

Stuck

a novel by Brooke Michelle Robison

Chapter 1

I wish I wore tights. The backs of my legs have been sticking to things all day: plastic chairs, metal chairs, cafeteria benches, the big blue exercise ball Mrs. Anderson keeps in the reading nook. Now as I sit on the concrete steps outside Clemmons Middle School, it feels like a million little razor-sharp crags are poking me in the butt. I can't wait to get home. I want to take a shower and put on some sweatpants.

When my mom's car pulls to the curb, I make sure to lift my body off the ground with my hands before putting my feet on the floor. I don't want to slide across the concrete as I stand up. My mom drives a black Volvo from 1999. It used to be her dad's. There's extra tinting on the windows so it always looks like I'm getting into some sort of spy car when she picks me up from school. It makes me feel cool. But I guess feeling cool doesn't amount to being cool, because most of the kids at school tend to think I'm the exact opposite.

"How was your day?" she asks me as I climb into the back seat.

"Meh. It was school. Kenny Feinstein fell on his face in P.E., so that was good."

"Good."

My mother knows she sounds callous expressing her delight over the misfortune of a sixth-grade boy. She doesn't care. Kenny pushed me down the concrete steps outside Watson Elementary last April and I broke all the bones in my left arm. The lower part of my arm, anyway. I'm left-handed. That's the hand I *write* with. He made my life miserable for four months. It was a complicated situation. I don't think I deserved it, but maybe I deserved ... something. I don't know.

I stay in the car while my mom runs in to get the groceries for tonight's dinner. I hate the grocery store. Any grocery store. It's like five hundred people all coming straight at you with humungous metal carts. Nobody has any regard for the safety of their fellow man. People are out to get their chili ingredients as fast as possible, no matter who gets run over in the process.

Then there are the people just standing in ridiculous places completely oblivious to the fact that they're blocking the pathway for like a million people. They don't care that they're causing a traffic jam that goes all the way out the front door. I can't stand it. Give me a hot car any day.

The backs of my legs feel sticky against the black leather seats in my mom's car. Why didn't I wear tights? Not only do I have to put up with this sticky leg situation, I also have to worry about germs getting in places I don't usually have to worry about. I'm not doing this again. I close my eyes and imagine standing in a cool shower—water rinsing away the filth of the school.

A small dog is in the car parked across from ours. He's sitting upright with his paws on the steering wheel. My mom left her phone in the car so I pick it up and snap a picture. I open up Instagram and post it to her account with the hashtag #dogdrivingacar. It gets four likes within five seconds. I guess there must be people who just sit around staring at their computer screens all day waiting for pictures of driving dogs. I wish I could live that kind of life of luxury.

When my mom gets back to the car we take off in a hurry. The sooner we get home, the sooner she can continue binge-watching *The Handmaid's Tale*. I'm not allowed to join her. I'm forced to do chores and finish all my homework before I'm allowed to touch any

electronic devices. It's not fair. She doesn't have to do anything before diving into her fun. I can't wait to be an adult.

When I get into the house I hurry upstairs and hop in the shower for a few seconds, rinsing off the back of my legs. I squirt some shower gel into my hand and rub it into a lather. I can't use a bath poof. That will just get contaminated by the filth. I don't wash my hair. I hop out and dry off my bottom half before my mother can even notice I haven't started my chores yet.

I have to vacuum the living room and dining room every day. This doesn't sound like much, but the chore also includes getting the rooms "vacuum-ready" according to my mother, which means picking up everything off the floor. So basically, it's my responsibility to clean the whole entire house every single day. It's like I'm Cinderella or something.

I do like the lines the vacuum makes in the carpet. It feels satisfying when I get them perfectly straight. Sometimes my mother has to tell me to stop because I'm "wasting electricity." Today I only spend a few minutes vacuuming. I need some extra time on the math problems Mrs. Carlson assigned this afternoon.

After grabbing my math book and binder out of my backpack, I lie on my stomach and open the book, trying for several minutes to find the right page. We're only required to complete the odd-numbered questions. It makes me feel annoyed for some reason. Why not just assign problems 1-10 instead of "1-19 odd"?

My pencil makes a weird sound as it slides against the paper, like wood is blocking the lead somewhere. I stand up and start walking to my mother's home office to use her electric pencil sharpener. I run into her on the way.

"Are you good with Chinese for dinner, Gretch?"

“Yes. Get General Tso’s.”

Mom and I order takeout about ninety percent of the time. She says it’s easier than cooking, and I can tell you that it’s absolutely easier than eating her cooking. One Thanksgiving we sat, starving, for seven hours before my mother decided that thawing the turkey was officially impossible and decided to take us to McDonalds. Never again.

I wonder how long it will take the food to get here. My stomach feels like it’s eating itself. I grab my pencil and write *starvation* in bubble letters on the back of an envelope. The letters look uneven and I decide to throw it in the garbage can. I’m still searching for the perfect method of drawing a lowercase “a” in bubble letters. Do I want it to have a little hook that goes over the top, or just a little tail? I can’t decide.

When the food arrives my mother and I split it up in the kitchen, but take our plates to different destinations. She eats in the bedroom, continuing to watch *The Handmaid’s Tale*. I eat mine in front of the television in the living room. We’re both content in our solitude.

It’s just Mom and me here in the house. I’ve never met my father. In fact, we don’t even know who he is. I’m what my mom’s friends love to refer to as a “test tube baby.” My mother has never married, but she wanted a child. She decided to have one on her own, and poof: here I am.

After finishing my dinner and my homework, I decide to hop back in the shower for a more thorough cleaning. I meticulously wash each part of my body, from between my toes to the greasy-feeling hair on the top of my head. It’s exhausting. I’m ready to crash by the time I’m finished.

I walk into my bedroom and fall face-first into the mountain of stuffed animals and throw pillows on my bed. I pull the comforter over my shoulders but don't bother to get under the sheet. I'm unconscious within minutes.

Chapter 2

"Gretchen, get your butt out of bed!" my mother says as she almost shoves me off my bed. I don't want to get up. Why do they start school so early? They shouldn't start until like 10:30. Or never. Never might be better.

I never dried my hair after my evening shower last night. It looks like I styled it with a deformed crimper. I turn on the sink and run my comb under the faucet. I pull it from root to tip, trying to remove the bizarre pattern of folds. Fail. I end up pulling my hair all back into a ponytail and tucking the end into the rubber band.

I mistakenly think that I'm the first person at the bus stop when I arrive. After singing for a couple of seconds, I hear a sneeze come from the small rock on my right. It's Kyle Larsen. He's managed to contort his entire body into his coat. His knees are against his chest and he's slipped his arms out of the sleeves to conserve heat. His head emerges from the collar like a turtle's from its shell.

