

Normal- (Ch.1)

"Wait! Really? He did that?" I screeched. Karla nodded shyly, but she wore a huge grin. "When? Why didn't you tell me?" I questioned.

"Just yesterday," Karla replied.

"K, that's great news!" I felt more excited than she did. I guess it was because nothing interesting had happened to me lately, so I was kind of living through my best friend.

Sarah turned around. "What? What happened?"

Karla made a face at me. "Why did you have to go yelling it?"

I laughed. "Sorry, I was just excited!" Karla rolled her eyes, but she laughed too.

"Ugh!" She buried her face in her hands.

"What? Tell me, please!" Sarah pestered.

"Come on, K, tell her," I encouraged.

"Fine. But next time I tell you something, you zip your lips," Karla warned me. We all laughed. "Bryan likes me."

Sarah gasped. "Wait! What? How do you know? Did he say?"

"Yeah, and he told K in the cutest way ever!" I shouted. *Ugh*, I thought. *Me and my big mouth, when will I ever learn?*

Karla slapped her hand over my mouth. I tried to push it off, but she was too strong.

"Karla, please! Get your hand off me! I promise I won't say," my words came out muffled.

"Don't tell!" Karla laughed as she pressed her hand harder against my lips. Sarah giggled.

"C'm on, you already told me this much, you can't leave me in suspense!" Sarah insisted. When Karla finally dropped her hand off of my mouth, I cracked up.

"I was going to tell her," Karla laughed. "But, since, you know, it's *my* life, I think I should get to!"

"Sorry!" I giggled. "But, I'm bored. I'm living through you. When something like this happens, I just have to tell." Karla ignored my defense statement.

"So, you know, we sit next to each other," Karla went on. "And, so, Bryan passed me this paper airplane."

"And then what?" Sarah asked.

"It said, 'open me,'" Karla explained. "So I opened it. And inside it, there was another little note. And it said, 'do you like me?'"

I heard our teacher's voice in the distance. She called my group to run a lap.

"Bye, guys! I'll wait for you at the tree!" I shouted to them. Karla continued explaining how Bryan asked her to be his girlfriend. Sarah gasped and squealed at everything Karla said. I laughed.

I started to slow down as I reached the tree, which had been the meeting spot for my friends and me for as long as I could remember. There, stood Jacob, the only boy in our friend group. As he saw me nearing him, a huge smile spread across his face and I noticed his dimples right away, like I always did.

"Hi!" He called to me.

"Hi," I smiled back as I jogged slowly near the tree. We couldn't stop completely, because otherwise the teachers would notice, and they'd yell at us to keep running. Jacob started to jog too.

"You won't believe what happened to K yesterday," I told him, even though I knew I wasn't supposed to and had already broken that promise.

"What?" He asked.

"Bryan asked her to be his girlfriend!"

"Really?" Jacob's eyes widened as he used that voice he always used when he was surprised. I smiled.

"Ah huh."

Karla and Sarah started to jog up to us. Their group must have been called. Karla glared at me. "You told him, didn't you?" She asked knowingly.

"I didn't even know you liked him!" Jacob shouted.

Karla scoffed. "Like him? How can you not like him? Those blue green eyes and-"

I held up my hand. "Hold it!" I said. "If you finish that sentence, you will undergo years and years of teasing from the three of us, just warning you." Everyone laughed, Karla included.

We started running the lap, talking more about Karla and Bryan. When Karla and I were a bit ahead of Jacob and Sarah, I whispered to her. "So, um, you don't like Jacob anymore?"

Karla shook her head. "Nah, I'm over him." She turned her head suddenly. "Oh my gosh! You are such a bad liar!"

"What? What are you talking about?" I asked innocently.

Karla laughed. "You said you didn't like him!"

"Yeah, and I don't." I knew I couldn't keep up the act much longer.

"Then why else would you want to know if I don't like him, huh?"

"Because, I care about my friend's happiness and if she is interested in two boys at once it would not be fair to lead them on and not good for her well-being," I shifted into smart-alec mode. Only my closest friends, Karla, Jacob, and Sarah, had seen the superficial, gossiping tween in me.

