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Author of THE BENEFITS OF BEING AN OCTOPUS

ANN  
BRADEN



## FLIGHT OF THE PUFFIN

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# FLIGHT OF THE PUFFIN



ANN BRADEN



Nancy Paulsen Books

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*For Ethan and Alice*

*May you fly free*





# LIBBY

**MONDAY, APRIL 30**

**THIS IS GOING** to be the best sunrise ever. I slather on more orange paint, catching the drips with my paintbrush and mixing them into the hot pink. I swirl it around and around. My paintbrush is like the band teacher conducting. I don't play an instrument, but I've seen him waving his arms when I peek in the band room.

I dip my brush back into the can and make even bigger circles, then add extra dollops above, like sparks flying up. I love how the sparks look. I know that's not how people usually make sunrises, but there's fire involved, right? I add more on the other side. I have to. There's too much joy inside me to not.

I step back. I knew this would make me feel better!

Now, it's time to add the yellow. I kneel down and pry the lid off the can. A blazing inferno just waiting to be unleashed.



That's when I hear footsteps.

And Principal Hecton's voice.

"Libby Delmar, what have you done to that wall?"



I sit in the seat in front of Principal Hecton's desk. He collapses into his chair and lets out a sigh.

His desk would look better with polka dots. He could get the magnetic kind, and then those of us having to stare at it could rearrange them to keep it fresh. Orange, blue, and purple dots would be nice.

Principal Hecton leans back and closes his eyes. "I should have known."

Maybe with a few yellow dots. That'd really pop.

He opens his eyes and leans over the desk. "Are you going to be just like your brother? And your dad?"

No way! Is he kidding? I try to do the exact opposite of them.

"Because I don't think I can handle that," he says.

Okay, maybe I did do some bad stuff . . . but it was to make things better. And it already did. I eye the still-wet paint splotches on my green pants. Value added!

"And don't think I didn't hear the stories about your grandpa, too, back when I was in school." Principal Hecton shakes his head. "I've got to tell you, I'm tired of your family pushing people around."

I press my lips together and try to imagine that sunrise. I'm not like them.

Principal Hecton eyes me. "And weren't you just in my office a week ago?"

It was twelve days.

"For physically assaulting Danielle Fisher."

That was a mistake. I shouldn't have let her get to me. I wasn't wearing that awesome rainbow outfit for other people. I was wearing it for myself. Who cares if she said I looked like a freaky clown.

Well, my fist cared.

"As you know, we have rules around here for a reason . . ."

He keeps talking, and I have to bite my lip hard so I don't talk back. Yes, I know punching her in the face was the wrong thing to do. Yes, I know that "not thinking was the problem," but did Danielle think before *she* talked? Because if she did, that's even worse.

And I get that girls aren't supposed to give other people bloody noses. Instead, everyone should be like model student Danielle, who fights the "right" way: by convincing the entire softball team to stop talking to me. So that even Adrianna Randell now walks past me without a word, as if we've never spent nights sprawled on pillows and giggling on her bedroom floor.

That sunrise was going to help me ignore it all.

Principal Hecton is squeezing his hands together

and almost whispering. "I'm going to have to do it," he mutters.

Is he talking to himself?

"Okay," he says louder, and lets out a long sigh. "I am going to call your father. And tell him he needs to come to school. He needs to see for himself what you've done."

My dad. Really? I've never seen him in my school. He's not the kind to come to open house or parent conferences. It didn't matter how many times teachers called home to schedule a conversation about my missing work or my "inattentiveness in class." He doesn't exactly appreciate getting "advice" about his children.

"I'm not like my family," I blurt out.

Principal Hecton laughs nervously. "I wish that were true." He starts writing up an in-school suspension slip. "Right now, I want you to bring those cans of paint back to the art closet and clean up that closet while you're there. Then tomorrow, during your in-school suspension, you'll be repainting that wall white again, like it's supposed to be."



Mrs. Ecker, the long-term art sub, is waiting for me when I get to the art room. She leads me toward the art supply closet as if I don't know where it is. As if I wasn't just in there an hour ago, when the door was left open like an invitation and the paint cans were screaming to me. I used to

get to go in the closet all the time when Mrs. DeSouza was still here and we had an actual art teacher.

I carry the paint cans into the closet and breathe in. It smells glorious. Of course, not as good as when Mrs. DeSouza would bring lunch from her brother's Jamaican food truck and the room would smell like jerk chicken and paint. Those lunch periods were heaven, and I thought I had it made.

"Chop-chop," Mrs. Ecker says. "There's plenty to do." She pokes at a pile of paint tubes missing their caps and recoils like a rainbow slug just slimed her.

I set down the cans of paint and look around. So many art supplies. Just sitting here!

"When I was in school, we would respect the property of our superiors," Mrs. Ecker says. "What would your parents think? You should listen to them."

If I listened to what my dad said, I would have punched Danielle Fisher long ago. I run my fingers along the bottles of acrylic paints. And then I remember I'm supposed to be cleaning, so I nudge them until they're in a bit of a line. Paints shouldn't sit unused like this. It makes me twitchy.

I move on to a different shelf. There are a whole lot of sheets of little ceramic tiles for a mosaic that Mrs. DeSouza ordered before she moved away from Spring Falls. Some have slipped out of place, and I start to restack them, but there's something else jammed in the way. I move a few of them to

the side and see the smooth rock Mrs. DeSouza used to keep on her desk. She left so suddenly that she must have forgotten it. I turn it over in my hand. Carved in a circle along the edge are the words *Create the world of your dreams*.

Here is someone who got me.

But is that even possible? Because the world of my dreams would have a sunrise opposite the girls' locker room that *doesn't* have to get painted over.

I glance at Mrs. Ecker. She's studying the fire escape map on the wall. As quick as I can, I shove the rock into the pocket of my hoodie.

Because what if what the rock says is possible? I mean, Mrs. DeSouza was someone who knew what she was talking about. Like, she knew how to draw a bird with only four lines.

Before Mrs. Ecker looks back at me, I swipe a bottle of glitter glue too. Because glitter.

That's when the secretary's voice comes on the art room intercom. "Mrs. Ecker? Libby Delmar's father is here. Please send her to the office."

I can't believe my dad is here. I walk as slowly as possible down the hall, wondering how mad he'll be. And it's not exactly predictable who he'll be mad at. The only constant in life is that it's never my older brother, Rex. He might have gotten suspended all the time when he was in school, but as long as Rex won the fight my dad didn't care.

I feel the glitter glue in my hoodie pocket and stop. I'm

pretty sure the world of my dreams would be all kinds of sparkly. I glance in both directions down the hallway. Empty.

I take out the glitter glue and squeeze a dollop of it onto one of the drab hallway tiles. I kneel down and spread it all around, hoping it'll look like the ocean waves reflecting that sunrise.

Except that when I stand up, it only looks like a smear. A sad, gray smear.

Who am I kidding? My world is too much of a mess to just add sparkle.

The sound of footsteps coming gets me walking again, and I practice my excuse in my head. I'm just on my way to the office.

But it's not a teacher who comes around the corner—it's a boy from my English class.

"Mr. Cruck told me to find you to give you this stuff," he says. "We're starting five-paragraph essays, and we're supposed to color-code our notes, and he wants you to . . ."

He keeps talking, but all I can see are the index cards and the box of colored pencils that he's handing me like a gift. Wasting these on a five-paragraph essay? No chance.

A five-paragraph essay is not the world of my dreams.



When I get to the office, my dad is yelling at Principal Hec-ton. "I'm in the middle of running a business! You think I have time to come here and help you do your job, Paulie?"

*Paulie? Who's Paulie?*

And then I realize: Principal Paul Hecton. I suddenly have a vague recollection that my dad and the principal were in school together.

Principal Hecton certainly looks like he remembers—and I bet he's having a whole lot of regret right now.

"I'd like you to see the vandalism before it gets painted over," he says.

"Then take a picture of it," my dad says. "You heard of a camera?"

Maybe my dad isn't angry with me, but this isn't much better. I take a step back and try to merge with the leafy potted plant at the entrance to the main office. Through the glass wall, I see none other than Danielle Fisher walking by. Great. Now the whole seventh grade will hear about this.

"You just want to make yourself feel important with all your calling home and handing out suspension slips," my dad continues. "But if you think you can use my daughter in your power games, you've got another thing coming."

Principal Hecton's face reddens. He picks up a student handbook. "With all due respect, I'd like to refer you to page thirty-four, where it discusses the vandalism of school property. There is nothing personal about—"

"Libby, get your stuff," my dad says, turning to me. "We're leaving."

I look between my dad and Principal Hecton. "Right now?"

“I’m not spending another minute being talked down to by someone who didn’t even know how to tie his shoes until fourth grade.”



I keep my backpack perched on my lap for the drive home. We live just on the other side of downtown, and my dad doesn’t exactly drive slowly, but still, it’s a long eight minutes.

The radio guy is yammering on about the varsity boys’ baseball game last night. My dad turns it way up, as a not so subtle jab at me. He hates it that I’m off the softball team, but who in their right mind would stay on a team that doesn’t want them?

We pull into the driveway, and I’m about to get out when my dad relocks the doors.

“You’re grounded,” he says. “For a month.”

A month? Is he serious?

Then he unlocks the car and climbs out. “And don’t embarrass me again.”

By the time I’ve steadied my breath, my dad is already at the bottom of our driveway talking with our neighbor Hal—probably convincing him to let him tune up his lawn mower.

