into the toilet bowl. It's all brown and orange and it smells terrible. But there's no baby in the toilet. I look hard just to make sure, but it's just throw up. Oh, thank goodness, baby! I'm sorry if you got scared, but I think you're all right.

I run downstairs to tell Grammy that I threw up and she just nods her head and says she's surprised I don't throw up more often. I ask her if the baby can come out when I throw up and she says she doesn't think so. So that's good. I'm not too worried now, baby. But you should still probably hold on tight if I ever throw up again.

Today's extra hot outside, so I put on a tank top and a skirt and go outside to find Daphne. But she isn't at Doris's Cutting Corner, so I try Scoggins Creek Coffee because Daphne loves to drink coffee. I cross the street to the little shack and peek inside. Instead I see Mrs. Fink and she says she hasn't seen Daphne today. She tells me she hasn't seen my mom come by in a couple days and asks if we've been doing okay since Gracie beat the shit out of the Walker girl last week. I tell her we're fine but I don't want to talk to Mrs. Fink anymore because I still get all shaky and scared when I remember everybody yelling and all that blood and how it dropped onto Hannah's daisy sandals.

There's an old blue car in the parking lot that I've never seen in Gaston, and I normally know what kind of car everyone drives because most people drive pickup trucks. This car looks

nice, even though it's old. The headlights are square so the car looks like it's smiling with two big eyes looking back at me.

Then I hear a whistle from behind me. It sounds like those whistles you hear in movies when a pretty girl walks by a group of guys on the sidewalk. The whistle's from pretty far away, though, so it doesn't hurt my ears. I turn and see a head of curly dark hair from behind a bag of groceries.

"Did you whistle at me?" I shout to the bag of groceries.

The groceries drop a little and a bearded face pops out from behind the bag. It's Theo! He smiles in his dark beard and says yes, indeedy. He did whistle at me. I jump off the curb and almost skip towards him. He drops the bag of groceries on the ground next to him and puts his hands on his hips, squinting down at me.

"Did you come here to see me?" I ask, trying to catch my breath.

Theo reaches into his paper bag and pulls out a jar of honey mustard. He says he'd planned on eating at the lake with some friends, but they ended up canceling on him. He asks if I want to join him instead. I tell him I have to ask Grammy because I'm not supposed to go anywhere with someone I don't know. But Theo says to bring Grammy, too. That makes me feel better, so I say that sounds like a good idea and Theo offers me his arm "so I can escort you to my carriage." I've never heard anyone call their car a carriage, and I thought carriages had horses to pull them down the street, but Theo says the horses took a break so we'll just use the engine for now.

I get in Theo's old, blue car and the leather seats feel hot against my legs so I have to stick them straight out so they're not touching the cushion at all.

“Where to, miss?” He smiles and his teeth are so bright. I tell him that. He laughs and says thank you and then asks where we can find Grammy Joanne. I can’t remember the exact address, but I know that we have to turn this corner and go down until the school and then we have to turn again. So Theo starts the car and “Free Fallin’” starts playing through the speakers. I tell Theo I play this song on the guitar and he stares at me for a second and asks if that’s true.

“Of course it’s true.”

“I love Tom Petty.”

“I do, too.”

Theo holds up his hand flat for a high five so I slap his palm and smile. When we get to my house, we ask Grammy if she wants to have a picnic with us. Grammy asks who the hell is this, but I tell her it’s okay because I met Theo in Hillsboro when I went to get my ultrasound.

“Pleased to meet you, Joanne.” Theo holds out his hand and Grammy looks at me without smiling, then shakes Theo’s hand.

Theo shows Grammy the bag of food and asks Grammy if she’d like to join us for a picnic. Grammy says she doesn’t have time to eat with us because she has to finish a quilt for Mrs. VanWyngharden’s baby shower. But she says she’ll talk with us on the porch and we can eat in the front yard.

Theo takes Grammy’s hands and shakes them both, saying he appreciates her letting us have lunch together and Grammy touches her chest and smiles. I’m glad Grammy likes Theo because he seems like the nicest boy I know.

“Are you really pregnant?” Theo wipes a bit of turkey off his beard and leans back on the blanket, looking at me with a look that I don’t know, but I remember he said I could look however I wanted back at him and so I smile and nod and say that I am really pregnant. He smiles and takes another bite of his sandwich and when he swallows, he just says congratulations. And I say thank you.

“Are you scared?” he asks.

I tell him I threw up this morning and that scared me because I was afraid the baby would come out my mouth.

“No.” Theo covers his own mouth and asks if that can really happen.

“Of course not,” Grammy says from the porch, tying the yarn on her blanket into little knots. “Rae’s just got it in her head that that baby’s stuck in her damn throat.”

Theo laughs and holds up his hands. “I’m probably no more knowledgeable,” he says. He looks back at me. “Are you excited?” he asks me.

I nod as hard as I can. I’m so excited! I love babies. I tell Theo that babies have the sweetest sounding laughs you’ll ever hear. I tell him babies feel softer than feathers, even though feathers are really really soft, and that I’m going to be the best mom in the entire world. He takes a sip of soy milk. I brought the soy milk from our fridge for the picnic because Theo didn’t have any drinks and I can’t have real milk all the time, and I thought the soy milk would taste good with the cookies Theo brought for dessert. The milk stays on his beard right above his lip and he looks like this ad I saw in a magazine once where Batman had a milk mustache and it said we should drink more milk so our bones can be really strong. Even though I don’t drink a lot of

milk, I think I have strong bones because I've never broken any bones and Daphne's broken so many bones she said she's lost count.

Grammy clears her throat really loud so I look over at her and so does Theo. She's still looking at her blanket, but her eyebrows go up.

"So why are you in Gaston, Theo?"

Theo swallows some food in his mouth and says, "My youth group was supposed to have a picnic at Hagg Lake, but none of them could make it."

"How old are you?" she asks.

"I just turned twenty in April," he says.

Grammy nods. "Mmm." Then she looks up at him. "So you decided to eat lunch with Rae?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Grammy's eyes get small. "Is Rae your friend?" She doesn't smile. I don't know why Grammy isn't smiling. I am Theo's friend and I think that's wonderful! Theo is so sweet and he laughs a lot so I can laugh with him.

Theo sits up on the grass and brushes his hands on his knees. He looks at me. "She is my friend," he says, smiling. Then his eyebrows scrunch down and he leans towards me. "We're friends, right?"

I nod. "Yeah, Theo's my new friend, Grammy."

Grammy looks at Theo again, but doesn't say anything. Then she finally nods and goes back to her blanket. "Well, that's real nice." She smiles a little bit, so I don't feel confused anymore.



Theo lays on his stomach and tells me he remembers I told him that I'm great at telling stories.

“You said it's because you have Williams?”

I say that that's what my mom says and she loves my stories, so I like that I have Williams.

Then Theo asks if I can tell him my favorite story and I get very excited because I love telling stories and my favorite story is about the princess who cries tears made of orange juice. Theo rubs his hands together and says to commence with the tale of the orange juice tears!

Once upon a time, there was a little princess who cried all the time. She cried when she stepped on a rock. She cried when she missed her bus to school. She even cried when the jelly in her peanut butter and jelly sandwiches would leak through the bread. Personally, I love when the bread is purple from all the jelly, but this little girl wouldn't even touch it.

The worst thing about it all was that the princess's tears were made of orange juice. And you know how orange juice sort of burns in your throat when you drink it? Well it burned in her eyes whenever she cried! And so the princess would cry more because her eyes would hurt and tear up and more orange juice would hurt her eyes until all her tears were gone and her eyes were swollen and orange.

The princess had many doctors who came and tried to give her shots so that her tears would turn normal again, but she hated shots and needles and that made her cry, too. Other doctors gave her pills but the pills were so big that they'd get stuck in her throat and she cried

even more. She didn't know what to do and, frankly, she was tired of crying so much. So she'd cry from being tired.

The king and queen were just as sad as their daughter was. They cried almost more than the princess, but their tears were normal tears made of water and all day long they would ask each other, "Why can't our daughter cry like us?"

This was especially hard because the little girl was growing up and soon she had to find a prince to marry. But all the princes wanted to find a princess who didn't have eyes that were bright orange every time they cried. They said, "Someone else will surely love this princess. But *my* princess will have normal tears made of water and she'll cry like everybody else." Every time a prince came to visit the castle, the princess would get so nervous and cry in her bedroom before he came. She worried whether he would be kind and whether he would care that her tears were made of orange juice. So when the princess finally met the visiting prince, she looked like a goblin because her eyes were so big and orange and her face smelled sour from all the orange juice tears that fell down her cheeks.

One day, the princess was out in the garden, crying because some prince had run away screaming when he saw her orange juice eyes. Her tears fell onto a big golden flower and the flower spread open big and turned to face her.

"Why are you crying?" the flower asked.

The princess explained that she would never find someone to marry because of her orange juice tears and the flower said, "If you come talk to me every day for three days, I can fix your tears."

The princess smiled and said that she would be back tomorrow and she skipped away, smiling the biggest smile she ever smiled.

The king and queen were surprised when their daughter came home smiling and laughing. They had just been crying over another lost prince who wouldn't marry their daughter and they didn't know why the princess was so happy. She told them everything would be fixed soon and that they should stop crying.

The next day, the princess came to the flower and the flower made her smile and laugh like when he told her jokes like the one about the tree.

“What's the joke about the tree?” Theo asks.

I ask him what should you do to a tree when it's upset.

“What?”

“Leaf it alone.”

The day after that, the princess visited the flower and told him a funny story about the man who wanted to grow taller and stretched his legs so long that all his pants didn't fit and so he had to wear a big flowery dress. The flower liked that story and he told her how much he liked talking to the princess. She said she liked talking to him too, and that she'd like to keep visiting him even after he fixed her orange juice tears.

The next day was the third day and so the princess skipped out to the garden where the flower was planted, but the flower was gone. She couldn't find him anywhere. She tried calling for him and still, she couldn't find him. The princess was so sad, she sat on the ground and started to cry right there. She looked at the ground and saw orange juice tears hitting the ground and she cried harder because her tears were still orange. But then the princess touched the tears

and realized that they didn't hurt anymore. The tears didn't burn in her eyes. Instead, they were sweet, like honey.

Then, the princess felt a hand on her shoulder and she turned around and there stood a tall, handsome prince! He had golden hair and it looked just like the gold in the flower petals, and he smelled like honey and he laughed and said, "Surprise!"

The golden prince told the princess how he had been put under a spell and was supposed to remain a flower all his life unless he could meet a princess and make her happy for three days. The princess was so happy that she cried tears of joy, and she laughed because she didn't mind anymore that her tears were orange, because the prince said her orange eyes were beautiful and that she smelled sweeter than any flower he'd ever known.

And so the prince and the princess married and the king and queen were happy and only cried when they stubbed their toes or fell down the stairs. And the princess and the prince lived happily ever after.

Theo waits a moment before saying anything. I ask him why he's not saying anything and then he sits up really fast.

"That was an awesome story!" He puts his hands on top of his head and does a backwards somersault onto the grass and I laugh because I've never seen anyone do a backwards somersault after I told them one of my stories.

Theo stands up and says he's so very glad he was able to have lunch with me. Then he takes my hand and helps me stand up and he gives me a big hug. I'm happy I get to hug Theo. He smells so good and his arms hold me tight like when my mom hugs me goodnight. I let go of

Theo and tell him he smells like bread and leather and he laughs and pats my head. He asks if I want to hang out with him again soon and I say yes I do.

Grammy stands up from her chair on the porch and puts her blanket down on her seat. “Hey,” she says, “give us a call any time if you wanna stop by again.” She folds her arms. “Maybe you can bring your folks or something.”

“Sure thing,” Theo says, “I bet they’d love it.”

Theo walks up to Grammy and gives her a hug which makes her laugh hard and he says goodbye to the both of us and drives away in his old, blue car.

During dinner, Momma asks me what I did today, but I don’t say anything because Grammy talks before I can.

“Rae’s got a new friend,” she says.

Momma looks at me. “Oh yeah?”

Grammy puts her fork down and rubs her knuckles on one hand. “He’s a nice Christian boy who looks like Paul Bunyan.”

I don’t know who Paul Bunyan is, but it makes Momma smile.

Momma puts her napkin up to her mouth and whispers, “I think we’ve had enough boys for one decade, Mom.”

Enough boys for a decade? There aren’t any boys here. Just Gracie, Mom, me and Grammy.

Grammy waves her fork in the air like a magic wand. “Oh, don’t worry, Annie. It’s nothing like that. He’s not looking at her with his pants.”

I look at Grammy and Annie. “How could he look at me with his pants?” I ask, but Grammy and Momma don’t look at me. They just keep eating. I hold Momma’s hand and tell her, “I met him at the gas station in Hillsboro, remember, Momma?” I got home that day and ate a toasted peanut butter sandwich and it was so good! My mouth felt like it was stuck shut, but after I drank some soy milk, I felt better.

Momma looks at Grammy, so I do, too. Grammy nods at both of us and says, “It’s good for Rae to have some nice friends for a change.”

I look back at Momma, who’s still staring at Grammy, then she looks back at me and smiles. “Well, that’s very nice,” she says, and keeps on eating.

## THE ADOPTION FAMILY CHAPTER

Today Momma says that we have to go meet a family that might adopt my baby. I don't want to meet the family that might take my baby so I sit on my bed under my covers and sing Oh Shenandoah to myself over and over again. My chest hurts and I have to hold my breath before breathing back out. Momma says that makes it so I can feel calmer and I don't let the air back out of my body before I get a chance to use it.

Shenandoah, I long to see you. Away you rolling river. For her I'd cross your roaming waters. Away, I'm bound away 'cross the wide Missouri.

What if I don't find a husband, baby? What if I have to give you away? What if there's another family out there who feeds you and changes your diaper and gets to walk you to the bus stop and packs you school lunches and reads you stories before bedtime and kiss your knees when you fall off your bike? What if there's another family out there who can't do all those things as good as I can and they make you sad?

Momma opens my door and asks if I'm okay and I just keep singing Shenandoah because I don't want to talk about another family taking my baby away. She says it'll be okay because they're not getting the baby right now. We're going to see if they're good people and if they'd be a good mom and dad for the baby.

Baby, the name of this family is Mr. and Mrs. Stotka. That doesn't sound like a very nice name. It gets stuck in my throat and I can't quite say the name right. I don't want your last name to be Stotka. I'll bet Theo's last name is a lot nicer than Stotka.

I ask Momma if we can give the baby to someone with a nicer name and she just laughs so I put the covers over my head and keep singing Shenandoah.

‘Tis seven years since last I’ve seen you, and hear your rolling river.

Momma taps my arm and says she’ll take me out to eat after we meet with the family. I ask her if we can get the shell pasta and eat macaroni and cheese when I get home and she says yes. I love macaroni and cheese, and the shell pasta is the very best kind. So even though I still don’t want to meet the Stotkas, I have to be nice and not cry when I see them, and then I can come home and eat macaroni and cheese with shells.

When I think of looking at families to adopt my baby, I think of the pound. I remember going to the pound once to look at all the dogs. Grammy Joanne and Grandpa Bill took me when Gracie was still a baby. There were lots of them and they barked so loud that I started to cry and I had to wait outside while Grammy looked inside. She came out with a tiny puppy that had yellow fur and a bright pink tongue. He was so soft and he smelled like dog food and my Grammy named him Chuck. Chuck was the nicest dog I ever met, but he ran away so we never saw him again. But there were a lot of mean dogs in the pound, too. They were the ones barking so loud and making my ears hurt. I think the Stotkas would be like a big black guard dog that’s always showing his teeth. That’s what they sound like to me.

Momma and I drive all the way out to North Plains to meet the Stotkas. Their house is brown with bricks on the side and they have a big field with a bunch of horses chewing on grass. I smile because my grandpa had a horse he liked to ride named Lady and when I’d put my hand on her big brown neck, she’d lean down and kiss my head.

We knock on the door and the Stotkas let us inside and there’s a man there that says he’s the Stotkas’ lawyer. The Stotkas don’t look like big black guard dogs, but their lawyer kind of



does. His teeth stick out of his mouth and his voice is rough like scraping sandpaper against the sidewalk. He doesn't smile at all, but he looks like he's almost smiling because his teeth are so big. I'm not sure what face to make when I look at him, so I try to look at the Stotkas because they smile a lot.

Mrs. Stotka looks like a little giraffe. Her neck is long and she has a pointed nose, and her hands have splotches on them. I ask what happened to her hands and Momma tells me it's not polite to say things like that, but Mrs. Stotka says that's okay and tells me it's a birthmark. I have a birthmark on my foot. It's little, though. I ask Mrs. Stotka if she likes her birthmark because of how big it is and she says she does and Mr. Stotka puts his arm around her like a nice husband in a movie. I like that Mr. and Mrs. Stotka hold hands with each other. I'm going to hold hands with my husband when I marry him because I want him to know that I like being next to him all the time. I like holding lots of people's hands. People smile and talk to me when I hold their hands. I think it makes them feel good.

“Something that might be hard for some people is that Rae has Williams Syndrome.” Momma says and she puts her arm around me. She says that my baby might have Williams too and I smile because if my baby has Williams, that means she'd be good at telling stories and she could play guitar with me because people with Williams are supposed to be really good at playing the guitar or piano or accordion or lots of other instruments. Me and my baby could play music all the time because we'd both have Williams. I'd love to teach you how to play Clair de Lune, baby. I learned it on the piano and I'm learning it on the guitar and it's not very hard. It's such a pretty song. It's my favorite song to listen to because it feels like I'm swimming in all the music and it makes me feel like I've got the sun inside of me.

Momma taps my shoulder and tells me to hush my humming right now because this isn't the time to sing songs. Mrs. Stotka and Mr. Stotka look at me and neither of them are smiling, but I can't help smiling because Clair de Lune is so beautiful and I tell them that but they still don't smile. Mr. Stotka whispers to Mrs. Stotka really quiet but I hear him and he says, "We could wait." I don't know what he wants to wait for. They can't get the baby right now even if they are nice and friendly. Momma says my baby's about as big as a plum right now.

"What was that?" Momma asks and Mr. Stotka asks my mom can you find out before she has it, and Momma's hand on my shoulder squeezes pretty hard so I tell her to please not squeeze my shoulder so hard and she says sorry.

On our drive back home, I ask Momma why she hurt my shoulder.

"I'm sorry, baby," Momma says, "but it makes me mad when people don't accept you because of your Williams."

I tell her I think most people are very nice and I like being friends with everyone and that I'm sorry if me having Williams makes her sad. I remember Momma was really sad once when I came home from school and told her my teacher wouldn't let me go on an overnight field trip because she couldn't find a chaperone to stay with me and Momma and Dad and Grammy and Grandpa all couldn't come with me. She told me it was because my teacher felt bad for my Williams and she didn't know how to take care of me, which I thought was silly because I know what to do on an overnight field trip and I was a really good girl in school.

Momma pulls to the side of the road and stops the car and gives me a hug and I tell her that the Stotkas seemed very nice, but she says we can keep looking so I'm happy we don't have to give you away yet, baby.

Theo called our house! Grammy tells me when I come inside that he's going to come over soon and that's even better than macaroni and cheese, even with shell pasta. And that's good because Momma ends up having to pick Gracie up from her friend's house so she can't make macaroni and cheese until later.

When Theo comes over, he gives Grammy a big hug and she laughs deep like a gorilla laugh. Then he gives me a hug and spins me around and my feet kick out. He asks if I want to go fishing and says that Grammy can come, too. I ask Grammy and she says it's okay, so me, Theo, Grammy, and Gracie all go to Hagg Lake and get a boat from the boat house. The sun is shining right off the surface of the water so it looks like a big flashlight shining back up at the sky.

Grammy stays next to the car and says she'll watch us from the shore.

"You sure, Joanne?" Theo asks. "I brought enough fishing rods for all of us."

Grammy waves her hand and says nah, and that gets motion sickness. She says she'll just stay here and read her book.

Theo gets three poles and a classical guitar from the trunk of his blue car and tells me and Gracie that we can sit in the boat while he pushes it off into the water. He paddles into the lake and when we get to the middle of the water, he stops and sets one of the poles up in the middle of the boat.

"Have you ever fished before, Gracie?" Theo asks.

Gracie shakes her head. "I've gone with Grandpa Bill on fishing trips, but I've always been too little to fish."

Theo taps Gracie's knee, "Well, today you're gonna learn!" He holds the pole up and tells Gracie to grab hold.

"All right," Theo says, "what you're gonna do is hold on tight to this pole." He holds the fishing pole above Gracie's hands and shows her how to throw the fishing line out. I've never fished before either, so I watch and see how it's done. Gracie laughs as the line flies into the lake and drops in the water far away from the boat. Then Theo tells Gracie to sit down and squeeze her knees against the bottom of the pole. Gracie sits on the seat in the middle and faces out toward the water, holding the pole and watching the water.

Theo sits on the other side of the boat, facing me. The sun hits him in the eyes so he has to squint which makes his whole beard move up on his cheeks and it makes me laugh.

"What?"

"Your whole beard moves when you squint."

He scratches his chin and says the beard's almost as lively as he is and that it has a mind of its own. I ask Theo why he ever grew a beard because I don't know too many younger people with full beards. He says I just didn't like getting stuck with a razor every morning.

I tell him I'm very good at shaving my legs and I never cut myself and he laughs and says you're better than me, for sure.

Theo's laugh sounds like it starts from the bottom of his belly button. It's deep and big and it makes the boat shake. I like hearing Theo laugh.

"What did the fish say when he hit a concrete wall?" I ask.

I hear Gracie sigh and her shoulders go up and down. She says, "Oh brother." Theo smiles and asks me what did the fish say.

“Dam.”

Theo chuckles, then he leans forward to me. “Well, what did the wall say back?”

“Huh?” I don’t remember the wall saying anything back. Daphne told me the one about the dam and she told me it’s funny because a dam is a wall that holds water back but it sounds like a swear word. I ask Theo, “What did the wall say back?”

“Dumb bass.”

I laugh because a bass is a fish but a dumb bass sounds like a swear word Grammy says, especially when she’s driving and someone cuts her off. Gracie laughs too, but she doesn’t turn around from the water. I’ll have to remember that joke and tell Daphne the next time I see her. And Grammy.

“Hey!” Gracie shouts. She’s pulling back on her pole. “I think I got one here!” She looks at Theo. “What do I do?”

Theo stands up and sits behind Gracie on her seat. He holds the pole right above her hands. “Okay,” he says, “I’ll keep holding the pole, you reel it in.”

Gracie grabs the knob on the side of the pole and spins it with both of her hands.

“Keep going!” Theo says.

Gracie spins the knob around and around until a little white fish flies out of the water on the end of the fishing line.

“There it is!” Gracie screams.

Theo nods. “Keep reeling it in.”

I pat Gracie’s back and laugh at the fish swinging back and forth on the end of the line. It looks like the metal chime on the clock in our house going back and forth, back and forth. “Look

at it jump,” I say to Gracie. She smiles up at me and then looks back at the fish. After a few more turns of the knob, the fish falls into our boat.

“Grammy!” Gracie yells across the water. “Grammy! I got one!”

Grammy looks up from her book and waves at us. “Bring it back and let’s see it.”

So Gracie holds onto the line with the fish on it and Theo grabs the paddles and rows us back to shore.

Grammy’s standing near the water with her hands on her hips. She helps pull the boat onto the sand and takes the fish and the pole it’s stuck on.

“Well, look at that,” Grammy says.

Theo rubs his hands together and looks at me and Gracie. “We could probably catch one or two more if we go out again. What do you say?”

I nod and say that I’d like to catch a fish, but Gracie shakes her head and says she’s okay.

“You sure?” Theo asks.

Gracie nods, bouncing the line up and down that her fish is stuck on. “I wanna look at my fish.”

“Gracie, quit waving that damn thing in my face,” Grammy shakes her head, crinkling her nose.

I look back at Theo and ask if I can still go out on the boat with him. I’ve never caught a fish before and I’d love to try.

Theo looks up at Grammy and so do I. “What do you think, Joanne?” Theo asks.

“Please, Grammy!” I give Grammy a hug around her waist and look up at her face so that I see all the lines under her chin.

Grammy smiles and kisses me on the head. “Go on,” she says. “But you better get a big one.”

I bunch up my hands into little balls, I’m so excited! Theo nods his head toward the boat and says let’s go, then. I sit in the boat again and Theo pushes us into the water and rows back into the middle of the lake. I watch Grammy sit at the picnic table by the car and open her book. Gracie sits on the other side of the table and lays her fish on the table, looking at it so closely that her face almost touches the scales and Grammy hits her arm so she backs up. I laugh because Gracie’s so funny. She loves worms and spiders and bugs and all of that. I’m scared of a lot of bugs, but Gracie isn’t. Maybe one day she can teach me not to be afraid.

“Okay,” Theo says, putting the paddles down on the floor and handing me a fishing pole. “Put your hands around this and hold on tight.”

I remember what Gracie did, so I throw the pole back and then forward again, and the line soars out into the lake and drops below the water. I hold the pole between my knees and wait just like Gracie did.

“So what did you do today?” Theo asks, casting out his own fishing line next to me. I tell him I had to go visit the Stotkas and Mrs. Stotka looked like a giraffe because her hands had spots on them, and she seemed very nice, but I didn’t like how upset my mom got when we left, so I don’t want to have to give the baby to the Stotkas.

“Doesn’t Stotka sound like a terrible name?” I ask Theo.

Theo nods and says that Stotka does sound like a terrible name, but the worst name he’s ever heard before was a boy named Finch Scragman. ScrrrrrAAAAAgman, Theo says this with

his mouth wide open. It makes my nose crinkle because it sounds like nails scrrrrraping against a chalkboard. I shiver and say that that's even worse than Stotka.

“What's your last name?”

Theo tells me his last name is Maxwell. I like the way how much my lips move when I say it back. M-axw-ell. He asks me if I think I could find someone good to be the mom and dad of my baby and I tell him I want to keep the baby myself because I know I'd be a good mom and I think I could be a better mom than someone else.

“I think you could, too,” Theo says. The sun bounces off the water and shines under my chin and my whole face feels warm. I'm glad Theo thinks I could be a good mom.

Theo sets his pole between his knees and leans back into the boat. He looks up at the sky and then at me. I smile.

“Do you want to fly airplanes when you grow up?” I ask him. He sits back up and shrugs.

“You mean, like a commercial pilot?” He asks. I nod.

Theo shakes his head and picks up his pole, reeling his line back in. “I'd like to be a seminary teacher or a missionary.” He looks at me. “Do you go to church?”

“I love church!” I say. Everyone comes together and we sing and we're nice to each other because that's how God wants us to be.

Theo nods, smiling with all his teeth. “See, you totally get it. I just want to help people for the rest of my life. I think that's what God wants me to do, too.”

I ask Theo how he knows God wants him to do that and Theo says he just feels good and bright inside every time he helps someone in need. He says God makes him feel good and bright inside, too, so it must come from the same place.



I just love how nice Theo is and he just wants to help people. I want to help people, too. If that's a job, I want that job for forever.

My fishing pole jerks and I squeal because I'm so surprised. Theo laughs and drops his pole on the floor, moving over to me. He helps me take the pole and reel in the line. His arms come from behind me and help me twist the knob around and around and around and it's harder to pull so he pulls harder around and around until a shiny silver fish jumps out of the water and dances on the string. Theo says this is a great catch on my first try.

When Theo brings the fish into the boat, he holds it down under his hand and says that the fish must've swallowed the hook because it's stuck so far down, so he bends the hook straight and pushes it through the scales of the fish to pull it out of the fish's mouth. Blood spits out from the fish and onto the floor of the boat and my chest feels tight because I don't like to see the fish struggling and knocking its tail against the boat. There's not much blood, but it's dark red against the floor and it looks like there are little holes in the bottom of the boat so we can see the lake underneath. I cover my mouth and start to cry. The holes in the bottom of the boat all blur together until I blink and take a big gasp and Theo asks why I'm crying and I tell him I don't want him to hurt the fish. Hannah's nose bled so much when Gracie punched her and everyone got so mad at Gracie and I get so sad when everyone screams at each other. I cover my ears because I can still hear Mr. Walker yelling at Gracie, what the hell did you do.

Water hits my knees and I open my eyes. Theo's holding the empty fish hook in both his hands like he's giving me a present.

“Where'd the fish go?”

Theo points to the water and says he let it go. I take a big gulp of air and look all around the boat and then I hug Theo and tell him thank you and I didn't like seeing the fish bleeding.

I know, is all Theo says and he pulls the fishing line back in from his pole and lays my stick down so we don't have to fish anymore. Theo says we should do something else instead.

"Can we sing?" I ask, because I love singing outside. Theo picks up his guitar from the other end of the boat and asks me to play him something.

"What do you want me to play?" I ask.

"Whatever you want," he says.

I think for a second. "Early one morning the sun was shining I was laying in bed, wondering if she'd changed it all, if her hair was still red."

Theo sings with me and we go all the way through Tangled Up in Blue. Theo nods his head when he sings like he agrees with everything he's saying. I ask him if I can hold his hand because I want him to know how much I like being next to him, but he lets me smell his hands and they smell dirty like fish, so I pull away really fast and tell him nevermind and he laughs and says we should go because the sky's getting dark and I'm hungry. I tell Theo the best thing about meeting the Stotkas is that Momma said she'd make macaroni and cheese with shell pasta and he laughs and says shell pasta is better than camping on the coast and seeing the sun rise. I think about it while I wait with Grammy and Gracie as he puts the boat away and I feel good because Theo must really like macaroni and cheese to say that.

## THE SUNDAY CHAPTER

I wake up this morning and feel like my belly's gotten twice as big. I feel like a big grapefruit is sticking out of my shirt, but then I poke it, and it's just me. I ask Gracie if I look any bigger, but she says I just look like I've eaten a lot of food.

Oh, I'm so excited you're getting so big and healthy, baby! I had another dream about you last night, you know. I dreamed that we went to Mr. Lambert's pool to swim. You were in a bright pink swimsuit with bows and polka dots and you carried around a little blow-up dinosaur tube to sit on in the water. Theo was there, too. He was grilling chicken on the barbeque and singing as loud as he could so you could hear him when you put your head underwater. You were such a big girl, baby. You loved to hear Theo sing and you'd do flips off the diving board and it scared me at first because I was afraid you might hit your head on the wall, but you were just fine. I went to go talk to Theo at the barbeque and we both watched you kick and swim and make bubbles in the water with your mouth. Then Theo held my hand and we both jumped in the water too and so we all swam down to the bottom of the pool and stayed there because we could breathe underwater. Theo and I sat on a couch that was at the bottom of the pool and you came and sat on my lap. We all played patty-cake and you fell asleep on my lap. And baby, when you snored, lots of bubbles came out of your nose! It was so funny. I pointed at all the bubbles and Theo and I laughed because you looked like a little sleepy fish. Then Theo kissed me, baby. It didn't feel like we were underwater. I took a big breath and then I woke up.

I would like for Theo to kiss me, baby. I don't know what it would feel like to kiss someone with a beard, but I'll bet he feels sort of fuzzy like a stuffed animal. I've seen him a lot and I'm so happy he's my friend. He came over to my house and we all played Candyland,

Momma, Grammy, Gracie, Theo and me. Momma says he's a sweet boy, but he looks like a lumberjack. But she laughed when she said that, so I think she likes that he looks like a lumberjack. Gracie says he's really fun and she wants him to come over again so they can play poker because Theo said he's really good at poker and Grammy said she bet that she could beat him. So the next time he comes over, we're all going to learn how to play poker.

Daphne hasn't met Theo yet, but she said he sounds cooler than anybody in lameass Gaston, that's for sure.

I had to go in for another doctor's appointment, too, but they didn't give me an ultrasound this time. They just put a stethoscope up to my belly and asked Momma lots of questions. Momma says the baby's as big as a big orange now. I won't have the baby until she's as big as a watermelon, so you still have to grow a lot more, baby.

Which reminds me, Daphne says that lots of women poo when they have a baby. Right in front of everyone! I don't want to poo when I have you, baby, so I'll make sure and go to the bathroom before. Daphne also says that my feet will get really big and be full of water. I don't know why my feet would be full of water, but she says my ankles will disappear and there will be nothing in my feet except water. Will I still be able to walk if I just have water in my feet? What if I step on a pin? Will all the water come out like when Daphne's mom's waterbed got a hole in it? I didn't know so many weird things could happen to a pregnant lady. I hope they don't happen to me, baby. I just want you to get bigger and then you can come out and be beautiful.

Momma tells me it's time to go to church. I can't believe it's already time to go to church because I just woke up, but Mom's got her Sunday dress on and tells me we have to go now. I

put on my Sunday dress and my pretty shoes. My belly sticks out just a little bit in the dress because the dress doesn't stretch very far, but I can still get it on just fine. When I come downstairs, Gracie and Mom and Grammy are all waiting to go. Grammy doesn't wear anything different when she goes to church. Just her regular floral blouse and slacks. She just says she doesn't think the Good Lord cares if she talks to him in slacks 'cause the Lord's seen her in slacks before and at least she still talks to him.

We walk into the chapel when everyone's still singing and sit on the back pew. Mrs. Parmley and Neil wave us over and we scoot down the pew and sit closer to them. Neil shares his paper with me and we finish singing Nearer My God to Thee. The pastor gets up at the pulpit and starts to talk with his loud, shaky voice. Normally, Pastor Jansen shakes his fists when he's been talking for a while and sometimes I see spit fly from his mouth. I don't know why Pastor Jansen doesn't have a water bottle with him. I think his throat must hurt a lot when he's done and that might be why his voice is so shaky, but then he gets up the next week and does it all over again.