"What time is it?" he asks. I wonder why he always gets here so early.

"7:04." Our bus is scheduled to arrive at 7:16. The rest of the kids usually arrive just in time to hop on. Occasionally we have to stop for kids frantically running behind us. But Kyle, he's always the first one here. Nobody knows exactly how early he gets here or why.

I sit on the curb and start tracing the outline of the bottom button on my coat with the tip of my finger. Clockwise first: *one, two, three, four, five, six*. Then counterclockwise: *one, two, three, four, five, six*. Back to clockwise: *one, two, three, four, five, six*. Matt and I sit in silence for seven minutes until the Peterson twins loudly arrive in the driveway where we're supposed to wait for the bus. They're fighting about something. They always are. I try

to ignore them, but it's difficult when they're actually physically harming each other. This morning I decide just to stand back and try to stay out of it.

"You did not. I had the fastest time. You can check the record on the game."

"But I was the one who *set* that record."

Michael locks his elbow around Scott's neck but Scott counters by kicking Michael's feet out from beneath him. Within seconds, they're both on the concrete battling to the death. Scott's jeans are torn and I see blood start to emerge from the scratches on his knees. I wonder if this concrete is as rough as the steps I was sitting on yesterday. Michael and Scott must get a lot of injuries.

When the bus arrives I'm the second to board after Kyle. The bus driver, Mr. Gladstone, looks chipper this morning. It's hard to imagine someone actually enjoying transporting a bunch of tired middle-schoolers at seven in the morning. I smile at him and take my usual seat: sixth from the front on the right.

I wore jeans today. They're much more comfortable, especially against the pleather school bus seats. I lean my head forward to rest it against the seat in front of me and stare at my shoes. Looking at the floor on a bus is always a bad idea. I don't want to know what's down there. Or do I? If I know exactly what's down there I will know exactly what to avoid. Actually, maybe I should always stare at the floor of the school bus. I mean, it's better than stepping in gunk.

My shoes have memory foam in the insoles. I thought that it sounded like a stupid idea when I saw it on the box, but it actually feels great. I resisted hard when my mom threw them in the cart. They look like nurses' shoes. I can't believe I actually mustered the

courage to wear them to school. At least my feet will be comfortable when the other kids make fun of me.

Our bus is the first to arrive at the school, but the rest of the fleet is right on our tail. Soon, hundreds of pubescent humans emerge from the bus doors, and the area in front of the school looks like Disneyland in the middle of July. Barely room to breathe. I manage to squeeze myself through the crowd and into the building. I gasp as I finally break free.

We have something called “advisory” every morning before first period. Basically, the teachers group random kids together and force them to socialize with each other. Apparently Mr. Charles, the principal, hates it when people walk around glued to their devices. He thinks we don’t know how to build relationships or interact with each other. He’s convinced advisory is the answer.

We start with a greeting. We all have to look each other in the eye, shake hands, and say good morning using the other person’s name. Then it’s time for “sharing.” They always have something different for us to talk about: what we want to do when we grow up, problems we see in our community, our favorite things about school, etc. Once Mrs. Anderson shared a story about her daughter who passed away as an infant. We all spent most of the day crying. It seems unclear whether Mr. Charles actually wants us to get that deep in the sharing sessions. I guess it did make us all feel closer to each other, though.

This morning we’re all required to greet each other in another language. My grandmother is German, so I have my *Guten Morgen* all ready to go when it’s my turn. Most kids just say *Hola*. One kid says a whole bunch of stuff in Japanese. Mrs. Anderson says *Anyong Haseyo*. I’m not sure what language that is, and am a little too embarrassed to ask.

For sharing, we're supposed to talk to the class about a time we felt gossiped about in school. Why would I do that? If I shared a time I felt gossiped about, I would essentially be tattling on half the people in this room. Luckily only volunteers have to participate, so I sit back and wait for somebody else to relive their trauma.

Elisa Ginsberg raises her hand and talks for about five minutes about how she feels uncomfortable when people talk behind her back about her petite frame. News flash, Elisa: that's not what people talk about. She is like a dwarf or something, but nobody actually cares about that. Behind Elisa's back, people talk about how she clearly *enjoys* saying the most insulting things possible, usually right to your face. Once she told me the small gap I have between my front teeth looked "unhygienic" and made her "want to gag."

Mrs. Anderson can't get anyone else to volunteer to share. We wait in silence for a few minutes before she starts to feel uncomfortable and pulls out the Apples to Apples box. After sharing, we're all supposed to engage in some sort of mandated game or activity. Mrs. Anderson usually ignores the daily instructions and lets us play our favorite board games until the bell rings. She's never really seemed enthusiastic about advisory.

She yells at us to rearrange the desks in a half-circle formation before we leave. With the tip of my index finger, I trace a ring around the corner of my desk six times before heading out the door.

Benjamin Watson starts walking with me on my way to social studies. He makes me feel so embarrassed. I know that's terrible. I know I shouldn't judge people based on their clothing, but does he have to tuck his sweatpants in to his gym socks every single day of his life? I try to walk a little bit ahead of him, but he catches up to me.

"We found two garter snakes in the tall grass near the big drainage pipe. Do you want to come see after school? They're really cute."

"Is anyone else going?"

"Oh, yeah! I'm sure everybody will want to come see them!"

"I'll go if Lindsay and Asha are going." I feel like a jerk as the words exit my mouth. I don't need cool girls. I should just go see the snakes. It shouldn't matter who else is going. If this were two years ago I'd be running to the drainage pipe with Benjamin as soon as the last bell rang for the day. I shouldn't feel embarrassed about being seen with him, but I do. And I feel guilty about feeling embarrassed. I trace the top button on my jeans with the tip of my finger: *one, two, three, four, five, six.*

Math is my favorite class of the day. Unfortunately, it comes very last and I have to suffer through hours of torture and boredom before I finally get here. Mrs. Carlson is amazing. Her obsession with frogs might seem a little extreme to some people at first, but it's what made me love her. She has a whole bookshelf in the back of the classroom filled only with frog figurines and dolls students have given her over the years. She wears a different pair of socks every day, always with a new species of frog printed on the side.

"Let's go over last night's homework. Switch papers with a partner and we'll go over the answers. Write your partner's score on the top of their paper when we're finished." We go over the odd problems. I ended up completing problems two, four, and six because it felt wrong to not complete at least the first six. This confuses my partner, Kyle, who marks almost all my answers incorrect. My chest feels tight and I try to explain myself to him, but

Mrs. Carlson scolds me for talking out of turn. I decide to wait until after the bell rings to address the problem with her.