Our apartment is in one of those big sprawling houses built when the mills in town were chugging away. And even though the house has four apartments, somehow my dad



got our landlord to give him full use of the garage for his engine business. Plus, with him strutting up and down the driveway all the time, the other renters decided to not even try to use the two parking spots in front of it. They just park on the street.

Last year, in sixth grade, we learned how there are tons of crowded old mill towns like ours on riverbanks up and down the East Coast. Maybe they're all sports-obsessed, and maybe every single one has a guy like my dad, who, no matter what happens, makes it about him.

I push open the passenger door. In a crack of the driveway, a dandelion is poking through, and I focus on it, keeping my head down.

I go straight inside to the kitchen. At least there's a new box of that healthy cereal in the cupboard—my mom actually listened when I told her what I'd learned about the importance of whole grains. I reach in the fridge to get some milk, and there's a whole chicken defrosting in there. My mom's currently on a seventy-six-ways-to-make-chicken kick.

Part of me wants to call her. But only a small part, because she hasn't forgiven me for quitting the softball team either. And my mom doesn't exactly let things go. You should see the way she stands at the checkout counter in the 7-Eleven and stares down the kids who try to shoplift. She doesn't let up until they've dropped whatever they

were holding and run away. And she's been looking at me like that for the past twelve days.

When I get to my bedroom, I throw my backpack onto the floor. Smack in the middle of the floor, too, because this whole room should be mine. But even though my brother, Rex, works at L&H Wholesalers and has an apartment of his own, he still uses this room as his closet. He never got over having to share it. When an unexpected baby sister shows up when you're eight, she'll always be unwelcome.

At least he doesn't sleep here. I remember Rex lying on his bed, zinging baseballs at the ceiling on the days he was suspended. The cracks in the paint are still up there.

I'm not like Rex, am I?

Even if I'm surrounded by his stuff. Even if we come from the same parents. Even if I just got suspended for vandalism.

I squeeze my eyes shut and press my fists to my forehead.

I.

Will.

Not.

Be.

Like.

Them.

I open my eyes and kick my backpack clear across the

room. It lands upside down on my bed, spilling out some contents. And suddenly, I remember what's inside it. I scramble over to my bed and carefully take stock: three index cards, five colored pencils, one bottle of glitter glue, and one rock. *Create the world of your dreams.*

How exactly am I supposed to create the world of my dreams with just this?

But then I remember what Mrs. DeSouza used to say to me when I'd stare at a blank white sheet of paper. *One line is all it takes.*

I think of that dandelion pushing its way through the crack in the driveway. That's me. That is *me*. I just have to find my way to the sunshine.

And these are the materials I have.

I sit on the floor and start to draw a dandelion pushing its way up on one of the cards. Behind it, I draw the sun rising over a mountain. And the sky is beautiful. I add orange and red and yellow all mixing together. And then I add glitter glue all over it.

I close my eyes tight and imagine Mrs. DeSouza looking over my shoulder. "Look at that light. Look at that sparkle," she'd say in her beautiful Jamaican accent. "And think about it, Libby, that's happening every day in every part of the world. Isn't that amazing?"

I open my eyes. In the shadow of the mountain, I write the word *amazing*.

I stare at it, then I add two more words.

*You are  
amazing.*

Because if I am going to have to sit in this room for a month, this is what I need staring at me.



# JACK

**MONDAY, APRIL 30**

**JOEY IS TUGGING** my shirt again. “Jack,” he says.

I stop dribbling the ball, and squat down next to him on the blacktop so I can hear him over the shrieks of the other little kids. “What’s up, little man?”

He points. Up. “Two more points.”

Joey doesn’t say many words when he’s focused on something.

I put the basketball in his hands. “You ready?”

He grins. He’s ready.

I spin him around so he’s facing away from me, and I lift him toward the rim. “Here comes Joey for the dunk,” I yell.

I can feel Joey’s ribs through his shirt as he squeals and tips the ball into the hoop. He’s the same size my little brother, Alex, was. And just as focused.

I set him back down on the blacktop, and he runs after

the ball. I know he's going to want to go again. The blacktop is finally clear of snow, and he's determined to get to ten points this recess. I glance at Todd and Sturgis, who are waiting for me to come play football, but they'll have to wait a little longer.

A speck on the blacktop glints in the sun, like glitter. I stoop down, but it's only a piece of neon-green foam. Probably from the playground ball that's starting to fall apart. I flick it off my finger and swallow hard. Alex used to sneak baggies of glitter home from school in his lunch box. He loved that stuff, but my parents didn't. "No boy needs glitter," my dad said. "It's just going to get everywhere," my mom said.

And it did. Scattered in his bedroom rug, tucked in the folds of the back seat of our pickup, in the corners of Alex's kindergarten cubby. I was still finding that glitter long after he was gone.

He's at my shirt again. Joey, that is. He tugs at it even though I'm already looking right at him. His eyes are lit up. Like inside him a whole stadium full of people are chanting his name, hoping he can deliver the game-winning dunk.

"One more time, okay?" I say.

When I cross the blacktop to where Sturgis and Todd are waiting, Sturgis tosses the football to me. "Took you long enough."

I shrug and throw it back to him. "You could have started without me."

“Not if we want to play three-on-three.”

I look across the muddy field to where the three other kids are waiting. “Come on. They’re sixth graders. You could’ve taken them.”

Our school has three boys in sixth grade and the three of us in seventh. There once was a guy in the grade above us, but he moved to a “less rural” part of Vermont back in third grade. But the sixth graders are cool enough. When you’re in a two-room K—8 schoolhouse, you find a way to get along with everyone.

“You want to play or not?” Sturgis says.

“Yeah, I want to.” I grab the ball out of his hand and take off across the field at top speed so Sturgis and Todd don’t have a chance of catching me.

I team up with two of the sixth graders, and our team is up 14–3 when Mr. Sasko gives his nod from the door to let me know that recess is over. I stuff the football under my arm and call to the rest of the kids to head in. This afternoon, I’m supposed to read to the younger kids—probably *Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs* again if Mrs. Lincoln lets the kids choose.

I’m rounding up the last of the younger students when an unfamiliar car pulls into the parking space next to Mr. Sasko’s truck. It’s shiny. Like it didn’t just spend all of mud season on Haycock’s dirt roads. The woman who gets out of the car has on a suit and high heels—not the best footwear for our muddy parking lot.

I'm about to follow the other kids inside when Mr. Sasko appears at the door again. His face is strained.

He strides out to meet the woman. "Lucinda, it's good to see you. I don't think I've ever seen you outside of Montpelier. Welcome to Haycock School. To what do we owe this special visit?"

The lady gives a tight smile. "Oh, I'm just coming to check things out and see what you're up to at your little school."

"What we're up to?" He chuckles and motions me over to them. "Well then, you can see the high quality of students we develop."

I walk over and stand tall next to Mr. Sasko.

He puts his hand on my shoulder. "Jack, I'd like to introduce you to Ms. Duxbury. She works for Vermont's Agency of Education. This is Jack Galenos. You won't find a finer student anywhere.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," I say. I do my best to give her a good, firm handshake.

"Jack, while I get the older students started on this afternoon's lesson, would you give Ms. Duxbury a tour of our school?"

I swallow. "I'd be honored."

Mr. Sasko squeezes my shoulder. "You're in good hands, Ms. Duxbury."

Ms. Duxbury nods to me. "Let's get started, then."

Mr. Sasko disappears inside, and I'm left with Ms. Suit in the parking lot.



“Well, this is our play area,” I say, gesturing to the slide, the swings, and the sandbox. “And our field.”

“I see,” she says. “And what sorts of activities do you do out here?”

She’s looking at the creaky set of swings like they might collapse at any moment. Even though they won’t. I’ve seen Mr. Sasko swing next to a kid who’s been having a hard day, and those swings are strong.

“Swing,” I say. “Play in the sand.” Isn’t it obvious? If I add *Go down the slide*, will she think I’m being a smart aleck? “Play football,” I say instead.

She nods and writes something in her notebook.

When she’s done, she walks over to the swing set. “So just dirt underneath this?”

“The grass gets worn away,” I say.

“But no wood chips?”

Does it look like there are wood chips? Does she really need me to tell her that?

But she’s looking at me like she does.

“No wood chips,” I say.

She writes that down in her notebook.

“How about I show you the inside?” I say.

She nods. “Please do.”

I try to walk slowly so she doesn’t have to move too fast. Where could those shoes possibly make sense?

I hold the door open for her, and I’m happy to see everything inside is in order. Mrs. Lincoln has all of the youngers

gathered around her while she reads—you guessed it—*Cloudy With a Chance of Meatballs*, and in the far room Mr. Sasko is working with the olders.

I point to the back wall, where there's a huge painting of the hilly farms of Haycock with our schoolhouse in the center. "Mr. Sasko designed that mural, and we all helped paint it."

Ms. Duxbury nods. But that was a good nod, right?

"At the beginning of each day, we all gather in here, and Mrs. Lincoln plays 'God Bless America.'" I nod toward the guitar in the corner.

Ms. Duxbury makes a few more notes, and I wait near the guitar. When I came back to school after the summer we lost Alex, Mrs. Lincoln played "On the Loose" and everyone sang along. I still don't know how they found out that was Alex's favorite song. Mrs. Lincoln said she knew the song from when she was a Girl Scout, but I don't know when the rest of them found time to learn it. I just know that those four minutes of singing were what got me through that year.