"You liar!" Karla laughed. I smiled a little in defeat. "I knew it! You're totally into him," Karla insisted.

"Fine," I admitted, "Maybe I kind of, sort of, a little bit like him."

Karla shoved me and I pushed her back as we kept jogging around the track. "Yeah right. You've liked him this whole year, haven't you?"

"Maybe, maybe not." I knew she couldn't stand when I toyed with her like that. But she just laughed.

"Alright, missy. Yeah, yeah, you have my go ahead." We giggled some more as we made our way back to where our class was waiting. We weren't the last people to finish the two loops around the grass, but we definitely weren't one of the first.

We made our way into the classroom and pulled our chairs down from on top of our desks. The twenty-eight of us settled down on the rug and waited eagerly for instruction. Our teacher, Mrs. Whaley, sat in her wooden chair in front of us.

“Alright,” she began. “Today I can add on to the chronicles of naughty Mr. Whaley.”

Everyone listened intently. Mr. Whaley was our teacher’s stubborn husband, and about once a week she had a new story to tell us about something “naughty” that he did. Mrs. Whaley started every day off with some sort of story, or if she didn’t start with one, she would end up leading into a few during attendance. One of the true stories was how Mr. Whaley broke his toe, and although it was incredibly swollen and bruised, he refused to wear the cast and use the crutches, causing him to injure himself even more.

Everything was perfectly normal. There wasn’t anything strange or different. I knew exactly what to expect of the last four months of school. Until I didn’t.

The School Musical (Ch. 2)

It was a cold Wednesday morning. I was nervous. Really nervous. That afternoon, I was auditioning for the school musical, *Mary Poppins*. I desperately wanted Jane Banks. Everyone knew that.

Karla and Sarah both wanted Jane too, but they were in different casts as me, so I wasn’t competing against them, which was good. Jacob, however, was in my cast, and he wanted Michael Banks, Jane’s brother. I wanted him to get Michael too.

“Hey!” I called to him as he walked through the school yard’s gate. He gave a nervous smile.

“Hi. You nervous?” He asked.

“That’s an understatement.”

“Yeah, me too.”

I smiled. “So, can I get a preview?”

He frowned. “I have a feeling I don’t want to know what you’re talking about.”

I laughed. “Please, just let me hear you sing it!” I pleaded.

His expression was firm and solemn. “No,” Jacob replied, “You’ll hear me sing at the audition.”

“Please, please, please!” I insisted. I wondered if he would get mad, or at least annoyed, but he just kept shaking his head.

“No.”

“But, how are you going to be Michael and sing in front of a huge crowd over and over again if you’re nervous to sing in front of me?” I tested him.

That lit a spark in Jacob. “I’m not nervous to sing in front of you, just the director.”

“Then why won’t you sing?”

I knew he couldn’t refuse now. I started smiling big, almost jumping up and down. I had no idea if he would be good or not, and I wanted to know before Ms. Madison, our director, did.

“You are too good at that.” Jacob shook his head, but smiled.

“I know. Tricking people is my specialty,” I replied, grinning.

“Ugh. Fine. But you owe me.”

“Yeah, sure,” I told him sarcastically.

Jacob ignored me and led me away to where no one else could hear. Again, I tested him. I asked how he would be able to sing the audition song in front of the whole cast and be Michael and sing in front of an audience if he couldn't even sing in front of the few kids on the playground.

"Oh, stop. I'm singing early, you should be happy," he responded.

"Yeah, alright. I'm happy," I smiled mischievously.

Jacob started singing a simplified version of *Let's Go Fly A Kite*, which was the song we were supposed to memorize for the audition. His voice was lower than I expected, but definitely not developed like a man's. Jacob kept a steady rhythm and sang smoothly, so I thought his chances of getting Michael were pretty good.

"You were so good!" *Oh my gosh*, I thought. *Did I actually almost say, 'you were so cute?'*

"Thanks," Jacob replied shyly.

The bell rang loud and clear. We ran over to the exercise square, where we were dismissed in groups to run two laps. I saw Karla walking toward us, she had her audition tomorrow. Sarah was already in the square, talking to a few other girls, and I had almost forgotten that she did her audition yesterday.