“I did all these right. Kyle just didn’t look at the right numbers. See? These are actually the answers to two, three, and four. He just thought they were the answers to three, five and seven.”

“Why didn’t you just do the odds like I assigned?”

“I don’t know. It felt wrong to not at least do the first six.” Mrs. Carlson stares at me for what seems like forty seconds without saying a single word. I feel like a freak.

“Okay, well, everything’s correct. Good job, Gretchen.” She smiles at me and I head out the door. I think about going over to the drainage pipe to see the snakes, but something keeps me from turning. I walk straight home past the big orange mansion with the enormous swimming pool in the backyard. They have a trampoline out back too. In the summer I’ve seen kids doing backflips off the trampoline to the pool. I don’t know who the kids are. They live so close, but I’ve never met them. They don’t go to our school.

Chapter 3

I sit upside down on our living room sofa while my mother and I watch *Dancing with the Stars*. My feet flop over the back of the headrest while my head dangles from the edge of the seat. Everyone is always so tan on this show. Staring at it without my glasses is just a big blur of orange and sparkle. I decide to sit right side up and put my glasses back on. It's not much different.

"Do you think I should take dance classes with the rest of the girls? Do you think that would help me fit in?"

"It might," my mother responds, "but you should really only take a dance class if you're interested in dance. Are you interested in dance?"

"I don't know. Maybe." I get up and try to do a couple of pirouettes across the kitchen tile. I land while still in control of my balance, so I dare myself to do six in a row. I fly right into the corner of the kitchen island. I can hardly breathe for a moment. It's almost like I feel the tile countertop actually press against my internal organs. I feel like throwing up.

"What are you doing? Come back over here," my mother demands. I walk toward her and lift my shirt, exposing my navel. My stomach is as white as my tee shirt, maybe even whiter. It's blinding. A drop of blood falls from a wound about two inches above my belly button. I wipe it away with the middle finger of my right hand and stare at it for a second or two.

"Gretchen! Gretchen!" My mother slaps my cheek a few times. "Gretchen!" I open my eyes and realize I'm on the floor where the kitchen tile meets the living room carpet. My head hurts.

"What happened?" I ask my mother. She tells me that I fainted at the sight of my own blood again. I've been doing this since I was little, but it hasn't happened in years because I try to avoid, you know, bleeding. I look down at my middle and see that my mother has already bandaged my wound. How long was I out?

"I don't know if dance classes are the best idea." My mother looks serious, but also like she's holding in laughter. I break the tension by cracking up myself.

"Yeah, I might die," I say, laughing through coughs. My mother helps me to my feet and we head back to the living room couch to finish watching sparkly orange people cut a rug.

Mom tells me to say my prayers before bed, but it takes me forever to finish. "Dear Lord, we thank you for all the blessings we've received." It doesn't feel right. I didn't say it with the right feeling inside. I try again. Still bad. Every muscle in my body tenses up. I try again. I feel worse. I try to think of the loveliest, most wonderful blessing in my life. Maybe that will help me feel truly grateful when I say the words. I imagine the view of the foothill mountains from the bottom of the valley and I start to relax a bit. I say the words again and my brain opens the gate: I'm allowed to move on.

"Please bless my mom and Grandma and Uncle Jim": that one feels even worse. I try it again and again. I imagine happy things. I try to imagine my Uncle Jim's life with as many blessings as I can think of. It doesn't help. I'm still not saying it with the right feeling. This is

serious. I am talking to *God*, of all people. If I don't get this perfect, who knows what will happen? Six. Maybe if I say it six times and try to hold the right feeling inside.

Please bless my mom and Grandma and Uncle Jim

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Please bless my mom and Grandma and Uncle Jim

It doesn't work. I know it will if I do it right though. I try again, nope. After six groups of six: boom. I can move on. Just one last part. The hardest one.

"In the name of Jesus Christ, amen." Again, it's not right. I try over and over again. Groups of sixes. Everything I can think of. After what feels like hours, I feel the anxiety leave my body and I rise to my feet. I flop onto my bed stomach first and cradle my pillow like it's the most beloved object in my world. I glance at the clock: 11:57. Mom sent me to bed at 9:45. I close my eyes and sleep through the night without dreaming.

Chapter 4

I am never speaking to Kelly again. Ever. I sit on the wooden bench outside the girls' locker room, my head cradled in my hands. I can feel seven different pimples emerging from different areas on my face. One on my nose. Two on my left cheek. Three on my forehead and one on my chin. The one on my chin is still beneath the skin, but feels big and powerful and like it might cause my head to spontaneously combust at some point.

People who pop their pimples make her want to vomit. I make Kelly Henderson want to vomit and Elisa Ginsberg want to gag. I should probably just lock myself up somewhere. My physical appearance is too nauseating for people to bear. I reach down to the head of the large nail that connects the wooden slats to the bench's legs. I trace the nail head with the tip of my finger. Clockwise first: *one, two, three, four, five, six*. Then counterclockwise: *one, two, three, four, five, six*. Back to clockwise: *one, two, three, four, five, six*.

"Gretchen! Get your behind back in here! You can't just ask to get a drink and use that as an excuse to skip gym class." I apologize and drag my feet back into the gymnasium. Mrs. Peets whacks my lower back with the back of her hand and tells me to stand up straight.

All I can hear is shoe rubber squeaking on the gym floor. It's like a symphony of unbearable sounds: rubber shoes, whistles, and balls bouncing. It takes everything I have inside me not to turn around and run back through the door I just begrudgingly entered.

I rejoin the group of girls on my "basketball team." We're not really a team. We hate each other, for the most part. Mrs. Peets just forced us together. Ava is pretty good, actually.

Her older brother plays on the team at the high school. Kelly just stands around and makes rude comments to people. Kara and Ainsley play a little bit, but they mostly just sit in the corner, whispering to each other. Ella occupies the bench most of the time. She says her doctor doesn't want her to get too involved. We all think it's a lie. She just doesn't want to get sweaty in the middle of the day.

Kelly tosses me the ball and I start dribbling it to the back of the half-court. My shoes make an even more ungodly sound than everyone else's. I pass to Ava, who shoots from near the free-throw line. *Swish*. I don't know if we're keeping score, but whatever team Ava gets placed on is destined to win, no matter what. Woohoo. I guess that means we're champions.

I want to say something mean to Kelly. I want to hurt her feelings. My mother would say I need to be the bigger person. That I shouldn't stoop to her level. I don't even know what I would say, anyway. Your hair is too blond and perfect. I hate your designer shoes. Yeah, that would be really hurtful.