Gracie tries to tap me on the shoulder behind Momma's back, but Mom turns to Gracie and shushes her, telling her pay attention. I feel a piece of paper slide under my hand and look over at the picture Neil drew on the back of the hymn words. It's a picture of me. I have a baby in my belly! I laugh but then Momma tells me to hush and pay attention.

Neil hands me the pen and tells me to draw something. I take the paper and draw Neil with his wispy hair holding a present in his hand. Neil takes the pen and giggles in his low voice. He asks me what's in the box, and I tell him that's up to you. So he takes the paper and he's

drawing for a long time, so I look back up at Pastor Jansen. His face is very red and he's speaking so loud I cover my ears so Momma puts her arm around me and kisses me on the head.

The paper touches the back of my hand and I look at the picture Neil drew. He made a flower and drew me smelling it with a heart over my head. I smile even though the pastor's talking so loud and put my shoulder to my ear so I can hold Neil's hand and I whisper how sweet of you! I put the drawing on my knees and look at the pretty flower and all of the swirls inside of it that look like little petals.

Mr. Frasier turns around and looks at Neil and me. I wave to him and whisper hello because his wife is dead, but he still doesn't smile back to me. Mr. Frasier must be really sad. I tap Momma on the shoulder and ask her if we can invite Mr. Frasier over to dinner sometime so he doesn't feel so lonely.

After we sing There is a Green Hill Far Away, we break for Sunday school. All of the teenagers go to one class together downstairs and even though Neil's not a teenager, he's allowed to come because he can pay attention better to kid lessons.

Mrs. Wade teaches our Sunday school. She has thin glasses and her hair is so black, it almost looks like parts of her hair are blue. Although, now that she's getting older, parts of her hair are white and gray, so it looks like her head is a big sky with shooting stars flying across her hair. I tell her I enjoyed her 12 layer jello at the 4<sup>th</sup> of July party at Hagg Lake and she says thank you, but it's so quiet I almost don't hear her. Then she stands in front of all of us and tells us to settle down. Neil sits on one side of me and Janice Knox sits on the other side of me and we get real quiet so Mrs. Wade can start teaching.

Outside there are big weeping willow trees that swish from side to side. They look like giant gorillas, swinging their arms back and forth except they look a lot prettier than gorillas. I love trees, but Momma says I can't climb them too high because one time I climbed a tree and there was a firetruck passing and its siren was going and I had to cover my ears but I didn't think about holding onto the branches and so I fell out of the tree and got a big scrape on my cheek. I think willow trees almost look like vines you can swing from like Tarzan.

"Are you paying attention, Rae?"

I look back at Mrs. Wade and she's not smiling so I say sorry, Mrs. Wade, and that I was just looking at the willow trees outside.

Mrs. Wade smiles, but her eyes stay the same so I'm not sure whether to smile back or not. I tell her the weeping willows look beautiful when the wind's blowing the branches back and forth like a dancing gorilla and then everybody in the class laughs.

Mrs. Wade hits the chalkboard with her flat hand and everybody's giggles disappear like bubbles popping on someone's finger. The laughs almost seem to pop when they cut off like everyone's forgotten to breathe but they still close their throats off to all the air in the room.

"You should pay more attention, especially because today's lesson is on licentiousness."

Grammy says licentiousness is what stuffy folks say about people they think are trashy but they don't have enough balls to say that. I tell Grammy that we learn about licentiousness at church and so it's probably something God talks about, but Grammy says God tells people the way it is and he doesn't mess around with fancy words.

Mrs. Wade asks me if I know what licentiousness means and I tell her it means when someone does something bad with someone else like kissing a lot or having sex and she smiles so I think I told her the right answer.

I can hear Janice Knox breathe out through her nose and her breath tickles my arm. Neil's hunched over and his head is resting on his knees.

"Did I get it right?" I ask Mrs. Wade when she still doesn't say anything. Everybody laughs even though I wasn't making a joke, but I laugh anyway because laughing makes me feel better than feeling Janice's breath and watching Neil scratch his head and trying to smile or not smile for Mrs. Wade.

Mrs. Wade turns around and writes on the board in big letters SIN. She says that sex is sinful and that people who have sex are doing something very bad.

"What if they get a happy little baby from having sex?" I ask. And Mrs. Wade looks back at me and says that it doesn't matter and that the baby will have a horrible life because its parents were licentious.

I don't think Mrs. Wade understands how wonderful a baby can be. I tell her that I'm having a baby and I want to tell her how excited I am but she talks over me and says I know you're having a baby and thank goodness you didn't know what you were doing, but I'm ashamed of your mother.

"Why?"

"Because she should've set a better example."

"But my mom's wonderful." She listens to my stories and she plays with me and Gracie when she gets home from work and Grammy says she works real hard so me and Gracie can



have lots of our favorite food. Mrs. Wade's black stars hair blends together into a gray soup because I start to cry and tears form a thick wall in my eyes.

I can't feel Janice's breath on my arm anymore. She is looking down just like Neil and a lot of the other kids in the class are too so I can't see from their faces how I should respond. I don't know if Mrs. Wade is sad or angry or joking and I don't know what else to say.

"Are you mad?" I ask Mrs. Wade.

Mrs. Wade's eyes open a little bigger and she steps backward toward the chalkboard, but the rest of her doesn't change. Her voice is quieter when she says maybe you should go find your momma and stay with her, so I wave bye to Neil and walk up the stairs where the grownups are listening to Pastor Jansen and I find my mom and sit next to her and put my head on her lap so I don't have to watch someone's face and so I can smell a little bit of dust and grapes on her hands when she brushes the hair out of my eyes.

On the drive home, Grammy says the F word for the third time I've ever heard her say it. Momma tells her to calm down and talk a little more appropriate because it's Sunday and today's the day we think about God. Gracie whispers in my ear what happened? And I tell her I don't really know, but I think Grammy's really mad at Mrs. Wade for not being nice to me. Grammy says she can swear on Sunday because she's more Christian than any backbiting wench who goes around hurting other people just because her husband ran off with the mayor's daughter.

"Well we don't know that for sure."

"Damn woman's bed is colder than mine."

I start to cover my ears because I feel like Grammy and Mom might start yelling, but they don't. Instead, I hear Momma laugh. I look in the rearview mirror at Momma's reflection and her eyes are crying but she's laughing harder than I can remember her laughing in a while. I laugh because I'm so happy Momma's laughing and I don't want Grammy to swear anymore because Momma doesn't like it, especially on Sunday because we're supposed to think about God. But Grammy starts laughing too and Gracie asks why everybody's laughing and she laughs a little, too.

I think God laughs a lot. Laughing makes me feel so warm in my face and in my heart. Sometimes I think the sun is made of people's laughs. It's so big and so bright, I'll bet it's full of people's laughs and smiles that float up through the air and get caught in it. That's why it's so big and warm. Whenever Momma talks about my dad and how he's in heaven, she'll tell me a funny story about him and she'll usually laugh a lot when she talks about my dad and so I think heaven and God must be full of laughing. When people laugh, I don't have to wonder if they're happy and I can laugh, too, and I can hug someone when they're laughing and I feel like we're closer than after anything we've ever said to each other in a conversation.

Babies laugh a lot, too. And you don't even have to do very much. Sometimes I just touch a baby on the nose and the baby will laugh again and again. And babies just came from God. I think that's why they laugh so much.

When we get in the house, Grammy asks if I want to call Theo and invite him and his family over for Sunday dinner. I'm so excited, I give Grammy a big hug and say I would love for Theo to come over for dinner. And even though I cried at church today, I'm so glad it's Sunday and that we can think about God and laugh and eat outside with all our friends.

## THE BROCCOLI CHAPTER

My belly looks like I swallowed an onion whole and it's just sitting there inside my stomach. This morning, Gracie was eating her cereal and I came downstairs and she dropped her spoon and just said where did that belly come from? I'm excited that Gracie noticed how big I'm getting. It means you're getting big and healthy, baby. And when I lay down in my bed, I can feel you move around in my stomach and it almost feels like a paintbrush gliding around my belly. I told Gracie to come and put her hand on my stomach to see if she could feel anything, but she said she couldn't.

Today, me and Gracie are supposed to help Mrs. Parmley plant broccoli in her garden. I don't really like broccoli, but I like going over to Mrs. Parmley's house because Mrs. Parmley's so nice and friendly and she has all those beautiful birds. I ask Grammy if I can bring my guitar and she says why not, so I bring my guitar and Gracie and I walk over to Mrs. Parmley's house.

When we pass Rocket Motors, Mr. Walker is in his garage, fixing up a motorcycle on one of those boards that wheels around on the ground. He sits up and stares at us. I can't really see what his face looks like with all that oil on his cheeks, but he doesn't say anything when I wave hello. Gracie pulls my arm and tells me we need to cross the street. When Mr. Walker isn't shouting so loud, he's really very sweet. He brought sweet potato fries to my dad's funeral and he let me have as much as I wanted and he pushed me on the swing in our backyard and asked me how are you holding up? I don't see him very much anymore because he took over Rocket Motors and now he works all the time fixing cars and motorcycles and everything else the folks in Gaston drive around in. Sometimes I go over to their house to get Gracie when she's playing with Hannah and I love looking at the giant painting they have over their fireplace. It's a big

colorful peacock with all its feathers sticking out behind its head and it's looking straight at you like it wants you to say hello. I told Grammy about it when I first saw it in their house and Grammy said that's a trashy knick knack to put in your house when you aren't even cultured. But I love it. I want lots of paintings in my house when I grow up. I want them to have color slashing through them and big bright faces so everywhere I look, there's something on my wall that wants to say hello.

I feel Gracie's hand squeeze my arm hard and I tell her not to hurt me like that. But she says we have to keep walking because Mr. Walker is looking at us. It's hard to walk as fast as Gracie when I'm carrying my guitar and it feels like I've got an onion sticking out of my shirt. Besides, I don't want to rock the baby too much in case she get scared.

"C'mon, Rae." Gracie takes a big breath and says shit really quiet and I tell her not to say that because only Grammy can say that but she still doesn't slow down at all.

"What's wrong with Mr. Walker?"

"Shh!"

Gracie walks ahead of me for a little while, then she turns around, still walking backwards and walking so fast that I have to jog a little to keep up.

"Mr. Walker hates me. Ever since I punched his spoiled daughter in the face."

"I'm sorry if I made you get in a fight with Hannah." I hold my belly and take deep breaths so my baby doesn't think I'm doing anything big and scary.

Gracie says it's okay and that it's not my fault and that Hannah's just a spoiled brat that nobody likes and so it's not hard for Gracie to stop being friends with her.

“You should still be friends with Hannah even if she says mean things,” I say. Hannah gave Gracie a stuffed elephant for her birthday last year and it’s almost as big as Gracie. She likes to sleep with it still even though she says she’s too old for stuffed animals. I tell Gracie that Hannah’s a nice girl and Gracie says she knows Hannah’s a nice girl and someday she will say sorry for punching her. But she doesn’t want to say sorry right now and I tell her that’s okay because she shouldn’t say sorry unless she means it.

Mrs. Parmley and Neil are already in the backyard when Gracie and I get there. They’re bent over on their hands and knees, picking broccoli sprouts out of a plastic box and putting them into other boxes in their garden. Gracie puts a pair of gloves on and squats next to Mrs. Parmley and Neil stands up straight and says hello to me and I say, “Hello, Neil.” His sunhat covers his wispy hair so that strands of it poke out by his face and dance around his eyes. He asks why I have my guitar and I say I thought it might be fun to play some music while I was here. And Mrs. Parmley turns around and says We’ll have to hear some songs before you go. And she claps her hands and so Neil claps his hands, too.

We pick the broccoli sprouts up out of their buckets and we have to be careful not to squish them because they’re supposed to grow straight up out of the dirt and turn into broccoli that you can eat. I ask Mrs. Parmley if she really likes broccoli and she says yes and that it’s Neil’s favorite. Neil nudges my arm with his pale elbow and asks if I’ve ever had broccoli and I say that I have and that I don’t like it very much and he laughs and keeps digging planter holes in the dirt.

When we're all done, Mrs. Parmley asks if we'd like any cookies because she'd planned on making some for us after we finished gardening. Mrs. Parmley makes delicious no-bake cookies and she puts coconut and peanut butter and little bits of toffee in them so that they taste more delicious than any cookie you put in the oven like snickerdoodles and chocolate chip.

We go into the front room by the kitchen and Neil says play us something. So I get out my guitar and tune it so all the strings sound right and start playing Moonshadow.

"If I ever lose my hands, oh, if—I won't have to work no more."

Mrs. Parmley sways back and forth while getting out ingredients for the cookies and Gracie helps her while Neil sits on the piano bench and bobs his head up and down.

"Do you have a guitar, Neil?" I ask. And Neil shakes his head no, but he does have a djembe drum up in his room. He asks if I want to see it and I say I'd love to because I've never played a djembe before, but it sounds almost like popcorn and I like that better than hitting a snare drum with a stick. Mrs. Parmley tells Neil to bring down her coin purse while he's upstairs so she can give Gracie and me money for helping her garden.

I've never been in Neil's room before. It's smaller than my room, but there's a skylight in the ceiling so the room's very bright in one spot with the sun shining right into it. Neil's walls are covered in torn pictures from magazines. There are polar bears and fish and sunflowers and people dancing and mountains and a picture of the White House and all sorts of different photos taped over each other so that I can't see the wall underneath them. His bed is very neat. I always forget to make my bed and Grammy has to remind me otherwise the blanket stays crumpled up on my bed all day and it doesn't feel as nice getting into bed at night when all the blankets and sheets are crumpled up.

Next to Neil's bed is a big djembe drum. It's covered in African cloth and tied strings run down the sides of it. We sit on Neil's bed and I ask him to play me something and he says he doesn't know anything. I ask if I can try and he slides it on the floor over to me. I feel the smooth top with my palms and hit the edge with the bottom of my hand. I hit the middle with the tips of my fingers. I get going in a rhythm and my feet get dancing, too. Neil laughs low and hits the sides of the bed. We both bounce on the mattress to the quick moving beat.

Drums are almost as fun as the guitar. I feel the beat run through all my skin and because it's a djembe, it doesn't hurt my ears so much. Neil stomps his foot on the ground and it isn't quite to the beat, but I keep drumming because I like making Neil so happy.

I hear Gracie call my name from downstairs so I stop drumming and tell Neil we should probably go help Mrs. Parmley with her no-bake cookies because she puts lots of extra stuff in them and she's so old, it might be hard for her to make them by herself. Neil stops tapping his feet and says he wants me to keep drumming, but I tell him I heard Gracie call my name and so that means she probably needs my help making cookies. Then Neil grabs my arm and says please play for a little bit longer. I tell him he should bring it with him downstairs and we can play it in the kitchen while Mrs. Parmley's making cookies.

"Rae." He holds my arm with both his hands. His face isn't smiling now. Normally, Neil's been smiling a lot more when I've seen him lately. Mom says he's usually so scared because he doesn't see anyone except his mother all the time, so strangers make him scared. I'm glad he's been so happy lately, because maybe he's making more friends than just his mom now. Neil could have lots of friends if he wanted. He's always laughing and he never gets mad at anybody and that's why I like Neil so much. But right now, he looks all scared again.

“Don’t look so scared, Neil.” I hold his hand so he knows I like being his friend. He smiles again and I feel better because I don’t like when Neil looks scared. I feel Neil’s hand squeeze mine sort of like when my mom squeezes my hand and so I squeeze his hand back and he laughs.

Neil asks me if I’m really having a baby, and I tell him that’s right. I pat my belly where the baby is and it feels like a big onion is stuck in my shirt. I wish I could feel you moving right now, baby, but you might be sleeping, so I won’t try to wake you up. Then Neil says I heard someone talking to Mother about how you did something with Robby Sandberg.

I nod and tell him I had sex with Robby Sandberg because I thought it looked like it might be fun, but it wasn’t really great, and anyway, having a baby is much more exciting because I love babies and I’m going to be a really good mom.

I hear Gracie call my name again, asking me to come downstairs, so I tell Neil we should take the djembe with us when we go downstairs and we can play down there.

Neil pulls my arm and says no, and my eyes water a little because it really hurt when he pulled my arm. I tell him don’t do that, Neil. You hurt my arm. And his face gets all scared again and I ask him what’s wrong.

Neil looks at me and says, “I want to be a dad, Rae.” I tell Neil he should be a dad because he’d make a really nice dad, but he shakes his head and says he doesn’t think he’ll find a good mom because Mrs. Parmley tells him he needs to find a girl just as special as he is.

“You’re a lot like me, Rae.” He rocks back and forth, still holding my hand. I try to pull my hand back, but he holds it harder so my fingers squish together and it hurts, especially because I’m wearing a ring and it digs into my other fingers with Neil squeezing them so hard.



“Stop squeezing my fingers, Neil. That really hurts.” I try again to pull my hand away from Neil’s but he grabs both my arms and looks at me so I can see his pale blue eyes and they’re big and shiny and the black dots in the middle are so tiny, it almost looks like all of the middle of his eyes are blue. His hands feel cold and I shiver a little bit.

Neil looks down at the bed and then back up at me and he says, “I want to marry you, Rae. And I could be a dad and you could be a mom because we would have sex together.”

I lean away from Neil and say I don’t want to have sex with him because I already had sex and I didn’t like it very much and besides, I have a baby right now and I want Theo to be the daddy. I don’t want Neil to be the daddy because he’s looks scared all the time and he’s older and he isn’t as nice to me as Theo is. I can’t breathe very well right now, and my eyes are filling up with tears, but I take a big breath and say, “You can find another girl to have babies with, Neil, but you’re my friend and I don’t want you to be my husband.”

Neil’s eyes fill up with tears, too. He leans forward and puts his head on my knee so I can feel him crying through my jeans and onto my skin. His voice is low and it almost sounds like he’s laughing, except I know he’s really sad and his shoulders shake up and down and I cry too and pat his head and tell him it’s okay.

“I want to marry *you*, Rae. I don’t want to marry another girl.” Neil sits up and tries to hug me, but I feel scared because his fingers are closed so tight around my arms. And he just says, “Marry me. Marry me. Marry *me*.” But I can’t because I want to marry Theo.

Gracie’s calling me again, so I try to get off the bed because I should go help her and I don’t like Neil being so sad. But Neil pushes me back on the bed and stands up in front of me

and says I can't go. I want to go. I tell Neil we should go downstairs and help make the cookies, but he stomps his foot and says, "You can't go until you say you'll marry me."

I stand up and say, "Neil, let me out," but he says no. And I feel my heart stretching and hitting my chest and it almost feels like the djembe beat running through my skin. I run past him to get to the door but Neil wraps his arms around my waist and says no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. And I tell him to stop it and I'm crying hard because I'm so scared that Neil's going to get really mad and hurt my baby because he's squeezing me so tight.

"Put me down, Neil!" I reach around and hit his back. I can't see anything because there are too many tears making everything look blurry so I try to wipe my eyes and my glasses fall onto the floor.

"GRACIE!" I shout as loud as I can, because I don't want to be here with Neil anymore. I didn't know he could squeeze so tight and I didn't know he was that strong. I can't touch the floor and my breath is gone. I cry onto Neil's shirt and he puts a hand on my face, but his hand is shaking and I don't want him to touch me because my stomach hurts. I shout again for Gracie and Neil puts a finger to his mouth and just says shh, shh, shh. But I yell again and I hear footsteps up the stairs and the door opens and it's Gracie. She says shit, and I tell her not to say that, but then she yells for Mrs. Parmley to come upstairs, and then Gracie runs in the room and pushes Neil and tells him to get the hell off her sister. Gracie shouldn't swear so much, but I'm so glad she's here because I don't like Neil being so mad at me and hurting me because I don't want to marry him.

Mrs. Parmley's here now, too. She leans against the door and holds her face. Nobody's smiling or laughing and Neil's still holding onto me and I cry harder. Gracie pulls on his arms

and Mrs. Parmley says, “Neil, let go,” but Neil twists from side to side and I move with him back and forth. Please don’t hurt my baby, Neil. Please don’t hurt my baby.

Gracie bites Neil hard in the arm and he screams and drops me and I cover my ears because Neil’s voice is high and it shatters in the air like pieces of glass. I land on my side and my head hits the ground. I gasp. My head pounds into my ears. I don’t move. I wish I could sing and smile but I’m hurting and everything’s too fast and loud for me to think.

Baby, I don’t want Neil to be your daddy. I don’t want Neil to be your daddy. I want Theo because he’s so nice and he never yells and he would never grab me and hurt me and he would just laugh and play guitar and take you fishing and help you with your math homework and telling time because I’m not very good at that. And we would never cry because Theo and me would be so happy that you were here and we would help people all over the world and talk about God and be nice to other people so that they never cry. When are you going to get here, baby? I wish you were here with me right now. There’s so much yelling, and Neil’s crying, and Gracie’s swearing, and Mrs. Parmley’s saying oh no, oh no, oh no, and I don’t like being so upset, but nobody’s upset at babies, and I just wish you were here to make everything go away so we could just laugh and be happy. Please come soon, baby. I wish you were here right now.

## THE CHAPTER WITH MORE SAD PEOPLE

Me and Gracie are sitting at the table in Pastor Jansen's house because he lives next door to Mrs. Parmley and Momma told me to wait here before we went home, So I can have a word with the that son of a bitch, she said. Mom doesn't swear a lot, and I'm sad that she's so upset right now. A police car is outside and Grammy and Momma and Mrs. Parmley are talking to the police officer. I don't know who called the police. It could've been one of the neighbors because Gracie was shouting as loud as she could to call them when we got outside the house. I covered my ears and told her not to scream but she just kept screaming SOMEONE CALL THE POLICE! HELP! SOMEONE CALL THE POLICE! And she pulled me over to the pastor's house and that's when they called my mom and she and Grammy came over and now everyone's talking to the police outside.

Neil is sitting on the porch with another police officer and his head is in his hands. He's shaking a lot. I don't like to see Neil cry so much.

"Are you okay, Rae?" Pastor Jansen hands us both a glass of lemonade and sits next to me. I'm not very thirsty, but I drink a few sips anyway because my throat feels hot.

I hear Grammy's voice through the window. She's pointing back at Neil and shouting a lot at the police officer and Neil's shoulders shake harder.

"Neil's really sad," I say.

Gracie puts her lemonade on the table and covers her face, taking a big breath. Pastor Jansen tells Gracie to go in the living room and help Mrs. Jansen with her jigsaw puzzle. Gracie looks at me and then says okay and takes her drink with her into the living room.

“Neil’s a nice man,” Pastor Jansen says to me. I nod because Neil is really nice. He helps Mrs. Parmley because she’s really old and he’s never said anything mean about anybody.

“Why did he hurt me?” I ask. Pastor Jansen looks out the window so I do, too. Mrs. Parmley’s on the steps with Neil, holding him and rocking him back and forth. “He looks like a little baby,” I say and Pastor Jansen nods. He says that Neil didn’t try to hurt me and that he probably would feel bad to know that he did a little bit. I tell the pastor that I don’t feel any pain now and he says that’s good.

I wish everyone would stop being so upset. Neil didn’t mean to hurt anyone. One time I was playing with the Walkers’ dog but he was just a puppy back then. I hugged him real tight and Hannah yelled at me because he was so little and I was supposed to be soft with him. I didn’t know I was hurting him because I was so much bigger than he was. So I understand if Neil didn’t know he was hurting me.

Pastor Jansen puts a hand on my shoulder and says that he believes there aren’t a lot of people who do bad things because they want to. Everybody wants to be good, but sometimes we forget how and that’s when we hurt people. He says that I probably shouldn’t be friends with Neil right now because he’s forgotten how to be nice to people because he’s so sad.

“I don’t want to marry Neil,” I say.

“You shouldn’t marry Neil,” Pastor Jansen says. “That wouldn’t be good.”

Momma’s coming over to the house. I watch her through the window until she gets to the front door and opens it. I stand up and wait for her to come in because I’m not sure if she’s mad at me or not. She looks at me with her tired eyes and her lips start shaking. She opens her arms

and says Rae baby, come here. I'm glad Momma's not mad at me. I didn't want to call the police and I didn't want to make Neil and Mrs. Parmley so sad.

Mom kneels down in front of me so her face is just as high as mine. She says what happened, and I tell her Neil wanted to marry me but I don't want to marry him because he's old and he's scared all the time and he got mad and wouldn't let me leave.

“Did he hurt you?”

Pastor Jansen goes into the living room and says he'll be near if we need him, and Momma asks me again if Neil hurt me and I say that he hurt my hands and he grabbed my waist so I'm worried he might've hurt the baby because he picked me up so I couldn't leave.

Momma asks if Neil did anything else and I say that he cried a lot and she asks if he touched me in any bad places.

I hold my breath in my throat because I don't know why Momma would think that Neil touched me in bad places.

“I didn't have sex with him,” I say. I didn't like having sex before, so I don't think I'd do it again. But I tell Momma that Neil did say he wanted to marry me and we'd have sex and have babies. Momma's face drops down to her neck when I say that. I get goosebumps because Mom looks so scared. She asks me if I'm sure that he didn't try to have sex with me and I start to cry because I don't like thinking about Neil trying to have sex with me when I don't want him to. That's called rape and it happened to Eve Bailey and her parents made her go to a doctor because she was so sad all the time. Grammy says Eve had it coming and Momma always tells Grammy not to say that because Eve's such a nice girl. I don't know Eve at all because she's a lot older

than me, but Momma always told me to be extra nice to her when I saw her at church because she's so skittish.

“Neil didn't rape me, Momma” I say. Mom bites her lip and nods, giving me a big hug. Neil didn't rape me. He didn't even try to rape me. He was just really sad because I didn't want to marry him. I hope he's not in a lot of trouble. He's so sad on the porch right now. I don't want anyone to think that he raped me because he didn't.

Grammy comes through the front door and slams it shut and says, “That senile cow should know not to leave my little girl alone with that retard.”

“Don't call Neil a retard,” I whisper into Momma's hair. That's not a nice word and Neil's so nice to everyone. My throat feels hot again and I want to drink some lemonade, but I don't want to let go of Momma and so I hold her tighter and feel my tears catch in her hair and rub against my face. Neil just wanted to show me his djembe and then we were supposed to go back downstairs and help Mrs. Parmley with her cookies. Neil's not a retard. Neil's just sad and he forgot how to be good.

Momma lets go of me and holds my face in her hands. Her palms are calloused and rough but I like that because it feels like climbing a tree when I hold Momma's hands. I ask her if everyone will be okay and she says everyone's okay. I see tears in the corners of her eyes, but they never leave because Momma doesn't ever cry and she knows everyone will be okay.

That night, I go downstairs to get a drink but I stop on the steps because I hear Momma talking in the kitchen. Grammy's upstairs, so I don't know who she's talking to, but then I hear her say, “Jim, I wish you were here.” I know she's talking to my dad because his name's Jim.

Sometimes Momma talks to my dad, even though he's dead. I talk to him too when I need help because Momma says he's always close by, we just can't see him. She says, "I'm not sure how to do this without you. I wish you were here to make me laugh and take care of everything."

I stay on the step, listening to Mom talk to my dad for a little longer and then I go back upstairs because I'm not thirsty anymore and I heard Momma laugh so I know she's okay.



## BECKY AND THE DRAGON

Once upon a time in a far away kingdom, there was a little girl who played the saxophone. She played it every day and whenever she played, all the neighbors would lean their heads out of their windows and listen and even though she played pretty early in the morning, nobody minded because it was much better to wake up to a saxophone than to an alarm clock.

One day this little girl—her name was Becky—came across a little squirrel in the road that had been run over by a car. His leg was broken and he couldn't move and Becky didn't know what to do. She didn't know any first aid and the nearest hospital was miles away. The squirrel told her not to worry though, and said that if she had any music to play he would love to hear a beautiful song while they waited for someone else to come along.

Becky pulled out her saxophone and played the prettiest song she knew, and all the notes flowed out of the bell like thick honey and wrapped around the squirrel and covered him in sweet music so that his leg healed up as if nothing happened.

The squirrel was so surprised that he jumped up and screamed, which made Becky scream and then the squirrel thanked Becky and hugged her ankle because the squirrel was a lot smaller than Becky, and he ran away and told everybody in the kingdom that Becky's saxophone was magical and could heal anyone who was hurt.

You can imagine how many people wanted to meet Becky and hear her saxophone, because there were a lot of people hurt in the kingdom. A big line formed outside Becky's house and there were people with broken bones and paper cuts and spider bites and splinters in their fingers that were really hard to get out. Becky healed everyone that came to her house with her

beautiful music, but by the end of the day she was getting really tired. She played and played, but her lungs had used almost all the air they had and she couldn't play for much longer.

Finally, an old wizard came to Becky's house and asked if she could heal his crooked back because he couldn't reach it with his wand. Becky played into her saxophone, but her lips barely sputtered a note before she started to float up in the sky. She didn't know what to do! She tried to play heavier notes so that they would pull her back to the ground, but the more she played, the higher she flew. She went higher and higher until she found a nice big cloud, so Becky stopped playing and fell right into the middle of the cloud. She looked down and got scared because she was so high up. She didn't know how she was going to get down.

Then, a giant dragon came stomping through the clouds shouting, "WHO'S IN MY CLOUD-HOUSE?" and Becky got very scared because she didn't know she'd landed in a dragon's house. She tried to find another cloud that she could hop onto, but all the other clouds were too far away for her to reach, so she pulled out her saxophone and tried playing it so that she could fly onto another cloud, but the dragon heard her saxophone and ran over to meet her.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING ON MY CLOUD?" the dragon said, but his voice was very loud, so Becky had to cover her ears. The dragon had just come from dinner where he'd been eating townspeople as a snack. Everyone in Becky's kingdom was afraid of the dragon and tried to hide from him whenever he came down to snatch somebody up. He was very tall and green and his nose was all black from blowing fire out of it so much. Becky noticed that one of his wings was broken, which was probably why he was stomping through the clouds instead of flying in the air. Becky told the dragon she was sorry for coming in without knocking, but she'd been playing her saxophone and she accidentally flew into the sky and didn't know where else to

land except on this cloud. The dragon said that he would let her off his cloud if she would play for him, but Becky was very tired from playing all day and she didn't think she had enough air to play anymore. Besides, her reed was almost broken and so all the notes were coming out scratchy. But the dragon stomped his foot and said "YOU MUST PLAY FOR ME." When Becky tried to run, the dragon ran ahead of her and spread out his arms so that she couldn't pass. Becky begged for the dragon to let her off the cloud because she wanted to go home, but the dragon wouldn't let her go until she played for him. Becky started to cry because she was so far from home and she didn't know how to get down off of the cloud, but the dragon said that he would swallow her whole if she didn't play right then.

Well, Becky pulled out her saxophone and was about to start playing, but then she had an idea. She told the dragon that she needed to tighten the keys before playing and he said, "WELL, HURRY IT UP." Becky turned around and pulled out the reed and then split the reed down the middle so that it was almost cracked in half. Then, she put the reed back in place to fasten it in again. She turned back to the dragon and said, "I can't play right here, the air is too thick and so you won't be able to hear the notes." The dragon said they could move closer to the thinner air at the edge of the cloud and Becky said that was a great idea. So the dragon sat right at the edge of the cloud and said, "HOW'S THIS?" And Becky told him that was perfect. Then, with all the air Becky could get into her lungs, she blew as hard as she could into the mouthpiece of the saxophone.

At first, the cloud started to shake, then, as the notes streamed out of the saxophone, Becky heard the most awful scratching noise. It sounded like a fork being dragged across a chalkboard while broken bows scraped against violin strings. The noise was almost too terrible

for Becky to stand, but she kept playing and the notes flew through the air and hit the dragon right in the stomach so that he fell off the cloud. The dragon tried to fly, but his broken wing couldn't flap, and he tumbled down and down until he hit the earth with a giant BOOM!

Becky shouted from the cloud for someone to come and help her when finally the wizard flew up by the cloud with his newly straightened back and he told her to grab onto his shoulders and he flew her down to where the dragon was. Everyone in the whole kingdom was crowded around the dragon, clapping and hugging each other because they didn't have to worry about him eating other people anymore. The dragon opened his eyes and looked at Becky and said, "I'm sorry." His voice wasn't loud anymore because he could barely whisper.

Well, Becky started to cry because she didn't want the dragon to die. So she asked for the wizard to fix her broken reed. The wizard touched the reed with the tip of his wand and mended it back together as if it were good as new. Then, Becky held the saxophone to her mouth and started to play a song she'd never played before. It was like it had come straight from her toes and through her stomach and chest and throat and out her lips into the saxophone and it was the most beautiful music anyone had ever heard. The notes glided out of the saxophone and glowed and danced around the dragon until they made a big golden blanket that covered the dragon. Then, the music notes broke apart and disappeared into the air and everything was really quiet.

The dragon opened his eyes again and sat up. Everyone was scared because they thought he was going to eat them since that's what the dragon usually did when he was in the kingdom. But instead the dragon turned to Becky and with a soft voice he said, "Thank you. Nobody's ever helped me before."

Becky crept up to the dragon because she was still a little scared herself, then she gave him a hug around his ankle since he was so much bigger than her. “No more eating people, okay?” she said.

The dragon agreed that he wouldn’t eat a human ever again. He never liked them much anyway, so he ate broccoli and carrots and peaches and watermelon for the rest of his life.

And so the kingdom had a giant party for Becky because it was her birthday and she had saved the entire kingdom by healing the dragon with her magical saxophone. And the dragon and Becky got to be very good friends and he ended up learning how to play the accordion and they formed a band and played for everyone in the kingdom, healing people with broken bones and paper cuts. And they all lived happily ever after.