"Sarah! How did it go?" I asked.

"Great!" She seemed really enthusiastic.

"Do you think you'll get the part?" Jacob asked.

"I hope," Sarah replied.

When Karla had made her way over to us, I turned to face her. "Hi! We have our audition today."

"I know. I hope it goes well."

"Thanks," Jacob replied for me.

"And how did yours go, Sarah?" Karla asked.

"Really well. I remembered everything," Sarah told Karla.

"Good. I still have to learn it."

"Wait! What? You haven't started learning it yet?" I couldn't hide my surprise.

"Yeah, but, singing comes naturally to me," Karla didn't seem bothered by my comment.

Jacob just shrugged. I made eyes with Sarah. Karla had never mentioned singing as something she enjoyed doing, and unless it was a "hidden talent," I didn't know how she would learn the song in a day.

Mrs. Whaley called Karla and Sarah's group first today, then mine, and Jacob's last. I ran fast that day, I needed to channel some of that nervous energy. I could run, like *really* run, when I wanted to, but I preferred to jog. I used to do track, but I got tired of it and shifted to swim team, which was more of a challenge (I was the slowest on the team).

We entered the warm classroom. I wondered if Mrs. Whaley knew that that day was "Audition Day," which was the most important day of the year in my mind.

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It was Tuesday night. I kept running around the house nervously. It had been almost a week since I auditioned for Jane Banks, and Ms. Madison said that the Wednesday Cast, which was Jacob and mine, would receive individual emails on Tuesday telling which part we got.

I felt like I was on a race against time. *What if Ms. Madison forgot about me?* I thought. *What if she casts every part and there isn't anything left for me?* I kept telling my mom to check her email. I was a nervous wreck. When the email finally came at nine p.m., I didn't know what to do.

"Tell me!" I shouted. "No, wait, don't tell me! No, tell me! No, wait!"

My mom put her hands down hard on my shoulders and looked me in the eye.

"Stella, calm down. Why don't you go to your room and lie down on your bed, all comfortable? I'll read the email, and then come and whisper in your ear, okay?" My mom talked to me like I was crazy, but I was too anxious to care.

"Okay," I panted, shaking. I walked slowly to my room, but then I sped up and slowed down again, just too nervous to do anything.

Then my mom walked in. I wanted to look at her, but I was afraid I would be able to figure out the news by her facial expression, so I kept my eyes down, staring at my pillow. She crouched on my bed and leaned toward me.

"Jane Banks," she whispered.

I jumped up. I started screaming with joy. I couldn't believe my ears. I had been doing plays and musicals, both professional and educational, for years, and I had never gotten a lead role.

"Wait! What? For real?" I was out of breath.

My mom just smiled. Then I grabbed her hands and started jumping up and down. She started jumping with me. It would seem weird to a bypasser, but I don't think anyone, not even my mom who had been doing professional theater since she was eleven, will ever understand how purely happy I was in that moment. All that fear, anxiety, and adrenaline that had been stored in me since the morning of the audition vanished. I couldn't wait to tell everyone at school. I wanted to shout it from the rooftops.

My mom and I stopped jumping up and down and screaming for a minute.

"Stella," my mom warned. "No matter how excited you are, be humble at school. Your friends may not have gotten the role they wanted, so being this energetic will only make them feel worse."

"But I can tell them that I got Jane, right?" It felt good to say those words: *I got Jane*. I wanted to repeat them over and over again, just to make the good news more real.

"Right. They'll find out at rehearsal, and everyone will be talking about what role they got anyway, so you might as well tell them when you see them. But say it softly, and gently."

I nodded. A grin was plastered to my face as I climbed into bed that night. I probably slept with a smile all night long.

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When I arrived at school, my mom's words kept echoing in my ears. But as soon as I saw Jacob, his warm smile made me forget everything she said.

"Jacob!" I screamed when I ran over to him. "I got it! I did it! I got it!" He knew instantly what I was talking about.

"Really?" *His voice is so adorable when he's surprised*, I thought, smiling subconsciously.

"Yeah! Oh, what about you?"

He shook his head. "No, I got Robertson Ay. He's the Bank's family's house boy."