I decide not to say anything. I just play basketball until the bell rings. If I say something to her, she'll just say something meaner to me. I don't know if I can take any more. At the end of class she smacks me on the butt and says "nice hustle." I don't really appreciate the physical contact from her, but I'm glad it's not another insult that comes out of her mouth.

We head back into the locker rooms and I start toward the bathroom stall to change. Nobody in our class showers. My mother tells me horror stories of her days in gym class where everyone basically had to huddle up butt-naked and try to get clean around these big communal shower heads. I thank God every day that that isn't my life. I don't even like the

other girls to see me in my underwear. That's why I change in the stall. Some girls don't seem to care. Some of them run around the locker room playing games barely dressed. It makes me feel uncomfortable. I wonder what the boys do.

By the time I have my blue jeans on the bell rings, informing me that I need to be on the other side of the school in exactly five minutes. I slip on my shoes without tying them, grab my backpack, and dart out toward the art room, accidentally leaving my gym clothes on the floor of the bathroom stall.

"Gretchen!"

"Shhh! What?"

"There are actually six garter snakes over by the drain. You have to come see. Billy figured out they were all piled on top of each other in a hole. C'mon, Gretch."

"Maybe," I tell Benjamin. I don't know why I don't just say yes. It doesn't even matter. Looking at a few snakes with a guy who tucks his sweatpants into his socks won't totally ruin my social standing, will it? "Actually, Let's meet there twenty minutes after school gets out. I have to pay a fee at the library first." Benjamin's face is nothing but teeth. Beaming. You'd think I'd just agreed to his marriage proposal, judging by the look on his face. It embarrasses me and I look down. I start tracing circles with the balls of my feet. Six clockwise, six counterclockwise. I close my eyes and try to remember something that makes me happy. Something that doesn't make me feel tense. I can't remember anything.

Chapter 4

We head down Oakwood Drive and cut through the Stevensons' yard, crouching as low as we can to the patches of green and white bishop's weed that cover their lawn. When we were in fourth grade, Mr. Stevenson caught us cutting through here and flew into a fit of rage. He said the "S" word at us. We never cut through on the west side of the house anymore; the east side is much more discreet. Somebody needs to tell this guy that if he doesn't want kids cutting through his yard all the time, he should buy a house that doesn't have the only access in the neighborhood to a big cool drainage pipe. Kids will be cutting through here for eternity. Unless he puts up a fence. I hope that idea never occurs to him. That would suck.

My shoe slides on a patch of mud and I land butt-first in a puddle of marshy goop. Benjamin grabs my hand to help me up, but it takes me a second even to realize what happened. Every muscle in my body feels tense. We keep walking.

"Here! Look!" Benjamin points to a small hole in the ground filled with several small snakes. They're not scary. They're cute. I think. "Do you want to hold one?"

"Okay," I say with hesitation. Benjamin grabs one by the end of its tail, then grasps its neck with his other hand. I reach my arm out and the little guy slithers onto me. When you see snakes at the zoo, they always almost seem like they're dead. They never move. These puny dudes won't stop wiggling.

I giggle for a few seconds before I feel something warm on my arm. I look down and see a bit of liquid spilling off my elbow.

"Oh my gosh! He peed on you!" Benjamin shrieks. He starts laughing so hard I'm surprised he doesn't pee himself. I look around. I don't want to wipe it on my clothes. Maybe I can rinse it in the creek. All I can feel is the urine on my arm. That and the mud on my butt. I trudge over to the creek and stare at the muddy water. It's hard to decide which is more disgusting. I mean, the stream undoubtedly already has a bunch of animal urine in it anyway, right?

I can't stand it. I bend forward and cup some water in my right hand to pour over my left forearm. It's muddier than I expect and my arm is now covered in mud *and* urine.

"Gretchen, why is your face so red? It's just pee. Sheesh. Just take a shower when you get home." His words mean nothing to me. In fact, they make me kind of angry. I can only feel two parts of my body: my arm and my butt. I wonder if I could feel it if somebody punched me in the stomach.

"I have to go." I say abruptly. I turn around and start speed-walking home. Running seems too dangerous. Things could jump around and fling to different parts of my body. I have to keep the contamination contained.

"Holy crap, Gretchen, grow a pair!" I hear Benjamin shout from behind me. What a jerk. I start walking faster. That's it. Benjamin is on the list. He's on my bad list just like Kenny Feinstein and Kelly Crandall and all the rest. Who would have thought this dork who tucks his sweatpants into his socks every godforsaken day of his life would be yelling at me to grow body parts I can't so I can be as brave as him. He doesn't understand. He doesn't get what my body does when it feels contaminated. Also he's sexist.

I strip almost naked in the entryway of our house and walk straight to the bathroom. I turn on the shower and let it get as hot as it can. Droplets of cranberry body wash look

like blood dripping from in between my fingers. I wash my left forearm six times, making sure to wash my hands in between each scrubbing. Once the contaminated areas feel clean, I step out of the shower and rinse the tile with the detachable head. Then I hop right back in again and go through my normal shower routine. This way I won't have to worry about accidentally contaminating other parts of my body while I'm trying to clean them.

"Gretchen, you have been in there for forty-five minutes! We are in a drought! You are being irresponsible." My mother's tone is annoyed. I rinse off and try to think of something happy. It doesn't feel right, so I do it one more time. Bingo. I hop out and dry myself off.

My mother's face looks furious when I exit the bathroom "Sorry," I say sheepishly.

"Why are you so red? Gretchen, how hot was that water?"

"Hot enough to get everything off," I tell her, and head off to my room to get dressed. I notice that she's still staring at me as I close the door.

Chapter 5

I back up until I can feel the bricks of the school against my body, then slide down into a seated fetal position, wrapping my arms around my knees. It scrapes on the way down. One of the bricks catches on my tee shirt and exposes my bare skin to the rough material, gouging my left shoulder. I don't care. Thinking about the physical pain seems like a great distraction.

Last year Kenny Feinstein was a jerk. A huge jerk. Almost a criminal. This year, he's a monster. Sub-human. Last year, Kenny got suspended for pooping in a box and leaving it in front of Mrs. Buchanan's classroom door. Today, Kenny bit a kid's *nipple* off. Nobody knows what the punishment will be. Only time will tell. Most people are saying they doubt they'll ever let Kenny come back.

It keeps playing over and over again in my mind. Leon Michaels is one of three black kids who go to our school. I've never really thought about him that much. From what I observe (as someone who typically won't go near the boys with a ten-foot pole), kids like him. They don't treat him any differently, I don't think. But what happened today was so weird. Craig and Kenny were playing wall-ball, as usual. When Leon walked over and started talking to them, Kenny pounced on him like a panther. He ripped Leon's shirt off.