I'm not about to tell Ms. Duxbury any of that, though.

"How many students are in this school right now?" she asks.

"Seventeen," I say.

"Two teachers for seventeen students?"

"Well, yeah," I say. "Because of course we have to divide up sometimes." No way are the little kids going to sit

through a lesson on ratios. Does she actually expect that to work?

But she's writing in her notebook again *and* raising her eyebrows at the same time.

"Let me show you the other room." I say.

"There's only one other room?"

"Well, there are the bathrooms too."

"Would you show them to me?"

"Uh, sure." I lead her out into the tiny hall that runs between the two main rooms and stop in front of the bathroom doors. Why does she want to see them? All there is in each one is a toilet and a sink. Is she going to go into the boys' room?

But when I turn back, I realize that she doesn't want to go inside them. She's just scribbling in that stupid notebook again.

"Is there a separate bathroom for the teachers?"

I try not to sigh. "No. They use these."

"So, no gender-neutral bathroom?"

I'm not even sure what that is, but I know we don't have one. I glance in at Mr. Sasko, and he catches my eye and comes out into the hallway. I guess my face didn't communicate the cool and calm I was going for.

"How's the tour going? Is Jack being a gentleman?" Mr. Sasko jokes. Because of course I'm being a gentleman. I always am.

But Ms. Duxbury doesn't smile. "It's very useful for me to be here." She pulls a folder from her bag and hands it to Mr. Sasko. "I'm sure you're already aware of the recent guidelines the Agency of Education has released."

Mr. Sasko nods as he takes the folder. "You all are working hard, aren't you?"

"Just trying to make sure our limited grant funds are going to the right schools."

"Well, those Small School Grants are important to us. And we are always open to suggestions for making our school better," Mr. Sasko says. "Like last year, Jack had the great idea to get us outside for a whole day every month. Next month, we'll be launching bottle rockets." He puts his hand on my shoulder. "The students are planning it themselves. Isn't that right, Jack?"

I nod. "We're trying to find the trajectory that'll land a rocket in Mrs. Drake's old pig trough."

Mr. Sasko laughs. "I promised the winner all-you-can-eat bacon."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Sasko, but this is not a joke." Ms. Duxbury taps her notebook. "I wouldn't treat the directives from the Agency of Education simply as 'suggestions.' The only schools that receive grants will be those who can demonstrate academic excellence, operational efficiency, and meet Agency of Education standards."

Mr. Sasko stiffens and takes his hand off my shoulder.

“Jack, how about you see if Mrs. Lincoln needs help with the youngers.” He turns to Ms. Duxbury. “Why don’t we continue this conversation in my office?”

“It was a pleasure to meet you,” I lie.

Ms. Duxbury nods, but she doesn’t even look at me. Instead, she disappears with Mr. Sasko into the oversized closet he and Mrs. Lincoln use as an office.

I slip into the back of the youngers’ room. At the moment, I’m really hoping some meatballs will fall from the sky. And that one will splat right on top of Ms. Duxbury’s notebook.

My dad always told me that the beauty of living in the middle of nowhere was that we get to make our own decisions about what’s right for us. I eye that lady’s shiny car through the window—there’s no way she knows what we need better than we do.



# VINCENT

**MONDAY, APRIL 30**

**I SETTLE ONTO** the floor behind the locker-room trash can with my math notebook. Only a few more weeks until we get to the geometry unit. I've been teaching myself geometry online, but it's not the same as having Mr. Bond explain it.

I turn to a fresh page in my notebook and start drawing triangles. Triangles are everywhere you look. There are triangles in the floor tiles, in the metal supports beneath the locker-room benches—even the people in this school form a triangle. One side is the popular kids, who are good at PE and looking cool. Another side is the kids who want to be like the popular kids but aren't quite as good at that stuff. And the third side is the creative, artistic kids, who don't care about being popular and are instead cool in their non-popularity. Everyone knows where they fit.

My mom wants me to be one of those creative kids.

She runs an art supply store where we live in Seattle, and she's got short purple hair. She even named me Vincent, after that *Starry Night* artist guy, van Gogh. But I didn't get those genes. I guess when my mom was looking through the sperm donors' profiles, she didn't think she'd need to choose someone artistic. She thought she'd have that part covered. She was wrong.

The other kids at school form a triangle. But me? I am a point in space.

I finish filling up one page with triangles and begin a new page. Suddenly, there's a sneaker next to my math book. Two sneakers. With legs.

"You want us to believe you were actually on a baseball team?"

It's Cal Carpenter. And a bunch of his friends. He's talking to me, isn't he?

"What team?" I say.

He gestures at my shirt with his foot. I look down and remember I'm wearing an old rec league baseball shirt. I made contact with the ball precisely one time. That was when a fly ball from my own teammate hit me on the head while I was sitting on the bench. And there was no "making the team." There was only my mom "making me do it."

"When's that shirt from? Third grade?"

"Fourth," I say. Which is totally different from third. I can't be the only seventh grader who still fits into shirts from fourth grade.

“That’s sad,” Cal says to his friends. “I bet he hasn’t been able to be on a team since then.”

He doesn’t actually sound sad about it.

I am also not sad about not being on a baseball team. They announced baseball tryouts a few weeks ago. All I could think was, there’s no way anyone could convince me to play that horrible sport again.

“Look,” Cal’s friend Zachary says, “he’s even drawing baseball diamonds in his notebook!”

“It’s his dream, isn’t it? To be on a baseball team again!” Cal says. “His dream!”

Cal and Zachary and the rest of them start laughing all over themselves.

“I don’t care about baseball,” I say.

“Sure you don’t,” Cal says.

“That’s why you’re drawing fields in your notebook!” yells Zachary.

“They’re triangles,” I say.

“Triangles!” Now they’re doubled over in laughter. “Right.”

Why do they care if I like baseball? Is it not possible to mind your own business at this school?

They’re still laughing when they pick me up and put me in an empty locker, like it’s the easiest thing in the world, never mind my flailing limbs.

The sound of a slamming metal door is loud when you’re outside a locker, but it’s even louder when you’re inside.



And inside it's a tight fit, too, even for a seventh grader who still fits into fourth-grade shirts. I guess the makers of the locker might have known this would happen too. Why else would they add air vents? But then why didn't they add a way to open the door from the inside?

I squirm a little.

Nope. Not happening.

*Just pretend you're in your room at home. And you're just choosing not to move.*

I close my eyes and picture the poster I have on my wall of Katherine Johnson. It's of the real one, not the actress who played her in the movie *Hidden Figures*, even though that was how I found out about her. "It has rockets," my mom said when she took me to see the movie. What my mom didn't tell me is that it was about three black women mathematicians who kept having doors shut on them but found ways to open them because they could do all these complicated calculations in their head. Like math was their superpower. What would Katherine Johnson do right now?

I open my eyes. She would find triangles. She could see triangles everywhere she looked.

I peer through the slits in the locker. I can still see the triangles on the floor tiles. I start counting them.

When I spot Ms. Lemmick, the PE teacher, I bang on the locker like my life depends on it.

When she opens the locker door and I fall out, she looks

me up and down and then shakes her head. "You're missing fourth period, Vincent."

Right. As though I purposely chose to hang out in a small, smelly locker.

She basically has the same expression as in PE class when she's just yelled at me to run. Because in her mind, my version of "running," which is a mix of stumbling forward and walking quickly, does not count.

"Yeah," I mumble. "Thanks."

She sighs and pull a stack of hall passes from her hoodie pocket. "Here. I'll write you a pass."

"Thanks." I say again as I take it from her.

"Do you want to report who did this?"

I shake my head and turn to go. Why do I feel like all of this is my fault?

"You've got to toughen up," she calls after me. "Otherwise, they'll destroy you."

Thanks a lot.



My mom's at the kitchen table when I get home to our apartment. Monday afternoon is the one time during the week she doesn't work. It's her "serendipitous time." She's got an enormous collection of colored pens organized in glass jars all around her.

I hang up my raincoat to dry. By spring in Seattle, it doesn't rain as often as in the winter, but it still rains.

Today the barometric pressure is 29.46 and holding steady.  
No sun coming out anytime soon.

“How was your day?” she asks.

“Fine.”

“What was the most interesting part?”

“None of it.”

“That’s not true.” She stands up and puts her finger on my nose. “It was your day, and you are exceedingly interesting, and therefore any day of yours is interesting to me.”

I shake my head.

“Hey! Check out what I found for you at Second Chance.” She runs over to her bag and pulls out a T-shirt with a sloth riding a motorcycle. “Isn’t it funny? Like how they’re so slow, but not if they’re on a motorcycle. Mind-blowing, right?”

I nod and try to laugh.

She hands me the shirt. “Wear it tomorrow. It’ll crack people up.”

I look at the garden of flowers she’s been sketching in her notebook. Purple with stripes of blue, orange, and pink.

“What kind of flowers are those?”

“They’re from my imagination.”

“So, not real.”

She wraps her arm around me. “Who knows? Might be a not-yet-discovered flower. It’s a great big world out there.”

I nod. “I’m going to go do my homework.”

“Are you sure?” She squeezes me tighter. “You just got out of school. Give yourself time to be creative. Go exploring.”

“Mom . . . I . . .”

“This is why I wish we could have a dog. You’d be heading out on a long walk together right now.”

“I just walked home from school. In the rain. I don’t need to go for another walk.”