I literally felt myself shrink in disappointment. I had mainly wanted Jacob to be Michael so that we could practice together.

I must have looked pretty upset, because Jacob felt the need to comfort me even though it was him that didn't get the part.

"But, it's okay. Robertson Ay, he's more my style. Clumsy, food lover, the class clown, that kind of thing."

I smiled. Jacob had always made everyone crack up, and Karla, Sarah and I always teased Jacob for how he was constantly hurting himself one way or another. He loved food, he always had, but he somehow managed to stay thin, and was just as short as I was.

"It's gonna be really fun," Jacob continued, "I get to faint on stage."

I laughed. "Wait! Really? I can't wait to see that!"

"Yeah, me too."

I had gotten Jane Banks. One of my best friends was perfectly happy with his part. Sarah had gotten Mrs. Brill, the Bank's family's maid, and had a lot to rehearse. And Karla, well, she ended up getting one of the Chimney Sweeps, and was excited about getting to dress like a tomboy, a role she took on more often than not. The school musical was going to be a blast. I was going to sing and act and dance, which I had always loved to do. The show would be perfect. I knew it would.

Rumors (Ch. 3)

February was going by quickly. I laughed, screamed with excitement, and gossiped at lunch like I always did. I was the first to raise my hand in class and an absolute perfectionist when it came to grades, like I always was. I rehearsed for the musical like crazy and was determined to be the best Jane Banks I could be, which was standard routine for me every time I was in a show.

But something was slightly off. Kids were nervous and confused. Apparently, in China, and lots of Asia, and Italy as well, there was something going around. It was said to be kind of like the flu. I didn't know what to think. I had gotten the flu that year and it made me feel pretty bad, but I took some medicine and then life proceeded as usual. Some kids seemed to know more about it than others. Like, Henry, a big blonde boy in my class that always had everyone cracking up. But, it didn't seem like he was being funny when he was talking about this mysterious virus.

"Now I know why Owen's family moved," Henry began, with a crowd of kids around him. "Coronavirus."

Owen was a shy boy in my class that had moved from China two years ago. I felt the instant need to prove Henry wrong. I thought at the moment that I wanted him to be wrong because I had always wanted to be right about everything and it was natural for me. However, the real reason was probably because I didn't want the virus to be as bad as some kids were making it out to be.

"No, that's not possible," I corrected him suddenly, "Owen moved a while ago. This didn't even exist back then. And also, if it did, his family would have moved just outside of China, not all the way to America."

All eyes turned to me. Henry was popular, definitely, but he wasn't a jock or the kind of boy that made all the girls giggle nervously. He was just popular, because he was funny and nice so people liked him. So I think everyone was kind of surprised that I publicly corrected him.

"Oh, well, I didn't know that Owen moved a while back," Hugo tried to defend his words instantly. "So, um, you know, it makes sense that I would think he moved 'cause of the virus."

I didn't even notice that Owen was listening. He walked into the circle and spoke loud and clear. I had only ever heard him whisper or mutter.

"She right," he said, referring to me. "We move because my dad get job here. No because of virus." He started laughing when he explained that last line. A deep, belly laugh, with a huge friendly smile across his face.

None of us knew what we were supposed to do. *Should we laugh with him?* I guess most of us assumed Owen was laughing because he thought what Henry said was ridiculous. But I thought what Henry said was scary. *If someone would actually have to move because of this, I pondered, then it would have to be really bad, right?*

I shook my head in response to my own thought. *No, I corrected myself. Owen didn't move because of the virus. He moved because his dad got a job here. It isn't bad. It isn't.*

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"Alright," my mom said decidedly. "Pizza is ready in forty-five minutes."

My mom's best friend since childhood, who my sister and I called our aunt, was coming over for dinner. She had the same name as my mom, Heather, so naturally she was *Auntie Heather*. I always knew we were in for a good night when she would come over. Although she didn't like to admit it, she was a natural at imitating people, and although that could sound mean or rude, it made my sister and me crack up.

The doorbell rang. Our dog, Geri, started barking. Auntie Heather was here. I ran to the door and pulled it open.