This is when I started darting toward the school entrance as fast as I could. Brawling means bleeding. I can't deal with it. Ainsley told me they wrestled for about three minutes before the ultimate grossness actually happened. Then everyone saw Kenny open his mouth as wide as a hippo and clamp his choppers right on Leon's chest. There was

apparently blood everywhere. Kenny looked like some sort of vampire who just had the ultimate feast. I'm really quite glad I decided to go inside.

It would be better if Kenny never came back. He's hurt too many people. Leon and I can certainly attest to that. I had to deal with not being able to do anything with my left hand for months. Now Leon will have to deal with only having one nipple. Unless they reattach it, I guess. Can they do that? Like a finger? Does it have to be put on ice? I don't know. I hope they expel Kenny. He deserves whatever he gets, even if I do feel guilty about the events that led to him pushing me down the steps last spring.

The sky is completely cloudless. Almost too blue. I try to inhale and exhale slowly, steadying my heart rate. I lift my hand and stare at the impressions that thousands of tiny concrete indents have made in my palm. It feels tingly. I rise to my feet and pace back and forth between the side of the building and the parking lot, hoping every car that passes is my mother, finally here to pick me up. She's always so late if she has to pick me up on a Wednesday. I should've just taken the bus home, but I wanted to go to the meeting about glee club. There were some girls there that seemed kind of nice, maybe. I don't know. Maybe missing the bus was worth it.

When she finally pulls up I hop in and strap my seatbelt on.

"Were you there? Did you see it?" She asks. I guess the news is all over town.

"The nipple?" I ask. She nods. "I was there at the beginning, but ran away once things started getting violent. I didn't want to pass out again."

"They need to throw that boy in a mental institution. He needs professional help." I shake my head in agreement as I trace the button on my seatbelt with the tip of my finger.

Clockwise first: *one, two, three, four, five, six*. Then counterclockwise: *one, two, three, four, five, six*. Back to clockwise: *one, two, three, four, five, six*.

Sleeping seems impossible. When I close my eyes I see myself falling backwards down the four concrete steps that lead to the entrance of Watson Elementary. My arm twisting. Either that or Leon's nipple flying through the air, spewing blood. It's like the images are on shuffle. I don't know which one I'll get until my eyes are shut. At least I made it through my prayers; that was particularly difficult tonight. It's hard to feel like you're talking to the Lord the right way when violent images are flashing through your mind.

When I finally dose off I dream that Jimmy Fallon is the President of the United States and everyone has to start wearing acid-washed denim as a uniform for America. My mother is a scorpion who can only talk to me. Nobody else can see her. It's hard even to get people to see me.

Chapter 6

My uncle Jim is six-foot-six. He has sandy blond hair and an unkempt beard that makes him look like a transient. I'm not really sure what he does for a living. He wears coveralls almost every single time I see him, so I imagine it's got to be something with cars or machinery. I asked him once and he told me he was a top secret agent for the government. I'm pretty sure that was a lie.

"Do you guys like Indian food?" he asks my mother and me as we cruise down Second Boulevard.

"Yes, but it has to be Sitara India. Mom insulted a waiter at Taj." We all laugh as we stare at my mother, whose face turns from a beautiful tan to a fiery red before our eyes. We try to go out to dinner with Uncle Jim at least once a month. He lives about an hour away, so sometimes he travels down here, but other months Mom and I drive up to Fairview.

Riding in Jim's truck feels incredibly high. Mini Coopers and Smart Cars look like ants from up here. I stare down at the Honda Civic parked next to us at the stoplight. I can see the contents of this guy's car through his sunroof. He's apparently never thrown a soda can away in his life. It's like he's driving around in a big garbage bag.

There's no wait once we arrive at the restaurant. I try to order a Dr. Pepper but my mother tells me she doesn't want me having that much caffeine. I tell the waitress I want chicken tikka masala, the only thing I ever order because it's the most delicious thing on the planet. Uncle Jim orders a whole bunch of stuff I've never heard of and hands his menu back to the waitress. She walks away and he knocks his knuckles against the table four times.

“So your mom told me about the nipple thing. That’s gnarly, man. There were some brutal fights when I was in middle school, but nothing like that. That’s freaking crazy.”

“I know,” I respond, “that kid is nuts. It’s the same kid who pushed me down the steps last year. I think they’re probably going to expel him.” I reach down and trace the button on my jacket six times with the tip of my finger.

“Well, I’m glad they never expelled me for anything stupid I did. Kids make a lot of mistakes before they get things sometimes. Not to excuse his behavior.” Nobody says anything for a few seconds. I play with the wrapper that came on my straw, folding it by triangular sections. Mom almost knocks over Uncle Jim’s water with her elbow.

“These plates are extremely hot. Please be very careful.” The food smells heavenly. I’m starving. They served hot dogs for lunch today at school. I ate the brownie and the apple slice and threw the rest in the trash. I’ve been waiting for this all day. We dig in like a pack of hungry lions hovering over a zebra.

“So what are you gonna be for Halloween, Gretch?” Jim asks with his mouth full. I don’t know how to answer. I mean, last year Asha, Benjamin, and I all decided we were going to dress up like feelings from *Inside Out*, but I don’t think that’s happening anymore. Asha is way too cool to talk to me, and I am currently not speaking to Benjamin. What am I going to do on Halloween? Sit in the living room and hand out candy with my mother? That’s a terrible way to spend the last Halloween before you turn thirteen.

“Um, I don’t really know. I had some plans, but social things fell through. People are jerks. I’ll figure it out.” Mom and Jim look at me with pity. They start talking about how much middle school sucks and everyone hated it. Great. I still have to endure over two and

a half years of this torture. I don't think telling me that it was a bad experience for everyone is necessarily the right way to make me feel better.

A song comes on that I've heard before. I've always wondered what it was called and who did it. I ask Jim. He doesn't know.

"Oh, I think this is Harry Styles," my mom says. "You know, that boy from One Direction." Jim looks at my mother with disgust. "What?" She squeals. She pushes him like she wants him to fall out of our booth. A large frown remains on his face. I look down at my feet as they start laughing. Harry Styles. I'll have to look him up when I get home.

After we finish paying my mother takes a quick phone call outside. Jim talks to me about a Halloween costume my Grandma made for him when he was in middle school. He was a Nintendo. An NES. There was a big cardboard box that went over his shoulders. On it there was a screen with a scene from Super Mario Brothers. He had controllers coming out of his waist. It sounds adorable. My mom would never make me a costume like that. She doesn't have the time, and she just didn't inherit the creativity gene from Grandma. Jim and I head out when we see Mom getting into the car outside the big glass front door. He knocks four times on the table before we leave.