“You could be about to discover things you’ve never discovered. Going on adventures.”

“That’s just in books. Real dogs don’t go on adventures. They just go poop.”

Also, I’m terrified of dogs. They bark, and there’s the whole slobber thing. Thank goodness my mom is allergic.

She holds up her notebook. “Okay. Want to color these flowers with me instead? I got a new set of markers you could test out.”

“Mom.”

She sighs. “Fine. But at least get yourself a snack first. Math is bad enough when you’re not calorie-deprived.”

I bring some carrots and hummus into my room, drop the motorcycling-sloth shirt on the floor, and sit underneath my poster of Katherine Johnson. It’s a giant picture of Katherine when she was a kid, and she’s got her hands on her hips, looking up like she can do anything. It says *REACHING FOR THE MOON* across the top, because that’s the title of Katherine’s autobiography. I begged my mom’s

bookstore friend to let me have the poster after the event at her store was over.

I take a bite of a carrot and glare at the shirt. No matter how hard I try, I can't be the cool, creative kid my mom wants me to be. And I sure don't want to play baseball like Cal Carpenter said either.

I jab a carrot into the container of hummus and try to get the vision of Cal Carpenter's face out of my head. I need to have some sort of signal to everyone else that says: *I'm not in your triangle. I'm not like you. I'm just me.*

Me.

Non-artistic.

Me.

Scared of dogs.

Me.

Kind of triangle-obsessed.

A drop of hummus falls off my carrot and onto my shirt. I glare at the hummus. I glare at the picture of the giant baseball on the shirt. Why do all these T-shirts think they know who I am?

I scoop up the drop of hummus with a carrot, then take off the shirt and put it in the laundry. I start digging into my bureau drawer for something else, but it's mostly full of shirts my mom bought me because they're "funny and cool," and I am most definitely not that. Don't I have something that isn't baseball-related or covered in animals wearing sunglasses?

And then I remember . . .

I open my closet and rummage around, and finally there in the back I see it. The white button-down shirt I wore to that *Reaching for the Moon* bookstore event. Katherine Johnson wasn't there, but there was a lady from NASA who talked about Katherine's work. I sat in a packed audience surrounded by people like me, who were interested in the same thing. Now that was cool!

I take out the shirt and look at it closely. There's a little embroidered emblem of a bird on the top left corner. It's a puffin. Like the bird on the cereal box that my mom gets. And its beak has some fabulous triangle action going on. Katherine Johnson would approve.

I pull on the shirt and button it up. I guess I've grown, because it's super snug. But it feels good, like I'm still surrounded by all those people at the bookstore. I tuck the shirt into my sweatpants. If Clark Kent merged his button-down outfit with his spandex one, I bet he'd end up with something like this.

Plus, I remember reading on the back of the cereal box that puffins can fly at fifty-five miles an hour. That'd be great for getting away from people like Cal Carpenter.

I look in the mirror. The shirt clearly sends the message: *Don't expect me to be like anyone else.*

It's perfect.



**T**

**MONDAY, APRIL 30**

*Wet concrete.*

*Sirens.*

*Shadows.*

*Never safe to sleep.*

*But so*

*very*

*tired.*

*Peko snuggles up.*

*Her fur warm against me.*

*Follow her breath.*

*Breathe with her.*

*Trust*

*her.*

*Only*

*her.*

*One breath at a time.*

*Still here.*





# JACK

## TUESDAY, MAY 1

**ON TUESDAY,** I get up super early and head to the kitchen to make myself a couple peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwiches. It's still mostly dark out, but today's the first day of turkey season, and Uncle Sid's picking me up soon to go hunting before school.

My dad would be joining us if he were here, but these days he spends most of the week up in northern Vermont on a construction job.

Based on the cold mug of tea sitting on the counter, my mom's up too. She's probably outside. I pull on my coat and take my sandwiches out the door. I find her around back. She's been at her garden beds for weeks now, but mostly she's only been able to look at them. "Scheming," she said. But I guess it's finally the day to start loosening up the dirt, because she's dragging her shovels and everything out of

the shed. Her shift at the hospital doesn't start until two in the afternoon on Tuesdays.

"You gonna stick around and help me?" she calls when she sees me.

I shake my head, and just as I'm telling her that Uncle Sid will be here any minute, we hear his pickup truck coming up the driveway. I hustle back to meet him, taking the long way around, because I never go on the east side of the barn. Not since the day Alex died.

Uncle Sid is out of the truck, leaning up against it like he's been waiting for hours. I bet he thinks I'm still in bed and he's going to shame me when I come out of the house all groggy. Too bad I'm not. And too bad I'm a good shot with a pine cone.

"Hey!" he calls, rubbing the side of his arm where I beaned him. "Watch it, or you'll be running after those turkeys, trying to catch them with your bare hands."

I pick up my rifle from where I left it on the porch. "Remember? I'm packing my own firepower this year."

"You're lucky you passed your hunting license test."

"As if I needed luck. I knew every single answer."

"Only because you've got the best teacher." He puts his arm around my shoulder. "I'd say *that's* pretty lucky." He laughs and releases me. "Okay, hop in. Let's go get those turkeys."

Uncle Sid turns up the radio, and soon we're bumping

down our dirt driveway. “So how’s school?” he asks, pulling onto the main road.

“It’s good, but yesterday was annoying. This lady from the state showed up to check out our school. She acted like she knew way more than us. Like we were hicks or something.”

“We get the short end of the stick up here in the hills.” Uncle Sid shakes his head. “The government likes to poke its nose in our business because they don’t trust folks like us. Not even with our schools.” The radio goes to static, like it always does when we dip below the hillside, and Uncle Sid flips it off. “Those people don’t even get hunting. Don’t even get that eating turkey from the grocery store is way worse. Especially for the turkey.”

He parks the truck on the side of the road near our hunting spot and cuts the engine. “Just remember, when it comes to your life, your school, your town, you name it . . .” He pokes a finger at my chest. “You know best.”

I’m happy that Uncle Sid gets it—and his words make me feel better. So does hunting. It’s peaceful in the woods and just the way I like it. A test of our stealth as we try to slip noiselessly down the trails in the fog of the morning. Uncle Sid and I have gotten so good at communicating with tiny movements that it’s like we have our own language.

Once we get to our spot with a good sight line, I get down low with my back to a tree and wait. By now, I’m

used to staying as still as possible, but it used to take all the effort I had. I remember my first hunting trip with Uncle Sid, when I was nine and he caught a buck. I was proud to have helped, but when we got home it was clear that Alex was upset over the whole hunting thing. The night we were going to eat the venison, Alex didn't want to come to the table. But my dad forced him to sit with us, saying, "No son of mine is going to be a vegetarian!" So Alex stayed at the table, and even though he was only five at the time, he didn't even cry, because he'd already learned not to in front of our dad.

Alex missed a lot of dinners after that. He'd have stomachaches, and my mom would bring toast and milk up to his room, where he'd make tons of animal drawings. Sometimes he'd cut them out and make little houses for them. A book would become a tent. His laundry basket would turn into a lake for the ducks. Who were definitely not being shot down by hunters.

Uncle Sid has been making a hen call with his slate, and after a long wait we hear a rustling in the bushes. Quickly, Uncle Sid gets his shotgun in position and trains it in the direction of the sound. He's waiting for it to come into view, until he sees its beard.

He looks at me. He's telling me to get my gun ready.

I've been waiting for this. The moment when I'm the one who gets to take the shot. I lift up my gun, train it, and wait, trying to keep my hand as steady as possible.

But when the turkey and its beard come into view, I don't pull the trigger.

Because all I can think about is Alex.

I can tell Uncle Sid is eyeing me, but he doesn't give me a hard time about it. Instead, he pulls his trigger, and takes the bird down.

"You'll get it next time," he says, patting me on the back as we go to get the turkey.

I look at the bird. One shot. No suffering.

If it was going to end up as someone's dinner anyway, at least it got to live a life with no cages, right?



# LIBBY

**TUESDAY, MAY 1**

**I'M RIGHT IN** the middle of a dream involving huge paint cans when the lights go on in my room. I open one eye to see Rex going through his shirt drawer.

I cover my face with my pillow. "What time is it?"

Rex ignores me.

I roll over to see the clock next to my bed: 5:45. "Really?" I say. "You gotta wake me up at five forty-five in the morning?"

"If I have to be up, so should you." He takes out a short-sleeve polo shirt with the L&H Wholesalers insignia and changes into it. "No one respects lazy." He crosses the room to flick me on the forehead before heading out.

That's when my mom shows up in the doorway. "Rex! I didn't hear you come in. Getting ready for your shift too?"

She doesn't even try to be quiet, because obviously anyone worth anything is already awake.

“Wally! Rex is here!” she shouts.

“Thanks for washing my shirts,” Rex says.

“Hey, buddy. How’s it going?” My dad’s fresh out of the shower, and his volume is set to extra-loud. He and Rex do their special high-five/fist-bump combo right in the doorway of my room. I roll over to face the wall.

“Want to come over for dinner tomorrow night?” my mom asks. “I’m trying out a new chicken recipe.”

“Aren’t Wednesday nights softball games?”

My dad laughs. “You haven’t heard? Libby quit the team.”

Honestly.

“Are you kidding?” Rex raises his voice. “Really, Libs. After all I did to make you the catcher that you are?”

I glare at the wall. So maybe he did teach me to catch way back when he was occasionally a nice brother, but that shouldn’t require payment of a lifetime of servitude.