"Hi!" Auntie Heather laughed with her arms open wide. I gave her a hug. As soon as Geri saw that it was Auntie Heather, she stopped barking. Auntie Heather bent down to pet Geri, and was met with hundreds of wet kisses.

My sister, Allegra, came to the door and greeted Auntie Heather as well. As Allegra and I walked down the hall, our parents exchanged hellos.

Seated at the table, I was excited to dive into an olive topped pizza, but more excited for the conversation ahead. Whether my parents and Auntie Heather were talking about politics, financial situations, their students as all three of them were teachers, or a rude person they encountered the other day, Auntie Heather would always make us laugh.

I tuned out the small talk and focused on the pizza, as any ten year old would. I knew exactly when things would get interesting: about right after everyone finished their first slice of pizza, fifteen minutes after the conversation started.

"So, this Coronavirus thing," my aunt began. *Wait, what!* I thought. *No, no, no! Everyone finished their first slice. The conversation should become hilarious, not serious. No more about this Coronavirus. I've heard too much about it.*

"Yeah, I know," my mom replied.

Allegra jumped in with her scientific voice on. "Well, I think everyone is making too big of a deal out of nothing. I mean, it's basically a bad flu. People die from the flu every year. What's the big deal?"

That got me interested, but differently than I had hoped. *People are dying?* My fork stopped midway to my mouth.

"Yeah, I agree," Auntie Heather continued. "It really is just a flu."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. This was an Auntie Heather Dinner. It was all supposed to be fun and light. I wondered if I could turn the conversation around.

"So, today at school-" I interrupted.

"Just one second, Stell," Auntie Heather told me. I stared down at my plate. I had nothing funny to say, anyway. It was Auntie Heather who was the funny one.

Auntie Heather left at about a quarter after ten. I was supposed to be asleep, but I was really just lying in bed, thinking. *If Auntie Heather, who is funnier than Jacob, funnier than Henry, she's the funniest of all the funny,* I began thinking, *if she, of all people, chose to talk about this virus over making too tweens laugh, then, then, then...*

"Then this is really bad."

On The News (Ch. 4)

Life proceeded, but differently. We were supposed to practice "social distancing," which meant avoiding large gatherings, wearing masks when you're in a small space, and so on. Mrs. Whaley didn't talk about it, but she got mad at the kids that did.

"On the news, it said that the Coronavirus-" one boy started when we were sitting on the rug one morning. Mrs. Whaley cut him off.

"So, today, we're going to..."

At first she sent the message of not talking about it gently. She just interrupted by changing the subject. But as things seemed to get worse, she got snappier.

"The news said that the Coronavirus-

"We have nothing to worry about," she addressed the class.

"Well, on the news, the reporter said that-" my classmate continued.

"Stop. Just stop it. Stop."

None of us had ever heard Mrs. Whaley use that tone before. When giving us directions, they were always soft and kind. My class was surprised, but I think we all understood. She didn't want us to get scared.

That evening, Mrs. Whaley sent out a message to all the parents. It said to tell their kids to not talk about the Coronavirus, because she didn't want us to mix up our facts and scare other kids. But the next day at school, everyone kept talking about it, including me.

"Did you know that they found a case of Coronavirus in Walnut Creek?" Karla informed us.

Walnut Creek was the neighboring city, that was quite a bit bigger than our small town.

"Really?" Jacob asked. *Oh, wow*, I couldn't help myself from thinking, *if he uses that voice again, I don't know what I'll do*. "I'm glad I don't live in Walnut Creek anymore."

Jacob's dad had just moved to our town, so now both of his parents lived near the school.

"Wow," I answered. "Pretty soon, there will be a case in Lafayette."

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"Should I turn on the news?" My dad asked.

"What?" I wondered. "But, we don't have the news. We only have *Netflix* and *Amazon Prime*."

"Actually," my dad corrected. "We do have the news. But, we never watch it because we don't want you girls to get scared."

"Oh," Allegra said.

My mom walked in the room. "Sure," she answered my dad. "It's important to stay informed."

My dad reached for the remote and then switched on the TV. The remote shuffled through the pages: first *Netflix*, then *Amazon Prime*, next was *YouTube*, and finally, the last page, the news. A commercial ended just as we clicked on the news page. A pretty blonde reporter showed up on the screen.