## THE GAME CHAPTER

Momma sits me down this morning and asks me how I feel. I feel fine, so I tell her that, and she pulls me in for a hug. I ask her why she's so sad and she doesn't say anything. Her face is on my shoulder and I feel her shake, so I get worried and start to cry a little, but she says nothing's wrong. She's just glad that I'm okay. I ask Momma if Neil's okay and she laughs a little and says she doesn't know. She never talked to him, but when we left I could hear him crying on the porch and I felt bad that he was so sad, but I didn't want to go over there because he scared me when he grabbed me around the waist and I thought he was going to hurt my baby. Still, I hope he doesn't stay sad for too long. And I hope he finds someone to marry so that he can be happy again.

I ask Momma if Theo can come over and play some games with us. Mom says she's not sure that's a good idea, but I tell her please please please please, Momma. And so she says okay, but she tells me to invite his parents, too. I'm so excited to see Theo because he's so nice to me and I don't have to look at his face if I want to smile and right now I want to smile even though nobody's smiling in my house right now.

Theo and Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell come over with a box of Otterpops. I LOVE Otterpops. Sometimes they cut the inside of my cheek when I'm trying to slide the popsicle out of the wrapper and into my mouth, but it tastes so good and it's so nice to have something cold when it's hot outside that I don't mind it too much. Blue is my favorite. It tastes like bubble gum and berries and sometimes it turns my lips blue so I like to pretend that I'm frozen and lay really still and Gracie laughs a lot when I do that.

Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell look a lot different from Theo. Theo has dark, curly hair and he's very pale, but Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell are both blond and tan and they look like they're ready to go swimming all the time. Mr. Maxwell wears sandals and shorts that make a swishing noise when he walks and Mrs. Maxwell is very short and wears dresses that go all the way down to the floor. They don't laugh as much as Theo, but they smile a lot and I like that.

Theo puts his arm around me and says, "How are you doing, buddy?" And I tell him I'm just fine and I learned a new song on the guitar. He tells me he'd love to hear it sometime soon and says, "What game do you want to play?"

I love playing games. Whenever we have time to sit down and play something, Momma doesn't look so tired and Grammy doesn't swear so much. Sometimes Gracie helps me when we play games and I'm glad she does because she usually wins so I could use her help. I love that everybody can sit down and do something and they don't have to do anything else except laugh and play.

I tell Theo I'd like to play *Pictionary* and so Gracie gets the board out of our closet and brings it downstairs for all of us. I'm not very good at drawing, but I love seeing pictures and trying to say what the picture is. It's fun when I finally find out what it's supposed to be and then the picture makes so much sense. Gracie sets it up in the middle of the living room, but Momma says we should eat outside first and then we can come in and play.

We go out to the backyard and eat tuna sandwiches that Grammy made and Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell talk to Momma about the vineyard and Grammy talks to Theo about flight school. I ask Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell if they've ever flown in a plane while Theo's flying and they say they'll wait until he's certified and flown for a while before they get in the plane with him and they

smile and Theo laughs and so I laugh too because I'm glad everybody's so happy. It almost feels like being really little when me and Momma and Dad and Grammy and Grandpa Bill would go out for picnics and Dad would put as many Pringles as he could into his mouth and try to talk and little bits of Pringles would get stuck in his mustache. One time my mom would laugh so hard she spat juice onto Grandpa's pants and he laughed and everybody laughed. My dad's laugh sounded like a big truck engine. He'd almost growl when he laughed and I loved picturing him as a sabertooth tiger with his big mustache hanging down like teeth. When Momma started dating Phil, I thought he was nice, too, but his laugh didn't sound like a truck. He was a lot quieter than my dad and he didn't laugh as much, but when he did it sounded like Grammy snoring in her sleep.

Momma takes a sip of kool-aid and then leans close to Mr. And Mrs. Maxwell. She talks quietly, but I can still hear her.

"I don't think you realize how much we appreciate Theo being Rae's friend. He brightens her day whenever he comes by."

Mrs. Maxwell puts her arm around Mr. Maxwell's shoulders and whispers, "Theo just loves Rae. He thinks she's just adorable."

I put my hands over my mouth and smile as big as I can. Theo thinks I'm adorable! Theo thinks I'm adorable. I'm adorable! He likes me. I know he likes me because he thinks I'm adorable.

Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell and Momma go inside to help clean up the dishes and help Gracie set up both teams for *Pictionary* while Theo and I clean off the picnic table. Theo takes a green napkin from the table and tears it so that it looks like a big U.



“I’ve been contemplating whether or not to dye my beard,” Theo says. He holds the napkin up to his face. “What do you think of green?”

I laugh and tell him he looks like a leprechaun, so he squats down and dances back and forth on his feet. “Hi tee tie! Where be my lucky charms?”

“They’re at the end of the rainbow,” I say.

“A likely story, lassie.” He leans in and shakes a finger at my nose. His green napkin beard ripples when he breathes out his nose and I feel his breath on my face. In movies, this is usually where the boy kisses the girl. I look at Theo’s lips because they’re very close to my face and they look soft and pink, even though he’s covered in hair. I feel my heart speed up. I feel you kicking, baby! Do you want me to kiss Theo, too? Sometimes in the movies they kiss with their mouths open and you can see their tongue, but I think that’s really gross. I want Theo to kiss me, but I don’t want to feel his tongue, I just want to kiss him on the lips and maybe on the cheek and I want him to hold my hand because then I’ll know that he likes being close to me.

I hear Theo swallow in his throat and I just know he’s going to kiss me. I smile and lean in closer and I almost ask him myself if he’s going to kissing me, but then Theo says, “You’re lucky you’re such a nice lass, otherwise I’d let ya have it.” He backs away and puts his fists up next to his face, moving his arms and jumping back and forth on his feet, and I smile because he looks like a boxer who has a green beard, but then the beard falls off and he straightens up. He says we should go inside and mentions that he might need help playing *Pictionary* since it’s been forever since he last played. I play *Pictionary* a lot, so I tell him he’ll be fine if he sticks with me and he pats my head and says, “That’d be a mighty comfort to me, lass,” and he goes inside to show everyone else his green leprechaun beard before we all play *Pictionary* together.

“Damn, you’re getting big,” Daphne says the next day. She’s painting her nails in the front of the store because it’s lunchtime and nobody’s here at Doris’s Cutting Corner except her and me and a little camera they put in the corner of the room. They have the camera there because the last time they left Daphne by herself in the store she tried to use one of the stylist’s curling irons and almost burned the place down. Luckily, Mr. Knox was walking to Scoggins and saw some smoke from inside the salon, so he radioed the firemen to come and put it out before it got too big. Grammy says Daphne’s head is emptier than Jesus’s tomb, but Momma doesn’t like Grammy to talk about Jesus like that, so she only says that to Gracie and me.

I feel my stomach because it’s just sticking out in front of me and I can’t even make it move anymore when I try to suck in. Daphne sticks a bottle of nail polish on my belly and tells me to hold real still and so I hold my breath and the bottle stays standing right on my belly. Daphne says that’s freaky and asks me how the man-search is going. I tell her Theo almost kissed me yesterday.

Daphne stops moving. She turns to me and takes my shoulders, shaking me so I look in her freckled face. She asks me if I really think Theo likes me and I tell her I think he does like me.

“Enough to kiss you?”

“I think so.”

Daphne swears again and asks me if I’ve ever kissed someone before. I tell her I kissed Robby Sandberg a little bit while we were having sex, but that’s because I’ve seen them do it that way in the movies. Robby kept sticking his tongue in my mouth, though, and he licked my face

and it smelled really bad, so I told him to stop licking my face and he didn't kiss me at all after that. Daphne laughs when I tell her that and I ask her why, but she doesn't answer. She just asks me, "Have you ever kissed someone you weren't sleeping with at the same time, ho-bag?" and she laughs again and so I laugh, even though Momma tells me that ho isn't a very nice word. Daphne uses lots of words that aren't nice, but she likes being around me so I don't mind. Besides, it's kind of fun to swear around Daphne because she laughs so much when I do it.

"I've never kissed anyone but Robby Sandberg. And my grammy and grandpa and Momma and Dad," I tell Daphne. I remember laughing so hard when Dad would kiss me goodnight with his big black mustache. He'd blow on my neck and tickle me and I'd feel his mustache roll around on my skin like a big caterpillar. I loved my dad's mustache and Momma says she loved it too, but Phil never had a mustache, so maybe that's just something Momma liked with my dad.

"Rae-gae!" Daphne hits my shoulder and I look at her again. She says, "We need to get you ready to kiss Theo."

I smile and say okay, because I want to do a good job when Theo kisses me. Daphne asks me if I have any dolls I can practice on at home and I say I have two.

"I want you to practice kissing on them before you go to bed," Daphne says. Then she tells me we should find a guy to ask about kissing and so we go next door to Ace Tavern and she tells Jesse Campbell to come back to the salon with us. Jesse just got back from Iraq and his parents got divorced while he was out there, so he lives in his dad's house here in Gaston. He doesn't talk to me very much, but Daphne's good friends with him. She told me once that he plays the piano really good when he's drunk and that she thinks we'd make a good band if he had

plenty of booze. Jesse's not drunk right now though, so I don't ask him if he can play something on the piano for me.

Daphne sits him on a salon chair and asks him to tell us how he usually tries to kiss a girl for the first time.

"A *real* kiss," Daphne says. "Not with some whore you hooked up with at a club."

Jesse laughs and says Daphne's one to talk and she hits his shoulder and tells him to shut up.

"Come on, Jess." Daphne sits me down on a stool and she pulls a chair next to Jesse so we're all in a circle. She tells him, "My friend here needs to know what to expect from a guy if he wants to kiss her."

Jesse runs his hands through his hair and looks at me. Then he asks Daphne if she's serious and she says, "Hell yes, I am. Tell Rae what a guy does when he wants to kiss a girl."

Jesse takes a big breath and twists a little in the chair from side to side, then he hits his knees and says, "Okay. The first thing is that the guy gets really close to you all the time."

"How close?" I ask.

"Yeah, how close?" Daphne asks, smiling. So Jesse leans in toward Daphne until only a small piece of air sits between their noses. Daphne laughs and pushes Jesse's chest so he backs up and he looks back at me.

"That make sense?" Jesse asks, and I nod. "Then, he'll probably put his arm around you and you can lay your head on his shoulder and then, whenever you want, you just make eye contact with him and lean in closer and he'll kiss you."

I blink and slouch over, feeling a little confused. “I sit that close to people all the time, and I always look in their eyes.”

“Do you get around?” Jesse laughs. But Daphne smacks him over the head and he swears and asks what the hell was that for. Daphne tells him he’s not much help to us and he can go back to work. She pushes him out of the chair to the door but then she stops him just before he leaves and pulls on his shirt so that he bends forward and she kisses him. He puts one hand through her hair and his other hand grabs her butt and she laughs and shoves him out the door.

I ask Daphne how she did that. She didn’t wait for him to get real close to her because she just pulled on his shirt, but he still kissed her and he even touched her butt. I don’t want Theo to touch my butt, but I think it’d be fun if he ran his hands through my hair. Grammy says I have beautiful hair and it looks like fire when the sun’s behind me.

Daphne giggles and tells me it’s not the first time she’s kissed him so she can pull on his shirt if she wants. I didn’t know Daphne had a boyfriend but she tells me he’s not really her boyfriend. They’ve just started talking a lot and she thinks he’s cute and even though he’s an idiot, he’s fun and he has a car so she’s just going to see where it goes.

“Do you think you’re gonna marry him?” I ask.

“Hell no,” Daphne says. She sits back at her desk and says she’s not going to get married for a long time. I ask her why and she tells me it’s because she’s having too much fun right now and getting married just doesn’t sound like much fun at all. I don’t understand why she doesn’t think being married would be tons of fun. Especially if she had a baby. I’m trying hard to find you a good daddy, baby. I’m trying to get Theo to kiss me and then when he does, we’ll hold

hands and fall in love and then he'll ask me to marry him and we can be one happy family. So I just need him to kiss me, then everything else will be easy.

"I heard Neil went all chester-molester on you," Daphne says, putting on another coat of nail polish. She looks up and asks me if I'm okay. I tell her that Neil makes me sad because all I can think of is how much he cried when I told him I didn't want to marry him.

"He cried?" Daphne asks. "Damn, he's got issues. That guy's like 40 years old."

I tell her, "No, he's not. I don't remember how old he is, but I know he's not 40 because Momma told me once that he's a little younger than she is and she's not 40 yet."

"Still, that's messed up." Daphne blows on her nails. After a second she says, "You sure you're okay?"

"I'm a little sad." Neil's so nice and I don't like Daphne to be so mean about him.

Daphne pats my hands. "Well, lighten up! You're gonna kiss Theo really soon."

And even though Neil makes me sad, I'm so happy to kiss Theo that I don't think about being sad anymore, because as soon as I kiss him, baby, I know everything will work out.

## THE BOY OR GIRL CHAPTER

I found out today, baby, that you're the size of a sweet potato. It's a little strange thinking about you like pieces of food, but Momma tells me that so I know exactly how big you are inside my belly. But I have a doctor's appointment today and today's the day I get to find out whether you're a boy or a girl! I know you're a girl, but I get to know for sure now. Momma's almost as excited as I am. We picked out some clothes for me at the store yesterday and they're beautiful. I'm wearing a blue dress that has flowers at the neck and it just billows out like a big cupcake at the bottom, so my belly has a lot of room to fill in the dress. I also got these pants that have a stretchy waist and Momma says I'll stretch them pretty far before I have you.

Momma also told me that we're going to meet another adoptive family. The Iversens. That sounds like a lot better name than Stotka. Besides, Momma told me she spent a lot of time trying to find a good family to meet who would be perfect for you, baby, so I shouldn't complain because that will just make her sad. I just have to make sure I get Theo to kiss me fast so that I don't have to give you away at all, baby. The Iversens are a mom and dad and one little boy. They had him a long time ago and found out that the mom can't have any more kids, so they want to adopt my baby.

We drive up to Hillsboro again and when we get there, Dr. Lennon asks me how I'm doing and I say that I'm doing well and I tell him I'm excited to find out whether my baby's a boy or a girl and he says he's excited, too. He says that this time they need me to get into a hospital gown because I'm bigger and I'm a little nervous to take my shirt off in front of Dr. Lennon, but he leaves before I start changing so it's just me and my mom. The nurse, Julia, comes in and asks if I'm doing okay and she's got fish all over her scrubs. I've never seen a

nurse wear fish on her scrubs. I ask her where she got her shirt and she says there's a store a couple blocks away that sells all kinds of nurses' scrubs. Julia and her husband like to fish and so she got a pair of scrubs with fish on it because it reminds her of her husband.

I tell Julia that I went fishing for the first time just a little while ago. I went with Theo, but I didn't catch any fish because I didn't like it when the hook went into the fish and Julia tells me that fish normally don't feel it when you hook them unless it goes through their neck instead of their mouth. I still don't think I would like to catch a fish again. I didn't like all the blood and seeing the fish jump up and down like it was hurting. But I did like the feeling of being on the water in the boat with just me and Theo. It was so quiet and it felt like all my thoughts were covered in cotton balls because I just remember feeling soft and happy.

Dr. Lennon comes back in and asks if I've been eating good food to keep the baby healthy, I tell him, "Yes sir, my mom makes sure I eat fruits and vegetables everyday." Dr. Lennon smiles and says it's a good thing my mom is so on top of things. Then he takes my blood pressure and temperature and has me breathe while he puts his cold stethoscope on my back. He asks to talk to my mom for a minute while Julia sets up the machine for the ultrasound. I ask Julia if she's ever seen the Loch Ness Monster and she laughs and asks me why I'd ask her that.

"Normally the Loch Ness Monster lives in lakes and rivers and that's where people go fishing. He's not in Hagg Lake because I've been in Hagg Lake a lot and I've never seen him, but he could be in other lakes."

Julia tells me to lay down and squirts a bunch of gel on my stomach. She says she's never seen the Loch Ness Monster before, but she'll keep her eyes open the next time she goes fishing. And she says, "If we catch it, I'll take a picture to show you next time you come in."



I don't think she'll ever catch him, though. Theo says the Loch Ness Monster's only been seen a couple times, and the cameras weren't very good back then. The pictures of him are all fuzzy and hard to see. Most of the year, the Loch Ness Monster lives in Scotland, which is really far away from Gaston. I've looked on a map before, and you have to go through Texas and New York and then there's a big ocean in between Scotland and the United States, so you'd either have to fly over the ocean or go on a boat. I think I'd rather fly because there are lots of sharks in the ocean and some of them eat people.

That's another thing Theo knows a lot about. Sharks. He said that most sharks attack people in really shallow water, like on the edge of the beach. He said it's because the water is all murky and you can't see through it and so a shark might see someone playing in the water and think they're a fish. Theo also said that there's a shark that can swim in rivers. It's called the bull shark but in Africa they call it the Zambezi shark and it's the deadliest shark in the entire world because if someone goes swimming in the Mississippi River, they might find the shark and scare it and then the shark will eat them. Theo said that the bull shark doesn't swim in lakes though, so Hagg Lake is safe from sharks. I like how much Theo knows about sharks because I don't know very much about them and it's fun to watch Theo get really excited whenever I ask him something about sharks. The nature channel has a special on sharks every year that lasts the whole week and Theo said he's going to watch every episode he can even though he's probably seen a lot of them already. That's going to happen next week, I think. Theo said I can come watch some shark episodes with him because everyone should know as much as they can about sharks.

The great white shark has eighteen rows of teeth that are so sharp, you never feel them bite you because they can cut through you so quickly that it's too fast to feel any pain. The tiger shark will eat anything and people on the nature channel call it the garbage disposal of the sea. A lot of surfers get eaten by sharks because from the bottom of the ocean, they look like seals floating on the water and sharks really like seals because they're so fat. Most sharks can smell blood in the ocean from really really far away and that's how they find most of their food. If you're ever attacked by a shark, you should try to poke its gills or its eyes or hit its nose because those are all really sensitive and the shark might let go of you if you do that. Shark skin feels like sandpaper because there are lots of little teeth all over their bodies so you might get cut if you try to pet a shark. Some sharks can swim in the water just as fast as a car on the freeway. And sharks can feel your heart beating in the water because your heart sends out electricity. I don't really understand how that one works, but Theo said the electricity flows in the water so that sharks can feel it and if the electricity is big, that means that the animal in the water is really big, so sharks can decide if they want to eat something depending on how big it is.

Julia's holding that plastic thing that looks like a remote control but she doesn't say anything. Momma comes back in and Julia looks at her.

"Your daughter knows a lot about sharks," Julia says. I'm glad she said that because Theo wants me to know everything I can about sharks.

I ask Momma what the doctor said and she says we'll talk about it later. Julia puts the remote control thing on my belly and moves it around in all the gel. The monitor comes on and there's a bunch of green specks on the black screen. She moves it a little more. I see you, baby! I see your head! You're so big and so beautiful. Even though you're just a bunch of green lines on

the screen, you look really pretty because you're a little baby and all babies are beautiful. Julia moves it around a little more and then says that she can tell us what the sex of the baby is. Momma asks me if I want to know and I tell her I really really really want to know. Julia says you're going to be a GIRL!!! YOU'RE A GIRL, BABY! Oh, I'm so excited to dress you up in sun hats and jewelry and get you pretty dresses that make you look like a ball of fluff! You're going to be so beautiful, baby! You're going to play the piano and guitar and you're going to have a beautiful voice and Theo's going to fly you around in an airplane and you're going to love it so much! I look at Momma and she's smiling so big. I haven't seen Momma smile that big in a really long time. Oh, baby, you're making everyone so happy just because you're in my tummy and you're such a beautiful girl!

We should give you a name. I ask Momma if that's all right, but she says maybe we should wait a while because the adoptive family might have a name they want to give you. But if *I* get to keep you, then I get to pick your name. I'll give you a secret name that I'll call you for now and if I get to keep you, then that will be your real name. What would be a good name for you, baby girl? I really like my mom's name, Annie, but I like lots of other names, too. There's a girl I used to go to school with who was named Priscilla. She got made fun of for having that name, but I always thought it was really pretty.

When we get out of the doctor's office Momma and I have to drive out to Portland to meet the Iversens. I've only been to Portland a couple times. We went to see the Rose Parade once when my dad was still alive, and it was raining really hard, but we stayed under the cover of this café and watched all the floats and bands ride by. Miss Portland wore a raincoat so I couldn't see her face very well, but she looked very pretty from what I could tell. Portland's a

little noisier than Gaston, so it always scares me when I first walk around the city, but I like hearing all the people talk to each other about the craziest things. One time I overheard a man talking to a woman in a restaurant about how mad he was that his bike was broken because he was supposed to meet a woman he was dating online at a park out by Multnomah Falls. They had to reschedule until his bike got fixed and he was upset because he said this woman was so raw and powerful that he could feel a spiritual connection with her even through the computer. I don't know exactly what he means by that, but I was happy to hear him talk about someone else he loved that way. I love to see people in love holding hands and hugging each other. I think some people become a lot happier when they find someone else who wants to be around them all the time, and that makes me smile.

Momma has to drive over the bridge to get to the other side of the river and I get a little scared because we're so high up and if the bridge broke we might fall into the water and there might be bull sharks in this river. We make it across okay, though, and when we find the Iversens house, Momma parks the car and tells me to hold on a second before getting out. I stop and look at her and she tells me that these are very nice people. She knows because she's talked to them on the phone a lot and they seem very wonderful.

"I've got a really good feeling about them, but I don't want to give this baby to anyone you don't feel good about." Momma takes both my hands and holds them and I squeeze her hands but she doesn't squeeze back. She says that this is a family with a mom and a dad and they'll be so good to the baby and she wants me to like them so that I'm not sad when I have to give my baby girl away.

Oh baby, I wish Theo would kiss me soon. If I could marry him, then I could keep you and everything would be so great. But if he doesn't kiss me soon and I have you and I'm not married yet, then I'll have to give you away. I don't want to do that, baby. I really really don't want to do that. But if this family's really nice, you might be really happy with them if I can't get you a daddy. I want you to have a daddy so bad, baby girl. I have to *have to* marry Theo before I have you, but if I don't, then maybe you'll get Mr. Iversen for a dad, and I hope he's nice because that'll be the backup plan.

I tell Momma I want Mr. Iversen to be a nice dad and we need to make sure he's really nice before deciding that we'll give my baby to them. Momma says they're both very nice, and she can't wait to meet them in person so I can see how nice they are. She gives me a hug and tells me she's proud of me and I'm glad that Momma's so proud of me because Grammy still says I'm in a heap of shit whenever we talk about me having a baby.

Momma and I get out of the car and go to the front of this tall townhouse that's blue. I like that it's blue because most of the townhouses on the street are brown and they don't look very pretty. We knock on the door and Mr. Iversen opens it. He looks like Professor Plum from the game *Clue*. I don't know how to play *Clue* very well, but sometimes Grammy lets me play with her and on the box they have all these people wearing different colors. Professor Plum is tall and skinny and wears a suit and big glasses. I like that Mr. Iversen looks like Professor Plum because that means he's probably very smart and I want you to have a smart daddy if I don't get married, baby girl.

Mr. Iversen says to please come in and his voice is very soft. He says that we can call him Dan and his wife Alice will be in soon. Momma and I sit on the couch. Mrs. Iversen comes into

the room with a tray of drinks. Mrs. Iversen is very short and she's wearing all blue. She has bright blue eyes, but her hair is very dark and that makes her eyes look even bigger and brighter. She says, "I love your dress," and I tell her thank you and that I like her blue dress as well. Blue is my favorite color and she says she likes blue a lot, too. She asks me if I want to drink some grape juice or some water or milk, and I tell her I can't drink a lot of milk because of my Williams.

"Oh yes, we've heard a lot about Williams Syndrome from your mom." Mrs. Iversen sits down next to Mr. Iversen and holds his hand. I like that she holds his hand. She asks me what it's like having Williams and I tell her that I like it because I can play lots of instruments and tell stories and I love music and Momma says I can make friends easier than most people because of my Williams.

Mrs. Iversen tells me to hold on one moment and she goes to the kitchen and opens their back door. She calls outside and says, "Jason, come here please." She comes back with a little boy. Jason is almost as tall as Mrs. Iversen, but his face looks like he's no older than Gracie. Mrs. Iversen tells him to say hi and he says hi and sits on the couch next to Mr. Iversen. I ask Jason how old he is and he says that he's eight, and I tell him my sister Gracie is nine and we had cake and ice cream a while ago to celebrate.

Momma talks to Mr. and Mrs. Iversen more and I find out that Mr. Iversen teaches high school band. He plays the cello, which is the most beautiful instrument I've ever heard and I ask him if he will play for us before we go. He says maybe next time and I tell him to promise to play the cello next time we come and he laughs and says okay. Mrs. Iversen writes for a magazine and she can write at home.

“So,” Mrs. Iversen says, “it’s really the perfect time to adopt because I can spend as much time as I need to with the baby.”

Jason likes to play basketball but Mr. Iversen’s trying to teach Jason how to play the drums because they’re easy to learn. I tell Jason that the guitar is really fun too if he wants to play something else. Jason smiles and hugs Mr. Iversen and I like that because Mr. Iversen seems like he loves Jason very much.

I ask Mrs. Iversen if I can have a glass of water and Momma says I can help her take the tray back into the kitchen while she gets it, so I go with Mrs. Iversen into the kitchen and help her put the cups into the sink. “Is Mr. Iversen a good daddy?” I ask Mrs. Iversen. “My mom says that my baby needs to go to a mom and dad who love her very much and I don’t have a husband so that’s why I’m supposed to give her away.”

Mrs. Iversen turns off the water and looks at me and her eyes are all shiny like she might cry.

“You’re having a girl,” she says, but her voice doesn’t go up.

“Yes,” I say. “I know because we just found out at the doctor’s today.”

Mrs. Iversen puts a hand over her mouth and laughs, but her eyes are crying. I ask her if she’s okay and she says that yes, she’s okay.

“We’ve been wanting a little girl for a really long time,” Mrs. Iversen says. I hold her hand because I don’t know if she’s sad or happy. Then she gives me a big hug.

Mr. Iversen calls from the living room “Alice,” he says, “is everything all right?”

“Yes,” Mrs. Iversen says back. She hands me the glass of water and leans close to me.

“Mr. Iversen is a very good dad,” she says, smiling. That makes me feel wonderful.

When me and Momma go, Mr. Iversen and Jason and Mrs. Iversen say goodbye to us on the porch, and Mr. Iversen says he can't wait for us to come again and that Alice plays the piano so maybe when I come back, he and Alice and I can all play some music together. I'm excited to go back because I think the Iversens are a nice family.

And baby, I think Mrs. Iversen is very nice and pretty and so I want to call you Alice.



## THE SECRET CHAPTER

Dear Alice, I love your name. I think it's a beautiful name. You're getting SO BIG! I woke up this morning and felt like I'd grown a soccer ball in my stomach overnight. I'm standing in front of the mirror in my room right now with no clothes on and I think I look really strange. Most of my body's just fine, but then when it hits my stomach, it goes out past my toes and my back curves inward. I almost look like the letter S.

Outside my window, I see Gracie leave for the bus stop. School's started again, but I don't have to go because Momma says she doesn't want me in school right now with a baby and all, so Grammy Joanne's going to help me with schoolwork while I'm at home. I've seen some people from school who were pregnant. They stopped going to class when they got too big because they had to have the baby and take care of it.

I walk closer to the mirror and look at my face. My skin looks brighter, like I swallowed a lightbulb. Grammy says that when women get pregnant, they look like they're glowing. I open my mouth but there's no light in my throat. I pull my hair up on top of my head like some people do in the movies when they're at fancy parties. I touch my lips. I have big lips. Maybe I could borrow some of Mom's lipstick and make them look dark and pretty. My nose is very small. Normally I don't look at my face that much, but I feel like I should try to be prettier if I want Theo to kiss me.

I put on a yellow maternity dress that has bees on it and I ask Grammy if I can go say hi to Daphne. Grammy says that's fine as long as I'm back in time for lunch because then I need to work in some writing books she got from Costco. Daphne called last night and said she needed to

talk to me and so I should meet her today. I don't know what she needs to talk about, but I like talking to Daphne because she gets just as excited about everything as I do.

When I get to Doris's Cutting Corner, Daphne's at the front desk with a magazine. A couple of the salon stylists are there cutting people's hair. One woman has her head covered in little hair curlers so that she looks like she's wearing a plastic popcorn ball on her head. I saw one girl come out of here with hair that was completely blue. Momma said she heard people talking about it at church, but Grammy said she thought it was fun and people should mind their own damn business when someone changes their hair because it's nobody's hair but their own. I don't think I'd ever dye my hair blue, but I've always wanted to get dreadlocks. There was this one woman shopping at the market once; she had dreadlocks and they looked so fun because her hair just came down into little points that rested on her shoulders. She was very nice, too. She talked to me for a long time in the cereal aisle before Grammy came and got me. Her name was Sheldon and she was from Eugene, but she and her husband were camping near Hagg Lake for the weekend. She had a dog that was waiting outside and she looked straight into my eyes when I talked to her and I liked that because I like to see people's eyes when they're talking to me. I asked Sheldon about her hair and she said she thought dreadlocks were beautiful and they're very low maintenance so she can focus on more important things and that all I'd need was some wax to make it work. When I told Momma I wanted dreadlocks she said, "What the hell would you want to do that for?" She said they're disgusting and told me I can have dreadlocks when she's dead and doesn't have to see them.

"Rae-gae!" Daphne waves a hand in front of my face and pinches my nose. I shake my head and look at her and say what and she says, "Stop going brain dead on me." She pulls

another chair up by the desk so I can sit down next to her and then she asks me what I'm doing this weekend. I don't know what I'm doing this weekend so she says I should have a sleepover with her. I LOVE having sleepovers with Daphne. One time we went out to the lake when it was pitch black and Daphne jumped right into the lake with her clothes on and everything. I just put my feet in the water because I didn't want to get my clothes wet, but Daphne was so funny and she sang and spit water up in the air. Daphne does the funnest things when we have sleepovers. I don't know if my mom will let me stay at her house, but I tell Daphne I'll try to come over.

Daphne tells the women cutting hair that she'll be back in a minute and she pulls me outside. She says we're not going to sleep at her house and so she told her mom she'd sleep at my house.

"I'll have to ask Momma if you can stay at our house," I say, but Daphne tells me to shut up because she's not going to sleep at my house either.

"Where are we going to sleep then?" I ask.

"We're going to go camping," Daphne says, "but you have to keep it a secret from your mom because I don't think she'd let you go camping with me." I nod my head because I don't think Momma would let me go camping with Daphne either. I ask if we're going to get a tent and s'mores and make a campfire and Daphne says she'll take care of all of that, but I have to keep it a secret and I can't back out on her because her momma won't let her leave the house unless I'm with her.

"Why can't you leave the house without me?"

"Because my mom thinks you'll keep me from doing anything stupid."

I smile because I'm glad that Daphne's mom thinks I wouldn't let her do anything stupid. I tell Daphne I really want to make s'mores and so she shouldn't forget to bring the marshmallows and crackers and chocolate. Daphne laughs and says she won't forget, but I need to tell my mom I'm sleeping at Daphne's house. I say okay and I'm excited to go camping with Daphne, and it's even more exciting because it's a secret camping trip.

Later, Theo and me are in my backyard. I ask Theo if he can keep a secret. He laughs and says he's the best at keeping secrets.

"I'm going camping with Daphne this weekend," I say. And just thinking about going camping with a tent and a campfire and being with Daphne makes me happy because I laugh so much when I'm with Daphne and I love love LOVE making s'mores in campfires.

Theo leans back on his elbows and picks a piece of grass in our yard, twisting it around his finger. He says he doesn't know why that's a secret and I tell him it's because Daphne's mom thinks she's going to my house and my mom thinks I'm going to her house, but really we're going camping.

"Who's Daphne again?" Theo asks. I tell him Daphne's one of my best friends and she takes me places in her car and she sings to the radio and she laughs a lot and I've never seen her sad before, so I like being around her because she's always so happy. Theo chuckles and says that Daphne sounds like a real character. I tell Theo not to say anything to Momma or Grammy and he puts three fingers up and says Scouts honor, which means he promises he won't.

Theo asks how the baby's doing, and I tell him that her name is Alice.

“So she’s a girl?” Theo asks, tying more pieces of grass together. I tell him we found out last week and Alice is the name of the woman who wants to adopt my baby and she’s very nice, so I want to name her Alice. I ask Theo if he likes that name and he says, “Alice is a beautiful name.” I’m glad Theo likes it.

“Do you want to be a dad?” I ask Theo.

“I would love to be a dad.” Theo ties a flower in the middle of his pieces of grass. “Little kids are more fun than any grownup I’ve ever met.” I tell Theo that Mr. and Mrs. Iversen are very sweet and Mr. Iversen plays the cello and Theo says the cello is beautiful and that he used to play it in middle school.

“Can you still play?” I ask.

“No,” Theo says. “My parents sold it when I stopped practicing and got into guitar.” Theo asks if I think Alice would like Mr. and Mrs. Iversen as her parents. I say that I think Alice would like Mr. and Mrs. Iversen very much, but I want to be her mom and I know I’d be a good mom. Theo says I’d be a very good mom and I tell him that Alice needs to have a mom and a dad and that’s why my mom won’t let me keep her. If I were married and there were a mom and dad, then Alice would be able to stay with me, but I don’t have a husband right now, so that’s why we had to meet with the Iversens.