When we get home I ask my mother if I can use her laptop. She asks if it's for school and I tell her no.

"Okay. Only twenty minutes then," she says as she hands it to me. I rush into the living room and open it up while lying on the couch. I google Harry Styles and a picture of the most beautiful boy I've ever seen in my life pops up. I try to find a video for the song we heard in the restaurant. What could it be called?

I find it after just a few seconds of searching. It's called "Sign of the Times." I watch the video three times in a row. He's wearing a long flowing coat with old timey shoes and his beautiful hair blows in the wind as he begins to fly around the world. His eyes pierce my soul. I pause the video and just stare into his eyes for a few minutes before my mother yanks the computer from my grasp.

"Time's up, girly." She says. My heart aches. I walk into my bedroom and shut the door. I wish I could have my own computer or phone or iPad or *something*. It seems like my mom is so much more protective about internet stuff than my friends' parents. It's just not fair.

Prayers are much easier tonight. It seems like everything might be easier now that I have Harry's eyes to imagine when I don't feel right. Things are okay. Harry's with me now. My chest feels warm and I run my middle finger up and down my sternum six times before falling asleep.

Chapter 7

Neither Kenny nor Leon show up to school for the rest of the week. The school is absolutely on fire with gossip. This morning somebody told me that Kenny is going to prison. I don't think that's true. They don't throw sixth-graders in prison, do they? I guess with Kenny they might make an exception, though.

Elisa Ginsberg sits next to me in English class. She gets really irritated if I even accidentally invade her "personal bubble." I think it's just me. She doesn't seem to get that weird about other people coming near her. She just thinks I'm disgusting for some reason. Probably because of my pimples.

Mr. Rand is giving us a vocabulary quiz in four minutes and has given us a final chance to cram. I don't need to. The words are easy. I've known what "economy" and "migration" have meant for years. I get out a paper and draw Harry's name in bubble letters. I just do a little tail on the lowercase A. It looks beautiful. I almost draw it five more times before Mr. Rand tells us to put our things away. I wish I could finish the sixth. It makes me feel uncomfortable not to.

The day passes quickly. I feel happy. Lighter. Harry's face makes me feel better when I start to feel bad. I wish he was sitting next to me here in Art class. I stroke my sternum with my middle finger, up and down six times.

"Aaaaahhhhhhhhh!!!!!"

"Stop it Mike! She doesn't want to see!"

"I got thirteen stitches! Why wouldn't she wanna see?"

The hallway is complete chaos as I walk toward the nook where the buses pick us up after school. It's almost Halloween, and the nipple incident is fresh in everyone's mind. The student body is obsessed with gore. I gotta get out of here.

"Gretchen!" The familiar voice of Lilian Ratliff calls out to me. I turn around. "Are you going to join the glee club?" I nod and she breathes a sigh of relief. "Good. I'm scared of the eighth-graders." I don't think I know any eighth-graders. I don't know whether to be afraid of them or not. It's weird that I make Lilian feel safe. I thought she didn't even like me. "Let's meet here on Monday so we can walk over together, okay?"

"Okay." I smile at her as she waves goodbye. Maybe Lilian will be one of my middle school friends. Maybe I won't experience this whole thing in solitude like I thought I would. I breathe a sigh of relief myself.

The school buses seem extra yellow today against the bright blue cloudless sky. They smell like rubber. Like a tire store. Maybe they all just got new tires. It's pretty intense.

"Oh, your shoes are untied, honey," Mr. Gladstone says to me as I try to climb aboard. I stop and lean down to fix them, causing everyone behind me in line to start moaning and groaning out of impatience. I don't turn around or say I'm sorry. I finish tying and climb on board, walk down the middle, and plop myself in the sixth row back on the right. I lean my face against the window and stare. A fly is caught between the two panes of glass on the window. It seems impossible that he could have even gotten in there. Certainly impossible to rescue him. It's hard to watch. He frantically flies around, obviously clinging to some sort of hope. I look away for the rest of the ride home.

Chapter 8

After seventh period on Monday I exit Mrs. Carlson's room and enter the swarm of busy, buzzing bodies that instantly fill the hall to capacity seconds after the bell rings each day. I stand on my tiptoes and look for Lilian's light brown hair. I spot it a few feet away and dash over. We look at each other with a little fear in our eyes before turning right toward the choir classroom.

Four girls are already inside. I recognize Jane Weathersby from elementary school. I haven't seen her all year. We don't have any classes together. I honestly thought she went to a different school. She motions for Lilian and me to come sit with her.

"Are there any eighth-graders here yet?" I ask in a hushed tone. Lilian points to the top of the choral risers where three blond girls dressed in volleyball uniforms sit with their feet resting on the chairs in the row in front of them. All of them look strangely similar. Like they could be sisters, but not really. They all have the same hairdo. The same makeup. The same uniform that barely covers their butts.

I settle into my seat between Jane and Lilian and feel grateful that I'm surrounded by other sixth-graders. What Lilian told me was right: these girls seem intimidating for some reason. They're pretty and popular and each one of them looks like they could beat the crap out of me without even getting winded.

About eight more girls come in and sit in the risers before we start. Two of them are other sixth-graders. I don't know the rest.

"We are going to start with some vocal warmups!" The teacher says from across the room. She has a funny accent. I'm not sure where she's from. France? Russia? Italy? I don't know. I'm not great at guessing people's country of origin based on their accent.

She sits down at the piano and plays nine notes in a row: five ascending and four descending. She starts very low. Much too low for me. She plays it over and over again going a little higher each time. I finally find a range where I feel comfortable singing. Jane smiles at me and starts singing too.

Before we know it, the notes start getting so high it hurts to try to sing them. One of the eighth-graders is still going strong, though. She's powerful. Her voice does that vibrating thing. It gets higher and higher. She sounds like an opera singer. It's beautiful, I guess. If you like that kind of singing. It sure is impressive.

"Very nice work, girls. Ripley, remember to completely raise your soft palate as you bridge over your break." The teacher starts playing more warmups. I wonder if we're actually going to sing songs. It would suck if this were all we ever got to do in glee club.

After a few more minutes of warmups, she stops playing and tells us she would like to hear all our voices individually. The whole choir engages in a collective gasp. She says she just wants to hear us sing a few lines from a song of our choice. The soprano from the back volunteers to go first. I start racking my brain and my pulse jumps to 150. Nobody can pay attention to Ripley while she sings. Everyone is too nervous about their own performance.