"Hello. We're back now on CBSN News, at 6:00," she told the camera. "This evening we will cover more information on the Novel Coronavirus, a possible shelter-in-place and..."

"What's a shelter-in-place?" I interrupted the reporter. Of course, she didn't know that I interrupted her and kept talking.

"When people have to stay in their homes and not go outside." My dad explained it to me so quickly and simply that you would think he was explaining how to fasten a biking helmet.

"In Italy, hospitals are reaching their capacity," the reporter continued. "Governor Newsom is here with us today explaining what California's plan will be if we experience the same problem."

The Governor took up the whole TV. When the reporter was finishing her last line, Mr. Newsom was in a little box in the corner of the screen, but the box quickly expanded as he started talking.

"Yes. Hello. We are considering many options. We could..."

I started tuning out Governor Newsom's voice. I was much more concerned with what a shelter-in-place could mean. I didn't know what staying in our house would really entail. *What about grocery shopping?* I wondered. *And walks? And trips to the library? And, school?*

I surprised myself with my own thought. I knew school couldn't be cancelled. That just didn't happen.

The TV shifted to a blurry video of about a dozen nurses carrying a stretcher with a person wearing a ventilator on it. They brought the person through dark doors. The doors were glass, not wooden or any color that would be considered dark, but they looked creepy. Like, terrible things happened behind those doors. Terrible deaths.

I got up from the couch and walked out of the living room. I slid into the chair behind the kitchen desk, and I pulled out the computer.

How many Coronavirus cases are there? I typed. The screen showed a few options of links to websites. I clicked on a link that read, Global Map-Coronavirus It brought me to a page with a grey map of the world. On the top of the map it said Updated 14 minutes ago so I figured that it was pretty accurate.

When I brought my cursor over the map, each country that the little arrow on my screen crossed made a number pop up: the amount of cases in that country. I brought the cursor over to America. 649 cases 649? I thought frantically. *Oh my gosh.*

Three days later, I visited the website again. I brought the white arrow over to America. It read 4,373 cases.

"Mommy!" I called in the voice a toddler who dropped their ice cream cone would use. "It's spreading!"

People (Ch.5)

I was panting. I had just run incredibly fast. I was one of the first to be done with the two loops. I was pretty proud of myself.

When all the kids had lined up, Mrs. Whaley brought us inside like she always did. My spot in line was towards the end, so I didn't see what all the other kids did.

"Whoa!" I heard a few of my classmates say.

"What happened here?" Jacob asked.

When I finally entered the classroom and wasn't blocked by a ton of kids that were way taller than me, I saw what everyone was talking about.

All the desks, which were always put together in groups of three or four, were spread out, at least three feet away from each other. The big desks, the ones that two kids share, had a line of blue tape down the middle, separating one kid from the other.

"We are no longer going to be gathering on the rug," Mrs. Whaley started. "I will dismiss you to your cubbies in groups. And, when we stand in line, we will all be arms distance apart."

We all knew what that meant. The Coronavirus had become scary.

That afternoon, right before we went off to eat lunch, our principal Mrs. Kim walked in.

"I just wanted to make sure that all your students know how to login to their Google account on a computer," she asked Mrs. Whaley.

"Yes," Mrs. Whaley answered.

"And, they know how to get onto Google Classroom all on their own?" She continued.

"Yes."

"Alright then," Mrs. Kim answered. "I'll um, I'll see you all on Monday."

I heard the hesitation in her voice. That little pause before saying, "I'll see you all on Monday." It was so slight though, that I'm not even sure Mrs. Kim herself heard it.

Lunch was outside that day. "It's because we're practicing social distancing," all the teachers had been saying. My friends and I sat down.

"Why did Mrs. Kim ask that?" Sarah wondered.

"Yeah, that was weird," Karla agreed.

I didn't know what to do. *Should I tell them?* I had an internal debate. *Should I tell them what I suspect?*

Jacob sat down. "Everything has been strange today," he noticed.

"Guys, I know why Mrs. Kim came in and said what she did." I decided to tell them.

"Why?" Sarah asked.