Theo looks at me and smiles and says I’ve got a lot of things figured out. I do have it figured out, because Theo would be the perfect daddy, and then I could keep Alice and be her mom. Sometimes Theo’s eyes crinkle on the sides like he’s smiling but I can’t always tell if he is smiling because his beard covers most of his face.

“Can I smile?” I ask Theo because I’m not sure if he’s happy or not.

Theo laughs and says, “Remember, I told you to do whatever you wanted around me,” so I smile and tell him I’m excited for Alice to get here and I know everything’s going to be okay.

Daphne told me that girls don’t ask boys to kiss them, the boys are just supposed to do it, but I really want Theo to kiss me right now. I never found my mom’s lipstick, but I lick my lips and scoot a little closer to him. He picks another piece of grass from the ground and ties it to the other pieces. Then he nudges me in the side. It tickles and I laugh and bend away. Ooh! Alice! I feel you kicking! I sit up fast and Theo asks if something’s wrong and I say feel my stomach.

“What?”

I grab Theo’s hand and put it right where Alice is kicking. I wait to see if he can feel anything. My heart hits against my chest harder because Theo’s right next to me and his hand is warm. Alice kicks again and Theo gasps.

“Did you feel it?”

“I felt it!” Theo smiles and looks at me. “I can’t believe it, I felt it!”

I turn toward Theo and give him a big hug. He holds me tight in his arms and pats my back saying that’s so awesome, Rae, that’s so awesome.

Theo’s back is strong. I can feel the muscles under his shirt that stretch and tighten when he pats my back. I can feel his beard between my neck and shoulder and it sort of tickles, but I don’t move because I like having his face against my skin.

Then Theo pulls away and pats my belly, saying it’s awesome again. He picks up the pieces of grass and ties the two ends together so it looks like a big crown with a flower in the middle and he puts it on my head and says, “For you, my queen.” My mouth doesn’t stop smiling because I feel like my head is floating in a big cotton ball. Everything around me feels soft and

wispy and yet inside my stomach and chest I feel like a big firecracker's bouncing off my bones and shooting through me. I don't know how to describe it, Alice, but I'm in love with Theo.

## THE CAMPING CHAPTER

This morning I go over to the market with Grammy to get some marshmallows and chocolate and graham crackers. Momma said I could sleep over at Daphne's because it's Labor Day weekend and I haven't had a sleepover with Daphne in a long time, but she also said I probably wouldn't sleep over at Daphne's house again for a while. Daphne has a firepit in her backyard, so she told me to tell my mom to get the s'mores stuff so we could make s'mores in her yard, even though we'll really be making them while we're camping. I'm so excited to go because the last time I slept over at Daphne's house, we drove to Forest Grove and went bowling with some of Daphne's friends and then we ate at a restaurant and stayed there until really late at night. I'd never been out so late before, but Momma got really mad and that's when she said I wasn't allowed to hang out with Daphne anymore.

At the market, Grammy and I roll the cart down each aisle looking for food that tastes good when it's roasted. Grammy finds some Starbursts and I find a big pineapple. I love pineapple. One time I ate an entire roasted pineapple on a stick at the state fair, and there was so much I threw up afterwards. I still love pineapple, though.

Grammy has to get some other things from the store like paper towels and parmesan cheese, so she leaves me in the candy aisle and tells me I can pick two more things to roast in the campfire and then to bring them to the front and meet her there. I stare hard at the shelves and look at all the chocolate and fruit and sour stuff and I don't know if I can choose just two. I crouch down to look at a box of licorice and then a pair of ratty shoes stand next to me. I look up. It's Robby Sandberg. He's got his hands linked together on top of his head and his squashed face looks all serious and twisted to one side.



“Hi there, Robby,” I say, poking at a hole in the top of his shoe so that I feel one of his toes.

Robby jumps back. He almost falls in the other side of the aisle, but he catches himself and stands still for a moment. He looks down and when he sees my face his eyes get all wide and he just says ah shit.

I stand up and walk over to him to ask him if he’s okay. His eyes smush further together and he sort of smiles so I smile back. He looks at my belly but he doesn’t say anything. I tell him I’m gonna have a baby girl, but he still just stares at my belly.

“My mom said I shouldn’t talk to you.” Robby scratches his face and turns his head to the side.

I ask Robby why his momma doesn’t want him to talk to me but he just shakes his head and backs farther away from me.

“I’m sorry you got in trouble,” I say. I didn’t mean for everybody to get so mad at Robby because I was the one who asked him if he wanted to have sex. I didn’t think he’d mind because Daphne said Robby’s had sex with a lot of girls from school. Daphne says he’d bang a mailbox. I just wanted to see what it was like so I figured I’d ask if he wanted to. I feel bad that he can’t even talk to me, though.

Robby opens his mouth a little and I can see his tongue poke through the gap in his teeth. I remember when he kissed me, I could feel the gap in his teeth because he sort of bit my lips. I didn’t like feeling his teeth because it made me think of kissing a dog, and then when he put his tongue in my mouth it really made me think of kissing a dog. As soon as we were done, Robby put his apron back on that had grease and oil all over it and he said he had to go to the front to

give Mrs. Fink her espresso machine that he fixed up. When people in the movies have sex, they don't usually leave to give someone their espresso machine. Most of the time they stay in bed and kiss each other and say that they love each other. I felt a little sad when Robby just got up and left, but I don't love Robby Sandberg, so I didn't want him to tell me he loved me anyway.

Robby says he just came here to get some M&M's and that he can't be gone too long because he's not supposed to leave school for lunch. I forgot Robby's still in school. He's younger than me so he'll have to go to school for a little while longer.

I tell Robby he doesn't have to worry about keeping the baby because I'm going to keep the baby unless I give it to the Iversens. He asks me who the hell are the Iversens and I tell him they're a very nice family of a mom and a dad who plays the cello and a little boy named Jason. Robby says that sounds boring and I don't know what to say because I think the Iversens aren't boring at all. Then Grammy comes down the aisle and sees us both.

"Dammit, Robby Sandberg," she says. "Don't make me call your dad, you little shit." Robby backs up and runs out the store. He didn't even get his M&M's.

"Grammy, that wasn't very nice," I say. Robby looked so sad and scared when he left. But Grammy just says that dumbass will think twice before showing his stupid face around me again.

In the line to buy the groceries, Grammy puts all the Starbursts and pineapple and marshmallows and everything else on the moving belt. A woman in front of us has a little baby resting on her hip. Ooh! It's the cutest little baby I've ever seen. He has dark dark black hair and pink pink cheeks and he's got on tiny green overalls.

“Your baby’s so wonderful!” I tell the woman. She turns around and says thank you and I buzz my lips at the little boy. He claps his hands and laughs and his laugh sounds like little bells. I run my fingers up his arms and he smiles with a big open mouth where a lot of little teeth poke through his gums. Oh, he’s so beautiful. I ask the woman if I can hold him and she says yes and the baby bundles his fists against my shoulder and sits like a big green ball in my arms. He sits against my belly and looks right at me with big brown eyes. I give him a hug but I’m really gentle because Momma says we can’t squeeze babies very hard.

The woman finishes paying and so I give her back her baby boy. I wave bye bye and he waves back. Oh, Alice! I can’t wait to see you. I’ll dress you up in overalls and big dresses and when you get old enough I’ll take you to a Bob Dylan concert and we’ll have so much fun together. I’m glad I don’t have to marry Robby Sandberg. Robby’s very nice and I feel bad that everybody’s so mad at him, but he doesn’t like babies very much and Theo’s more perfect than Robby could ever be.

Momma drives me over to Daphne’s house and drops me off in front of her driveway. She rolls down the window and leans over the seat. “Remember to be a good girl,” she says. “Don’t do anything you wouldn’t do if I were there.”

“I won’t, Momma.” I always try to be a good girl. Momma gives me a big hug and tells me to call her if I want to come home early. She waits until I knock on the door and Daphne answers it and she waves at my mom and my mom drives away. Then Daphne pushes me outside and tells me to wait on the porch until she comes back because she has to tell her mom she’s

leaving to go to my house, even though she's not. I wait outside with my sleeping bag and my backpack full of food for roasting and my toothbrush and an extra change of clothes.

Daphne's house is a lot smaller than my house. It only has one bathroom and everything's close together right when you walk inside. Daphne's mom has a dog and a cat, but they don't chase each other like you'd think. They play together in the backyard and run through all the grass together. One time I got lost in that high grass because Daphne and I were playing hide and go seek and I went into the middle of the field behind Daphne's house, but she never went out that far to find me. She called my name and I stayed really quiet because you're not supposed to say where you are in hide and go seek. But after a while I was getting tired because it was dark and cold and I'd been crouching down in the grass for a really long time. I went back inside and Daphne's mom looked really surprised and said that Daphne'd gone to Scoggins with some other friends. Daphne must've thought I went home because I was so good at hiding.

In the front window, Daphne looks out at me and points to the garage. I start walking to the garage and she waves harder so I run to the garage where Daphne's little car is parked.

"Hurry! Let's go." Daphne runs out the door and jumps into the driver's seat so I hurry in on my side and shut the door with my bags on top of my lap. That makes it hard to buckle my seatbelt, but I finally get the belt clicked in and lift up all my bags so the seatbelt can sit on my hips. I wonder what would happen if we got in an accident and the seatbelt squeezed against my belly. Would it hurt Alice? I tell Daphne please don't get in an accident because the seatbelt my hurt my baby, and she laughs and says, "Don't worry, Rae-gae, I know how to drive."

Daphne backs out of the garage and we drive out of the neighborhood and onto Front Street. She rolls all the windows down and screams out her side, yelling SO LONG, BITCHES. I

have to cover my ears because she's so loud, but I laugh and say it too because it's fun to say bitch around Daphne. She looks at me and laughs really hard. We get to all the stores and Daphne parks her car by Doris's Cutting Corner.

“Do you have to go to work?” I ask. I didn't know the salon was open this late.

Daphne smiles and gets close to my face. “No, dummy, we're going to make a quick stop at the tavern before we go.” She takes her keys out and opens her door. “I just gotta say hi to Jesse.”

I take my bags with me out of the car and we both go in the tavern. It's not very bright inside, but soon my eyes get used to it and I see that there's nobody here. Most of the chairs are flipped upside down on the tables and empty glasses and peanut bowls line the bar. Daphne goes to the kitchen and says where the hell is everyone. I go back and see Jesse in an apron cleaning dishes in the sink. He says the tavern's closing early this weekend because the managers left town for Labor Day so he's in charge. Daphne grabs Jesse's apron and pulls him in and kisses him on the mouth. Jesse looks over at me and stops kissing Daphne.

“Uh....” Jesse looks back at Daphne.

Daphne laughs. “Rae got me out of the house.”

Jesse nods and says, “Oh, okay.”

“We're going camping,” I say, showing Jesse my bags.

Daphne leans onto Jesse so that he almost falls back into the sink, then she backs up and says, “Hey, doesn't your brother work here too?”

Jesse nods once and says, “Yeah, Brett’s in the room over doing inventory.” Daphne tells Jesse to get his brother and we can play a game, so Jesse kisses Daphne again and then goes into the back room.

I ask Daphne when we’re going to go camping because I brought the s’mores and Daphne claps her hands and says, “Ooh, Jesse, we could make s’mores on the stove.” Then she looks back at me and asks if that’s okay, Rae, and I say yes because I know Daphne really likes Jesse and I’ve never made s’mores on the stove before. I ask Daphne if we’ll go camping after that and she says yes so I get out the chocolate and graham crackers and marshmallows.

Jesse comes back down with a blond boy that looks younger than Jesse, but they both look a lot alike, except the boy has longer hair and he’s skinnier. Jesse comes over and puts one arm around me and he puts his other arm around Brett.

“Brett, this is Rae. She’s Daphne’s friend and she’s really nice. You wanna show her the ropes to making s’mores on the stove?”

“Jesse, do you have any cards?” Daphne puts her elbows against the sink and leans back.

Brett takes my bag of candy and says, “Woah, you’re pregnant.” I don’t really know what to do because I thought we were going camping but we have to play cards first and make s’mores on the stove with Jesse and Brett. But Brett smiles and says, “I think Rae’s a cool name,” and that makes me feel good because I like my name a lot and I tell Brett my real name is Rachel and he just says huh.

Jesse gets some cards and Daphne shuffles them. I don’t know many card games, but I play *Go Fish* a lot with Grammy and Gracie. I tell Daphne we should play *Go Fish* and she says that’s a great idea and she goes to the bar and puts a few cards into different piles on the table for

her and me and Jesse and Brett and then she puts one big pile in the middle where we're supposed to fish from. Jesse comes out of the kitchen and takes his apron off and sits next to Daphne. He whispers in her ear really quiet but I hear him say, "When the game's over, we should go in the back and check your inventory," and Daphne giggles and kisses Jesse again. I don't know why that's so funny, but something in my stomach feels a little unsteady. It feels like I just got yelled at by someone I don't know and so my hands feel a little shaky, but I don't know why. I look back at Daphne and she's licking the side of Jesse's face real slow, which is very gross, but Jesse doesn't tell her that it's gross.

Brett comes out of the kitchen and says, "Ah hell, get a room." Daphne and Jesse and Brett all laugh and so I laugh because I'm glad we're laughing now instead of Daphne licking Jesse's face. Brett pulls out a carton of cigarettes and hits them against his hand before taking one out. I tell him cigarettes are bad for you. Daphne says lighten up, Rae, but Brett laughs and lights the cigarette.

I remember when I was little, I had a bundle of straw wrapped in some paper and I lit it with Grandpa Bill's lighter and tried to smoke it because I remember seeing all the beautiful women on Grammy's TV shows and how they'd blow smoke rings out of their mouths like it was as easy as breathing. I coughed a lot, and I didn't know what was so great about breathing in smoke, but when Momma found out she put me in time out and said I wasn't allowed to touch Grandpa's lighter ever again. I told her I just wanted to look like those beautiful movie stars but Momma said smoking's bad for you and those movie stars will look terrible when they get older from all the smoke they breathed in.

Brett scrunches his mouth to the side and says, "I'm good at blowing smoke out my ass and not my mouth." Jesse and Daphne laugh so loud I cover my ears. Grammy sometimes tells me and Gracie not to blow smoke up her ass and I asked her what that means. She said it's when someone's lying to you to make you feel better. I don't know if that's what Brett means, but it doesn't make any sense.

The bar table is sticky. I feel a raised bumpy ring on the table and brush my fingers over it in a circle. All the levers behind the bar are sticking out like coat hangers, but I know that beer comes out of them because I've eaten here before with Grammy and Momma and Gracie before and Grammy and Momma get beers and they come from those little knobs on the side of the wall.

Daphne hands me my pile of cards and says, "Let's get this over with." We play Go Fish three times, and I win the second time because I had a bunch of the same red queens and some sixes and a bunch of jacks, but Brett wins both the other times.

When Daphne picks up all the cards, and puts them back in the box, I ask if anyone wants to make s'mores. Brett licks his lips and looks at Jesse and blows smoke at Jesse and Daphne.

"We could do that," Brett says, but Daphne jumps on Jesse's back and says they're going to check the inventory and says Brett and me can make the s'mores and then her and Jesse will come out to eat them with us.

Brett laughs and swats his hand in front of him. "Get out of here you horndogs!" Jesse runs to the back giving Daphne a piggyback ride and it's so dark inside I can't even see them anymore before they go through the door to the back room by the kitchen, but I hear them laughing and kissing even when they're gone.



“Are Jesse and Daphne going to have sex?” I ask Brett. They’re kissing a lot and I know Daphne’s had sex before because when I told her about Robby Sandberg and how I didn’t like having sex with him, she told me she didn’t like it either at first but now she likes it a lot and that’s why she doesn’t go to church because the rest of Gaston can mind their own damn business.

Brett looks at me with his mouth open in a big smile but he doesn’t say anything. Then he puts his cigarette out in an ashtray and says, “Come on, let’s make some s’mores.”

I wish Daphne would come back out so we could go camping. I don’t think my mom would like it if she knew Daphne was in the next room with Jesse having sex, especially because she thinks I’m at Daphne’s house having a sleepover. I start to lose a little of my breath and get more shaky. I’d get in a lot of trouble because Momma would be sad that I lied to her. I didn’t want to lie to my mom, but Daphne said she’s the only one lying here because I *did* go over to her house, we just left as soon as I went over there, so when I asked my mom if I could go over to Daphne’s house for a sleepover, I didn’t say that I would actually sleep at Daphne’s house. That’s how Daphne explained it to me, but now I’m starting to feel bad because I think I lied to my mom and we’re not even camping. Daphne’s doing something bad and she doesn’t even want a baby, but she could get a baby if she has sex with Jesse Campbell.

“Woah. Hey, Rae.” Brett puts his hands on my shoulders and looks at my face. I smell the smoke from a new cigarette in the side of his mouth and I close my eyes because they sting like the air has little fireballs in it. Brett raises my face up so I look at him. He says it’s okay and then takes my hand and leads me into the kitchen.

“See,” he says, pointing to the dirty stove, “we still got a hot pan from all the food.” He walks over and turns the knob to the right and the fire under the pan gets bigger. He shrugs. “I guess Jesse forgot to turn the stove off, but that’s okay. We’re using it now.”

I hear Daphne laughing in the next room and I fold my arms and hug my chest as tight as I can.

“I want to go home,” I say. Brett turns around to look at me and rubs his face with one hand. He says I can go home in a little bit, but we should just have fun right now.

“Look.” Brett takes another breath of cigarette smoke so the end of the cigarette lights up orange and it’s even brighter than Gracie’s hair. “I’ve made some damn good s’mores on this oven. It’s better when you grill the graham cracker. You’ll love it. And I bet your baby’ll be able to taste it and he’d probably like it, too.” I tell Brett she’s a girl and he laughs and says whatever. Then he waves for me to walk over.

I don’t know if you can taste what I eat, Alice, but you live in my stomach, so maybe you can. You’d probably love s’mores. They taste a little bitter at first because the marshmallow always gets burned on the outside, but then when you bite into the chocolate, everything gets all melted and sweet, but it’s not just the chocolate. The marshmallow and graham cracker and chocolate are all different sweets, and when they’re all smushed together and it’s hot and melting, I like to hold it in my mouth as long as I can so I can taste everything and it feels wonderful all the way to my stomach where I can’t feel it anymore. Maybe that’s when you can try some, Alice, and then you can let me know if you like it by kicking on my belly.

“Should I tell Daphne we’re making the s’mores?” I ask. But Brett says they can have some later. He pulls me closer to the stove and puts an arm around me. Something’s bubbling in

the pan and I ask Brett what it is and he says it's grease and the graham crackers taste better if we fry them in the grease. Brett asks if I've ever had deep fried cookies and I tell him no. He says I have to try it soon because deep fried anything is delicious, but deep fried snickerdoodle cookies are the best thing he's ever tasted.

Brett shakes his head. "How the hell did you get pregnant?" He touches my cheek, but his cigarette smoke is so close to me I cough in his face. He falls back, waving his hands and laughing as more smoke comes out of his mouth.

I watch a piece of Brett's cigarette fall off the end and land in the pan, then a big ball of fire pops up in the air and I scream and jump away because it happened so quick and the fireball was really big. Brett turns around to the stove and grabs my arm and says shit really really loud so I cover my ears. He says it again and again and I tell him not to say that, but he runs past me without saying anything and goes over to the sink to fill up a glass of water. I move toward the doors because I don't want to get burned and Brett's still yelling shit and it hurts my ears and makes me really scared.

Brett runs back to the stove and dumps all the water on the pan and oh my word, the fire's HUGE. I back out of the doorway and I start to cry because I've never seen fire that big outside of a fireplace. Brett screams and his voice cracks and he shouts Jesse's name. The fire catches the corner of the curtains on the back window and crawls up like a jagged orange snake. I tell Brett we should get out of here because the fire's getting bigger, but he says shut up, and he grabs a rag from next to the oven and hits the curtains with it but then he drops the rag because it lights on fire, too.

“Damn oil! Dammit! Damn oil! Ah shit, ah shit.” Brett holds his hand and looks around the kitchen.

The room’s very hot. I don’t think we should stay inside anymore. We have to leave. We have to get out.

Jesse pushes past me and says the F word and asks Brett what the hell happened. I hear Daphne scream and there’s so much noise and it’s so hot. I close my eyes as tight as I can and shout that we have to get out. Jesse takes his shirt off and beats at the curtain and the fire that looks like a snake moves around a little bit, but it keeps climbing up, up to the ceiling.

I can’t keep all the tears from coming out of my eyes. I look at Daphne and she looks scared and I cry harder. We have to get out, Daphne. That’s what I say, but I don’t know if she can hear me. I shouldn’t have lied to my mom. Oh! I hope Alice is okay. I hold my stomach and cry even harder and I turn and run to get out of the tavern because I don’t want Alice to get hurt from the fire.

Daphne yells my name and I tell her we have to go and keep running. I feel really dizzy. I just want everyone to leave so nobody gets hurt in the fire. Come on, everyone! Come outside! RUN OUTSIDE.

I turn the door handle and look back at Daphne but I trip over the sidewalk in the dark and I hit my head on the ground and that hurts a lot and I hold my stomach and gasp as much air as I can when everything goes blacker than the sky overhead.

THE CHAPTER AFTER THE CAMPING CHAPTER THAT WASN'T ACTUALLY  
CAMPING

I open my eyes and it feels like my brain is squished up against my forehead. I wince but moving my eyebrows makes my head hurt even more so I don't know what else to do with my face except hold as still as I can and close my eyes and I feel tears running down my cheeks.

Someone's holding me. The air smells like smoke but there's fabric against my face and the fabric smells like licorice and butterscotch candy. I try to open my eyes real slow so my head doesn't hurt as much. I see the bottom of Mr. Knox's pointy nose. I say, "Mr. Knox," but it doesn't sound like I said Mr. Knox. It sounds more like I'm humming and I don't know why I can't say Mr. Knox's name right.

Mr. Knox looks down and says, "Sh, don't talk, Rae. Shush, shush," so I stop trying to talk and I close my eyes again. Mr. Knox's arms aren't there anymore and I feel a lot of rocking and movement, but I don't open my eyes and pretty soon I fall back asleep.

Alice, I'm dreaming that I have to go to the hospital to have you and when you finally get here, you're covered in ash and when you cry, fire comes out of your mouth. It's a really scary dream and I don't want you to look like that, Alice. What if something's happened to you? You're not supposed to breathe in smoke because it's bad for you and there was a lot of smoke in that fire and so what if I breathed a lot of it in and now you're covered in smoke? Oh, Alice. I'd feel so terrible if anything happened to you. I should've told my mom where I was going. My chest hurts and I feel sick to my stomach and I don't know if that's because of you, Alice, or if I

just feel sick because I'm sick. My head seems like it's spinning. My feet feel cold air but my ankles are covered in something soft and warm.

I think I blacked out. I don't remember anything except running out of the tavern and then seeing the bottom of Mr. Knox's nose and so I don't know why my feet are cold now and my ankles are warm. It's probably because I blacked out. The last time I blacked out was a really long time ago. I went over to Alan Hendrickson's house and we played in his backyard because it was mostly a big forest. I stepped on a beehive but I didn't know it was there, I just stepped on it accidentally. Then all the bees got really angry and started stinging us. Alan ran up the hill but I lost my sandal and when I was trying to put it back on again all these bees kept stinging me over and over and over. I was really scared and I couldn't see anything except a bunch of dots in front of my face. Alan's mom yelled at his older brother to come and get me and so Mike Hendrickson ran down the hill and flipped me over his shoulder just like a fireman. That's all I remember because then I blacked out. When I woke up, I had all this yellow cream on me. It was on my stomach and my arms and all up my neck. And I was laying on the Hendricksons' couch. Dad picked me up and he was so mad. He told Mrs. Hendrickson she was lucky I didn't die because he would've sued her for not watching us very carefully. Mrs. Hendrickson didn't like that at all and they both started yelling at each other and that hurt my ears, so I found Alan and we went to play in the backyard again. When Dad came outside and saw me, he stopped and just started laughing as hard as he could. I didn't know what was so funny, but I was glad he wasn't mad anymore. We got in the car and he asked if I wanted some ice cream and I said yes, please. So we went to Baskin Robbins and I got chocolate chip cookie dough and my dad got cherries jubilee. I

think blacking out then was a lot better than blacking out this time. It hurt a lot less, and I don't think I'll get any ice cream this time because I'm not supposed to have very much milk.

I open my eyes and look down at my cold feet. They're sticking out of a brown fuzzy blanket. I'm in a hospital gown. I'm in the hospital. I must be in the hospital because I don't own a hospital gown and this isn't my house and it's not the tavern. It looks like Grammy Joanne's next to my bed asleep. I can't quite see without my glasses on, but I don't know anyone else with gray hair that they wear in a bun on top of their head.

Why am I in the hospital? I gasp and pull down the covers to look at my belly, but it looks normal. I look under my gown. My belly's not cut or bruised or anything like that. I think you're okay, Alice. I hope you're okay.

"Grammy?" I say.

Grammy opens her eyes while taking a big breath through her nose. She looks at me. And her eyes grow wide. "Oh, thank God. Thank God." She comes over to me and kisses me on the forehead and on the cheek and on the nose and I smell her vanilla perfume. One of her tears falls on my cheek like a warm drop of rain and I wipe it away.

"Is Alice okay?"

"Who?"

"Is my baby okay?"

Grammy holds my face and looks at me for a second without saying anything. The wrinkles around her eyes are shiny from all the tears that got caught in them.

"Your baby's just fine," she says. Oh, Alice, that's the BEST news I could ever ever EVER hear! I'm so glad you're okay! Oh, thank goodness you're okay! I smile and start to cry

and tell Grammy how happy I am that you're okay and Grammy laughs and sits back down in her chair. I ask where my glasses are and Grammy pulls them out of her purse and hands them to me and everything gets clear again when I put them on.

"Why am I in the hospital?" I ask.

Grammy says I might have a concussion from falling on my head. She says a concussion is when your brain moves a little bit in your skull and gets bruised. I hope my brain's not bruised. That might mean I can't remember stuff like in some movies I've seen before, but Grammy says I probably don't have that. That's called amnesia.

"They'll let you go this afternoon if everything's all right," Grammy says. She tells me Momma was in charge of catering at a wedding this morning and so she had to leave a little while ago but she was really sad to leave me because she didn't want me to be scared when I woke up, but I'm not too scared now that I know Alice is okay. Grammy asks if I want anything to eat and I say I'd love some ice cream even though I'm not supposed to have very much milk. But Grammy says it won't hurt to have some this once, and she says she'll be back soon. Then when she gets to the door, Theo comes in. Theo! Theo came to the hospital to see me! Grammy gives Theo a hug and tells him she'll be right back and she blows me a kiss so I blow her a kiss too and then it's just Theo and me in the room.

"Did you come to see me?" I ask.

Theo pulls a bouquet of flowers from behind his back. "I was in the neighborhood with these flowers and a get well card and figured you might want them." He comes next to my bed and sits in the chair Grammy sat in before.



Nobody's ever given me flowers before. I smell them and they smell like Sweet Tarts, and I tell Theo thank you and he puts them on the table next to my head. Theo leans on the bed and rests his chin on his arms.

"Your grandma said there was a fire." His eyes get wrinkled in the corners. "What happened, Rae?"

My eyes sting and start to cry because I remember how I lied to my mom and how Daphne and Jesse were having sex and how I knew I'd done something I shouldn't have. My lips shake and when I open my mouth, all the tears in my eyes spill onto my cheeks and my neck and my hospital gown.

"Hey, hey now." Theo pats my arm and says it's okay, but I can't stop crying because a lot of bad things happened when I lied to my mom about going camping. I cry harder and say it's all my fault.

Theo takes my hand and holds it in between his hands. "It's not your fault, Rae."

I tell him I shouldn't have lied about sleeping over at Daphne's house.

"What happened?" Theo asks.

I let out my breath really slowly and then look at Theo. "If we hadn't gone to the tavern, Daphne wouldn't have left me alone to go have sex with Jesse and I wouldn't have coughed in Brett's face when he was smoking and Brett wouldn't have dropped his cigarette in the pan and started the fire and I wouldn't have gotten hurt and Alice is fine but that's not for sure so she could be hurt too and it would be all my fault."

Theo's face disappears into his beard so that all I can see are his eyes looking down at the bed. He probably doesn't want to marry me now. Theo probably thinks I'm bad because I lied

and I started a big fire and I don't even know if Daphne and Jesse and Brett are hurt, but if they are, that's my fault, too. Oh, Theo probably thinks I'm very bad.

"I didn't mean to," I say. "I didn't mean to do any of this. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

Theo looks back at me and rubs my hand between his palms.

"Stop, Rae."

So I stop talking.

Theo takes a big breath and shakes his head. "It's not your fault. Your friends are a bunch of dickheads."

I laugh because Theo swore, but I tell him that's not very nice and Daphne's not a dickhead because she's my friend.

"Rae." Theo leans his face into his hands and I feel his mouth against my fingers. Then he looks up again. "Rae, you're the nicest girl I know. You shouldn't have friends who take advantage of you like that."

I just touched Theo's lips. I just felt them on my fingers. Did he kiss my fingers? His lips are very soft, which is funny because his beard is rough and fuzzy. Oh boy, Alice, I want to kiss Theo a lot. He's so nice and he brought me flowers. And he's not mad at me for the tavern catching on fire because he thinks my friends are dickheads. But he's not mad at me. He's not mad at me.

"You don't think it's my fault?" I ask Theo. And he laughs but he's not smiling so I don't know if it's a happy laugh.

"Not at all, Rae," he says. "You couldn't be bad even if you tried."

I touched his lips, Alice. I can't believe I touched his lips. I want to bring my other hand over to Theo's hands, but there's an IV sticking out of it and it hurts to move it very much.

"Theo?" I say, and Theo raises his eyebrows and says mm, and I say, "You're the nicest boy I know." I squeeze his hands. "Even though you shouldn't say dickhead."

Theo's beard moves up his face because he's smiling. He opens his mouth and laughs that big sort of laugh that starts from the bottom of his belly button. He claps his hands on his knees and sits back in his chair and he doesn't stop laughing for a really long time. I love hearing Theo laugh. It makes me feel like when I ride down on an elevator and the ground pushes back on my feet for a second and then my stomach drops because it almost feels like I'm flying.

Grammy walks back in with a carton of cherry ice cream and a plastic spoon. She asks what's so funny and Theo says, "Rae's just keeping my potty mouth in check."

"Oh hell, Rae." Grammy rolls her eyes and Theo laughs again. He gets up from the chair and says he should probably get going because he has to take a test later today. Grammy hugs him even with all the ice cream in her hands. "God bless you, Theo," she says. "You're a real saint."

Theo holds my hand one more time and says, "I'll see you soon," and then he leaves.

"Did he bring you those?" Grammy asks, pointing to the flowers. I nod and say that nobody's ever gotten me flowers before and Grammy says that's the sweetest thing she's ever heard.

I take a bite of ice cream and it feels so good in my mouth because it's cold and tangy and I feel more awake after swallowing. I ask Grammy if Daphne and Jesse and Brett are okay.

Grammy stops for a second. “Oh, they’re just fine,” she says. She gets up and hits the wall and it scares me because Grammy doesn’t hit things very often. “Those shit-brain kids left the hospital last night.” Grammy turns around and looks out the window. “They’re probably back home doing God knows what. Idiots.” She takes a deep breath, then she turns back to me and says, “Your momma says you can’t see Daphne ever again.”

I’m about to ask why but then Grammy points her finger at me and says, “I don’t want to hear it,” so I shut my mouth and don’t say anything.

Grammy tells me the tavern’s okay, too. It was just the window area that got burned and the rest of the kitchen has some smoke damage, but it’s nothing they can’t fix. I’m glad the tavern didn’t burn down. Me and Daphne would probably have to pay for a whole new one and I don’t think I have enough money to build a new tavern.

“I remember Mr. Knox carrying me,” I say. And Grammy nods and says Mr. Knox was coming back from another fire near the lake and saw the tavern so he got his team over there and put the fire out real quick and he put me in his truck to wait until the ambulance got there.

“Sure was a big surprise for him to see you lying on the sidewalk like that,” Grammy says. “He said he almost wondered if you were drunk.”

I finish the cherry ice cream and stare inside the empty carton. “Am I in trouble?” I ask.

Grammy laughs and says that’s up to my mom, but I’ll probably be grounded for a while and Momma mentioned not letting me play on my guitar for a week. I look down at the bed and say that I’m really sorry. Grammy sits back down and says, “Oh, hell, don’t feel too bad. You just got wrangled into something stupid by your stupid friends.”

“Theo says they’re a bunch of dickheads.”

Grammy's eyes go wide. She almost looks like she's choking because she can't swallow any air, she's laughing so much. She wipes her face and takes a big breath. "I like that boy."

Later, the doctor comes in and says that my baby's 100% okay because I fell on my back instead of my front, so that's a good thing. He said that my head's just fine and that I can go home. He hands Grammy an ice pack and a piece of paper and then the nurse takes the IV out of my hand and shuts the door so I can change back into my clothes and when I'm finally dressed, Grammy takes me home.

When Momma gets back from work, she sits me down at the kitchen table and says I have to tell her everything that happened. I cry and tell her I'm so sorry for lying, but she just hugs me and says she's glad I'm not hurt too badly. After dinner, Gracie and me and Momma and Grammy all play Candyland and Gracie gives me the Queen Frostine card because she's my favorite. My guitar's in Momma's room so I can't play any songs tonight, but I don't mind.