I close my eyes and try to picture Harry. I take my middle finger and run it up and down my sternum six times. Harry wouldn't be afraid. Harry loves to sing. Harry would want me to sing. After Ripley is finished, nobody volunteers for almost two minutes. The

teacher threatens just to call on us, but then I raise my hand. I can't really believe it as I watch it move into the air, but after it's done, there's nothing else I can do. I have to sing. I have to sing for a bunch of girls I don't know.

I rise to my feet and stare at the blue, industrial-looking carpet that covers the floor. I walk toward the front of the classroom and picture horribly embarrassing things happening. Not even music-related. Like peeing my pants or something. I shake my body out and rub my breastbone six times again. I inhale deeply through my nose.

I am a lost boy from Neverland

usually hanging out with Peter Pan

By the time I finish the fourth line, the teacher sits at the piano and begins playing along with me. I guess she knows this one. It sounds better. I feel more confident and try to project a little more. It feels good. I try to pour all the anxiety I'm feeling into the song, and it kind of works.

The whole room applauds loudly and whistles for me when I finish. I'm a little shocked by the response. I always figured I wasn't very good. Maybe they're just being nice. It boosts my confidence either way. I take my seat and rub my sternum again—a little thank you for Harry.

We started with nobody wanting to volunteer, but now kids are arguing over whose turn is next. Lilian sings "Amazing Grace," but is almost too quiet to hear. The teacher has to tell one of the eighth-graders the Ariana Grande song she picked is too inappropriate for school. It's fun to see everybody muster their courage. It makes me feel closer to all these girls. Maybe I will have friends in middle school.

Jane is the last to go. She sings "Tomorrow" from *Annie*. She's amazing. Why did she go last? She should be on Broadway or something. My jaw is on the floor by the time she finishes.

"Belting is very bad for your voice," is all the teacher says in response. Jane comes back and sits down next to me. I whisper to her that she was incredible, but there are tears in her eyes.

The teacher tells us we need to check our school email so we can get the recording of the song she wants us to learn before our next meeting. She says some weird word that I assume means goodbye in her native language and we all start filtering out the door.

"That was fun," I say to Jane and Lilian. Lilian nods her head but Jane just stares at the floor. "I can't decide if I like the teacher or not. She has weird taste. I mean, Jane was amazing." Lilian continues nodding. "What was the teacher's name again?"

"Mrs. Aleksandrovic, but everybody calls her Mrs. A," Jane responds. We walk down the hall toward the front door together. It feels natural. Like I've always had friends here. I rub my middle finger up and down my sternum six times.

Chapter 9

Jane's mom called my mom and asked if we could have a playdate. It seems a little humiliating. I mean, of course my mother said yes, and I'm glad Jane's mom called and asked, but the whole situation just makes us sound like we're in kindergarten or something. I guess I don't really know how else we could have made plans, though. I feel like I am the only sixth-grader in the world who doesn't have their own phone. Most of the kids at school just text their friends to plan when they want to hang out. I can't do that. I get "playdates."

I stand on the big porch that wraps around the Weathersby mansion. Their house is painted bright yellow with white trim. The front door is blue and has a wreath decorated with autumn leaves and pine cones hanging in the center. I stare at a small weather-worn garden gnome that sits beside the front step as I ring the doorbell.

Two distinct sets of feet start hurtling down what sounds like a hardwood floor. The door swings open a few seconds later and Jane and Lilian stand in front of me, completely out of breath.

"C'mon," Jane manages to say between pants. I use my right heel to push my left shoe off then do the same with my bare left heel. It's harder without a shoe on. I follow Jane and Lilian through the entryway and into the kitchen, where Jane opens a door to reveal a set of descending stairs. I guess we're headed for the basement.

We walk down some carpeted steps and enter a large home-theater-style room. Her family has one of those sectionals that seats eight people and provides two cup holders for each one. It seems luxurious. I wonder how many people they have in their family. A lot, by

the looks of things. I feel a little jealous. Sometimes I wish it wasn't just me and Mom around our house.

Jane turns left and opens another door, which I fully expect to be a playroom of some sort. It's not. It's more stairs. Going down again. We're already in the basement, but we're going down more stairs? This is the weirdest house I've ever seen. It has two stories above ground and two stories below ground. Two subterranean floors.

This next set of stairs seems much more dangerous than the first. They're wooden slats with scary-looking nails sticking out of them. I walk down as carefully as I can, clinging to the railing for dear life. When we finally reach our destination I see what looks like miles of toys. Jane leads us over to a big Barbie Dream House next to where her American Girl dolls are displayed.

"Did you bring anything?" she asks.

"What do you mean?"

"Did you bring any dolls?" I'm surprised by the question. I mean, we're in middle school, right? Am I supposed to bring my Barbies when I go to hang out with other teenagers?

"No."

"That's okay. I have some you can use. Who do you want to be?" I reach out and grab a very tan Barbie doll wearing a dress like Elsa from *Frozen*.

"Okay, good. So, we're all college roommates. But we're really rich so we live together in this mansion. And I'm a pop star. Lilian's girl is named Lila and she's from the south of France. She came out here to be with her boyfriend." She points to a Ken doll in a toy Hummer. "Who are you?"

“Um, I guess I’m studying to be a computer scientist,” I say. “Oh, while my boyfriend Harry Styles is on tour.” Both the girls laugh and we start playing. It feels strange. I haven’t really done this in months. I thought middle school meant you were too old for playing like this. Our story goes all sorts of crazy places. All of our characters are way more obsessed with romance than they used to be when we were younger. I redress my doll in jeans and a belly shirt—something my mother would never let me out of the house in in a million years. I pick out a Ken doll to be Harry Styles and tangle his limbs up with my doll’s. Press their faces together. Try to make them hold hands. I rub my middle finger up and down my sternum.

Lilian stops playing somewhat abruptly and sits straight up. “Hey, guys, um, have you guys, um, started?” she asks. We look at her, puzzled.

“Started what?” I respond. Her face gets red.

“You know. Your period,” she says in a voice so quiet I can barely make out the words. When I realize what she’s asked, my stomach drops to the floor. I haven’t started. I don’t want to start. I don’t want to think about starting.

Jane and I both shake our heads. Lilian tells us she hasn’t started either. We all breathe a collective sigh of relief, but it seems ridiculous to do so. I mean it *is* coming. There is nothing we can do to stop it. It is our destiny.

“Well, I just want mine to happen so I can get it over with and I don’t have to worry about it anymore,” Lilian says casually. Jane and I look each other in the eye, then stare at Lilian.

“What do you mean?” I ask. “It’s not something that’s going to be over with for a very long time.”

“What do *you* mean?” Lilian says back at me with a confused look on her face.