I roll back over so I can stick my tongue out at him.

“And get this,” my dad tells Rex. “Yesterday she got so carried away with some stupid art project that I had to go over to that school to bail her out.”

“It wasn’t stupid,” I say. “And you didn’t bail me—”

“You think you should be talking back right now?” my mom snaps.

“You need to quit babying her and letting her live in her pretend world,” Rex says. “She should pull her weight around the house more.”

I glare at him. “Ha! You have your own apartment. You shouldn’t even be here.”

He cocks his head. Then he takes a sock from his pile of dirty laundry and flings it at me. “I can be anywhere I want to be.”



When they’ve all finally left the house, I throw Rex’s sock against the wall. It makes the least satisfying noise ever.

What does he know? So what if I sometimes want to live in a pretend world? It’s better than this one.

I take the card out from under my pillow to remind me.

*You are amazing.*

Those three words. They’re the reason I get out of bed.

I pull on an orange shirt, a yellow polka-dot sweatshirt, and red pants. I can be my own sunrise. Because I *am* amazing.



It’s a long walk to school, but it’s better than hanging around at the bus stop, now that Adrianna’s not talking to me. She’s not exactly subtle about it either.

An empty chips bag, skipping along the sidewalk on a gust of wind, is the only company I need.

I like that my route takes me through downtown. It’s quiet, and the shops are still closed. I stop in front of the art supply shop. In the display window are giant flowers made



out of tissue paper, along with the words SPRING IS HERE!  
PLANT YOUR SEEDS! PUT BEAUTY INTO THE WORLD!  
I press my nose against the glass. It's like the flowers are  
leaping out of the earth. Like they just needed someone to  
plant that seed and then they shot themselves up through  
the dirt and into the air like a rocket.

I study the buds on a bush next to a nearby bench. All  
around town, bushes just like this, with those yellow flow-  
ers, are blooming. But this one is still sealed up tight.

Maybe things would be easier if I could do a better job of  
staying closed-up. Like if I didn't wear my yellow polka-dot  
sweatshirt all the time. Maybe then, Danielle wouldn't have  
teased me, and I wouldn't have lost my temper and punched  
her, and I'd still be on the softball team.

I look back at the art supply store. Those flowers in the  
window sure are glorious.



# VINCENT

TUESDAY, MAY 1

**THE NEXT MORNING**, I put on my this-is-who-I-am puffin shirt and tuck it into my sweatpants. Mom's at the kitchen table on her computer when I come downstairs. She's friends with lots of other art shop owners, and they're always sharing pictures of their new window displays. She looks up and automatically holds her arms out for a hug, but as soon as she sees me, her eyes widen. "That's not what you're wearing to school, is it?"

I imagine myself as Clark Kent and try to stand tall. "It is."

"Is something special going on today?"

"Not really."

She presses her lips together. "The shirt's super small on you."

"I like it small. And I really like puffins. Actually, do we have any of that Puffins cereal?"

My mom is still eyeing me suspiciously. “I don’t know. Check in the cupboard.”

I dig way into the back—suddenly there’s nothing I want more in the world than this cereal.

“Here it is!” I hold it up like a trophy.

I can feel my mom’s eyes on me as I pour the cereal and hide behind the box. “Did you know that puffins spend eight months alone in the northern oceans, which is one of the harshest environments on the planet?”

“I did not know that, Vincent.”

“Well, it’s true.”

I don’t have to glance at her to know that she’s still looking at me.

“Are they one of those flightless birds?” she says.

“Not at all. Puffins can flap their wings very fast. Four hundred times a minute is what it says here.”

“And they actually fly when they do that? Because a chicken can flap its—”

“They’re nothing like a chicken, Mom. Nothing.”

That keeps my mom quiet for a while, and I focus on how delicious this Puffins cereal is. Crispy. Even in the milk. Quite a high-class cereal.

Quite a high-class bird.

I’m tilting the bowl to get the last of the milk, when my mom says, “Vincent.” I turn to look at her. “Eight months is a long time to be in a harsh environment. Is—”

"I know it is, Mom," I say. And then I put my bowl in the dishwasher and grab my backpack, and I'm out the door.



I hear them snickering when I'm at my locker. "What kind of weirdo boy are you?" Zachary Wilkins asks.

I turn to see Cal Carpenter jab him on the arm. "You kidding? He's no boy." He slams my locker shut before I've even gotten my books and looks me in the eye. "Girl."

If a puffin can flap its wings four hundred times in a minute, that's like sixty-five times in ten seconds. That puffin would be already out of here.

"Girl." Cal Carpenter repeats it when we're all bunched up at the back of science class getting our bowls of dry beans for the foraging lab.

I can't figure out why he's calling me this. Are girls bad? Considering how much time he and his friends spend at the popular girls' lunch table, I don't think they're against them.

And I'm not actually a girl.

"Girl."

I hear it again while I'm trying to forage for the beans with a fork like any good bean-eating creature would. This time, it's Zachary Wilkins who says it. Do girls wear button-down shirts with puffins on them? Maybe he's thinking about the puffins. Maybe he knows how the male puffins help take care of the baby puffins. Also, the babies

are called pufflings. Who wouldn't want to take care of a puffling?

"Girl."

I can't tell who says it this time because they pretend-cough it while we're handing in our vocab quizzes in English. Do they mean that I'm gay? How would that person behind me know whether I liked boys instead of girls? I mean, I don't particularly like either at the moment.

But Cal and his friends certainly seem confident. Would they know more about this than me?

"Girl."

In the lunch line.

I tuck my shirt in even tighter. The definition for the vocab word *surmise* pops into my head. "Infer from incomplete evidence."

And what precisely is their evidence? I don't see any single girl in the cafeteria wearing sweatpants and a button-down shirt.

"Girl."

In the hall on the way to social studies. Did Cal Carpenter call a meeting and tell everyone there was only one word they could use today? Though I do remember Zachary answering a question in science. He didn't say "girl" then. He said "paramecium."

"Girl."

When we're getting our supplies in art class.

We're supposed to be painting landscapes to practice

with vanishing points, but I just put a little bit of green at the bottom for the land, and make the rest of the paper sky. Blue, blue, and more blue.

I want to draw a puffin smack in the middle of that sky, with its wings flapping so fast that it's a blur.

But I'm not artistic. And when I try, it looks like a black UFO—specifically, a UFO drawn by a three-year-old. When I try to fix it, it only makes it worse. I crumple up my paper and throw it out before anyone can see.

When I finally get home, I crawl into bed and curl into the fetal position as tears start to fall.

One point in space. Why does it have to be so hard to be one lonely point in space?



# JACK

**TUESDAY, MAY 1**

**DURING LUNCHTIME AT** school, I help the youngers open their containers and clean up any spills. I've been helping out since I was ten. It was the fall after Alex died, when he should have been in first grade, that Mrs. Lincoln first asked if I'd start reading to them once a week. Today, though, is a record for spills. Two milks, one juice, and one container of crackers that immediately gets stepped on. And Joey, who's usually the messiest one, isn't even here for lunch today because he got picked up early.

I'm about to push open the door to the office to get a new roll of paper towels when I hear Mr. Sasko and Mrs. Lincoln talking inside.

"That grant is a third of our budget," Mr. Sasko is saying. "If we don't get it for next year, I don't know how we'll be able to stay open."

I freeze and pretend to examine the sponge-print butterflies Mrs. Lincoln hung up this morning.

The school might have to close?

It can't. Next year is my eighth-grade year. How could I spend it somewhere else? And what would happen to all of us? Just farmed out to a bunch of different schools in the valley, where all the students think they're better than hicks like us?

Mrs. Lincoln bursts out of the office, her eyes wide. "Oh, Jack," she says, nearly slamming into me. "I didn't realize you were there. Are you okay? Can I help you?"

I stumble over my words. "I just needed more paper towels, and I stopped . . . to look at the sponge-print butterflies."

"Oh, of course," she says. She forces a smile. "They turned out nice this year, didn't they?"

I nod. Every year, Mrs. Lincoln makes them with the youngest kids, and I remember how much Alex loved creating them. He fit so many sponge prints on the paper there was hardly room for Mrs. Lincoln's blue border. I'd never seen him that excited for a project. All of his drawings were of butterflies after that.

My whole life has been at this school. Alex loved this school. Joey needs this school.

Mrs. Lincoln grabs the extra roll of paper towels from inside the office. "Don't worry about the spill. I'll take it



from here.” As she walks away, she mutters, “At least that’s something I can do something about.”

She squats down to clean up the milk near the flag at the front of the room, and I think about how we gather around that flag every morning. But when we are saying the Pledge of Allegiance, we’re not pledging to do whatever the state wants. We’re pledging to uphold the Founding Fathers’ ideas about freedom and independence. *With liberty and justice for all.*

For *all*. We say it every day. And I’m going to find a way to stop that lady from the state from taking our funding. I’ll do whatever it takes to save our school.



# LIBBY

**TUESDAY, MAY 1**

**MY DAY AT** school is as joyous as you'd expect. There's the part when I'm forced to paint over my beautiful almost-complete sunrise. And the part where kids walk past the door of the in-school suspension room, peering in, acting so pleased, like they personally predicted this would happen. It's like how everyone crowded around the gorilla enclosure on our zoo field trip when the gorilla was throwing poop at things. No one was going to turn away, but no one would ever think about being friends with that gorilla.