Oh, I'm so glad you're all right, Alice! I'm so glad Momma isn't too mad at me and I promised her I would never ever ever lie to her again. And I won't. No matter what, I will never lie again. And even though I can't play my guitar for a whole week and I'm not supposed to see Daphne anymore, I'm glad everything's okay and I touched Theo's lips and he thinks I'm the nicest girl he's ever met. My head still hurts a little and Grammy has these giant pills I have to take to help my brain feel better, but I think today's even better than the last time I blacked out because the last time I blacked out I didn't have a healthy baby and a wonderful boy who held my hand.

## THE HALLOWEEN CHAPTER

Dear Alice, I've just gotten out of another doctor's appointment. Momma tells me you're about as big as a squash now. I'm getting BIG. This week I ate a bowl of cereal and I let it stand on my belly just like my mom used to do! But I was so excited, I laughed and then the bowl spilled over and I got milk all over my pretty blue dress, but it'll wash out, so everything's okay.

But Alice, I'm a little scared about something. The last time I went to the doctor, Momma told me after we got out that the doctor's worried my heart's not strong enough to have a baby. It's because of my Williams, and that makes me really scared and nervous. Having Williams means I probably can't run as fast as other people because I get so tired, but I never thought about being too tired to have a baby. Momma talked to me about it. I have to make sure my heart is strong enough so I have to take some pills every day and make sure nothing makes my heart weak. And then she said they were going to make sure my heart didn't work too hard during labor because they were going to give me a C-section. Do you know what a C-section is, Alice? It's when they cut the momma's stomach open and take the baby out. That REALLY scared me when Momma first told me, but she said they do it to lots of moms all the time and it's very safe. I might have to go to sleep when they do it, but they'll wake me up when you get here and I can still hold you and kiss you and sing to you once they sew my stomach back up.

Gracie asked me if any of my food or guts would spill out when they cut me open, but Momma said that won't happen either. I asked the doctor the next time we went just to make sure, but Dr. Lennon told me everything should be fine. I hope everything will be okay, Alice. I'm trying to be very careful and I'm trying to make my heart very very strong. And if I can get Theo to like me before you get here, Alice, then I know my heart will be strong enough to bring

you here safely! You'll be like Superman when you get here, Alice. You're going to be so strong and happy. I'll make sure.

Today is Halloween! I love Halloween and going trick-or-treating with Gracie and Grammy. Every year they have a big party in the church with pie eating contests and a big bowl for bobbing for apples and there's music playing and everyone in town comes and has fun with everybody. Gracie found this really great costume online. It's a skeleton, but there's a little baby skeleton right on the belly so it looks like an x-ray of me and you, Alice! Momma got me a black shirt and pants and she painted all the bones on and it looks fantastic! I keep trying it on in front of the mirror because I love looking at the baby skeleton. I asked Theo if he could come to the party and he said he'd try to stop by, so I hope I'll see him tonight, too.

Grammy asks if I can help her make a couple pumpkin pies for the party tonight, so we work in the kitchen and sing songs while we wait for the pies to bake in the oven. It smells like cinnamon and I think about all the red and yellow and brown trees outside when I smell the pies in the oven because we always eat pumpkin pie when the trees turn colors. My dad used to rake our whole yard into one huge pile of red leaves and then we'd both swim in it and pretend like it was fire. He would grab my hair and scream, "Your hair's on fire too!" And then he'd roll me around on the ground and blow on my face until all the fire got out of my hair. I knew there wasn't actually fire in my hair, but I loved rolling around in all the leaves and seeing red everywhere I looked.

The phone rings and Grammy picks it up. Her face gets all scrunched and she looks up and sighs really loud, so I don't think the phone call is a very good one. I ask what's wrong, but

Grammy holds up a finger for me to wait, so I eat the last piece of extra crust that we didn't use for the pies and lick all the sugar off my fingers. When Grammy gets off the phone, she laughs, but she rubs her eyes and forehead so much that I don't know if she's happy or impatient, because I asked Grammy once if she was happy when she rubbed her eyes and laughed and she told me "No, I'm just impatient and when I'm impatient and frustrated, I laugh, dammit." So I don't ask her if she's happy anymore when she laughs and rubs her eyes. She goes over to the oven and then looks at me and then turns off the oven and says let's go.

Grammy's jeep makes a loud rattling noise when it starts and I always have to plug my ears because it's so loud, but after we get out of our street the rattling gets quieter and then I ask Grammy where we're going.

"We've got to pick Gracie up."

"Why?"

"Gracie got in a fight at school."

Gracie's never had to come home from school for fighting. She's always been a very nice girl and she has lots of friends. I don't know why Gracie would get in a fight. She punched Hannah Walker at Hagg Lake, but she told me later that she was just as surprised as I was because she didn't even see it coming. She said, "Rae," and she made her hand into a fist and hit it into her other hand. Then she said, "I didn't even know what happened. I looked down at my hand and it hurt and there was Hannah all bloody and stupid."

When we get to school, Gracie's in the office and her shirt is ripped at the collar. She has a cut on her lip and she looks madder than I've ever seen her. Grammy has to go into the office and talk to the teacher, so she tells Gracie and me to wait in the car. When we get back in the



jeep, Gracie goes to the back seat and crosses her legs, all bunched up so she looks like a big ball. I sit next to her by the window.

“Gracie, you shouldn’t hit people,” I say.

“Well, you shouldn’t get pregnant, but you don’t see me giving you shit.”

I tell Gracie not to say that, but she just leans closer to me and says shit shit shit shit shit shit. I don’t like Gracie swearing so much and I start to cry because I don’t know if Gracie’s mad at me or not.

“Are you mad at me?” I ask.

Gracie punches the front seat and that makes me jump a little. I want to hold her hand, but I don’t want her to punch anything again. My voice gets quieter and I ask again are you mad at me, and Gracie covers her face with her hands. Her shoulders shake and her voice cracks through her fingers like playing the saxophone with a broken reed.

If I hug Gracie, she might punch me, but if I don’t hug Gracie she’ll keep crying and be really sad. I scoot closer to her and put my arms around her, but my belly’s so big I can’t reach all the way over her shoulders. Still, I pull Gracie toward me and hold her as tight as I can. She doesn’t move at all, but I’m glad she doesn’t punch me. I feel her back shake harder and I cry harder too so that my tears drip into her hair. “It’s okay,” I say. It’s okay. Then Gracie puts her arms around me and hugs me back, and she cries onto my shoulder.

“Gracie,” I say. “What’s wrong?”

She backs up and wipes her eyes with her sleeves and takes a big breath. Her shoulders still jump up and down every few seconds when her breath sucks in really quick because she’s

still calming down. Then she looks at me and her eyes are almost as red as the leaves on the trees outside.

“I hate all my friends,” Gracie says. Her voice catches in her mouth and sounds like when Momma starts the lawnmower. I ask Gracie why she hates all her friends, but she looks past me and says that Grammy’s coming. Gracie looks at me again and gives me the biggest hug.

“I love you, Gracie.”

“I love you so damn much.”

“Don’t say damn.”

And Gracie laughs and wipes her nose with her hand and we both wait for Grammy to get into the front. She looks at Gracie through the window all the way down the sidewalk. I hope Grammy doesn’t get too mad at Gracie. Gracie’s really sad and I’ll bet she’s really sorry she got in a fight, so Grammy should be nice to her.

Grammy opens the back door and leans against it, looking at Gracie and me. She whistles through her teeth and I cover my ears for a second, but then I uncover them because I want to hear what Grammy says. She looks at Gracie and bites the inside of her cheek and I hold Gracie’s hand to let her know it’s okay.

“Did you win?” Grammy asks.

Gracie squeezes my hand so I squeeze her hand back. She starts to cry a little again and I see a pink trail on her cheek go around the cut near her mouth and drop off her jaw and onto her torn shirt.

“Well, did you?” Grammy asks again.

Gracie nods her head, pressing her lips together and then says yes, ma’am.

Grammy nods back. “Good.” She closes the door and goes up to the front seat and drives us all home.

When we get back, Grammy turns the oven back on and then sits Gracie down on our couch and tells me to watch the pies. I ask if I can sit next to Gracie but Grammy says, “No, ma’am. You’re going to watch the pies so Gracie and I can have a moment alone.”

The window on our oven door is covered in something brown and crusty. It makes it hard to see through, but it looks like the pies are still too soft to take out of the oven. Grammy told me once that you know when something’s ready to come out of the oven because it’s a little gold on the top, like marshmallows. But you have to take them out right then, otherwise they get black and the kitchen starts to smell and you can’t eat the food anymore because it tastes like black coffee.

Even though I’m in the kitchen, I can still hear Gracie and Grammy talking in the living room. I hear Gracie say my name and she tells Grammy, “Everybody makes fun of Rae just to make me mad.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to hit them.”

And then Gracie’s voice gets all crackly again and she says, “Well they shouldn’t be so mean about her. God knows she wouldn’t put up a fight. She doesn’t even get it.”

I look back at the oven but I don’t check on the pies inside. I do get it, Gracie. Momma told me it’s not good to have a baby without a daddy. Well, I don’t have a daddy yet, so of course people are going to think I’m bad for having a baby, but it’ll all be okay when me and Theo get married. It’s so close! I can tell. I just know he wants to marry me. And then Gracie’s friends

won't make fun of her anymore, because Alice and me will have a family together. It won't be just me. I won't be alone. Gracie doesn't realize that, but I do.

Outside there are orange and red and pink leaves all around our yard. I wish Daddy was here to rake them up and play in them with me.

Grammy comes into the kitchen and opens the oven door. She says yup, these are done. She takes them out and sets them on a rack to cool by the window when Gracie comes in and sits by me at the counter. Her eyes are puffy, but she's not crying anymore. I put my hand on her knee, but she scoots away and says, "Aw, lay off, Rae. I'm fine." And then Grammy lets us help sprinkle cinnamon and sugar over the tops of the pies because that's the secret to making them taste really good. Extra cinnamon and sugar.

Momma calls upstairs for Gracie and me to hurry up or we'll miss the party. I stop by Gracie's door and knock and she says hold on, so I wait by the door in my skeleton costume. I'm so excited to show it to everybody at the party! The baby skeleton is so cute. She has a little bow and is all curled up like she's taking a nap. Momma told me Alice is just a little smaller than that, but not much. Alice, I'm so glad you're growing up big and healthy and strong. I'll bet you'll be able to run as fast as you want and your heart will be just fine.

Gracie comes out in her mad scientist costume. When she first made it, Grammy said she didn't know why there had to be so much blood, but Gracie wanted it that way. She even put wire in her hair so it sticks out straight to the side like she was in an explosion. I tell her she looks great and she drums her fingers together and says wonderful, and then we go downstairs to meet Mom and Grammy by the door. Grammy never dresses up for Halloween anymore. She

used to wear a cowgirl costume when Grandpa Bill was alive, but now she just wears an orange sweater that has pumpkins as buttons. Momma's dressed up like a black cat with pointy ears on her head and whiskers painted on her face. I ask why she doesn't have a tail and she says Because it got cut off in a cat fight, and then she waves us out the door.

When we get to the church, the gym's already filled with tons of people dancing and eating and bobbing for apples. I don't go inside the gym because the music's too loud, but I stand in the lobby with Mr. Frasier and the Finks. Momma says she'll be right out, but she has to tell Pastor Jansen that she's here and can watch the little kids because she signed up for that at church.

I sit on the couch next to Mr. Frasier and say, "Hello, Mr. Frasier." He isn't dressed in a costume or even a Halloween outfit, but his sweater is black instead of brown. He almost always wears a brown sweater, so he must be dressed in black for Halloween. Last year, Mr. Frasier painted a giant circle with pumpkins and ghosts and witches on it for our cakewalk. It looked so beautiful. The witches' hair flew behind them in the wind because they were flying so fast and the ghosts were eating pieces of cake, but you could see parts of the cake in their bellies because they were see-through. And Mr. Frasier didn't even use markers for the picture. He used real paint and he swirled it together so that it looked like something you'd see in a museum. I felt awful stepping on it with my shoes, but Mr. Frasier patted me on the back and said go right ahead. He even joined in the cakewalk, too. He brought his cane with him and moved his hips from side to side and he blew kisses to his wife who worked the music player. Mrs. Frasier died later around Christmastime and I remember seeing the cakewalk picture crumpled up in his garbage can so that one of the witches' faces stuck out of the lid, looking at me. I asked Grammy

why Mr. Frasier threw the picture away and she said probably because it took up space, but Momma thinks it's because Mr. Frasier didn't want to think of his wife anymore.

Now, Mr. Frasier looks at me and looks at the baby skeleton on my belly. I smile at him as big as I can because I'm supposed to be extra nice to Mr. Frasier. He clears his throat and looks at the Finks, who are fixing their costumes. Mr. Fink is dressed like Tarzan and Mrs. Fink like Jane, but Mr. Fink's toga won't stay up. I've heard Momma tell Grammy Roger Fink has something she sure doesn't mind looking at, and I think that means that she thinks Mr. Fink is handsome. His arms are very big and muscular and when his toga drops down by his basketball shorts, I see his stomach and it looks like he's been folded a bunch of times because there are deep creases in his stomach. That's called a six-pack.

"You need some pins to keep that darn thing up," Mr. Frasier says, folding his arms.

Mrs. Fink laughs and looks over at Mr. Frasier and then at me. She smiles and says, "Oh, hello, Rae." So I say hello back and she asks if I can help her hold Mr. Fink's leopard toga up while she pins the back together. I try to push myself off the couch, but my stomach is so big that it takes a couple times before I can stand all the way up. Mr. Frasier hmms in his throat and then props his cane up under his arms.

"Look at that belly," he says.

I smile and pat my stomach, "I know," I say. "It's getting big."

Mr. Frasier smiles but only with half of his mouth, so I'm not sure whether I should keep smiling or not. He grunts and tries to get off the couch too, but it's hard because he's so old. I come over and take his arm, but he moves away and says, "I can do it myself, stupid girl."

"Ben," Mrs. Fink says to Mr. Frasier. "Rae's just trying to help."

But Mr. Frasier sucks on his teeth and says sure, sure. And he walks through the front doors outside where there's nobody but himself.

Mrs. Fink tells me don't mind him, but I feel bad because Mr. Frasier seems very upset. I walk through the front doors too and see him looking up at the sky.

"Why are you upset, Mr. Frasier?" I ask, staying behind him.

Mr. Frasier leans onto his cane and takes a big breath, but he doesn't say anything. I walk up beside him and look at him. Then I look at the sky because he's still staring into it. There are so many stars out. They look like they're white splattered paint all over the sky. I say this to Mr. Frasier and he hmms in his throat.

"I remember last year you made a beautiful cakewalk picture," I tell Mr. Frasier. Little hairs on the top of Mr. Frasier's head move back and forth in the wind. I can see them because the moon is so bright behind him and all the hairs on his head and neck and even the hairs in his nose show up against the white moon.

"Why did you throw that beautiful painting away?" I ask.

Mr. Frasier still doesn't look at me. I lean my head onto his shoulder and I feel his body shaking. It feels like a thin page of a book when I'm reading outside on a really windy day. It's almost like waves going through him and I step back because I'm afraid he might fall over. He doesn't turn his head at all, but his mouth turns into a frown, but not an angry-looking frown. Mr. Frasier looks more sad than anything and I wish he'd smile.

The trees outside look sort of a brownish gray now, instead of red. Their leaves look almost burnt like they were hung over a campfire too long. I know they're still red, though. They just look brown because it's dark outside.

Mr. Frasier takes another big breath, still looking up. "I feel like I'm behind glass."

I look around because I don't know if Mr. Frasier's talking to me or someone else, but there's no one else around, so I think he's talking to me. I ask him why he feels like that and he turns around and finally looks at me and he doesn't look at my belly this time. Just me.

"It was her idea," Mr. Frasier says, "the cakewalk." Then he shifts his weight on his feet and looks back up at the sky. "She liked you a lot."

At first I don't know who he's talking about and I start to ask him who she is, but then he says Jean to himself and that was his wife's name, so I don't ask him anymore because he's probably talking about Mrs. Frasier. He says her name again and his voice gets all sticky like he should probably clear his throat. I ask Mr. Frasier if he's okay and he looks back at me and says, "Your costume's outlandish." Then he walks past me back inside, leaning on his cane for every other step.

What does outlandish mean? I'm not sure. But Mr. Frasier doesn't seem too excited to be at a Halloween party. Momma says he misses his wife a lot, so maybe he really misses her right now and that's why he was talking about her. I don't know what I'd do if my husband died and left me all alone, especially if we were old and I didn't have Momma or Grammy anymore and if my son shackled up with a floozy from Eugene. Mr. Frasier probably feels pretty lonely.

I go back inside to the lobby and the Finks aren't there anymore, but Neil is. He's sitting on the couch and when he sees me come inside, his face gets scared looking. I don't want to breathe in because I don't know if Neil's still upset with me. And I don't want Neil to ever squeeze my stomach again because he could've hurt Alice when he did it before, but I feel bad that Neil is so sad. I don't want Neil to feel scared or like he can't be a good daddy.



Neil starts to shake. I can see him shaking right there on the couch, but he says real quietly, "You're really big." I hold my belly in a hug and nod. Neil puts one hand over his face and bites his pinky. I don't know whether I should sit by him or not, but then Momma comes into the lobby and sees me and sees Neil and her eyes get real small, which means she's a little mad. That's what it means when Momma's eyes get small.

"Come on in, Rae," Momma says. "The music's stopped and they're about to serve the pie."

I walk past Neil and stop to pat his wispy hair to let him know that it's okay. He looks down lower at the ground and Momma waves her hand for me to come with her so I keep walking and leave Neil alone in the lobby.

"Everyone is so sad," I say to Momma. I wish Mr. Frasier and Neil and even Momma would smile and laugh because it's Halloween and everyone should have fun on Halloween. Momma does laugh, but she's not smiling and she stops in the hall and puts her hands on my shoulders.

"Rae," she says, "sometimes people are sad. But that's okay. Brings us all closer to the Good Lord, you know."

"Because the Good Lord was sad?"

"Yes."

I think for a second. "But he was happy, too." I know because he loved all the little kids and there's a picture in the church of Jesus smiling with a bunch of little kids. Besides, I have to be happy. I have to make sure my heart is good and strong for Alice.

Momma doesn't say anything. She smiles and kisses me on the head and says let's go get some pie.

Grammy's pumpkin pie is delicious because she puts the extra cinnamon and sugar on the top, but we only get to eat one of the pies because the other is for the pie-eating contest. Mr. Knox and Mr. and Mrs. Fink and even Pastor Jansen sit at the table to eat pies without their hands. Momma and Grammy and me are next to the edge of the table where Mr. Knox sits and he winks at us and says, "I'm winning this for you, ladies." Mrs. Wade is behind us with a stopwatch. She says go and all the people at the table dig their heads into their pies and everyone else starts cheering. It's very loud, so I cover my ears and shut my eyes tight to try to make everything go quieter. I bend over, taking a couple steps backwards away from the table because it might be less noisy from farther away, but I bump into someone and step on their feet.

"Hey, watch it."

I open my eyes and turn around. It's Mrs. Wade. She's dropped her stopwatch and she looks upset. I tell her I'm sorry and that I didn't mean to run into her. Mrs. Wade looks at my belly where the skeleton version of Alice sits and then looks back up at me.

"It's really something that you're broadcasting it to the world." Mrs. Wade flicks the bow on the baby's head. I feel someone's hand on my shoulder and I look up and it's Momma. Her eyes are REALLY small right now and so I'm a little scared because I've never seen Momma look so angry.

"Don't." That's all Momma says. And Mrs. Wade puts her hands in front of her and says she didn't mean anything by it, but Momma says, "I know exactly what you meant by it" and "You can harp on someone else, Jackie." Momma's hand closes tight around my shoulder. I'm in

the middle of Momma and Mrs. Wade and they both look really angry and I'd rather be back outside with Mr. Frasier who didn't say much of anything at all when he was upset.

Mrs. Wade bends down and picks up the stopwatch. I forgot there were still people eating pie. Mr. Knox looks like he might win. Mrs. Wade looks at the table and then at me and then at Momma. She shrugs her shoulders and mumbles something and I almost don't hear it, but I think she said sorry.

Gracie finds us in the crowd and says she's getting tired and wants to go home. Momma nods her head, still looking at Mrs. Wade, but Mrs. Wade's staring hard at the stopwatch in her hand. Momma says, "Let's go, I'm getting tired, too."

Mr. Fink ends up winning the pie eating contest, but it wasn't with Grammy's pie. Mr. Fink ate apple pie and I think Mrs. Jansen baked that one. Momma taps on Grammy's shoulder and says, "Come on, Mom. We're leaving." When we turn to go, I hear Pastor Jansen announce a costume contest and I get excited because I feel like my costume is a really good one and it could win. I ask Momma if we can stay for just a little longer for the costume contest, but Momma says we don't need to go showing off my predicament to every self-righteous churchgoer in Gaston.

My predicament is that I am seventeen years old, I'm not married, and I'm pregnant. Grammy tells me all the time that most people around here don't like that very much, but I still want to be nice to them and be their friends because I'm no different than before I got pregnant except I have a bigger belly.

Grammy and Momma and Gracie all look sad and upset and tired. I wonder if it's my fault because people don't like me being pregnant. Maybe Momma's friends make fun of her for it just like Gracie's friends. But, it's Halloween. I wish everyone would be happy on Halloween.

When we leave the church, I remember Theo said he might come by for the party and then I stop because I really don't want to leave in case Theo gets here. I ask Momma please please please can we just stay out here and wait a little longer to see if Theo's coming, but Momma says I can see Theo later because she doesn't want to spend any more time around the church.

I ask Momma if I can have a piece of paper from her purse. She pulls out an old receipt and asks why I need it, but then I ask for a pen. The pen slides around on the paper a little, but I hold tight and write:

Dear Theo, I'm sorry. Everybody is tired and wanted to go home. But you should come over tomorrow. I miss you. Love, Rae

Theo's probably happy right now because it's Halloween and Theo loves costumes and parties. I wonder what Theo dressed up as tonight. He'd make a good pirate because of his beard. I'll bet Theo's a pirate.

I stick the note in the corner of one of the windows in the front doors and look at it again. If Momma and Grammy weren't behind me and if they couldn't read it, I'd leave a note for Theo that said:

Theo, I love you. You would be the very best daddy for Alice because you wouldn't get tired and want to go home if you were with me tonight at this party. You always let me be happy if I want to. You are so handsome and funny and your lips are very soft. Please marry me so I can always be around you and always be happy and never be tired or angry or sad. I love love love love love you. Love you, Rae.

Maybe I'll write a note when I get home and then I'll give it to him the next time we see each other. Or maybe I'll kiss him. I'd love to kiss him. I think the next time I see Theo, I'll kiss him. Or I'll give him this note. I'll have to think about it.

## THE HEART CHAPTER

I wait in a padded chair for Mom to come out of Dr. Lennon's office, putting my arms around my waist and warming my stomach from the cold of the ultrasound jelly.

You're just getting bigger and bigger, Alice. I only have ONE MONTH LEFT before you get here! I'm excited to see you, but that means I have to get things moving with Theo otherwise I won't get to keep you at all. I'll tell Theo the next time I see him, Alice. I promise. Next time I see Theo, I'll tell him I love him and ask him to marry me. I've been so scared to do it because I'm afraid he'll say no, but he's been so nice to me, he has to love me, too. He's coming over next week to carve our turkey for us for Thanksgiving and Mr. and Mrs. Maxwell are coming over, too. Maybe by then we'll hold hands and we can tell everyone at dinner that we're getting married.

I think I'd really be perfect for Theo. He told me once what kind of girl he'd like to marry and he said, "She'd have to laugh a lot because I hate being too serious. And it'd be great if she loved music because then we could play together." And then he just shrugged his shoulders and said, "I don't know, just someone who's fun, pretty, and nice to everyone." I asked him if he thought I was pretty and he said, "Do you even have to ask? You've got to be the most gorgeous girl in all of Gaston." And then he picked me up in a great big hug and carried me up to his car from the edge of the lake where we were sitting. I almost told him right there. I almost said Theo, I love you. But then he set me down by the car and ran back to get all the fishing gear by the water. Theo holds my hand sometimes when we're talking and I can feel all the lines in his fingers loop around his hand. I love holding Theo's hand. It doesn't feel the same as when I hold Grammy or Momma or Gracie's hands. When I hold Theo's hand, I feel like I'm swallowing

some really hot macaroni and cheese and I feel it warming up my throat all the way down my chest and my stomach. And I feel like everything I ever do is even better because there's someone I really really love who will hold my hand to let me know it's okay. So that means I don't ever have to be by myself if someone's holding my hand.

Dr. Lennon's door opens and I see Momma's arm holding the door, but then she stops and keeps talking to Dr. Lennon. I hear Momma's voice, even though she's talking quietly.

"What? No, it would kill her."

I lean forward in my chair, staring at Momma's arm through the doorway. Kill who? Me? Alice? I cup my hands around my ears and lean farther forward.

"You'll have to tell her sooner or later, Annie."

Tell who? Who's getting killed? Is Dr. Lennon talking about me? What would kill me?

Dr. Lennon clears his throat. He'd been talking but I wasn't paying attention. "... too much for her. We can't take any chances."

"I know."

I sit back in my chair, looking down at my belly. Too much for me. Is having you too much for me, Alice? What's wrong with me? I know my heart is weak, but I'm taking pills.

Does that matter? Do my pills help at all? Maybe my heart is too weak to have you, Alice. It's too much for me. That's what they're saying. I put my hand to my chest, feeling the small pulse under my skin. It feels light in my fingers, like a soft-skinned drum.

Why do I need my heart strong to have you, Alice? You're in my stomach, not my chest. But I know that you eat the food I eat. Maybe our hearts are the same, too. Maybe only one of our hearts can be okay if it's too much for me.

So if my heart's not strong enough, having you would be too much for me. It might kill me.

One time when I was a lot younger, I was playing at recess and I fell off the jungle gym because my heart was so tired from running. I couldn't breathe very well and I was scared. They took me into the nurse's room and my counselor came in. Her name was Miss Pincock and she talked to me everyday at the end of school and helped me learn things better. I liked Miss Pincock. She had a pet skunk named Flower, just like in *Bambi*. And all his stinky spray was removed so Flower didn't smell bad. She brought Flower to work once and I got to play with him in her office. He was so soft, and he let me hold him and put my nose into his black and white fur.

Well, Miss Pincock came in and talked to me about running around at recess. She said I had to be careful because my heart wasn't very good. I started to cry because I didn't like being in trouble and I didn't like thinking about my heart and so Miss Pincock pulled out her harmonica, because she always kept a harmonica in her pocket, and she let me play it. I played until my dad came to get me and take me home. We stopped by the store first and he said I could pick out any treat I wanted, so I picked chocolate ice cream and he got cherry ice cream and we came home and he scooped us both a bowl of chocolate and cherry ice cream.

Dad also got me a harmonica from the store, except it wasn't metal like Miss Pincock's. It was plastic. But I still played it all the time and when I got back to school, I pulled out my harmonica to show Miss Pincock and she smiled and pulled out hers and she said, "Let's play something." We both played Danny Boy in her office and I was glad that playing music was so easy for me.



I was sad when I found out Dad's heart stopped because it was scared of a firecracker. I was scared to go around firecrackers for a while because I didn't want my heart to get scared and stop, too. At my dad's funeral, I had my harmonica with me and I asked Momma if I could leave it with Dad and she said that'd be very nice. I put my harmonica on his coffin before they buried him. Momma said that now Dad would be with me whenever I played music because he could play along, too. I tried to listen when I played music, but I didn't hear anything else. Momma said it was true, I just couldn't hear it.

What else can I do to make my heart stronger? I'm taking pills, I'm trying not to run around too much. What else can I do, Alice? What else makes my heart stronger? What's something I haven't thought of? What's even stronger than pills and not running too much?

What about love? Love is stronger than pills. I know that. It's stronger than firecrackers, too. Maybe Theo can make my heart stronger. Of course! Theo makes my heart feel big in my chest and makes me feel strong and happy. Ooh! This is great! This is wonderful! Everything will be fine. I'll work hard to make my heart strong, Alice. I'll work so so hard so that nothing will be too much for me and I'll have you and we'll be okay.

## THE JOCELYN CHAPTER

After my doctor's appointment we drive to the Iversens' again. I don't know whether I'm excited or scared. I feel like I'm really close to marrying Theo, so maybe I won't need to see the Iversens anymore, but Momma wants me to keep seeing them, so I have to go. The Iversens are nice, though. They make me feel like I belong in their home all the time, so I bet Alice would feel good there too if she couldn't live with me. I just don't want you to leave me, Alice. If I get married soon, maybe my heart will be strong enough to have you, and to keep you.

It's raining hard outside and I'm a little scared when we drive over the bridge again to get across the river to the Iversens' house, but I remember last time the bridge didn't even shake when we drove over it, so we should be fine, even if the road is wet. Momma knows how to drive in the rain. When we pull up in front of the Iversens' blue townhouse, I'm excited. I take my guitar out of the backseat because today me and Mr. and Mrs. Iversen are going to play some music together!

Mrs. Iversen opens the door and this time she's wearing a brown dress that has pink daisies all over it. I tell her I love all the flowers on her dress and she says thank you and tells me that my yellow dress is very beautiful and that she likes all the bees buzzing around on it. Mr. Iversen comes in, but he's not wearing a suit this time so he doesn't look as much like Professor Plum. Instead he's got flip flops and shorts with a t-shirt that has a bike on it. Mr. Iversen says, "Go ahead and put your guitar down," and he asks if we'd like anything to drink. Momma says no, thank you, and so we all sit down together on the couches. Mrs. Iversen says that their lawyer will call any minute and that they can get the forms all figured out if everything's ready to go. I

look at all the papers on the table and see tons of little writing and yellow and pink copies underneath some of the papers.

“Would you like to go out side with Jason, Rae?” Mrs. Iversen asks. “He’s painting right now on the patio.”

“Painting?” Momma asks.

Mrs. Iversen says that Jason loves to paint and is actually really good. I’d like to see what his painting looks like so I ask Momma if I can go outside and she says That’s probably a good idea. So I go out in the back where a small yard faces the Willamette River. It’s still raining but Jason’s bundled in several coats and standing under a covered patio, in front of a canvas and an easel and painting a beautiful picture of the Burnside Bridge. Except the river water’s not blue or even greenish-blue. It’s bright orange, and the sky is dark purple and raining lime green drops into the river. I tell Jason that the painting is very beautiful but I don’t know why the colors are so bright, and Jason tells me he thinks it looks better that way. I think so, too. The Willamette River even more if it was orange.

“Mom says you were in a fire,” Jason says. His face has streaks of black and purple and orange along his chin. I nod my head and say yep, and Jason stares at his paintbrush, thumbing through the tip of it. He doesn’t look up, but he says, “Did you get hurt?” I tell him I just hit my head when I fell, but I didn’t get burned or anything, which is good because it was a pretty big fire and I was really scared.

Jason looks up at me and his eyes are big. “Is Jocelyn all right?” he asks. I don’t know who Jocelyn is so I tell him that.

“Jocelyn’s your baby,” Jason says. “That’s what Mom and Dad want to name her.”

I say that I already named the baby Alice, and Jason says, “You can’t name her Alice. That’s my mom’s name and you can’t name a girl baby after the mom. Only boys do that.”

I don’t know what to say because I’m going to be the mom if everything works out, and I want to name the baby Alice. Jason flicks through the brush again and says he didn’t like the name at first either, but now he thinks it’s all right.

Jocelyn? Jocelyn. Jocelyn Jocelyn Jocelyn Jocelyn. I can’t name the baby Jocelyn. I want to name her Alice. But Jason’s turned around again and is painting the orange water.

Alice, do you like the name Jocelyn? Could you get used to that? I remember one of my teachers, Mrs. Philpot, had a baby that she named Jocelyn. I really liked Mrs. Philpot. She had big curly hair and she laughed a lot, but I never saw her baby because she quit teaching once she was too big to come to school anymore. I’ll bet her baby Jocelyn had lots of curly hair and was beautiful. I tell Jason I’ll have to think about this, and Jason looks at me but he doesn’t say anything. The rain hits hard against the roof over us and I jump a little at the rapping of the water.

“You’re very good at painting,” I tell Jason. He turns around, holding the paintbrush out to me and asks me if I want to paint something, so I say okay and he sets his canvas down against his fence and picks up a big piece of paper from a pile in the yard and pins it to the easel. He waves me to the easel and says go ahead.

I dip the paintbrush in water first because Jason says I need to wash it before I put it in another color, and then I dip it in the black paint and draw a big circle. Then I draw a neck and a body and then I get different colors to make a dress and a crown and a big sunflower. Then I dot the paper with little orange tears coming from the girl with the crown. I stand back and smile.

Paint is all over my dress, but I'm not sure how it got there. I look back at the painting and say tada. Jason says he really likes the tears and I tell him it's my favorite story and he says I should tell him the story while he finishes up the bridge picture.

When I finish telling the story, Jason's almost done with his painting. It looks so beautiful and I tell him that. Then Momma comes out from the back door and says, "Okay, Rae, come inside."

All of the papers on the coffee table are in neat piles now when I come back into the living room. I tell Mrs. Iversen that Jason let me paint a picture and she said she'll have to see it before we leave.

I look at both of the Iversens. "Jason told me you want to name the baby Jocelyn."

Mrs. Iversen looks at Mr. Iversen who smiles and clears his throat. "I had a sister named Jocelyn who died when she was sixteen," Mr. Iversen says.

I scrunch my face up because I didn't know Jocelyn was a girl who died and I ask how she died, and Momma says, "Rae, that's not polite," but Mr. Iversen says no, no, that's okay, and he says that she died in a car crash.