“Lilian, you know it’s something that happens every month, right? Like, we bleed every single month until we’re old ladies,” Jane explains. Lilian stares back at us, her mouth agape. We start trying to comfort her. Saying we’re sorry. It’s weird to say you’re sorry for something you can’t control. Something that’s going to happen to you too. I trace the top button on my jeans six times counterclockwise.

We try to lighten the mood and redress Jane’s American Girl dolls for an hour or so before her mother’s voice comes over an intercom system. Both my and Lilian’s parents have arrived to pick us up. I hop from my knees to my feet and take one final look around at the sea of toys, at the walls with no drywall and exposed insulation.

I stare for a second at Lilian’s Rapunzel tee shirt. I feel sorry for her. Sorry that she was wrong. Sorry that she’s going to get a period every single month instead of just getting it over with like she’d hoped. We trudge up the two flights of stairs it takes to get to the ground floor. I thank Jane’s mom and tell the girls that I’ll see them in school tomorrow before climbing into my mom’s stealthy Volvo.

“How was it?” My mom wants to know the scoop immediately.

“Fun. Um, I guess we still play with dolls. That’s like, literally what we did the whole time. I thought we were too old for that stuff, but it was fun. I think we got some good girl bonding time in.” My mom tells me she thinks that’s great while she drives us straight to Chipotle for dinner.

“Oh my god though, Mom—the funniest and saddest thing: Lilian thought periods were a one-time deal. Like we bleed for one week and then it’s all over with. Jane and I had

to break the bad news to her. It was awful." My mom starts laughing so hard she starts to cry. She pulls the visor down and fixes her makeup in the mirror.

"Bless her heart," she says between chuckles. "Bless her heart."

Chapter 10

Middle school feels like a different world now. I have friends. I didn't even really have friends in elementary school. Now I have people who look for me between classes. People who want to sit with me in the cafeteria. I don't know why I didn't play more with Jane and Lilian before now. It just never occurred to me. I guess it took the total immersion in pubescent terror to bring us together.

Lilian sits next to me in math class. She's not supposed to, but it takes Mrs. Carlson fifteen minutes to realize she's not in her assigned seat. When she finally figures it out she threatens us with demerits and yells for Lilian to get back to where she's supposed to be. We both giggle as she moves, and Mrs. Carlson furrows her brow.

We're learning about how to find the area of a right triangle. I kind of forgot to pay attention until now. I guess Lily was a bit of a distraction. I try to copy down the lesson notes from the board, but it all seems like a scrambled mess. I picture Harry Styles sitting in the empty rocking chair that sits near Mrs. Carlson's desk. I can see his big white teeth and his long wavy hair as he stares lovingly back at me. I rub my middle finger up and down my sternum six times.

The teacher tells us to get out our homework and switch papers with the person sitting next to us. The room is instantly flooded with the sound of paper being torn from spiral notebooks. I give my paper to Kyle, and he gives his to me. Kyle's writing is so hard to read. It's not that it's messy—just small. Everything he writes looks like it was actually written by some tiny leprechaun that crawled out of his pocket or something. Our third grade teacher diagnosed him with “tiny-writis.” Mrs. Carlson goes over each problem in

detail, and it takes us until the end of the period to finish the whole assignment. When Kyle hands me my paper, I notice that most of the problems have been marked wrong again.

"Kyle! I told you: you have to look at the numbers in front of each answer. See? I got these right. I just did more problems than she told us too. I did all of 1-6." Kyle shrugs like it's not his problem and heads out the door. I decide to take it up with the teacher.

"I got all these right, see? I just did one, two, three, four, five and si—" she cuts me off.

"Gretchen, this is the exact same issue you came to see me about last time. There is an extremely easy way to fix this problem: only do the problems that are assigned! Why are you doing work I'm not asking you to do?"

"It just feels weird not to do at least the first six."

"What? Why? What's so significant about the first six?" I don't know how to answer. Doesn't it just feel that way to her too? It's just a feeling. Like something is incomplete.

"I don't know. It just feels like that's what we should do." She stares at me. I can't tell if she's angry or not.

"You are only to do the problems I assigned this evening. If you do more, I will consider them incorrect and it *will* affect your grade." She's definitely angry. I nod my head and try to get out of the classroom as fast as I can.

I need a hug. I need somebody to reassure me that I'm good at math. Doesn't doing more problems correctly prove that? I'm so frustrated. I trace the top button on my jeans six times clockwise and six times counterclockwise with the tip of my finger. The hallways are empty. It seemed like I was only talking to Mrs. Carlson for a moment, but I guess it was

enough time for everybody to grab their stuff out of their locker and get the heck out of Dodge. I wish Jane and Lilian were still here. I wonder if I missed the bus.

If I had a phone I could text Jane or Lily about what happened. They would text back “OMG she sucks” and it would make me feel better. It’s not fair. I drag my feet toward my locker and gather all my books into my backpack. After a quick peek out the window near the front of the school I come to the conclusion that I absolutely did miss the bus. I turn to open the door to the front office and wait behind a boy in black skinny jeans and Converse high tops to talk to the office manager.

“Can I use the phone?” She looks a little annoyed.

“Of course, Gretchen. You know, you really need to try to make it to your bus before it leaves.” I want to explain that it was a teacher who made me miss it, but it doesn’t seem worth the effort. I pick up the old timey land line telephone and dial my mother’s cell phone number. Mom says she’ll be here in five minutes.

“How was your day?” Mom asks as I get into our spy car.

“Great, until math. I’m so annoyed at Mrs. Carlson. I got all of the problems right, but she says she is going to start marking down my grade unless I only do the problems she assigns. It’s ridiculous. I’m *good* at math.”

“You’ve been doing extra work?” Mom asks, puzzled. My body tenses up. I feel like I’m being interrogated by the police. I thought going above and beyond was supposed to be a good thing.

“Well, I always just do problems 1–6. She assigns odds only and it drives me crazy. It seems like I have to do at least the first six, right? It just feels incomplete not to.”

“What? Six? Why six?” she asks. Really? She doesn’t get that six just makes it feel right? Complete? I reach down and start pinching the skin on my knuckles with my fingertips. They become completely white and flat if I pinch hard enough.

“That’s just what makes it feel right. I don’t know. I thought people would get it if I explained it to them, but people seem more confused than ever. It just seems natural and complete. I don’t know!” My mom doesn’t say anything. She turns on Boynton Road and uses the dirt roads near the orchards to get back home. None of the trees have anything on them. They all look dead. Mom stays silent. I feel like a freak.

Please contact bmichellerobison@gmail.com if you would like to read the entire manuscript.