In-school suspension would be way more fun if I could throw poop at things.

At the end of the day, I join, the funnel of kids leaving the building and get stuck behind Danielle Fisher. "Did you see Libby in the ISS room again today?" she is telling Adriana. "Thank goodness you're not friends with her any-

more. My mom says that it's best to stay away from that *whole* family. I told you what her dad was like in the office yesterday, right?"

I keep my head down, but that doesn't stop me from hearing what she says next.

"She's a bully. Just like her dad."

I make a break for it as soon as I can. No way can I get on that bus. I'll go directly home, like my dad said—I'll just do it the walking way. I try my best to breathe.

Walking through town is a lot different in the afternoon, with all the businesses open. There are people all over the place, strolling on the sidewalks, and it's finally warm enough for a few to be sitting at the tables outside the bagel place. Near Happy Dental, there's a little boy with a buzz cut clinging to a bench and screaming. Tears are running down his face.

"Stop making a scene," his mom growls. "Let's go."

Maybe I'm the person watching the gorilla throw poop around now, but I can't help myself. Plus, the little boy's face is so desperate. Like letting go of the bench would mean certain death.

"I won't go," he cries.

"Joseph Sebastian Kelligan, you let go this instant," his mom orders.

"But I'm scared," he wails.

"We came all this way . . ." His mom starts to pry his fingers off the bench. "Don't be such a crybaby."

The boy looks up at her, his eyes wide, and I know exactly why: Now, even she can't be trusted.

I watch as she carries him, screaming, into the dentist's office, and I sink down onto the bench, running my hand along the part where his little fingers were clinging.

I wish I could run inside and tell him that I know what it feels like to look up into the eyes of the person who is supposed to love you most and wonder if they do. I pull out my index card that tells me that I'm amazing. I let out a long breath as I look at it. He needs it more than I do.

I fish out one of the colored pencils from my bag and write in little letters along the ridge of the mountain, *And you are not alone*. I look around for where to leave it. The bush next to the bench is the one with the closed-up buds from this morning. But not all the buds are closed up now! One glorious purple flower has burst forth!

I set the index card in the bush, next to the flower, right where he'll see it when he comes out, and skip the rest of the way home. Even though I don't have the amazing index card in my backpack, somehow I'm a whole lot lighter on my feet.



**T**

**TUESDAY, MAY 1**

*An empty stomach can feel like freedom.*

*Nothing weighing you down.*

*Zero.*

*Zip.*

*Who needs to eat?*

*But then it's over and it's back to being*

*a gaping black hole,*

*sucking all thoughts from the brain*

*except for food.*

*And Peko.*

*I always save some of my thoughts for her.*



# JACK

**WEDNESDAY, MAY 2**

**MY DAD'S COMING** home from his job tonight, and we're celebrating by eating the turkey Uncle Sid bagged. My mom's been brining it for a day. She even roasted the last sweet potatoes from the root cellar.

As soon as we hear my dad's truck in the driveway, my mom and I burst onto the porch. My dad doesn't say anything when he gets to us. He just pulls each of us into a long hug. He smells like asphalt and coffee, and it feels good to have the solid wall of his body back in our house. The money he makes doing construction is good, but two weeks is a long time to be away from home.

Uncle Sid arrives, and it's a real celebration. He's come straight here from his work, not wanting to miss a second with his older brother.

Once we're all sitting down with heaping plates, Dad

tucks into his turkey. “I saw our old neighbors Bobby and Phil the other night,” he announces.

“Yeah?” Uncle Sid says. “How they doing?”

“Real good. They’ve been working to keep our Second Amendment safe. Been circulating a petition in the towns around them up north.” My dad reaches for the salt. “I went to a community dinner with them, and they must have collected a hundred signatures in an hour. Those two don’t mess around.”

Uncle Sid starts talking about the time they took him out on their snowmobiles in the middle of a snowstorm, but I stop listening because that’s when it hits me—what if we did a petition to keep the school open? Signed by everyone in Haycock.

I eye my dad, laughing with Uncle Sid. Will he think it’s a good idea? Will he think I can pull it off?

When my dad pushes his plate away, he thumps me on the back. “That was one tasty turkey. So, tell me, Jack, how’s it going? You’ve been beating those other kids at football?

“Yeah, we’ve been playing.”

“And have you been winning?”

“Yeah, but . . .”

“But what?” he says.

I look between my dad and my mom. “But things at school aren’t great. The state is threatening to take away our grant money.”

My dad crosses his arms. “On what grounds?”

"I'm not sure, but this lady from the state came to see us, acting like we just crawled out from under a rock."

My mom puts down the serving spoon. "But our school needs that money to stay open."

I nod. "That's what Mr. Sasko said too."

She shakes her head. "Anyone who thinks it's a good idea to bus little kids down that hill in winter has lost their mind. It's not safe!"

I swallow and try sit up as straight as my dad. "No, but I think I have a plan."

"A plan?" my dad says.

I nod and try to keep my voice level. "What if I started a petition like your friends up north? What if I got signatures from everyone in Haycock?"

My dad stops eating, his fork poised in the air. "You think that would convince the state?"

I can't tell if it's a real question, or if he thinks it's a ridiculous idea to start with.

I look him in the eye, just like he's taught me. "I think it's worth a try. They shouldn't get to boss us around."

"But actually, it's not just the state you'd need to convince. It's the new consolidated school board," Uncle Sid says. "You remember how we got merged with the big school district down in the valley, right? That new board might claim they're looking out for our interests, but they'd steamroll this whole mountain if it meant more parking down there."



“I’d bet they’d be happy to have a reason to close our school and get more kids for their schools,” my dad adds. “More kids mean more money.”

“Still, we can play to their best intentions,” my mom says. “They’re always saying that they want to hear from ‘all voices,’ so let’s see what happens when they do.”

Uncle Sid smiles at me. “So you’re gonna call their bluff and go to the next school board meeting, armed with a petition full of signatures from everyone in Haycock? They won’t have the nerve to turn you away!”

My dad pushes up from his chair and walks over to the window. “Why won’t they let us be? This is David versus Goliath.”

“But, Dad,” I say, standing up too, “doesn’t David beat Goliath in the end?”

He looks at me, and I don’t look away. “I promise to take down Goliath.”

And even though I don’t say it out loud, what I’m thinking is: *I promise to make you proud.*



# VINCENT

WEDNESDAY, MAY 2

**“HOW ARE YOU** feeling this morning?”

My mom’s at my bedroom door.

Or at least I assume she is. I haven’t opened my eyes yet.

“Fine,” I mumble.

“Are you going to get dressed?”

Ha. Great question. Maybe I’ll go to school naked.

“Vincent?”

“Yes, Mom, I am going to get dressed.” I open my eyes and push up to my elbows just to prove my point. She’s got to get to work soon anyway. This coming weekend is the store’s big anniversary sale.

“Make good choices today, okay?” she says. She pauses and then crosses the room to give me a hug. “I love you,” she says into my hair. Her new face cream smells like oranges. When she releases me, she holds me by the shoulders. “I don’t want to see you hurt.”

“I know,” I say. “Thanks.”

Then she leaves, and I’m left staring at the button-down shirt hanging over my chair. I eye the motorcycling-sloth shirt still on the floor. No way can I wear that.

I guess I just don’t get middle school. In elementary school, no one cared what shirt I wore. Except that they never actually talked to me, so how would I know.

How am I supposed to make good choices? Have I ever made good choices?

I decide to skip the decision for now, and when I hear my mom in the shower, I put on my bathrobe and head to the kitchen. I pour myself a bowl of my trusty Puffins cereal. Those birds would never make fun of me. They would get me. I bet they know what it’s like to be bullied—I mean the box says their nickname is “the clowns of the sea.”

I stare at the cereal box as I eat and read more. It says that while puffins are out there on the ocean for all those months, they’ll float on the surface of the water and just go up and down with the waves. Up and down. Up and down. Totally chill.

I need to be like that.

It also says that they use their wings to basically fly through the water. And, really, who cares if you’re called the clowns of the sea if you can do that?

I hear Mom’s shower shut off, and I try to look as chill

as chill can be when she comes out of the bathroom, rubbing gel into her short, spiky hair.

“Are you all right with me leaving early, Vincent? Miranda called and was having a crisis—”

“Yeah, it’s fine.”

She kisses the top of my head again. “You sure?” She starts to sift through her purse for her lipstick. She chooses the bright-purple one today.

“Yeah. I got this,” I say.

I watch my mom apply her lipstick and then pull on the embroidered denim jacket that her friend June sent her. My mom can wear what she wants, because she’s found her people.

But I’m not my mom.

I’m a point in space. Out in the ocean. With no people.

I look at the photo on the box of the puffin flying. I trace the triangle of its beak. At least I have triangles to keep me company. I trace the triangle you get when you divide the rectangular box in two. I trace the triangle made by my spoon resting on the side of my bowl. One triangle at a time, I will get through this.

As soon as my mom is out the door, I wash out my bowl and slip back into my bedroom.

I look at my Katherine Johnson poster. Then I look at the shirt. There are two triangles at the tip of the collar. One on the left. One on the right. I take a deep breath.

I put on a clean undershirt, and then I put that button-down right over it.

Because if I wear something different, the bullies win. And they don't get to win.

The puffins and I get to win.

I walk to school over the waves of the Seattle hills. Up and down. Through the fog. Through the rain. Riding wave after wave.

Just like a good puffin.