Mrs. Iversen puts a hand on Mr. Iversen's knee and says, "It was snowy and the roads were slick and she couldn't stop all the way at an intersection." Momma shakes her head and says she's so sorry.

Mr. Iversen claps his hands together. "It's really okay," he says. "We just thought about it the other day." Then Mr. Iversen looks at me and says, "That is, if it's all right with you."

Mrs. Iversen looks at me too and so does Momma. I bite my lip and run my thumbs over each other, feeling the tops of my nails. Alice, I know I've been calling you Alice for a long time

and I really like your name, but Jocelyn's a pretty name, too. And Mr. Iversen's sister died, so it might be more special if your name was Jocelyn. Are you fine with that? I put my hands on my stomach. Alice! Is that you kicking against my hand? I swear I feel a kick right against my hand! I smile really big and feel a kick again. I think that means it's okay. I look back at Mr. Iversen and say the baby really likes the name Jocelyn.

Mrs. Iversen puts her hands to her mouth and her eyes get all shiny again like the last time I came here. "Is she kicking?" she asks, and I say that she is and Mrs. Iversen asks if she can feel the stomach.

I wave Mrs. Iversen over. "Come here, she's kicking really hard." Mrs. Iversen jumps off the couch and kneels next to my feet. She slowly puts her hand where my hand is, and I take my hand away so she can feel it better. I look at Mrs. Iversen's face and she's smiling really big and a tear rolls all the way down her cheek but she doesn't move. I don't think she knows that she's crying because she's smiling so much. The baby kicks again and Mrs. Iversen gasps and looks back at Mr. Iversen who's folding his arms and smiling, too. I smile as big as I can because I love how happy everyone is right now.

"That's so wonderful," Mrs. Iversen says. She finally wipes her eyes and laughs, backing up to sit on the couch again. I ask if we can play now and Mr. Iversen's eyebrows go up and he says oh, yes, and he gets off the couch and says just a moment, and leaves the room so I go to open my guitar case.

"We really are thrilled to have found you two," Momma says. "I couldn't imagine a better place for the baby."

I bet Momma would think I'm the best place for the baby if I had a husband. I would be the best momma ever if I had a husband. I'll work on that soon. Really really soon.

Mr. Iversen comes back with his cello and sits on the couch again. He looks at Mrs. Iversen and says, "You want to sit at the piano, Alice?" and Mrs. Iversen pats Mr. Iversen's arm and she gets up to go to the piano on the other side of the room. I sit back down with my guitar really excited to play because I've never played with a cello before.

"What songs do you know?" Mr. Iversen asks me, and I say lots. Mr. Iversen laughs and says, "Okay, which one's your favorite?" That's an easy one. Clair de Lune. Mr. Iversen nods and looks at his wife. "Do you know that one, honey?" he asks, and Mrs. Iversen shuffles some papers on her piano and says she actually has it here. Mr. Iversen smiles. "Okay, you start us off, Rae."

As soon as I begin, Mr. Iversen comes in with the low low notes on his cello and swims them through my guitar chords and then Mrs. Iversen fills in with piano. I close my eyes and strum and it almost feels like I can bite into the music, it's so thick around me. And the rain outside slips down the windows with low beats to fill all the spaces in between. I open my mouth and stick my tongue out, just to see if I can feel anything in the air. When I open my eyes, Mrs. Iversen's looking over at me smiling and Mr. Iversen's eyes are closed while he rocks with his bow side to side. The back door opens and Jason runs into the living room and his face has even more paint on it. He opens his mouth like he's about to say something, but then he stops when he sees us all playing and he sits on the hardwood floor by the door and watches us play. When the music swells into little rain drops, I strum through the blips of high notes that sway around all the

pool from the piano. I catch my breath because I almost forget to breathe through all the beautiful sounds around me.

When we finish playing together, I hug Mr. Iversen as tight as I can even though my belly's too big to hug people very tight. I tell him thank you and he pats my back and says, "Same to you, Rae. I can't thank you enough." When I go to the backyard to get my painting, I notice that the rain has stopped and the sun is even peeking through the clouds a little. Momma takes my guitar out to the car. We turn and wave to the Iversens who stand on the porch and wave back.

In the car, I keep smiling because the Iversens are so wonderful. I tell Momma that I really like them and Momma says she does, too. We make our way back over the bridge and I'm not even really scared because I know the bridge is safe. Momma's driving me to Hillsboro to see Theo at the airport. Theo was supposed to take me flying but I'm not supposed to now because I'm so close to having the baby, so he's going to show me the kinds of planes he flies and show me how he flies them, we're just not going to go in the air.

I'm so happy right now. I had so much fun with the Iversens and even though I'm going to try as hard as I can to get a husband before I have the baby, I still want to be friends with the Iversens and I want my baby to get to know them, too. They're such a wonderful mom and dad. I think you'd really like them, Jocelyn. Jocelyn. Jocelyn.



## THE AIRPLANE CHAPTER

Mom stops at the entrance of the airport where Theo's waiting by his car. I'm so excited to get to ride in a plane with Theo! He's told me all about flying and it just seems like so much fun. Momma points at Theo, saying, "And you're sure my daughter won't be up in the air?"

Theo laughs and says, "I promise. We'll just drive around the tarmac a little." So Momma gives me a hug and says to be safe, and I tell her I will. She gets back in the car and waves to both of us and then drives back out toward the highway from where we came.

Theo rubs his hands together and looks at me, smiling from behind his fingers.

"Ready?"

I nod.

Theo nods his head to the side and says let's go. We walk through the gates and into what looks like a giant black pool. There's blacktop everywhere except for a tiny building in the middle where a man walks out of the doors. "Hey, Franz." Theo waves to the man who waves back. The man asks if Theo's going to take me up but Theo says he's just giving a tour.

I look at all the planes and helicopters lined up on the road. They look almost like horses, they're so tall and it almost looks like they're waiting to take off racing each other.

"This one's a King Air C90. These are all Longrangers. And this," Theo stops, "is what I fly. A Cessna 206. We call her the Super Skywagon." The plane almost looks like a face on the front. It has a bar going across the top for the wings and the propellor comes out on a pointed tip so that it looks like a nose, and the whole airplane rests on two wheels that look like stubby feet.

Theo asks me why I'm laughing and I point out all the pieces of the plane's face and he smiles

and says that's why he likes the Skywagon so much. It almost feels like he's riding a cartoon character.

I grab Theo's hand and pull him forward. "Let's turn it on," I say. Theo laughs and says okay, okay. I'm so excited! I've never been in an airplane before. And even if we can't fly, at least Theo can show me what it's like to drive the Super Skywagon. I climb up the steps into Theo's side and scoot over into the other seat and then Theo climbs in after me. There are lots and lots and lots of little dials in front of us. And I make sure not to touch anything as I slide into my seat.. Everything is very tight. My belly barely fits behind the dashboard. Two steering wheels are in the front only they don't look like full wheels because there's no top or bottom to the handles, just the sides. I look at both the steering wheels and feel a little nervous. I ask Theo if I have to fly, but he says no and that he can take care of everything.

He reaches over my belly and takes the seatbelt, chuckling. "This can't be very comfortable," he says, but the seatbelt fits all right around me, I just have to pull at it to give me more slack. Theo clicks the seatbelt in and looks up at me, smiling. I start to feel my heart beating stronger in my chest because Theo's so close and I could kiss him right now if I wanted to. But then Theo moves back to his seat and buckles himself in. Oh, Jocelyn, I'll kiss him. I'll make sure everything works out. I won't let you down.

Theo flips a few switches above and below him and then starts the engine for the plane. Everything shakes and the engine's really loud and I get scared, so I cover my ears and tuck my chin into my chest. Then it gets a little quieter. I open my eyes and see that Theo shut the door.

"Sorry about that," he says, and pats my knee. I take my hands off my ears even though it's still really loud, but it's not as bad anymore and I think I'll be okay.

“Ready?” Theo looks at me. I nod and I feel my cheeks go up my entire face because I can’t stop smiling. I’m in a real plane! And Theo is with me. He puts a headset on and hands me the other headset so that we can talk to each other. Then he speaks into the microphone by his mouth letting whoever’s listening know that we’re moving out. He turns to me and covers the mouthpiece and says, “Don’t worry. I made sure to invite you when no planes were coming in.” Then he looks back at the switches and says, “Okay, thank you” into the microphone. He claps his hands together and says, “Here we go.”

The plane gives a lurch forward and it scares me at first. I grab Theo’s hand and he laughs. “Don’t worry,” he says. “Stella won’t let us down.” I ask him who Stella is and he says that’s what he named the plane, even though it belongs to the school so it’s not really his. He pats the top of the dashboard. “Ol’ Stella always treats me well.” So I lean back in my seat and try to stay calm but I still hold my hands around my belly just to keep Jocelyn safe.

We drive around the blacktop for a little while and soon I don’t get so scared anymore when Theo turns the plane or when he goes faster. Stella quiets down a bit when we get moving around and so I relax and look around out the window. The tall grass in the fields outside the airport is blowing back and forth in the breeze. I almost forget how cold it is outside because I’m so excited to be riding in a plane.

After driving a little longer, Theo turns to me and smiles. “Do you want to get off the ground just a little bit?” His eyes crinkle in the corners. I tell Theo I would LOVE to, but I don’t know if my mom would like that. He waves his hand. “You’ll be safe,” he says.

“Will it hurt my heart?” I ask.

Theo shakes his head. “I won’t take you very high,” he says. “Just around this field and back.” I nod my head and say let’s do it. Theo flips a couple switches in front of him and drives to the very back of the blacktop. Then he moves forward and gets faster and faster and I’m a little nervous but I’m excited too because I’ve never flown in a plane before.

When the noise gets almost too loud so that I have to plug my ears again, Theo pulls up on the steering wheel and the front of the plane lifts up. My stomach feels like it’s dropped into the seat and I grab under my belly and hold it up. I hope you’re okay, Jocelyn. I think you are. The rumbling underneath us stops. I look out the window and see the ground a little bit below us. We’re flying. We’re flying! I laugh and feel tears in my eyes. I don’t know why I’m crying, but I look at Theo and bunch up my fists and squeal. WE’RE FLYING! Theo laughs, looking at me and then back out the window and then at me again. He turns the steering wheel a little and the whole plane turns to the left. I gasp and grab the sides of my seat, but Theo takes my hand and tells me it’s okay. We’re just turning out onto the field.

The evergreens don’t look that big anymore now that we’re up in the air. I almost have to look down to see the horizon of the sky. I feel like a big balloon. I clap my hands and rub my stomach. I wish you could see this, Jocelyn. It’s really amazing to see everything big around me look just my size.

“I wonder if this is what the world looks like to God,” I say.

Theo looks at me and nods, and then he says, “Except he can also see what little ants are doing down there in the dirt.” Theo scratches his chin. “He really can see everything as clearly as he wants to.” I think for a moment without talking. God can see everything. He can see me in the plane and he can see all the bugs in the field that I can’t see. That’s really wonderful.

Theo arches his back and stretches his stomach out in his seat and then sits back normally. “I like to fly around sometimes just to clear my head,” he says. “All my problems look pretty small from up here.”

I look at Theo and shake my head. “You have problems?” I ask.

Theo nods quickly up and down. He smiles all to one side of his face. “Everybody has problems, Rae. The trick is how you deal with them.”

I look down at my belly, thinking. Then I say into the mouthpiece that I don’t think I have any problems, and Theo laughs. “No, you do.” Theo shakes his head. “You’re just a master at handling them.” I straighten up because I’ve never thought of myself as a master at handling problems. I don’t really know what that means, but it seems like a really good thing.

Theo pats my hand. “Ready to go back?”

I look out the window one more time from up here where everything seems free and happy. I turn back to Theo and nod and he nods back and says okay. We turn around and it scares me a little bit, but I take a deep breath and calm down because Theo is a good pilot and Stella is a good plane. I watch the trees grow taller and taller until the plane jolts a little bit and all the rumbling starts again. We drive around the blacktop to slow down and then we get to the row of airplanes and helicopters and Theo slowly backs into the open spot like he’s parking a car. He finally stops and turns off the engine and everything gets quiet.

Theo looks at me and holds out his arms. “What’d you think?” he asks. I unbuckle my seatbelt and hop over to Theo’s seat and hug him as tight as I can. I feel his back muscles tighten and he hugs me, too. He pulls me in close and I feel his stomach against mine as he laughs and says, “I guess you liked it.”

I don't let go of Theo for a moment, but I rest my head on his shoulder against his neck. "Thank you," I say, and he rubs his hand along my back and tells me thank you back.

I don't know if Theo can feel my heart against his shoulder, but it hits stronger and stronger against the bones in my chest. My heart really can be strong, Jocelyn. When I'm with Theo, my heart feels stronger than a polar bear. I pull away from Theo just a little bit and look at his face. He's smiling and I love when Theo smiles inside his big beard. His eyes are wide and blue and he stares back at me without even blinking. I move closer and Theo looks behind me out the window and then back at me again. He starts to say something, but I move closer and press my mouth against his. I kiss him. I AM kissing him. My heart beats even harder and faster. I'm kissing Theo right now! Jocelyn, I told you I'd do it. I told you! Theo's breath smells like gum and I close my eyes and take a big breath and feel the back of Theo's head with my hands and then press my lips even harder against his mouth and I know everything's going to be okay.

We're going to get married, Jocelyn. Don't worry, I finally did it! We'll get married and I'll be strong and healthy to have you. You'll get to stay with us, and Theo will take us flying in his airplane all the time so that you can see how small the trees look when you're in the air. And every night he'll come home from work and I can kiss him as many times as I want like right now. I'm so happy, Jocelyn! It's going to be so wonderful.

I hear Theo say something. He backs up and says Rae, and I kiss him again. Then I feel Theo's hands on my shoulders, and he pushes me away.

"Rae, stop."

I open my eyes, smiling, but Theo's not smiling back. He still has wide eyes, but his mouth is pressed together. I feel like all the cold from outside is rushing into me so I almost can't

breathe. I straighten up and ask him, “What does that face mean?” and Theo looks down at the floor.

Goosebumps raise up on my arms. “Did I do something wrong?” I ask.

Theo puts both his hands over his face and takes a big breath. “Ah geez,” he says. “I’m so sorry.” I don’t understand why Theo’s sorry. Does he think it was a bad kiss?

I start to cry because Theo doesn’t look very happy. I put my hand on Theo’s knee and take in all the air I can and then I say, “Theo, I love you.”

From inside his hands, Theo lets out a big sigh that makes his shoulders drop. He’s still covering his face. I wait a moment to see if he’s going to say anything, but he doesn’t, so I wrap my arms around my belly and rock a little back and forth.

“If we got married, Theo, I could keep my baby. I could keep Jocelyn and be the best mom in the whole world because Jocelyn needs a mom *and* a dad.”

Theo takes his hands away from his face and looks at me without turning his head. “I thought her name was Alice,” he says. I say I changed it because Mr. and Mrs. Iversen want to name her Jocelyn and I think she likes that name better. Theo smiles and so I smile. I look down at my belly and then back at Theo.

“You would be the best dad in the whole world,” I say. “You’re so fun and happy and you play the guitar.” Theo laughs when I say that and I relax a little bit more. I take his hand and hold it between both of mine. “Please please marry me, Theo.”

Theo pulls his hand away from mine and holds my shoulders. He looks at me and I see the crinkles on the sides of his eyes again like he’s smiling, but his eyes are wet, too. One tear

falls down his face and disappears into his beard. He takes a breath that sounds all ragged coming in.

“Rae,” he says, and then he swallows. He looks back at me and says, “Rae, I’m so sorry. I should’ve been more careful.” I don’t know what Theo means when he says he should’ve been more careful. He pulls away and puts both his hands together and touches his mouth.

“You’re so wonderful,” Theo says. “But we’re just friends.”

My eyes burn and I have to blink. I feel sick. My throat closes up and I wait a moment before I can breathe. I look down at my belly and think about all the folks in Gaston at church and at the Halloween party.

“Is it because of Jocelyn? Do you think I’m a bad person because I’m pregnant?” I ask.

Theo’s forehead scrunches up and he shakes his head. His voice sounds sticky and it catches in his throat when he says, “No, Rae. You’re not a bad person.” So I ask why he doesn’t want to marry me. He stops and looks down, and then back at me.

“I can’t. Rae, you’re so great, but—” He stops for a second. “Rae, we can’t get married. It wouldn’t be right, because you’re different. You and I are different.”

I shut my eyes tight and rock back and forth again. I thought me and Theo were almost exactly the same. We’re happy and we laugh and we both play music and we love God and always try to be nice to everyone and Theo’s almost as excited to see Jocelyn as I am. We’re perfect for each other.

Theo wipes his nose and stares at the dashboard. “It wouldn’t be right to marry you, Rae.” He looks at me. “Your mind—it’s not like me.”



Grammy says that to me sometimes, like when she said I had to give my baby up. She says I'm not like other people. I'm not normal.

"Is it because of my Williams?" I ask Theo. And he closes his eyes and I see more tears fall into his beard.

"It's not bad that you have it, because you're so good to people."

"But you don't want to marry me." My voice heaves forward and I almost can't stop myself from sobbing.

Theo rubs his face and says shit really quiet, but I can still hear it and I tell him not to say that.

"Rae, come on, let's get you home."

Oh my goodness. I feel so stupid. I put my head in my arms and open my mouth and let all my crying come out. I feel sick. I thought Theo loved me, too. Oh, Jocelyn. Jocelyn, I'm so sorry. I don't know what to do. What will happen to my heart? I can't keep you. You're not my baby, Jocelyn. You have to go to the Iversens because I have Williams. I can't run or drink very much milk and I can't make Theo love me. I can't make Theo think I'm normal. That's why he doesn't want to marry me. And now I can't have you. Oh, Jocelyn! I wish you were here. Can you even get here? Will my heart be strong enough? But even if you do get here, I can't keep you. Ah, I can't keep you.

I rock harder back and forth. My stomach hurts. I don't want to open my eyes. I feel Theo's hands on my back, but he doesn't love me. I cry harder and start to shake. I don't know what to do, Jocelyn!

Theo holds me by the shoulders. I hear him say Rae, but I don't want to talk to Theo anymore. I don't want to talk to Theo anymore. Oh, please, God. Why doesn't Theo like me? I can't breathe. I don't know how to make it better.

Theo's hands move under my knees. I feel him pull me out of the airplane and carry me down to the ground. I don't move. I don't want to move. I don't want to do anything. I just wish my baby was here and strong and healthy and that I could keep her.

The air stings my face because it's so cold. Oh, I feel so stupid. I kissed Theo and he doesn't even like me. He doesn't want to kiss me. He doesn't want to marry me and Jocelyn might not make it but I won't be able to keep her!

Theo carries me to his car and then I feel the seat under me. I can't stop shaking. I don't want to open my eyes. I almost throw up but I swallow before it leaves my mouth and my throat starts to burn. I feel the car start. Theo says ah geez over and over again.

Baby Jocelyn, I'm sorry I can't be your mom. I'm sorry I can't make Theo love me. I'm sorry my heart isn't very strong. I'm sorry I can't be like everyone else. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

## THE PAPER GIRL AND CARDBOARD BOY

Once upon a time, there was a girl nobody liked. She was made of paper. The paper girl tried to make friends, but whenever they'd play outside, the paper girl would blow away in the wind because she was so flimsy and thin and the other kids didn't like playing with her because they wanted to have friends who wouldn't fly away in the middle of playing jump rope. The paper girl liked to cook, but if she got too close to the stove, she would burn a hole in her arm and she had to put it out quick and then glue a new patch of paper onto the burnt hole, so the paper girl was not just made of paper, but paper patches and she looked like a mismatched paper quilt.

The paper girl would come home from school every day and cry on her bed because she had no friends and no one at school wanted to sit by her, but she couldn't let her tears touch her face because when her paper face got wet, it was hard to keep her head up straight and sometimes a new hole would rip open and she'd have to patch up her face, too.

One day, the paper girl was walking home, feeling sad because her teacher accidentally poked a hole in her stomach with a pencil and everybody laughed at her. The paper girl kicked some rocks but her feet only folded against the rocks and so she felt even worse. Then, a huge wind started blowing and picked the paper girl up into the air. She screamed because this wind was stronger than any wind she'd ever flown in before and she didn't know if she would land in one piece when the wind stopped. All the leaves from the ground whipped around her and one even ripped her hand in half. The paper girl covered her eyes and called for help and suddenly, she felt a hand hold onto her foot and pull her down.

The paper girl opened her eyes and stared straight into a cardboard face. She gasped. She'd never seen anyone with a cardboard face before. But this person didn't just have a cardboard face—his whole body was made entirely of cardboard.

“Hi,” said the cardboard person. “I’m the cardboard boy.” He stuck out his cardboard hand. The paper girl took it and smiled.

“I’m the paper girl,” She said. And she thanked the cardboard boy for saving her from that awful windstorm.

The cardboard boy waved his hand and said, “It was nothing. I heard you calling for help and I ran as fast as I could to your voice. You should be more careful.”

The paper girl was so grateful for the cardboard boy's help that she invited him over for dinner. The paper girl's parents were thrilled to have a friend of their daughter's over because the paper girl never brought people home for dinner. They cooked the best food they had for the cardboard boy and the paper girl was very happy to have made a real friend.

And from then on, the paper girl and the cardboard boy saw each other everyday. The cardboard boy held the paper girl's hand when big windstorms came around so she didn't fly away, and the paper girl showed the cardboard boy how to patch the holes in his cardboard feet. Soon enough, the paper girl fell in love with the cardboard boy and she knew he loved her, too.

One day, the paper girl and the cardboard boy were rowing on the lake in a very big rowboat so that neither of them got wet and the cardboard boy knelt down on one cardboard knee and told the girl that he loved her. He asked the paper girl if she would be his paper wife and the paper girl jumped into the cardboard boy's arms and said YES!

But the paper girl's arm ripped right in half when she hugged the cardboard boy because she wasn't careful and the arm fell into the water and sunk down to the bottom of the lake. The paper girl was embarrassed, but she laughed and shrugged because there was nothing she could do out on the lake but make the best with one arm until she went home and glued on a new arm. But the cardboard boy didn't realize how fragile the paper girl really was and he got scared and said, "Maybe we shouldn't get married."

And the cardboard boy jumped into the lake and swam to shore and even though the water made him flimsy and weak, he ran away from the lake crying and saying I'm sorry behind him.

And the paper girl sat in the boat by herself until she blew away in the wind.

THE END

## THE DAY AFTER THE AIRPLANE CHAPTER

I'm in bed right now even though it's the afternoon. I don't want to see Momma and Grammy because then I have to talk about my heart and my baby and giving my baby up to the Iversens. Momma keeps asking how I'm doing, though, and I put my head under my blankets and tell her I'm asleep. I hear Grammy talking outside my door to Momma and she says, "I don't know what happened, but I'll kill that kid." I hope she's not talking about Theo. I don't want Grammy to kill Theo. Momma tells Grammy that she hopes it didn't happen again, but I don't know what she means.

I have to get out of bed soon though because I have a doctor's appointment and Momma says I have to go to those because they need to check if the baby's still okay. I want to make sure you're okay, Jocelyn, but I don't want to go to the doctor. My head hurts because I've been crying in my bed since I got home yesterday. I don't remember leaving Theo's car, but I woke up in my bed and my head hurt really bad, and then I remembered Theo doesn't love me and it's because of my Williams and my chest hurt and I started crying again.

Now, my eyes burn when I blink and I think I cried out all the water I have in my body. No more tears come out of my eyes now, but I still cry. Or maybe if I don't have any tears, I'm just coughing. My stomach's so big, I don't know how to lay on my bed. I don't like sleeping on my back and I can't sleep on my stomach. I woke up in the middle of the night so angry because my whole body hurt and I hate being angry because it makes everyone sad and I get tired and nothing ever gets better until people are happy again. But I don't know how to be happy again. I feel so stupid because I can't change my Williams, even if I try really really hard. I can't make myself stronger unless people like me. And I can't make people like me if they don't like my

Williams. I don't know how many people don't like my Williams, but if Theo doesn't like it, I don't think a lot of people like it.

Grammy comes into my room, knocking on the door while she opens it. "Don't you close your eyes, Rae," she says. "I know you're not asleep." So I leave my eyes open, but I don't look at her. She sits on my bed and I hear her grunt a little. She puts a hand on the blanket over my leg and rubs up and down my ankle, humming real soft. I know the song, it's a really good song, but I don't hum with her.

"You gotta go soon," Grammy says. She pats my foot, but I don't move. Grammy leans forward and brushes the hair off my forehead and says it'll be all right. I look at her and I say I really am in a heap of shit.

Grammy laughs deep in her chest. "Ah Rae, I mean it," she says. "It'll be all right." Then she takes her glasses off and wipes them on her blouse. The Grammy looks at me over her glasses frames and frowns. I don't know why she's frowning, especially when she was just laughing. She puts her glasses back on and looks at me for a second. I ask her what, and she shakes her head. But I ask her again, so she says to me, "You didn't have sex with Theo did you?"

It almost feels like a pile of really hot rocks are bubbling around in my stomach every time I think about Theo. I feel my throat close up a little and if I had more tears in my eyes, I'm sure they'd come out, but I shake my head and swallow so my throat opens back up and I tell Grammy no, Theo doesn't even like me.

Grammy opens her mouth to talk but then Momma comes in and knocks on the door while she's opening it and says we have to go.

Grammy closes her mouth and straightens out my blankets and then says, “I want to talk to you about this when you get back.” But I don’t really want to talk to Grammy about it. Momma pulls the blankets off my bed and Grammy gets up and helps Momma get me out of bed.

I fell asleep yesterday in my yellow bumblebee dress and there’s still paint on it from when I painted a picture of the girl with orange juice tears in the Iversens’ backyard. I feel like there’s orange juice in my eyes right now because every time I blink, it hurts. I never knew you could run out of tears. Maybe the girl with orange juice tears would’ve stopped crying on her own because all your tears go away if you cry too much. I’ve been telling it all wrong this whole time.

“Why don’t you put on your green jumper, honey?” Momma holds up my new maternity jumper that Grammy got for me. It has frogs and lots of leaves all around the top and it’s very pretty. I take off my dress and change my underwear and then put the jumper on. Grammy pulls down on the bottom and then says I look so pretty.

Momma says let’s go, and we get into the car and drive in the rain all the way out to Hillsboro to see Dr. Lennon. In the car, Momma tells me all about what the baby’s doing right now. She says that Jocelyn can see light through my belly, and she can hear better, too.

“In fact,” Momma says, “I’ll bet if you were to sing to her, she’d get really excited.”

I think for a second. Can you hear me, Jocelyn? I didn’t know you could hear me. I bend down to look closer at my belly.

“Try it, Rae. Sing her something.”



I put my hands on my belly. The rain hits the windshield in little taps. I don't know if Jocelyn can hear me over the rain, but Momma says of course she can.

Oh, where have you been, my blue-eyed son? And where have you been, my darling young one? I've stumbled on the side of twelve misty mountains, I've walked and I've crawled on six crooked highways.

Jocelyn starts kicking inside my belly like crazy. It's like she's dancing and laughing right there in front of me. I stop and gasp and Momma says keep singing, so I do and she sings with me. I bend closer until I can't bend over anymore and sing closer to my belly. Jocelyn keeps moving and it makes me laugh.

I've stepped in the middle of seven sad forests, I've been out in front of a dozen dead oceans, I've been ten thousand miles in the mouth of a graveyard. And it's a hard, it's a hard, it's a hard, and it's a hard, it's a hard rain's a-gonna fall.

When I finish, I think about Jocelyn dancing in my belly and I start to cry. And this time there are tears in my eyes so I know it's real crying.

Momma rubs my shoulder. "Baby, what's the matter?" I tell her I really wanted to be a mom and now I have to give my baby away.

"I'm not strong enough to have a baby," I say.

Momma shakes her head. "We've been taking those pills, right? Everything should be fine."

But I know it won't be. My heart's not strong enough without Theo. Even without Theo, my heart might be stronger if I knew I could keep Jocelyn for myself. But I can't even do that.

"I'd be a good mom, wouldn't I?" I ask.

“Oh, baby,” Momma clicks her tongue. “You like the Iversens, don’t you?”

I say that I do. And I really do. I love the Iversens. Mr. Iversen is so smart and Mrs. Iversen is so nice, but I thought Theo and me could keep Jocelyn and she’d have a mom and a dad and then I could keep her for myself.

Momma doesn’t say anything for a second. Then she looks at me and says, “What?” But then she bends her head to the side and says, “Ah, Rae baby. Oh, no.” And she looks at me and then back at the road and bites her lip, saying, “No, no, no. That’s not what I meant.”

I cry harder and cover my eyes, and Jocelyn stops kicking and dancing in my belly. I tell Momma that Theo doesn’t even like me anyway, but I don’t know if she can hear me because I’m crying so much. I hate crying. I don’t want to cry anymore. My head hurts and my face feels as thin as paper.

Momma takes my hand and says shh, shh, shh. She parks the car in front of the doctor’s office and when I get out of my door, she comes around the side and gives me a hug, even though it’s raining hard. I can’t hug Momma very tight, but I try anyway.

“I’m so sorry, baby,” Momma says. “This is my fault. I’m sorry.”

I don’t know why Momma thinks Theo not liking me is all her fault, but I don’t want Momma blaming herself. I tell her not to be sad and she pulls away from me and I see rain on her face, but it looks like there’s tears in her eyes, too. I ask, “Are you crying?” and Momma looks down and wipes her eyes and looks back at me. Momma never cries. I feel awful that Momma’s so sad. I wipe the water from off her cheeks and the tears and the rain feel warm and cold as they slide down my fingers.

“Don’t cry, Momma.”

Momma gives me another hug and whispers in my ear, “How about we eat macaroni and cheese with shell pasta when we get home?” and that makes me a little happier because I love macaroni and cheese and I really love it with shell pasta. Momma takes my hand and squeezes it and I squeeze hers back and then we walk into the doctor’s office.

When we get inside, everyone looks at us without waving or smiling or saying hello and then they look back at their magazines. I sit down and Momma goes to the front desk to tell them that we’re here for my appointment and then she comes and sits by me and shows me pictures of movie stars from the magazine she picked up next to her. We look through it until Julia, the nurse I’ve seen here before, comes out and calls my name. Momma and I go with Julia through the hallway and into a small room with pictures of babies and pregnant ladies on the wall. Julia looks at both of us and asks is everything okay, but Momma says yes, we’re fine, and Julia says okay and tells me I need to change into the hospital gown before she comes back. I’ve been going to the doctor’s a lot and nothing scary happens. But I’m afraid of what the doctor’s going to say about my heart and about my baby.

After they check everything and make sure the baby’s healthy and everything’s normal, I change back into my jumper and Dr. Lennon comes in and talks to Momma and me about what they have to do for me to have the baby.

“We have to take all the precautions we can for your heart, Rae,” Dr. Lennon says. Then he explains that he wants to take Jocelyn out of my stomach, not my private parts, because that will be better for my heart. I’m a little scared about them cutting my stomach open and I make sure to tell Dr. Lennon I don’t want my guts to spill out like Gracie said.

Dr. Lennon laughs. “Don’t worry about that,” he says. “Everything will be okay if we’re prepared.”

Oh, that is VERY good news! Dr. Lennon looks very calm, so I make myself calm down, too. Oh, Jocelyn, I’m so so glad we’re preparing now. If we’re prepared, then they can make my heart strong enough to have you, Jocelyn! I want you to be okay.

I start to cry a little more and Dr. Lennon looks at me and hands me a tissue. I just know that I won’t get to keep her when she gets here. Momma holds my hand and tells Dr. Lennon that we have to get home because tonight we’re eating macaroni and cheese with shell pasta. Dr. Lennon says that sounds delicious, and Momma puts one arm around me and with her other arm she shakes Dr. Lennon’s hand and says goodbye.

All the way home I don’t talk at all. I just hum to myself with my head against the cold window, feeling all the wetness from the cold and rain outside.

Where hunger is ugly, where the souls are forgotten, where black is the color, where none is the number, and I’ll tell it and speak it and think it and breathe it, and reflect from the mountain so all souls can see it, and I’ll stand on the ocean until I start sinking, but I’ll know my song well before I start singing. And it’s a hard, it’s a hard, it’s a hard, and it’s a hard, it’s a hard rain’s a-gonna fall.

And in my belly, I can feel Jocelyn start to dance a little bit.

When we get home, I go to my room and get under my covers again. The rain outside hits my window hard like it’s trying to get in. One time Grandpa Bill took me out to Mr. Buckowitz’s pumpkin patch to pick out a pumpkin for Halloween. It started raining REALLY hard and

everyone ran out of the pumpkin patch because all the water kept getting higher and higher. Grandpa put me on his shoulders and ran to the car. We had to drive home very slowly because Grandpa said the water could make the car slide all over the road and that would be dangerous. I remember thinking all the rain was trying to break through the window and get in the car and I got really scared and started to cry. I didn't want the rain to get in the car because it sounded like angry rain. Grandpa told me there's no such thing as angry rain because all rain is falling and they can either fall in peace or be scared to death of hitting the ground. That made me feel a little sorry for the rain that's scared of hitting the ground. So that night I prayed for all the rain to fall in peace and Momma said that's a nice thing to pray for. Sometimes I pray for it still, even though rain doesn't have a brain or heart or anything to make it afraid.