## WEDNESDAY, MAY 2

*Now I get to wear  
eyeliner  
if I want.*

*No one looks at me.  
No one cares  
now.*



# LIBBY

**WEDNESDAY, MAY 2**

**MY DAD DIDN'T** care that I didn't take the bus home yesterday, but my mom did—and she confronted me when I got home. “I haven't worked hard all my life just for you to be one of those low-class kids loitering around, getting into trouble,” she reminded me while dipping the egg-yolky chicken into bread crumbs. I told her that I had walked straight home (the bench outside the dentist's office was directly on my way) and that it's healthy to breathe fresh air once in a while. But she made me feel like one of those shoplifting kids at the 7-Eleven when she turned her beady eyes on me.

So when the dismissal bell rings on Wednesday, I tuck my head down and climb the stairs of the bus. My mom will be at work when I get home, but she's made sure that my dad will be watching for me.

I'm feeling pretty gross when I get dropped off—the

whole ride I had to listen to Adrianna and Danielle talk extra-loud about how everyone would be going to Danielle's house for pizza on Friday after practice. So I don't even mind when my dad greets me with one of his bad jokes—at least it's better than getting yelled at.

"Libby," my dad says, "what do you call a can of soup that eats other cans of soup?"

I pause in the driveway. "I don't know. What?"

He checks the oil of the engine he's working on. "A *cannibal*."

"Good one." I say.

"You could have at least tried to guess," he yells as I head inside.

So much for not getting yelled at—I should have figured. My dad likes to think he's the joking kind of dad, even though he doesn't actually smile when he tells jokes. It's more like he's testing me. Like the drill sergeant of jokes.

The phone rings as soon as I walk in the kitchen. It's my mom at work.

"How was your day?" she says.

"Fine," I say. At least today wasn't in-school suspension.

"Good," she says. I can tell she's sucking on a cough drop. She's been getting over a cold for weeks. "So, your dad and I were thinking. When Rex was your age, he was already making money."

Selling fake Pokémon cards at school. What a role model.



“But we’re fair. We’re not going to insist that you do that.” She sucks hard on her cough drop. I can practically smell the menthol from here. “Instead, we think Rex is right. It’s time for you to start helping around the house more.”

More? I already take out the trash, put away the dishes, and do my own laundry. “Doing what?”

“Doing the dinner prep. If you’re not going to have softball after school anymore, you’ve got to find something useful to do with that time.”

“I am doing—”

“Don’t try to tell me that you playing with crayons is somehow helping the family.”

“They’re colored pencils,” I mumble.

“What was that?”

“What about homework?” I say.

“You have plenty of time to do that before you go to bed. Now, with you doing the chopping and prepping before I get home, it’ll be just like on the cooking shows when they can have a dinner ready in minutes. I even printed out tonight’s recipe for you. Do you see it on top of the microwave?”

There it is. Chicken ratatouille. “Yeah, I see it.”

“Good. We’ll end up with healthy dinners, and you’ll learn the value of hard work.”

I finger the recipe. So many things that need to be chopped.

“Real practical work,” she’s saying. “Not just some silly worksheets at school. And definitely not coloring . . .”

*Don’t argue, I tell myself. It will only make things worse.*

I look down and realize I’ve just crumpled the recipe into a ball.

“Right, Mom.” I flatten out the recipe against the edge of the counter.

“And when you’re done chopping up each ingredient, put them each in their own Ziploc bag, because they’re going into the pan at different times.”

“But that’s so many plastic baggies. That’s not good for the environme—”

“And I don’t have time to do dishes for an extra hour tonight. Don’t give me lip. It’s the closest we have to the little glass bowls they use on the cooking shows.”

I close my eyes. “I’ll have it ready when you get home.”

“Good for you,” she says. “I’ll be there as soon as I can, and Rex is coming tonight too, so put the tablecloth on.” And then she hangs up.

Rex is coming—isn’t that nice! I start pulling ingredients out of the fridge and slamming them onto the counter. Green peppers. Eggplant. Zucchini. I miss the counter when I pull out the tomato, and it falls to the floor with a splat.

I sit down next to the tomato. It’s oozing juice into a gap in the linoleum.

My parents get me new shoes when I need them, right?

My mom didn't have that growing up, and she reminds me every time I get a new pair that I should be grateful.

I glare at the tomato, but I pick it up and put it on the counter before it can make any more of a mess. I don't like tomatoes. I don't even like chicken.

At least the eggplant looks like it has a face. I turn it so it can glare at the tomato too.

I examine the green pepper and then turn it on its side so its stem is like a long, curly nose, and it's *also* glaring at the tomato.

Maybe I shouldn't be making vegetables glare at each other. Maybe I'm just as bad as the rest of my family. But I don't want to be. I want to make things better for people, not worse.

The problem is, most people aren't exactly easy to like.

It's only when I hear my dad coming inside to use the bathroom that I remember I'm supposed to be chopping the vegetables.

I'm putting the final ingredient into its own special baggie when my mom gets home at 6:10.

"Finally, you've done something useful," she says when she sees everything chopped and bagged. "That's my girl." She turns on the stove and launches into a whirlwind of activity.

Chopping zucchini into ridiculously small pieces and then sealing them into plastic that will end up in a landfill: It's all I'm good for.

“Do you know what Dan—”

“Sorry,” she says. “I need to focus right now.”

I watch her, waiting to tell her about how rude Danielle and Adrianna are being, but before I get the chance, Rex walks in.

He drops his sweatshirt on one chair and sinks into another. “I’m tired.”

My mom turns to look at him. “How was your day?” she says.

Rex gives a big sigh. “They had me in the freezer section, showing the new guy how to operate the pallet jack.”

“Look at you. Pulling in a paycheck. Training others.” My mom beams at Rex. “I’m so proud of you. To think I used to worry you were gonna turn out like your uncle.”

“I’d like to see Uncle Wade make it through one whole shift in the freezer,” Rex says. “The gloves they give you don’t do squat and . . .”

My mom continues to look at Rex like he’s the best thing that’s ever happened. When does she ever pause cooking long enough to look at me? I decide to read the label of the can of tomatoes. Then I move onto the cereal boxes on the counter. You can learn a lot from those boxes of wholesome cereal.

“Could you move, Libby?” my mom says. “I need to get to the flour.”

I look up at her, but she’s focused on the flour behind me.

“Come on, Libs,” Rex says. “Get with the program.”

I roll my eyes but leave the room. No matter what I do, I'm always in the way.



After dinner, I head to my room, close my door, and take out my colored pencils and glitter glue. I took a stack of extra index cards from Mr. Cruck's pile while he went on and on about the importance of a good concluding sentence. He did say they were there in case we needed more, so I've got no guilt about that.

I start filling the index cards with drawings. One gets heart-shaped flowers growing out of the ground, and the words *I'm rooting for you* written across the dirt. Another gets a frog leaping across heart-shaped lily pads that say *Jump for joy! You're terrific!* and I use the glitter glue to trace the arcs of his hops. I fill one whole index card with sunset colors and make the silhouette of a bird flying across it. I don't know what to write, though. I hold it up to study it. The bird looks lonely. Too lonely. I add another bird flying behind it. Then I add another and another, until there's a whole V of birds flying behind it. I write: *Fly free! We're right behind you.*

Every time I think about my family, I do another index card.

The way my dad reamed out the pizza delivery guy last week because it took him an extra ten minutes to get to our house—even though there was an accident downtown that had blocked everything up—and then he refused to pay.

The way at dinner my mom loudly observed how much weight a woman at the other end of our street has gained.

The way Rex needles me every chance he gets.

Each one gets an index card.

My parents come to wish me a good night around nine thirty, and I quickly cover the index cards with a blanket.

"We like what we saw today," my mom says.

"Showing respect," my dad says. "Like you should be."

I shift the blanket a few inches to cover a card that's sticking out.

"I think this grounding is going to teach you more than you expect," my mom says.

"She's lucky she's got us as parents," my dad says, putting his arm around my mom. "Because when you're the daughter of Wally Delmar, you start ten steps ahead of everyone else."

When they finally disappear to watch TV in the living room, I look around at Rex's clothes all over the place. I look at the pockmarks in the ceiling from his baseball.

I lift the blanket and look at my index cards.

They are so different than anything my parents or brother would ever think to make. And they *are* useful.

Something that can make someone's day better.

I picture that boy on the bench outside the dentist's office. I hope he was able to find the one I left for him.

I take a deep breath. These index cards can't stay here. They belong out in the world.

Yes.

I gather them up and silently slip out of my window like a secret agent. Like the most useful, hardworking secret agent there is.

Who happens to be wielding a fistful of paper love bombs.

Once I'm in town, I look around. There are a few people heading to the late movie, but the sidewalks are mostly empty.

I start to stick the index cards all over the place—in a window box outside the pharmacy; in the bike rack at the library; attached to an ATM; in the window of the bagel place; on the steps into the ice cream shops; on a bulletin board outside the senior center; and stuck into the hedge between the hardware store and the post office. Even if no one thinks to pick one of them up, at least they're adding more flowers and sunshine to the world. That has to count for something.

Finally, I reach the bush near the dentist's office, and the card I left there is gone! Did someone find it? Did they read it? Did the dandelion and mountain and sunrise make them smile? Could I actually have made someone I don't even know smile?

I put another card in its place. That kid can't be the only one who doesn't like going to the dentist.

I still have two cards left when I look at the time and realize my mom's show is ending soon. I need to get back home.