I wish you could've met my grandpa, Jocelyn. He barely talked at all to anyone outside of the house, but he always smiled and laughed and made people feel good. Then, when we'd come home, he'd tell all kinds of stories that made me and Gracie laugh harder than anything. Whenever I'd get sad and cry about something, he'd take me on the porch and sit me on his lap and he'd tell me a story that made me feel all better, and then he'd tickle me and I wouldn't cry anymore. Grandpa would probably tell me a good story right now. I can't think of any new ones on my own.

Someone knocks on my door and when it opens I see it's Gracie. She smiles like she's been caught doing something bad. All of Gracie's teeth have come in this year and she has the most beautiful smile now. And her hair's so long, she has to put it up in a ponytail otherwise it gets caught in stuff and hurts her head.

“Hey,” Gracie says. I say hey back. She comes and sits facing me on my bed and crosses her legs. She doesn’t say anything so I ask if Momma sent her up to tell me dinner’s ready, but she shakes her head. For a while, she just looks out the window, so I look too and watch all the rain drip down the glass.

“Rae,” Gracie finally says, “you’re never sad.”

I stare at Gracie. I don’t know what to say. I am sad sometimes. I get sad when people at school make fun of Gracie and she gets upset or when people at church make Momma mad because they don’t like that I’m pregnant or when Grammy yells at Robby Sandberg.

“But you never get sad for yourself,” Gracie says. I don’t really know what she means. She scoots closer and asks if something’s wrong with the baby, and I say that if everything’s prepared, Jocelyn should be very healthy. Dr. Lennon is a good doctor and he knows what to do to keep me and Jocelyn strong and everything should be fine when she gets here. Then I start to cry again.

“I can’t keep her because I have Williams,” I say, but my voice feels like jelly and I have to swallow. Then I think about Theo and all those tears falling into his beard and how soft his lips were when I kissed him. I cover my face and my glasses and say I kissed Theo but then he pushed me away and told me to stop because he doesn’t love me because I have Williams. I open my hands and look over my smudged glasses at Gracie, but she’s not looking at me. She’s staring at the blankets and pulling on the ties of yarn on my covers. I look back at all the rain outside and close my eyes.

“If he loved me, we could’ve gotten married and then I’d be strong enough on my own to have Jocelyn and I’d be able to keep her and be a mom,” I say. My tears drop off my chin and hit

my arms in little warm dots. “But I’m not normal,” I say to Gracie. I look at her, but all the tears in my eyes make her face look blurry. I blink and feel all the warm leave my eyes and run down my face and off my chin and onto my arms again. Gracie looks up at me.

“I’m not normal and strong and so Theo doesn’t love me. I don’t think anyone will.” I take a deep breath and close my eyes. “I’ll never be a mom.”

My stomach hurts and I feel sick. I’ve never said that before, but I think it’s true. I’ll never have babies that I can keep because no one will marry me because I’m not normal.

Gracie pulls her hair over her shoulder and runs her fingers through it. Then she drops her hair and looks back at me. She says, “Rae, nobody’s normal.” I don’t know what she means when she says that. Grammy and Momma and Daphne and Theo are normal.

“Rae,” Gracie says, holding my hands, “Grammy’s mean to everyone, Momma doesn’t have any husband, and Daphne’s a stupid floozy.” Gracie shouldn’t call Daphne a floozy, but I don’t say anything and Gracie stops for a second, “And Theo....” She stares at the ceiling. “Theo’s got a beard.” I laugh hard into my blanket. It’s true. I don’t know any boy who has a big beard except Theo.

“Rae.” Gracie squeezes my hands between both of hers. “All my friends at school make fun of me for all of this except Jordan Fisher.”

Jordan Fisher’s lived across the street from us since he was born. I remember seeing him crawling around his front yard when he was just a baby and Momma was still pregnant with Gracie.

Then Gracie pulls on my arm. “Jordan told everyone at school to shove off because you’re the nicest girl he knows. And he’s one of my only friends who actually knows you.”

Gracie's face almost looks mad. I ask her what she means and why she looks angry, but then her eyebrows go up like she's surprised and she says, "Rae, anyone who actually knows you knows that you're the nicest girl in the world." Then Gracie shrugs and she says, "You make friends with enough people and why do you need your own baby anymore? You have everyone's babies to play with."

I do love playing with other people's babies. At church everyone has their babies with them and I love holding them and bouncing them and making faces so they laugh. Sometimes I get to help take care of all the babies in the nursery downstairs and I LOVE all the babies in there. And then all the mommies and daddies come and get them when church is over, but I get to see them again the next week. The daddies are so sweet when they come and get their babies. They pick them up and babies always giggle when they see their daddies.

"But what if I never find a husband?" I ask, and I think about Theo playing with a baby and that makes me sad because I know Theo would be such a good daddy, but he won't be married to me.

Gracie clicks her tongue and thinks for a second. "Do you want to have sex with him?"

I tell her no because it doesn't feel very good.

Then Gracie throws her hands in the air and says, "Then you don't even need a husband. You and Theo play together all the time and he's not your husband. What would change if you got married?"

I don't know what would change. We would live together, and it'd be wonderful to see Theo all the time.



“You see him all the time anyway,” Gracie says, and that’s true. After thinking hard about it, I really don’t know what would be any different about having a husband except that I could keep my baby and be a mom.

“We’re not Grammy’s kids,” Gracie says, “but she kind of acts like our mom.” I tell Gracie she’s our grammy and so she’s Momma’s mom, but Gracie says that doesn’t matter. “If I have kids,” she says, “you can be their momma, too.” I ask her if she really means that and she says, “Duh. You’ll probably be a lot better at it than me.” And Gracie laughs and I laugh because Gracie thinks I can be a good mom. And maybe Theo doesn’t want to marry me, but he wants to see me a lot. Theo’s still my best friend. Even if we’re not married.

“I hope Theo still wants to be my best friend,” I say to Gracie. He was so sad yesterday.

Gracie rubs my shoulder. “Anyone who knows you as good as Theo would want to be your best friend.” Then Gracie smiles and says, “You’re *my* best friend, Rae.” And I feel so good and my stomach doesn’t feel as sick anymore because Gracie’s so nice and she’s my best friend, too. I give her a hug and tell her that and she rubs my back.

“I just want you to be happy, Rae.”

I smile. I’m happy Gracie’s my sister, and I think I feel her smile on my shoulder, too. Then Momma comes in and tells us the macaroni and cheese is ready and I can’t wait to eat some because macaroni and cheese is my favorite, especially with the shell pasta.

## THE NURSERY CHAPTER

Dear Jocelyn, Dr. Lennon told me that in two weeks I'm going to come in to have a C-section and that if I do everything he says, then I'll be fine and you'll be healthy, too. I can't eat any food the day before, so I'm going to be pretty hungry, but Momma says I won't think about it much when I'm having you. My nurse Julia also helped me learn how to breastfeed at my last appointment. I'm a little scared to do that because there are a lot of reasons why it doesn't work for some moms and Momma said it feels weird, but you get used to it. And anyway, I'll only breastfeed for a little bit and then I have to give you to the Iversens, Jocelyn. It's all coming up real fast now, and I'm a little scared that something will go wrong. Dr. Lennon says that they're prepared for everything so I don't have to worry, but I still pray you get here safe, Jocelyn.

Today's the last day I'm going to see the Iversens before I have the baby because Momma wanted to go over all the last forms and birth certificate and everything else they need to finish before the baby gets here. I asked Momma if I can still see Jocelyn after she gets adopted and Momma said that's up to me, but I should probably see if the Iversens are okay with that because when I give her away, she'll be their baby, not mine.

Jocelyn, I feel like you'll always be mine. At least a little bit. So it's hard to understand what Momma means when she says that. I'm a little scared to go over to the Iversens, but Momma says everything's gonna be fine.

We drive all the way out to Portland and I can see all the Christmas lights on the streets when we cross the bridge. It hasn't snowed at all, but it's really cold today, so I hope it'll snow soon. Momma wants me to help pick out a present for Gracie after we see the Iversens, so we're going to Pioneer Square afterwards. I've never been to Pioneer Square so I'm excited to go.

When we pull up to the blue townhouse, I feel a little sick and I tell Momma I'm scared to go in.

"Don't be silly," Momma says. "You know Mr. and Mrs. Iversen." I do know Mr. and Mrs. Iversen. I hope they're nice when I ask about seeing Jocelyn. I don't know what I'd do if I couldn't see her while she's growing up.

Momma knocks on the door and then breathes into her hands, rubbing them together. The rain is light today and it feels like a sprinkler blowing at our backs. It's not hard and heavy like some storms, but Grammy says this kind of rain lasts for months if you're not paying attention.

Mrs. Iversen opens the door and gives both of us hugs, telling us to come in and dry off. Today she's wearing a red dress with green clogs. I think clogs are the funnest shoes. I had some clogs when I was younger, but my feet got too big, so I couldn't wear them anymore, but I felt like one of those Russian dolls whenever I wore them and I loved to hear them clop behind me when I walked. Mrs. Iversen leads us into the living room and I see next to the window a big tree with silver and gold balls hanging on the branches and a beautiful angel on the top. I look closer and notice a picture frame made of pretzels and see a picture of Jason in the middle, but Jason looks a little younger in the picture than he is now.

Mrs. Iversen comes up behind me and puts both her hands on my shoulders. "That was Jason's first grade picture," she says. "He made that for us in class and we put it up every year now, even though he gets embarrassed." Mrs. Iversen laughs and I tell her how beautiful her tree is and she says thank you, and we all sit down on the couch.

"Dan will be out in a minute," Mrs. Iversen says. "He's ordering a jogging stroller for me online. He thinks he's being sneaky, but he always forgets to clear the websites after he's visited

them.” Momma and Mrs. Iversen laugh. I like that Mr. Iversen’s buying Mrs. Iversen a stroller for Christmas. I think Mr. Iversen will be a good dad. Then I hear Mr. Iversen humming from down the hall and Mrs. Iversen puts her finger to her lips and says shh. She winks at me, so I press my lips together because I don’t think I’m supposed to tell Mr. Iversen that Mrs. Iversen knows he’s buying her a jogging stroller.

Mr. Iversen comes in and shakes Momma’s hand and then my hand and then he sits on the couch next to Mrs. Iversen. He puts his hand on her knee and looks at my belly.

“You’re getting big, aren’t you?” Mr. Iversen says.

I nod and smile. “I’m supposed to have a C-section soon.”

“That’s why we’re here, I guess,” Momma says. “We’d like you to know that you can come to the hospital to see the baby when she has it.”

Mrs. Iversen puts a hand over her mouth and looks at Mr. Iversen and Mr. Iversen says, “That’s a very noble decision to make, Rae. You’re being very grown up about this.” I wrap my arms around my belly and feel myself start to cry.

Momma puts an arm around my shoulder. “Ask them what you asked me,” Momma whispers to me. I feel a little bit sick because I don’t want Mr. and Mrs. Iversen to get mad at me for wanting to see Jocelyn when she’s growing up and I still wish I could keep her a little bit, but I don’t have anyone else to take care of her with me.

“What do you want to ask, Rae?” Mrs. Iversen looks at me with her eyebrows up a little.

I tell Mrs. Iversen that I don’t want her to get mad. She comes off the couch and kneels next to me and holds my hand.

“We could never get mad at you, Mrs. Iversen says. Her voice catches a little in her throat. “You’ve done so much for us.” Mrs. Iversen’s face looks older than Momma’s, but it looks like she’s smiled a lot more and all the lines on her face when she smiles have stuck into her skin. I suck in all my breath and look at Mrs. Iversen for a moment and then back to the ground.

“Can I still see Jocelyn after you take her?” I say as quiet as I can. I feel Mrs. Iversen squeeze my hand and I look up and she’s smiling.

“We were hoping you would,” she says.

Oh that’s so good! That’s SO SO GOOD. I’m so excited! Jocelyn, Dr. Lennon will keep you healthy and I can see you whenever I want! I can see you get bigger and bring you presents on your birthday and we can still play music together and everything will be so *wonderful!*

I wrap my arms around Mrs. Iversen and hug her and say thank you thank you thank you thank you!

Mrs. Iversen rubs my back. “Rae,” she says, “Thank *you* for making such a sacrifice for us.” And for the first time, Jocelyn, I’m more excited to give you to the Iversens than to keep you for myself because now you can have all of us. You’ll have such a nice family and they’ll love you and be nice to you and make you a good person and then I can see you and play with you all the time. Oh, Jocelyn! This is really perfect.

“We just finished the nursery.” Mrs. Iversen pulls away from me and looks at Momma and me. “Would you like to see it?”

I say I would love to see the nursery, so Mr. and Mrs. Iversen stand up and lead us past the kitchen and up the stairs. I’ve never been upstairs in the Iversens’ house, but in the first room

after we get up the stairs, the walls are covered in murals. On one side is a dandelion and then all the fluffy seeds from the dandelion jump off and as you go down the wall, they turn into people and there's a big sunset behind them and then the people start walking and on the other side of the wall is a whale and it's pulling a big boat full of people and some of them are swimming and some are about to jump off the side and a sun sits up in the corner with sunglasses, drinking a can of pop. There's so much orange and yellow and purple and red all over the walls. It's beautiful!

I tell Mrs. Iversen how pretty the walls are and she smiles. "Jason painted it," she says. "This is his little studio." I drop my mouth because Jason isn't even as old as Gracie and I can't believe he painted such a beautiful room. Mrs. Iversen puts her hands on my shoulders and says, "Wait until you see Jocelyn's room."

We walk down the hall and Mr. Iversen steps in front of us. "I give you, the nursery." Mr. Iversen opens the door and waves for us to step inside.

Oh my GOODNESS, Jocelyn! The room is WONDERFUL! The ceiling is bright blue with clouds and a sun on it and there are birds flying near the window and on the walls are tons of animals in a big jungle. A huge elephant sits on one wall smiling and spraying water on his head with his trunk. By his feet are little peacocks running near a pool of water and when I turn around and look at the wall by the door, I see a tiny piano and a blue ukulele resting against it. I gasp and run to the ukulele and ask if I can play it and Mr. Iversen says of course, and I play You Are My Sunshine while I look at the rest of the room.

"A mandrill!" I point to the monkey that looks like a clown. He's swinging on a vine near the bed and his mouth is open and smiling and he looks like he dipped his face in paint. I love

mandrills! They're my favorite animal. A green, leafy vine hangs from a hook on the ceiling and is tied up near the window where a tree is painted up the side so that the vine looks like it's coming out of the tree. The crib sits on the other side of the window and is made of dark brown wood and the blankets look almost like leaves. A cluster of butterflies hang down from the ceiling above the crib and turn together like a big whirlwind. There are orange butterflies and blue ones with black spots and yellow and white ones, and they all fly in circles. I bend down and look up at the butterflies to see what it would look like from the crib and then I see on the ceiling a bunch of clouds that look like letters, and then I notice that the letters spell the name JOCELYN.

A swingset sits in the other corner of the room and I walk over and push it and it rocks a little back and forth. I turn on the switch that's on the side of the swing and the seat swings to Rockabye Baby, and a rug in the middle of the room circles around itself in rainbow colors like a big rainbow snake coiled up in itself.

I bend over and sit on the rug and look around at the big jungle all around me and I open my arms as big as I can.

"This is PERFECT!"

It really is. It's just what I would want Jocelyn to see when she's playing and sleeping and I rub my belly and say, "Jocelyn, this is your room. You're going to love it so much."

Mrs. Iversen comes and sits next to me and says, "I helped Jason with some of the pictures, but this is mostly him. He came up with it and everything." I shake my head because I can't believe Jason did all of this. He is such a smart little boy and he's not even that old and these pictures are so beautiful.

“I think Jason’s going to be a great big brother,” I say, and Mrs. Iversen says she thinks so, too.

When Momma and I are getting ready to leave, Mr. Iversen hands Momma a piece of paper.

“If anything comes up,” he says, “these are our cell numbers.” And then Mr. Iversen swallows and says, “We really can’t wait.” Momma takes the paper and says thanks and I give Mr. Iversen a big hug.

“I’m glad you’re Jocelyn’s dad,” I say. And my eyes start to burn and I cry a little bit because I think Mr. Iversen is the best dad I could ever pick for Jocelyn and I’m glad he gets to keep her and play music with her and I think everything will be okay.

Mrs. Iversen hugs me too and kisses me on the cheek and says Merry Christmas, and I say Merry Christmas too, and Momma and I run through the rain and get into our car and even though it’s really cold outside, Mr. and Mrs. Iversen stand out on their porch and wave to us while we drive away. I clap my hands and look at Momma and smile.

“Did you see the Mandrill?” I ask, and Momma laughs and says she did and she thinks the nursery is wonderful.

We drive back over the bridge into downtown Portland and I don’t even care about all the water underneath us. Jocelyn gets to sleep in a jungle and she has a swingset and a piano and a ukulele and I can come and see her whenever I want and Mr. Iversen’s buying Mrs. Iversen a jogging stroller because he loves her and he loves Jocelyn and now Jocelyn gets to have me and the best family in the world. You’re going to love it, Jocelyn. I know you will.



## THE BABY CHAPTER

It's almost Christmas, Jocelyn! I got you a pretty blue dress at the store and so when you get here, you'll get to dress up all nice and fancy, and the Iversens will think you're so pretty. I hope you like the dress. Momma helped me pick it out. I wanted to wrap it up like a present, but Momma said you wouldn't be able to open it anyway because you're so little, so it's sitting on my drawers spread out so it doesn't get wrinkled. I have a little blue bow next to it that I can put in your hair. Will you have red hair like me, Jocelyn? I hope you do. And I hope that you smile a lot and I hope you never forget me.

This morning, I feel a little sick and my back is sore, but it doesn't matter because me and Gracie are going to decorate the tree. Grammy always pulls out a white tree every year and puts it up for Christmas. I love it because it looks all snowy and it doesn't snow very much in Gaston, so I like thinking that it's snowing inside on our Christmas tree. You're getting so big, Jocelyn, it's hard to walk around very much, but Gracie said she'll put the lights on so she can walk around and around the tree. I'm just going to put up all the apples and reindeer and Santas we have in the ornament box. Grammy's making apple pie with chocolate chips in it. It's a secret recipe that only Grammy knows how to make, but it's so good! She bakes it every Christmas when we're decorating the tree so when we finish, we can come in the kitchen and have chocolate apple pie.

I get out of bed and look in the mirror by my door. My belly is SO BIG. I lift up my shirt and look at all the lines on my skin. My belly button's pushed out now instead of in. Momma says that happens sometimes when people get pregnant. Closing one eye, I try to see what I look like without my belly, like when it was just me. I can't believe there's so much extra sticking out

of me. I bend backwards a little bit to keep myself from falling forward. A hot pain runs down my lower back like a knife that's been sitting in the fire. I gasp, but then the pain's gone and I just stand for a second with my mouth open.

Gracie opens my door and looks at me. "Rae, what's wrong?"

I pull my shirt down and shake my head a little bit and tell her everything's okay. My back just hurts a little bit. Gracie laughs and says, "Well you're carrying a medicine ball in your gut." I tell her it's not a medicine ball, it's a baby, and she rolls her eyes and says that Grammy set the tree up, so we can start decorating it. I'm so excited because I love Christmas and playing music while we decorate the tree and smell Grammy's chocolate apple pie, and this year I get a baby for Christmas and so it's going to be the best Christmas ever!

We go downstairs and I have to take the stairs real slow because I'm so big. When I get to the bottom of the stairs, another pain goes through my stomach and my back. This time I squeeze my eyes shut and say ow.

Gracie stops and takes my hand. "Come on, Rae. Come on." I open my eyes again and everything's fine and so we go to the tree and open the box of ornaments on the floor. Gracie picks up a small rubber snowman. It's my ornament that I've had ever since I was a baby. Gracie has a small glass bear and it makes a bell sound. She pulls out the bear and says we should put ours on first. I find a branch near the top and stretch to hook the snowman on it. Gracie puts hers near the bottom and then gets the lights out from another box on the floor. She pulls out the giant tangle of wires and light bulbs and she asks me to help her get the knots out. I hold the lights at the very end while Gracie pulls and unties all the knots. She wraps them around the tree and I bend down and try to get a handful of ornaments. It's really hard to bend down right now

because my belly gets in the way of my knees. I swing my arms in front of me and try to grab something, but I miss. I swing again, but I miss. Gracie looks at me and laughs. She bends down and takes a few ornaments out and hands them to me and I tell her thank you.

She shakes her head. “It’s a good thing you’re not huge all the time. I’d have to do everything for you.”

Grammy turns on the radio from the kitchen and turns it up so we can hear it in the living room. They’re playing Someday at Christmas. I love that song. Stevie Wonder can make his voice sound like its dance through the air and it feels like he’s flying. I sing along while I put ornaments on different branches. Gracie tells me to spread them out more, so I move a couple of them to other places on the tree.

I bend over to reach the box again, but this time I crouch more so I’m closer to the ornaments. Then it feels like a crack in my skin rips through my belly and into my back. I fall back on my bottom and hit the floor, trying to get as much air as I can into my lungs. My eyes water because it hurts a lot, but then it goes again and I just feel a little shaky.

Gracie stops draping lights on the tree and bends down next to me. “Rae,” she says, “are you okay?”

I swallow and nod. I tell her my back and my belly hurt a lot, but it’s gone now.

Gracie makes her eyes smaller. “Are you having your baby?”

I tell her I’m not, because Dr. Lennon’s going to get the baby next week. Everything’s all prepared for next week so Jocelyn’s not supposed to come yet. I’m not having the baby today. Gracie bites the inside of her cheek and her eyebrows are all the way up. I tell her I don’t know why she’s making that face and she lowers her eyebrows and says, “I just don’t know if you’re

right,” but I tell her I know it’s true because Dr. Lennon said I’m not supposed to have the baby until the year’s over and the year isn’t over yet, so I can’t have the baby right now. And Dr. Lennon’s a doctor so he knows when I’m supposed to have the baby. Gracie nods and says okay, and then she helps me up and gets me more ornaments to put on the tree.

I feel my heart hit harder and faster in my chest and I get a little scared. You can’t come yet, Jocelyn. We have to be prepared so my heart can be strong enough. So just stay there until next week. My heart beats a little softer. I take a big breath and keep putting the ornaments on the tree.

When Gracie runs out of lights, she takes the end of the string and tells me to get ready, and then she plugs it into the wall and the whole tree lights up in green and red and blue and purple and yellow and white! It’s so beautiful! It blinks and looks like little stars made of Skittles, shooting through a big snowy sky. There are only a few ornaments left in the box, so Gracie takes them and puts them in a few empty spots on the tree and then we both back up and look at it and Gracie puts her arm around me and says, “Merry Christmas, Rae.”

Grammy looks in the living room. “Oh, you’re done.” She comes over and looks at the tree with us. She clicks her tongue and then says, “Where’s the star?” and Gracie runs to the box and pulls out the big gold star we put on the top of our tree every year.

“Who wants to put it on?” Grammy asks. “Gracie? You wanna put Rae on top of your shoulders?”

Gracie laughs and shakes her head. “I’ll put it on,” she says. We get out a stool and Gracie stands on it while Grammy and I help her up, then she puts the star on the top point of the tree and says tada. Gracie turns to get off the stool and almost slips, but I hold onto her and she

grabs Grammy's hand on the other side and we both help her back down. Then another big pain runs through my stomach and my back and I try to gasp but I feel like there's no air in front of me to take. I get scared for a second and my heart hurts and I finally gulp in all the air into my lungs and hold it there and close my eyes. The pain goes away and I just feel weak.

"Rae, baby?" Grammy says, and I feel her hands on my shoulder. I open my eyes and everything's blurry for a second because my eyes are wet, but Grammy and Gracie are looking at me.

"I told you you're having a baby," Gracie whispers. I tell Gracie to quit it. I'm not having any baby right now.

Grammy looks at my belly and says, "I don't know," and then I get scared. I'm not supposed to have my baby yet. But Grammy says, "Calm down. It might be a false alarm." I hope it is a false alarm. I want everything to be perfect for you, Jocelyn, so don't try to come out yet.

We go into the kitchen and Grammy helps me into a chair and then Grammy gives me and Gracie slices of chocolate apple pie. It smells so good and it's still hot because she just got it out of the oven. I take a piece with my fork and I have to blow on it because it's still too hot to eat, and then I take a little bite. The crust flakes off in my mouth, but the chocolate runs down my tongue and it's so good! The apple and cinnamon are the last thing I taste and everything runs together so I can't tell what's in my mouth anymore, but it all tastes sweet and it's all warm. I tell Grammy thank you for making the pie and Gracie says thank you, too and when we finish our slices, Grammy says that Momma should be home soon because today's her last day before she gets a vacation from work for Christmas. Then when she gets home, we're all going to the

movies together. I don't remember what we're seeing, but it's a Christmas movie and I love Christmas movies because they're always funny and there's always big families in them. I told Momma I wish we had a big family to have Christmas with because I only have one uncle and he lives in Nebraska, so he never comes out here for Christmas and we only see him sometimes in the summer if Mom can stop working for a little bit. Momma told me I should invite Theo and his family over on Christmas and we could have dinner together, but when I called Theo's house, nobody answered. I should call him again tonight after the movie. I haven't seen Theo since I rode in his airplane with him. I hope he's not mad at me. Momma said I should say sorry if I want Theo to be my friend again, so when I see him I'm going to tell him I'm sorry for kissing him and that I want him to be my best friend again. I miss Theo. I really really hope he's not mad at me.

I go upstairs to get my coat hanging on the side of my bed, and then the biggest shock runs through my belly and it feels like fire but it spreads all over my back and my legs and my chest like something boiling hot spilled onto my skin. I grab my belly and fall back onto my bed and groan. My eyes water and my heart starts beating harder and this time the pain doesn't go away. It just swims through me and I squeeze my bed post and cry harder, but I can't breathe. I can't breathe. Please don't come yet, Jocelyn. Please please please PLEASE don't come yet! My heart feels like it might jump out of my neck. I try to swallow. Then I finally gasp in a big sob and cry into my pillow. The pain and all the hot in my legs and my stomach and back disappear, but my chest feels sore. I put my hand near my heart. It almost feels like a fan spinning under my skin. I don't want anything to go wrong.

I push myself off the bed, but my head gets all dizzy and I sit back down again. Everything looks blurry and the room starts to move. I shut my eyes. Please God, please make my heart stop hurting. After sitting still for a long time, I open my eyes again and the room stops moving, but I still feel sick. Taking a big breath and then holding it in my lungs, I stand up slow and try to look at the window and nothing else.

My shoes are in my closet, so I take little steps across the room and open my closet door and bend down slowly to get my shoes. I move back toward the bed, but before I can step, another shot of hot pain burns into my stomach and back and into my chest again.

“Ah!” I back up and hit my head against the wall and I try to yell, but all my voice gets sucked out of my lungs because my heart feels like it’s jerking up and down my ribs. My knees buckle and I hold onto the frame of my closet door, but I can’t keep myself up and I fall onto the floor. It’s everywhere! Squeezing and stretching all my insides. I can’t move. My head starts shaking against the wall and I only see my hand pressed down into the carpet. Everything else is gray and fuzzy. I look at my hand. I feel sick. I want to open my mouth and breathe. I want to breathe in all the cold air so the fire and hurt will disappear.

I hear the door open. I see Gracie’s shoe next to my hand. Finally, I feel coldness slide down my throat. I breathe. Gracie slides me up against the wall and I try to open my eyes bigger to see her face. She’s close to me. I can smell her toothpaste. I pull in air and all the fire and pain feels like it’s just sizzling at the bottom of my body now.

“Rae!” Gracie shouts. I wince because Gracie’s talking so loud. She looks at my door and yells for Grammy and I tell her not to scream because it hurts my ears. But Gracie yells again and it shocks me and I open my eyes as big as I can and then I see that Gracie’s face is wet. The

floor feels like drums hitting harder and harder. I see Grammy's legs and try to look up, but my eyes close again and I don't want to lift them open. Grammy's hands are cold against my face. I shake my head and open my eyes again and Grammy looks mad. I try to ask her what that face means, but my mouth doesn't move much. I just want to stay put. I don't try to move again and I feel like I've gone to sleep.

The floor shakes again and through my eyelashes, I see that Gracie's gone. I sit still and I don't know what's going on in front of me, but then I feel the heat jump up again into my body. My eyes shoot open and I see Grammy staring at me and holding the phone to her ear. Stretching and crunching. Stretching and crunching. Everything inside me burns and I cough without meaning to. My chest. It feels small and squished. Grammy holds my hand and I feel my head hit the wall again and again and then I feel something push me forward and my face is on Grammy's shoulder.

Please don't come yet, Jocelyn. You're supposed to come next week. I can't have you yet. My heart's not good. My heart isn't normal and I can't have you normally. Why won't you stay put, Jocelyn?

Then the hurt goes away again and I feel tears on my chin and on my neck. I'm crying. All my insides feel like cardboard or like saltine crackers. Grammy's talking. She's talking to me.

"Come on, Rae. We have to go."

"To the movies?"

Grammy laughs. "Oh, hell no," she says. "To the hospital."



I start to cry harder and my chest hurts and I say I don't want to go to the hospital yet because Jocelyn's supposed to come next week. But Grammy says Dr. Lennon told her to go to the hospital and he's going to meet us there.

"What about Momma?"

Grammy says Momma's on her way home right now and then we're going to go. Grammy and Gracie's hands are on my back and shoulders and I feel them pull me up. I stand on my feet, but everything starts to spin and I wobble a little bit. Gracie holds my hand and puts her other arm around my back and says it's okay, it's okay.

This hospital is a different one than where we usually go to see Dr. Lennon. We have to go to Portland to have the baby because Dr. Lennon said there's a special office he works at in Portland for moms who have special needs.

I tell Grammy that we have to go into Portland and she says, "I know." She takes my suitcase from under my bed that has clothes in it for when I'm supposed to have the baby.

"No, no, no," I say.

Grammy turns to me. "Listen, Rae, everything's going to be okay. But we have be prepared in case you have the baby early."

But we're not prepared. We're prepared to have Jocelyn *next* week. This isn't supposed to happen. Jocelyn, please don't come today. You need to be healthy and strong and I'm too weak to have you today. Dr. Lennon needs to give me medicine and give me machines that keep my heart strong for you and I don't have any of that yet. Jocelyn, please stay there. Please don't come yet. I need you to be healthy. I need you to be okay.

Gracie helps me down the stairs and Momma comes through the front door before I reach the bottom. She looks at me and then Gracie and then sees Grammy behind us on the stairs.

“What happened?”

“We need to get to the hospital,” Grammy says.

“Now?” Momma asks.

“Now.” Grammy says. Momma opens the door again and helps me and Gracie walk through it. I hear Momma whispering, asking Grammy what’s wrong, and Grammy says, “She’s having contractions. The damn thing’s coming early.”

Gracie opens the door to Momma’s car and helps me into the front seat. Another sharp pain sears through my stomach and I look up at the ceiling of the car and gasp. OWW! Then my breath cuts off because my chest pounds even harder than my stomach. My eyes cross into each other so it looks like there’s two of everything. I can hear my heartbeat straight up in my ears, like big mallets drumming on my head. I try to pat my chest and calm my heart down, but my stomach crunches together again and I bend over. I can’t breathe. I can’t. Please, God, let me breathe.

I feel the car engine start and everything around me rumbles. I tighten my face and press it against the window. The cold shakes me awake and I suck in the wet air and hold my stomach, rocking back and forth. Then everything feels cold and the heat falls back down to the bottom of my body.

We leave the driveway and Momma pats my hand. I roll my head over to the other side and look at her.

“I can’t have the baby, yet,” I say.

Momma nods. “Yes, you can. Just be strong. Be strong for Jocelyn.”

I feel my heart pounding. I have to be strong. I’ll be strong for you, Jocelyn.

We pass the tavern and Scoggins Creek Coffee. I see Mr. Frasier through my window holding a paper cup outside the little building. He stares at me and I try to tap the window. He keeps watching me until we get so far that I can’t see him anymore.

This time we don’t have to cross the bridge when we go to Portland. The hospital is closer than the Iversens’ house, but it still takes a long time to get there. I have a few more contractions in the car on the way there and then they stop. They’re contractions because you’re coming now, Jocelyn. I close my eyes and everything gets muffled and dark, but then before long another contraction starts and wakes me up. It’s easier to breathe if I take a big breath when the burning first hits me and then when my heart beats too hard, I don’t have to suck in because I already have air in my lungs. I don’t figure this out until we’re almost at the hospital, though, and by the time we stop in the parking lot, I can’t even move my hand to open the door. I’m so tired.

I feel my door open and all the cold air stings me and hurts a lot, but I don’t move to get warmer. Hands move under me. I smell Momma’s hair around my face. I breathe in dust and grapes. She sets me down in a chair. It’s a wheelchair. Everything’s dark.

Ow! OW! I yell and it hurts my ears. I don’t know where I am. I look around but I can’t see Momma or Grammy or Gracie. I start to cry. There’s a needle in my hand. I’m lying down. My stomach. My back. I try to move to make the pain go away, but I’m too tired. Someone’s voice talks to the side of me. He moves closer. It’s Dr. Lennon. He’s talking about anesthesia.

That's medicine to make me feel better. But he says I can't have a lot of it. My heart's too weak. I have to have other medicine first.

The pain fades a little bit. I try to reach for Dr. Lennon's arm, but my hand drops before I can touch it. He turns and looks at me.

"Jocelyn?" I say.

Dr. Lennon touches my shoulder. "Shh shh. Stay still."

I see nurses walking back and forth. I can't tell if any of them are Nurse Julia. I don't think she's here. Dr. Lennon injects a needle into a tube by my bed. He looks at me and tells me to breathe. I've been holding my breath and so I shake my head.

"Rae, breathe."

I open my mouth and try to get in all the air. I feel like my heart is shaking the whole bed. My eyes look up and up and then my eyes close for a second. Then air pours in. My heartbeats slur together like a river in my chest. I breathe again. My eyes open. Dr. Lennon's looking at a screen next to my bed. Then he looks at me. He turns to the nurse standing by him and says to get Dr. Thomas in for the anesthesia and the nurse leaves. Then Dr. Lennon says he'll be right back and he leaves so it's just one nurse and me in the room.

Sweat coats my forehead. I feel shaky and tired, but the pain is disappearing. Jocelyn, if our hearts are the same, then I want you to be strong. I'll be strong for you. Jocelyn, you can have my whole heart.

Another contraction comes, but this time I keep my mouth open and breathe. All my muscles tighten and I feel the sweat run from my forehead down my nose. The crunching and stretching turns into stabbing and I have to gasp, but I'm so glad I can gasp. I feel my chest. My

heart doesn't shake the bed now. I smile as big as I can. Thank you, God. Thank you for letting me breathe.

The contraction goes away and I stretch as tall as I can on my bed. I want to sleep, but I know I have to be awake right now for Jocelyn. A woman comes into the room with a white coat. Her hair is red like mine and I like that.

The woman smiles. "Hi, Rae," she says. "I'm Dr. Thomas." Dr. Thomas is here, Jocelyn. Everything will be okay. She looks at the screen by my bed and then looks at the needle in my hand.

"How's your heart? Does it hurt?" Dr. Thomas asks. "Can you breathe all right?" I nod and say that Dr. Lennon gave me some medicine so my heart would slow down.

Dr. Thomas nods. "Okay, well I'm going to give you some medicine, too. This will make the contractions hurt a lot less."

I smile and tell her thank you, because they hurt a lot right now.

Dr. Thomas smiles. "You're doing so great," she says.

Dr. Lennon comes into the room and I ask Dr. Lennon if my mom is outside and he says she is and he's just told her how I'm doing. Then Dr. Thomas asks Dr. Lennon about the medicine he gave me and I close my eyes and hear their voices crawl through the air to my ears when another contraction comes.

I hold my stomach and close my eyes. All the pain spreads down into my toes and I didn't even know I could feel contractions in my toes. I want it to stop right now. Jocelyn!

PLEASE be strong!

I feel a hand rub my arm. It's Dr. Thomas. "Hold on, Rae." She scrunches her forehead. "It'll settle down soon."

I hold onto the side of my bed until my muscles stop cramming together and the heat and the squeezing and crunching all go away again. Dr. Thomas pats my shoulder and I'm glad she's here because her face is so beautiful and happy.

Dr. Thomas flicks her finger against a tube and then sticks it into the tube that's connected to the needle in my hand. Momma comes through the door and I start crying because I'm so happy to see her.

"You're gonna have the baby today, Rae!" Momma says. She's crying and Momma never cries.

"She's going to be strong," I tell Momma. And Momma nods and says yes, she is.

"Aren't you excited to see Jocelyn?" Momma asks me, but I don't say anything.

I look up at Momma, "I love you," I whisper.

Momma kisses my hand and I feel the tears on her cheek. "I love you too, baby girl."

I feel the bed move and the nurse next to me looks down and says, "Here we go."

Momma looks up at the doctors and then stops and we roll past her and leave her in the hallway. "I'll see you real soon," I hear her say, echoing through the corridor.

We stop in a room full of metal and curtains and lights and I'm a little scared, but it's hard to keep my eyes open. I feel like another contraction is going to start soon and I hold my breath, but then Dr. Thomas stands over me and puts a mask on my face. She says she wants me to count backwards from ten and I tell her I can't count very well, except my tongue doesn't work very well so it all comes out mushy.

Jocelyn, take my heart. Please take my whole heart and be okay.

Dr. Thomas leaves and I just see the lights above me and I close my eyes because they're so bright, but then I can't open my eyes back up. All the beeping from my monitor and Dr. Lennon's voice and even the pain in my belly just stops and everything's dark and quiet.

## TO JOCELYN

Dear Jocelyn, I have Williams. This means my heart isn't good and sometimes people don't think I'm normal and I can never have a husband unless he really likes my Williams. When I have to have a baby, my heart hurts a lot because it's not supposed to work that hard and it wasn't strong enough for both of us. Sometimes people make fun of me or Gracie or Momma because I have Williams. You might have Williams too, Jocelyn. And if you do, you might meet people who think you're not normal and they don't want to be around you.

But the rest of Williams is absolutely wonderful. I tell stories to Momma because Williams means I'm real good at telling stories and people like to listen to them. And I make so many friends because Williams means I like to talk to people and people like to talk to me. And I'm really good at playing the guitar and I love music and even the people who don't like to be around me like music, so really, I'm friends with everybody.

I almost want you to have Williams, Jocelyn, because then you'd be just like me and you'd see how great it is. But I want you to be healthy and to have a good heart and I don't want you to feel like people don't like you. Even if you don't have Williams, I bet you'll be so nice and beautiful. I bet you'll have so many friends because you'll make everyone feel wonderful. Maybe you'll be able to run really fast and you'll win lots of races, but you'll be nice to the people that don't win, too.

Please be healthy, Jocelyn. I'm sorry I can't be healthy enough to have you on my own, but I know you'll be okay. You have a good family, Jocelyn. I'm glad you have a dad who can play music with you. Mr. Iversen can play the harmonica. And the cello. And the violin and



guitar and piano and drums. So even if you do have Williams and your heart isn't very good, you can come home and play Danny Boy and lots of other songs with your new dad.

Please be okay, Jocelyn. You have to come here. I know you'd be a perfect little girl, and the world needs perfect little girls to make people happier. God must know that the world needs perfect little girls. He wouldn't let you die. Please, God, please let Jocelyn be healthy and strong.

## THE REAL LIFE JOCELYN CHAPTER

I can't open my eyes at first, it feels like there's goo on them, but I hear muffled sounds all around me and I feel vibrations through the air that hit my skin. I want to open my eyes. I try really hard and then I rest for a second because I'm so tired. Then after a little bit, I try again, and I see light come through my eyelashes. Someone's saying my name, I think. It's Momma. Momma's saying my name. I open my eyes more and I see her in front of me. Everything's blurry and slow and I feel a little sick. I blink again. I'm still here.

"I'm alive," I say, but my lips can't move very well, so it all comes out slurred. I'm alive. I take a quick breath.

"What about Jocelyn?!" I feel my eyes sting with tears. "Where is she?" Oh, Jocelyn. I'm so sorry. I took it. I took my heart from you.

Momma puts something on my face. My glasses.

"Rae, look," Momma says. This time I hear her much clearer. She smiles at me and bends closer to my bed. "Look," she says again.

Momma lowers her arms and I see a bundle of blankets. I ask her what's in the blankets, and she says look. My arms are heavy. I can't move them very well, but I pick up my hands and I move the blanket so I can see better.

A baby! I ask Momma if this is my baby and she nods.

"This is Jocelyn."

JOCELYN! You're here!!! YOU'RE ALIVE! Oh, you're so beautiful! You have red hair like me! I KNEW you'd have red hair. And your nose is so little! You're here! You're here!  
JOCELYN, YOU'RE *HERE*!!!

I sit up in my bed and I feel a little dizzy at first, but then it goes away. My stomach is sore, but I don't care. I hold out my arms and ask Momma if I can hold her.

“When you've woken up a little bit, I'll give her to you,” Momma says. “But you can look.”

Oh, Jocelyn! You have the most beautiful mouth. Your lips are bright and you aren't even wearing lipstick. You're so beautiful, Jocelyn. Your arms are so tiny! I can hold your wrist with my thumb and my finger. And your nails. They're so so so little!

I get closer to your beautiful face and say hello. And then you move, Jocelyn! You moved when you heard my voice! I say hello again and you turn your face to me. I brush my fingers over your head. Your hair is so soft, I almost can't feel it on my hand.

“How's her heart?” I ask Momma. She nods and says that Dr. Lennon says she's a healthy girl. I start to cry because I'm so happy that you're healthy, Jocelyn. I'm so so so happy you're healthy. Thank you, God. Thank you for making Jocelyn healthy and that she's finally here!!! I almost can't breathe because every time I take a breath, I smile so big and all the air in my lungs feels like play dough.

“Are you okay, Rae, baby?” Momma says, touching my arm.

I cry even harder. “I thought I was going to die.”

Momma nods her head. “I know it was scary, baby.”

“But you said it would kill me.”

Momma stops. “What?”

I look at Jocelyn then back to Momma. “I heard you talking to Dr. Lennon once and he said having Jocelyn would be too much for me but that you had to tell me sooner or later. And you said it would kill me, but you were wrong. It didn’t kill me! I’m here and so is Jocelyn!”

Momma doesn’t do anything for a second. Then she smiles. “Oh, baby. You’re not going to die.”

I tell her I know that because I’m here now, and she laughs. I look back at Jocelyn.

“Can I hold her now?” I ask.

Momma nods once. “Sit up tall and hold your arms out.”

I do and then Momma puts Jocelyn and all her blankets in my arms and says to keep my right arm up, so I do. My stomach feels bruised, so I keep my arms off my stomach and take you in. Jocelyn, you weigh almost nothing at all. You’re so little. I look closer at your face and I’m so glad you don’t have Robby Sandberg’s squished face. You are so pretty. You’re my pretty girl.

Dr. Lennon comes in and says hello to Momma and me and he puts his hands on his hips.

“Everything went just fine,” he says. “She’s a healthy girl and you’re going to be fine too, Rae.” I tell Dr. Lennon thank you for keeping Jocelyn safe, and he checks the screen near the wall and looks at the clipboard on the end of my bed.

“I think we can take you into the postpartum room,” Dr. Lennon says. I ask him what that is and he says it’s where I can stay until I leave the hospital.

The nurse comes in and takes Jocelyn out of my arms. I don’t want to let her go but the nurse says, “We’ll bring her to your room in her crib so she can sleep.”

I’ll see you soon, Jocelyn. Just go to sleep and I’ll see you soon.

Two nurses help me get into a wheelchair. It's hard to move my legs because I can't turn my waist very well. It feels all stiff, but Dr. Lennon says I just need to take it easy and I'll heal fine. We wheel through the halls to my room and I look down my gown to see the cut they made into my stomach, but it's wrapped up so I can't see anything. When we get to my room, Momma and one of the nurses help me out of my chair and into my new bed. The covers are cool and they feel good over my legs.

Then the other nurse pushes in a crib with plastic sides so I can see Jocelyn. Her hands are bunched into fists next to her face. Oh, you look so cute when you sleep, Jocelyn. The nurse opens the crib and takes Jocelyn into her arms. Then she starts crying. Your voice is so thin and wobbly, Jocelyn, but you'll learn how to sing and shout and you'll have the prettiest voice.

The nurse takes her over to me and asks if I want to try nursing her. I get a little nervous and say that I'm not sure I know how. Nurse Julia taught me, but I never had to feed a baby while I practiced.

The nurse shrugs. "Well, just see if she latches and try your best."

Momma rubs my arm and says, "It'll be all right, Rae."

I pull down my hospital gown and take Jocelyn from the nurse. Jocelyn turns right to me with her mouth open and I'm not sure what to do.

I look at Momma. She nods. "Well, put it in there, Rae."

I bring Jocelyn closer and she latches right onto me and starts sucking. I smile at Momma.

"She's doing it!"

I don't know how you know how to do that, Jocelyn, but I think you're much better at this than I am. Then I feel something move through my chest. It feels so strange! I don't know where it's coming from. I don't think I like it. I scrunch my face and Momma laughs.

"Is it working?" she asks, and I say I think so.

The nurse looks closer at Jocelyn and nods. "See," she says, "you're a natural." She tells me that I have to feed Jocelyn again in a few hours and Momma says that she'll remind me. But soon I have to take pills so I don't make milk in my chest anymore because I'm not going to keep Jocelyn for very long.

I look at Momma and ask her when the Iversens are coming.

"They already came," she says. They got to hold Jocelyn while I was asleep. I feel a big lump in my throat and I try to swallow it and I ask Momma when I have to give Jocelyn away.

Momma leans against my bed and touches my knee. "I was going to tell you, but then you went into labor so I never could."

I don't understand what she means. "What were you going to tell me?"

Momma turns her chair to face me straight on. "Rae, the Iversens are taking her tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow!" I hear my voice crack and feel Jocelyn twitch a little in my arms. I hold her closer to my chest and talk quieter. "But she just got here." My eyes fill with tears.

Momma leans back in her chair. "Dr. Lennon doesn't want any more strain on your heart, especially after this big surgery. He thinks you'd heal faster if the baby were already with her adoptive family." Momma touches my arm. "Having her around would be too much for you, sweetheart. That's what Dr. Lennon meant."

I look down at Jocelyn. I have to heal before I can see you. Jocelyn's tiny chin moves in and out. She's so warm. Oh, Jocelyn. I wish I could keep you forever. But at least we're both alive.

I hold Jocelyn closer and my eyes feel really hot. She makes a small squeak and I smile. I bend close to her and sing quietly by her ear.

You belong among the wildflowers, you belong in a boat out at sea. Sail away, kill off the hours. You belong somewhere you feel free.

When Jocelyn stops feeding, the nurse takes her and lays her in the crib to go to sleep.

"She sleeps a lot," I say, and the nurse smiles and says that newborn babies have to sleep more than normal people. Momma holds my hand and says that I should try to sleep a little, too. Dr. Lennon said I need to get some rest because my body's really tired. I do feel exhausted.

I tell Momma I'll see her in a little bit and she smiles and says, "See you soon." I take my glasses off, lay back in my bed, making sure not to pull the muscles tight in my stomach, and go to sleep.

"Gracie, don't stand so close to the baby. You stand too close, you'll scare the shit out of her."

I smile and open my eyes and see Grammy and Gracie by my bed. Gracie's looking into the crib and Grammy's looking at me.

"Hey, baby," Grammy says. I stretch my arms and say that I wish I could hug her, but Grammy says, "Don't be stupid. You have a giant cut through your stomach." She moves my hair out of my eyes and hands me my glasses from the table by my bed.

Momma comes in and says, “Good, you’re up. Time to feed Jocelyn again.”

This time it’s a lot easier and I don’t feel so strange anymore. Gracie stares at Jocelyn and then at me.

“That is so weird.”

I nod and tell Gracie it’ll only be for today, though. Dr. Lennon says breast milk is really really healthy when babies are first born, but then it goes back to normal and so that’s when Jocelyn can go to the Iversens and they’ll just feed her with a bottle.

Gracie smiles and puts her hand on my shoulder. She looks at Jocelyn and then at me and she says, “You scared me pretty bad.” I say I’m sorry, and Gracie shakes her head and laughs and says, “I’m really glad you’re okay.”

When Jocelyn’s done, Grammy holds out her arms and says, “Let me hold her,” and she takes Jocelyn and puts a yellow beanie over her head and then walks around the room with her.

Grammy laughs. “She looks a little like your mom when she was a baby.”

I like that. Momma’s one of the prettiest ladies I know. I hope you grow up to look like Momma, Jocelyn.

There’s a knock on the door and Grammy says yeah, and Mrs. Iversen’s head pokes into the room. I smile because I’m happy to see her, but I also feel a little scared because I know she’s going to take Jocelyn away soon.

“You’re awake!” Mrs. Iversen says. And I nod and then Mr. Iversen and Jason come in too, and Mr. Iversen’s holding Jason’s hand. Grammy hands Jocelyn to Mrs. Iversen and then Mrs. Iversen comes and sits next to my bed. Her whole face looks like a lightbulb’s shining on it, she looks so happy.



Mrs. Iversen smiles with her tongue between her teeth. “She is so beautiful.” Her voice almost sounds like she has pudding in her throat. It’s thick and sticky and she swallows and then laughs.

I look at Jocelyn and then back at Mrs. Iversen. “Are you happy?” I ask, and Mrs. Iversen laughs again and starts to cry.

“Oh, Rae,” she says, “I’m so very happy.”

Mr. Iversen and Jason come stand next to Mrs. Iversen and look at Jocelyn. Jason walks closer to her and bends down next to her.

“You’re my sister.”

He smiles and looks back at Mr. Iversen and says that she’s pretty. I see Mr. Iversen start to cry, too. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a grownup boy cry before. Except Neil and Theo, but I don’t think they’re real grownups.

I ask Mr. Iversen why he’s crying and he wipes his face and laughs.

“You’re right,” he says. “I should probably be tougher about this.”

Mrs. Iversen laughs and so I laugh. People cry when they’re really sad, but they can also cry when they’re really really happy. I think the Iversens are happy. I think they’re happy because Jocelyn’s their baby now.

Mrs. Iversen holds Jocelyn close to her and kisses her on the cheek. She looks at me and whispers thank you.

Then Jason comes up to my bed and says, “This is for you.” He bends down and picks up a basket and sets it on my bed. A present! I untie the blue bow on top and pull down the wrapper and inside there’s chocolate and boxes of macaroni and cheese!

I pull out a box and show it to Momma. “Look!” I say. “Look what the Iversens got me!”

Mrs. Iversen says, “We asked your sister what your favorite food was and she just said mac n’ cheese, so we thought we’d give you some boxes.”

Momma nods and says, “It’s really perfect.” And then she says, “What do you say, Rae?”

“Thank you so much,” I say. “I didn’t think I’d get any presents.”

Mr. Iversen opens his coat and pulls out a camera. “Can we have a picture?” he asks, and I get excited because I love taking pictures and so the nurse takes the camera and the Iversens and Jocelyn and Momma and Gracie and Grammy all stand around the bed and I sit in the middle and we all smile and the nurse says one, two, three, and then she takes the picture.

I still can’t believe you’re finally here, Jocelyn. I’ve been waiting so long to see you. You’re even more beautiful than anything I could ever think of. And you make everyone so happy. The Iversens love you so much. I think you’re the best baby in the world.

After Mrs. Iversen gives Jocelyn back to me, the Iversens say they’ll be back in a little bit and then they leave and Grammy takes Gracie to the cafeteria and then it’s just Momma and me and Jocelyn together.

Momma sits next to my bed. “Are you ready to give her away?”

I look down at Jocelyn in my arms and feel myself start to cry. Momma kisses me on the forehead and says, “You’re such a big girl, Rae.” I wipe my face and look back at Momma and tell her I can do it.

There’s another knock on the door. Momma and I both look up and the door opens. It’s Theo. It’s Theo in my hospital room.

“Theo!” I say, and Jocelyn jumps a little in my arms.

“I’ll get her,” Momma says, and she takes Jocelyn and puts her back in her crib. Then Momma asks me if I want any food and I ask if I can have grape juice and she says she’ll be right back. Then she looks at Theo, but she doesn’t say anything. Theo waves and then Momma leaves.

Theo looks almost exactly the same, except his face isn’t smiling so much. He walks over to me and stops.

“Is it all right if I sit down?”

“Yes.”

Theo sits in the chair by my bed and then looks over at the crib.

“Wow!” He says, “It’s a baby!” I smile and say her name is Jocelyn.

Theo nods. “She’s gorgeous.” Then Theo looks around the room and back at me. He smiles. “We’re always meeting in hospitals.”

I don’t know what he means because I saw him more times in my house or on the lake or in his car than at the hospital. That only happened one other time when I hit my head in the fire. I tell Theo that and he laughs and says, “My bad. I must not be keeping track.” I tell him that’s okay.

Theo puts his hands over his face and takes a big breath, then he moves his hands and looks at me and smiles.

“How are you?”

I tell Theo I’m really happy right now, but I have to give Jocelyn away tomorrow.

Theo’s face scrunches up. “I’m really sorry, Rae.” He looks down at the bed, but I tell him it’s okay, because the Iversens are really nice. They’re the nicest family I could ever give my

baby to. Theo rubs his neck and says well that's good, and then he doesn't say anything for a while.

I watch Theo stare at the ground and I start to hum Shenandoah. Theo looks up and his eyes crinkle and then he hums along with me. We go through the verse and the chorus and then Theo stops so I stop.

“Rae.” Theo shakes his head. “I am—” He stops, swallows, and then says, “Sorry.”

I put my hand on his head. “Don't be sorry, Theo.”

Theo smiles and takes my hand off his head and holds it. “I should've been clearer about how I felt about you. I thought I was being so great and everything.” Theo looks down at the ground and says, “I'm just an idiot.”

I don't want Theo to think he's an idiot. I squeeze his hand. “Theo, it's okay. I can still see Jocelyn all the time.”

Theo drops my hand and stands up and puts his hands over his mouth, walking around the room. Then he stops and stares at me.

“What?” I ask.

“You're my best friend, Rae.”

I smile and Theo's face gets a little blurry because I feel myself cry a little, but I blink and then everything gets clear again. It's hard to talk because my voice feels like jelly.

“You're my best friend, too,” I finally say. I'm so glad Theo's still my best friend.

He walks back to my bed and says, “I've missed you. I just didn't want to make you sad anymore.”

Theo's the best guy ever. I'm glad I know him because he's the nicest friend I have. Jocelyn, you'll have to see Theo all the time, too. I think you'll like him.

I look up at Theo and say, "I don't think we should get married anyway, because when you're married you have to have sex, and I don't want to do that."

Theo laughs so hard, I have to cover my ears. I smile and watch Theo fall back into the chair and wipe his eyes. When I take my hands away, I still hear him laugh low in his stomach like I remember him doing the last time I saw him in the airplane. Jocelyn squeaks a little in her crib, but then she's quiet again. Then Theo takes a big breath and looks at me and smiles.

"So we can stay friends?" he asks.

I open my arms. "Come here," I say, and Theo bends down and to give me a hug. I reach up too far because I'm sore, but Theo reaches down around me. His beard feels scratchy on my neck, but I'm so happy we're friends again. I see Jocelyn move a little in her crib and I cry harder into Theo's shirt because tomorrow I have to give Jocelyn away.

"At least I get to keep you," I say to Theo.

I feel Theo's arms hug me tighter and he says, "I'm always here for you, buddy." He pulls away and says, "You ever need to talk or fly in an airplane, you just give me a call." I would love to fly in Theo's plane again. And maybe the Iversens would let me take Jocelyn sometimes and we could fly around with Theo above all the buildings and trees.

Theo looks back at Jocelyn. "So she's going to be an Iversen," he says. His voice doesn't go up, so I don't say anything. I just nod and look at Jocelyn, too. She moves her head a little and I see her red hair peek out of her beanie against her forehead. She is so beautiful.

I look back at Theo. "I'm more happy than sad," I say. And it's really really true.

The next morning, I make sure that I don't cry at all when I give Jocelyn to Mrs. Iversen. She bundles Jocelyn up in a red blanket and sings to her while holding her in her arms and Jason smiles down at her and Mr. Iversen pats Jocelyn's head and their lawyer hands Momma a piece of paper and then Grammy says, "Well that's that, I guess." Jocelyn stretches her arms and yawns in Mrs. Iversen's arms and she looks so adorable.

Mr. Iversen hugs Momma and tells her, "Thanks again. We really owe you our lives."

Then Mrs. Iversen looks at me and says, "Thank you." But she whispers because Jocelyn's sleeping. "Please come and visit often."

I will. I love you, Jocelyn. I love you so much. I'll see you soon.

## THE CHAPTER AT HOME AGAIN

Dr. Lennon comes in and checks my stomach where they cut me open. When he takes the bandage off, I see my stomach and I get a little scared because my stomach's yellow and purple and there's a dark line with stitches. The stitches aren't that big, though, and Dr. Lennon says the bruising is normal and that it'll go away in a week or two. He talks to Momma about the medicines I have to take when I get home and how I have to clean my stitches so I don't get infected. I'm a little scared of getting infected, but Dr. Lennon says that it shouldn't be a problem because my mom is very responsible.

The nurses help me out of my bed and into a wheelchair and Gracie pushes me down the hall and out to the car where Grammy's waiting. After I get in the front seat, I wave to the nurses and say, "Thank you for helping my baby get here safe." They smile and wave bye to me and Momma shuts the door and gets in the back with Gracie.

I run my hand over my stomach. I've never had surgery before. My legs and belly feel really sore, but they don't hurt as much as I thought they would. It's like when I bang my knee on the coffee table at home and it just hurts a little after a couple days. I was afraid it would feel like someone stabbing me because that's what doctors do when they cut you open. They stab you. Grammy tells me to quit poking at my stitches and so I take my hand off my stomach and look out the window at all the trees around the road.

Maybe Theo will take me flying again soon. The trees look so big from down on the ground, but I know that when you get up in the sky, the trees look small, standing around like skinny green people at a party. I ask Momma if I can fly with Theo soon but she says I have to

wait until I'm all better and that won't be for a little while. But then after I'm all better, I can go flying with Theo again.

I lean my head against the window and close my eyes. The window's cold and it feels good against my forehead. Then I remember something.

"Is today Christmas?" I ask Grammy.

She smiles and says Merry Christmas, and I turn to the backseat and say Merry Christmas to Momma and Gracie, but Gracie's asleep so I just look at Momma and she nods and says, "We'll have to open presents when we get home."

I'm so excited for presents, even though I don't think any present is as good as getting a baby, even if they go to live somewhere else. I'll have to give Jocelyn the dress that I got for her soon. Maybe we can drive to the Iversens tomorrow and give it to her.

When we get back to our street, Grammy leans forward and looks out the window. She scrunches her face up and I ask her what's wrong, but she doesn't answer me.

"What the hell?"

Then Momma gasps. "Oh my goodness."

I look out the window to see what's happening and then I see our house. In front of the door on the porch is a pile of presents!

I say that maybe they're from Santa, but Grammy says, "You know there's no such thing, Rae. Somebody else must've dropped them off." Grammy shakes her head. "Who the hell would do that?"



Grammy parks the jeep and gets out and runs to the porch. Momma wakes Gracie up and comes around to help me out of my door. When Gracie sees the presents she smiles and asks, “Did we get more?”

Momma puts her hands on her face. “I don’t believe it,” she says.

We walk across the front yard and I have to walk real slow because of my stitches, but Grammy picks up a big card and waves it over her head to us and says, “Look at this.”

We get to the porch and Grammy opens the card and inside it says YOU ARE IN ALL OF OUR PRAYERS, RAE. MERRY CHRISTMAS!

“It’s from Mr. Frasier,” Grammy says. I ask her how she knows that because nobody signed their names on the card or the presents, but Grammy closes the card and looks at the front.

“He painted it,” she says. “I can tell it’s his.” The cover of the card has a beautiful tree with a star and lots of red and green and gold ornaments on it and there’s an angel flying over the tree with her hands out like she’s going to give someone a hug. Next to the tree is a girl in a blue dress with a big belly.

“Is that me?” I ask. Momma says she thinks so and Grammy says that this is Mr. Frasier, for sure. I touch the cover and feel the raised paint on the paper and follow the swirls around the tree. I smile and feel my eyes burn with tears because I’m so surprised that Mr. Frasier would paint a beautiful picture just for me.

I look at Grammy. “Why did he do that?”

Grammy shrugs. “Finally got his head out of his ass, I think.”

Momma tells Grammy not to say that on Christmas and Grammy rolls her eyes and says, “I’m as happy as you are. I’m just confused.”

I tell Momma I saw Mr. Frasier on our way to the hospital. He was getting coffee and I saw him through the window.

Momma smiles really big and says, “Well, we’ll have to tell him thank you.”

“He won’t like that.” Grammy shakes her head. “Just open the presents and enjoy yourselves.” Grammy scoops up an armful of the boxes on the porch and tells Gracie to get the rest and then Momma opens the door and we go inside.

Me and Gracie open the presents while Grammy and Momma watch. Inside the presents, there’s candy and a soccer ball and I get a ukulele! Momma can’t believe it when I pull it out of the box and she says that maybe we should return it, but Grammy says, “Annie, let those Christians be Christian and keep the damn guitar.” I tell Grammy it’s a ukulele, not a guitar, and she says, “Whatever.”

I’m so excited to have my own ukulele! I sit and play it while Gracie opens up the rest of the presents. I wonder who gave us all of them. There’s a box of pretty dresses and shirts for me and Gracie and another present has paint and paper and coloring pencils. Grammy laughs when Gracie opens each box, but Momma keeps saying oh my word, oh my word.

When all the presents are opened, Grammy says, “Well we have a couple more for you two,” but Momma says she doesn’t want to spoil us rotten. Then Grammy gets off the couch.

“They’re in the closet,” Grammy says. “I’ll get them.”

We get two presents and the first present for me and Gracie are matching new shoes for church. I’m excited to have new shoes and they’re red and I’ve never had red shoes, but they look beautiful. Then Gracie opens her other present and pulls out a camera. A real one! She

points it at me and clicks and the flash goes off and hurts my eyes, but then she shows me what the picture looks like and I laugh because my face in the picture looks funny.

My present's really heavy, so I don't lift it off the ground. Momma puts the box on the couch next to me so I can tear the wrapping paper off and open it myself. I reach my hands inside and feel cold plastic. Momma takes it out for me. It's an accordion! A big brown accordion!

I clap my hands and smile. "This is perfect! It's just what I wanted." I press the keys on the side while Momma pushes it together and it makes a loud noise so I have to cover my ears.

"Maybe we'll have to get you headphones while you play," Grammy says.

I'm so happy. I'm so so happy! Momma tells me I can't play it until I'm all better, but that won't take very long. I give Momma the biggest hug and tell her thank you thank you thank you thank you! She kisses me on the cheek and says, "I love you, baby girl."

The Maxwells come over for dinner and after we eat, I show Theo my ukulele and accordion. He says whoa and takes the accordion and tries to play on it. He pushes a few of the keys and then he starts to play a song I've never heard before. I have to cover my ears so it's quieter, but it sounds pretty. I ask him what song that is and he tells me it's Backstreet Girl by the Rolling Stones. I tell him I really like it, but Theo says that it's not a very good song, it's just the only one he knows that has an accordion part in it.

Theo asks me how I'm feeling and I tell him my belly's a little sore and that I'm tired but that's normal because I just got done with surgery. He smiles and asks how I'm feeling about Jocelyn. Oh, I really miss Jocelyn. I wish I could've seen her for a little longer before she left, but I'll get to see her again soon because the Iversens said I can see her whenever I want.

“Maybe you should write a song for her,” Theo says. “You can play it on your new accordion.”

That’s a great idea! I’ll play it for Jocelyn and she’ll love it and every time she hears it she can think about me and maybe if I play it a lot, I won’t miss her so much.

Theo pats my head. “You’re so awesome, Rae.” I smile and say thank you. Theo is the best guy in the whole wide world.

Gracie comes over and shows us the pictures she took under the table during dinner and Theo laughs hard and says, “My mom would be mortified if she knew her upper thigh was caught on film.” I laugh too and my stomach hurts a little because I’m laughing so hard.

Momma walks by and sees what’s on the camera and says, “Gracie, take that off. That’s not very nice,” but Momma laughs a little too, so I’m glad she’s not mad at Gracie.

When the Maxwells get ready to leave, Theo comes over to me and takes a small box out of his pocket. It has a gold bow on it. He hands it to me and says, “Merry Christmas, buddy.” I smile and tell him thank you. He hugs me but he doesn’t squeeze very hard because of my stitches and then he leaves with his mom and dad.

Momma and Gracie go to clean up the kitchen, but Grammy says I should probably get some sleep. She helps me up the stairs to my room and I have to walk slow up the steps. After I brush my teeth and take my medicine and get my pajamas on, Grammy helps me into bed. I’m exhausted and I have to catch my breath after walking around upstairs. Grammy sits next to me and holds my hand.

“I’m still learning from you, Rachel,” Grammy says. I’m not sure what she means, so I ask her what she’s learning from me, but Grammy just shakes her head and says, “Go to bed.”

She gets off the bed, grunting a little, and goes to the door and turns the light off. I ask her if she can leave the door open a little bit and she says sure.

“I love you, Rae.”

“I love you too, Grammy Joanne.”

Then Grammy turns the light off and shuts the door. After Grammy leaves, I sit up in my bed and turn on the light on the nightstand. The medicine makes my stomach feel better, so I can sit up without feeling so sore. I take the box Theo gave me from off the table and turn it over in my hands. It's light and it doesn't rattle when I shake it. There's a small card under the bow and I take it out and read it.

“I got this for you and Jocelyn, but until you get a picture for it, I have a spare. Merry Christmas.”

I untie the bow and take the ribbon off and then lift up the lid. Inside is a bunch of cotton balls. They all have faces drawn on them with marker and they're smiling at me. I pull the cotton balls out and underneath there's a big locket. There are blue flowers all around it and the metal looks like it's really old. It's beautiful! I open it and see a picture of Theo and me. We're on the lake with our fishing poles. On the other side of the locket, Theo wrote, “What do you call a girl who can't tell time, loves music, and can't drink a lot of milk? Perfect.”

He means me. Theo's saying that I'm perfect. I take the chain and open it over my hands and put the locket over my neck. It's cold on my chest, but I hold it in my hand so it warms up and I whisper, “Thank you, Theo.”

I set the box back on the table, but I keep Theo's card in my hand. Then I get the pen sitting next to my lamp and I turn the card over and start to write.

Dear baby, I miss you. You're beautiful and sweet.

You make me happy and everyone else you meet.

Please remember me, baby, and remember I love you.

You still have my heart. I love you, I do.

I like it. Jocelyn will like it a lot when I make up music for it on my accordion. I put the paper back on the table and turn the light off. Outside my window, the moon's covered by a few clouds, but it's still shining through the glass so that my whole room looks bright and gray like it's been dipped in silver. I think that'll be my next story, Jocelyn. The moon that turns everything into silver.