When I get close, I relax. My room is still dark. There's no silhouette of my mom in my window, waiting to pounce.

But then I hear my dad talking . . . outside! He's in the driveway, pacing and talking on his phone, trying to get some customer to pay up. "I'm not going to tell you again I don't do this work for free," he says.

When his back is to me, I cross the driveway and press myself against the side of the house.

"I know how much you thought it was going to cost," he says, "but it's not my fault the parts had to be special-ordered. That comes at a premium price."

The motion-sensor lamp on the garage is lighting up our driveway, but I'm safe in the shadows. I just have to not make any noise.

Through the window, I can see my mom stand up from her chair and cross the living room. I know a new show is coming on now, but it's that one she's always complaining about, with the announcer who winks too much. Could she be going to check on me?

I don't have much time.

When my dad turns back toward the garage, I go for it. I heft myself up and through the window as quick as I can.

I exhale and crawl into bed. I've barely pulled up the covers when I hear my mom come into the hallway. I quickly curl onto my side, facing the wall, and a moment later my door creaks as she peeks in.

I picture the new index card I made with the flowers



growing out the dirt, trying to reach the sunshine. It's the one I just left outside the art supply store window. *I'm rooting for you.*

My parents might see themselves as strong and sturdy like concrete.

Too bad I'm that dandelion sprouting through the cracks.



# JACK

**THURSDAY, MAY 3**

**ON THURSDAY MORNING**, I get to school early. I'm planning to tell Mr. Sasko my idea for a petition. But before I can even get inside, one of the girls on the playground needs help tying her shoes and two other kids ask me to settle who gets the next turn on the swing. Before I know it, the playground is filling up and Joey is at my shirt, tugging for a lift to the basketball hoop.

I kneel down, so I'm eye to eye with Joey. "You and me, we've got a mission today. Different from basketball," I whisper. "But just as important. Even more important."

Joey's eyes go wide. "What?"

"You know how if we have a problem, then Mr. Sasko and Mrs. Lincoln will help us out?" I say. "Well, now they have a problem. And we're going to help them. You in?"

Joey can't nod fast enough.

"You and I will go into the building early, and I'll go into

the office to talk to them. Can you make sure all of Mrs. Lincoln's teaching supplies are ready for her?"

His eyes get wider. "Like her whiteboard markers?"

"And the lined paper she uses for the morning warm-up."

"And the pencils and extra erasers!" he adds. "I'll get it all ready!"

Joey and I slip into the building, and he goes right to the whiteboard and starts lining everything up.

Mr. Sasko and Mrs. Lincoln are in the office when I knock, and both look surprised when I blurt out, "I'd like to help."

"You're always such a help around here," Mrs. Lincoln says. "I don't know what we'd do without you."

"Thanks," I say. "But this is different—I heard what you said about what could happen if we don't get that grant from the state."

"Oh no, Jack," Mr. Sasko cuts in. "I'm sorry we weren't quieter. I don't want you to have to worry about this."

"That's okay, because I have a plan." I stand up straight. "I'd like to collect petition signatures from the people in this town in support of our school. We could deliver it to that new school board and send a copy to the lady from the state."

Mr. Sasko tilts his head. I swear there's a new spark in his eye.

"I always like how you think, Jack." Mr. Sasko leans forward and looks at Mrs. Lincoln. "I'd say it's worth a

shot. We could deliver it at the school board meeting next Wednesday.”

“Sure.” Mrs. Lincoln nods. “We can make copies of the petition here. And perhaps Jack could spend his community service time on it later this afternoon. As it is providing a service to the community.”

“I most certainly agree.” Mr. Sasko looks at me. “Why don’t you use our writing block this morning to draft the language for the petition. Do you think you can organize the other older kids to help you collect signatures?”

“Definitely.”

And suddenly a plan is in motion. Even Joey is excited about collecting signatures—so excited that I’m pretty sure he doesn’t quite understand why we’re doing it.

By the time school is over, I’ve got twenty copies of a petition and all of the older kids ready to go door-to-door to get signatures this weekend. When Sturgis tries to make an excuse about how he has to babysit his younger siblings, I tell him to bring them along.

“We’re an army,” I tell him. “Because this is war.”

The state might think they have all the power, but they don’t know who they’ve poked.



**T**

**FRIDAY, MAY 4**

*Ketchup.*

*The Sunshine Drop-in Center got a donation.*

*Ten giant tubs of ketchup.*

*Ketchup on pasta.*

*Ketchup on beans.*

*Ketchup on bread that gets dropped off on its  
expiration date.*

*Uncle Eddie always said ketchup counted as a  
vegetable*

*if you ate enough of it.*

*Peko drinks from her new*

*cleaned-out*

*non-ketchupy*

*giant tub*

*water dish.*

*The rain fills it back up.*

*Drip,*

*drip,*

*drip.*

*A reminder that*

*sometimes*

*an expiration date*

*is just a suggestion.*

*Sometimes*

*it's possible to keep going.*

*Keep*

*going*

*for longer than what*

*anyone else*

*would expect.*



# VINCENT

**FRIDAY, MAY 4**

**FOR PE TODAY,** I'm "playing basketball," and I am successful in that I stay away from Cal and his friends and don't get hit in the face by the ball. But that's the easy part. It's the time in the locker room that requires detailed planning to minimize exposure.

Five minutes and thirty-five seconds in the bathroom stall. Then after the bell has rung and when everyone is gone, I'll have one minute and twenty-five seconds to grab my books and get to class. At least that was the plan.

Except that when I go to get my books, Cal and his friends are still there.

"Did you seriously just put that same shirt back on?" Cal says.

"Gross, man."

I think that's Zachary talking, but I don't look up, so I'm not sure.

“How many days has it been?”

*Stay focused. Just get your books.* I slip past them.

“Hey! We’re talking to you!”

I pick up my stack of notebooks and binders. I focus on the cover of my math notebook, where I’ve drawn exactly one hundred and eight overlapping triangles of various sizes.

I turn to face them. “I am wearing an undershirt underneath. And I change that every day. And I haven’t spilled anything on it.” Mostly because I’ve stopped eating lunch in the cafeteria. I can make a picnic blanket out of paper towels in the accessible bathroom in the music wing, which nobody ever uses during lunchtime.

Zachary and the others are laughing, but Cal comes toward me. “Do you respect the people at this school?”

Respect them? “Uh . . . I guess?”

“Then show respect for their eyes and change out of that shirt.”

“Everything okay over there?” It’s Ms. Lemmick’s voice from the PE office.

“Yep. Everything’s fine!” Cal says, and I slip out the door and walk away as fast as my legs can go.

I get to social studies out of breath and sink into my seat. Next time, I’ll only leave one minute and seven seconds to get here. And I’ll bring my books into the bathroom stall with me.

I squeeze my eyes shut while Mr. Henderson asks if there are any questions from the homework.



The thing about Clark Kent and Katherine Johnson is that they weren't just a boring, nerdy boy and a girl who could see triangles. They were people who flew! Katherine, because it was her math that calculated the trajectory of that first rocket, and Clark Kent, well, because of the cape.

But where's my cape? Where's the rocket I've calculated the trajectory for?

What if I'm just a boring, nerdy boy who sees triangles and who's always almost about to get stuffed into a locker—and nothing else.



When social studies is finally over, I pick up my books and head into the crowded hallway. At least now I get to go to math.

But that's when I hear Cal Carpenter's voice at my ear. "I told you to change out of that shirt, didn't I? Didn't I?"

Before I know what's happening, I feel my shirt being pulled out from my waistband and being tugged up, up, up. I want to fight back, but my arms are pinned in the air as the shirt gets stuck.

I can't see anything, but I can hear. My voice. Panicked. Cal's laugh and the sound of other kids in the hallway, not wanting to miss a second of this.

Then I hear Mr. Henderson.

He's coming. But not fast enough.

Cal tugs my undershirt up around my head too. Pop,

pop, pop—the buttons fly off my puffin shirt—and then both shirts are gone.

My bright-white, bony chest suddenly exposed.

I can see now, but it's not good. So many eyes watching. No one stepping in to do something.

Cal lets go of my arms. Mostly because he's laughing so hard. He tosses my shirts to a kid on the far side of the hallway, and I picture the puffin with its triangle beak and its short, sturdy black wings. Because it doesn't ride the ocean waves forever. It can fly.

It's time for this puffin to take flight.

I fly down that hallway. Away from everyone. I fly out the double doors at the back of the school, into the rain, and right past the PE field. Too bad Ms. Lemmick misses out on seeing the fastest speed I've ever gone.

I run until I can no longer breathe. Like I'm going to pass out and throw up at the same time.

Everything looks blurry, which is fine, because it means I can't see all the people wondering why a kid who should clearly be wearing a shirt isn't.

I stop in an alley and double over, convinced that I'm about to meet the chicken parmesan I had for lunch. Instead, I just retch. I can't even throw up right.

I'm still staring at my pathetic puddle of spit on the concrete when I realize there's someone in the alley with me.

"You want this?" they say, holding out a shirt.

I try to say yes, but I'm still gulping for air. Desperate to

cover my chest, I pull the shirt on. It's a basketball shirt—and it's big and dirty, but better than no shirt.

By the time I'm able to form words and look up, the person is disappearing around the corner. I can just make out a green raincoat.

I speak up anyway, and my "Thank you" echoes down the alley—but the only response is the sound of a dog barking.