"Because," I started to explain, "Incase we have to do school online. If you know, school is cancelled."

The confusion on their faces vanished and was replaced with despair.

"Oh." Jacob sighed.

We started talking about the epidemic. We were worried we would get in trouble, and we were tired of hearing the word, *Coronavirus*, so we called it *pickles* instead.

"My mom's friend went to the hair stylist a few weeks ago," Sarah started, "Then, a week later, the hairstylist called my mom's friend. Apparently, the hairstylist's husband has pickles."

"My dad's friend in New York got pickles. He recovered though," Karla told us.

Jacob sighed with happiness. "I love pickles."

I looked up in surprise. "You love the Coronavirus?"

Jacob started cracking up, but Sarah and Karla and I were confused. We made eyes with each other and waited for Jacob to catch his breath before asking what he meant.

"No," he said between chuckles. "I love pickles, like the food pickles!"

We all started laughing, that type of laughter where you start to fall over uncontrollably. A kid living in normal days wouldn't have laughed that hard. Maybe they would have giggled a little, but that would be it. But we were so desperate for something happy, something funny, something silly, that the second we found it, we clinged onto it. I never wanted to let go of it. I just wanted to laugh and laugh and laugh and hold on to that single moment of happiness, that moment of joy. I never wanted it to end.

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My mom was driving my sister and me home from school in our silver minivan. It was quiet in the car, which was new.

"Mommy?" I asked.

"What?"

"Do you think school will close?"

She was silent, thoughtful. We passed by the deserted Lafayette plaza, the long green grass. Usually at this time of day, it was filled with people. Talking people. Laughing people. People that were singing and dancing. People that were eating. People that were running back and forth on the grass, racing their dogs. People. For a second, I saw them all. The little kids with their toys. The teenagers with their friends. The mingling couples. The grocers and the butchers. The doctors and the nurses. The teachers and the soccer coaches. The dogs and the squirrels. All of them, right there where they should be. But that was it. It was just for a second. They disappeared, and it was just the deserted plaza again and the wild green grass that hadn't been mowed in ages. The people vanished. They all vanished. They were all gone in the blink of an eye.

"I don't know, sweetie," my mom answered finally. "We'll just have to wait and see."

We drove home. Home, the place where people can't wait to be at the end of a day, to relax with their family. That's where we would be for the next three months. Stuck there. Stuck at home. With nowhere to go. With no people in sight.

The Last Party (Ch.6)

I woke up excited. That day was Karla's birthday. We were going Go Cart Racing. She had been planning it for months. I couldn't wait to drive around the track, at top speed.

Two hours before the party, my mom got a message from Karla's mom.

Hi Heather. It read. I just found out from the Go Cart Racing club that the kids will be wearing publicly used helmets, and since they will be touching the handles of the Cart and many other things that other people have used, I just don't feel comfortable having the

party there. Of course, Karla is upset, but it's for her own safety, and the safety of Stella and Karla's other friends. Would Stella like to join us at *Batch & Brine* for a late lunch? It would mean a lot to Karla. Thank you.

My mom informed me of what Karla's mom had said. I was upset, but I couldn't imagine how Karla must have felt. *I mean*, I told myself. *It's her birthday. And a pretty big one, too. She's turning double digits.*

We arrived at *Batch & Brine* at two o'clock. Karla, Karla's mom, Sarah, and a friend of ours named Clara sat at a table. Karla looked alright.

"Hi! Happy birthday!" I shouted.

Karla looked up as she noticed me. "Hi! Thanks!"

"Where should I put this?" I asked, referring to her present in my hand. I had gotten her a string art kit.

"Oh, right here," Karla's mom replied.

"Where's Jacob?" I asked as I sat down swiftly.

"We think his parents didn't get the message in time. I hope he doesn't show up at the Go Cart Racing track," Karla told me, with a little cough in her throat at the mention of racing.

Balloons were all over the place. Apparently, Karla and her mom knew a few of the waiters there.

We started playing balloon volleyball. Karla and I were sitting on one side of the table, and Sarah and Clara on the other, so we divided up the teams that way. Karla and I kind of had an unfair advantage because of the wall behind us. If the balloon went over our heads, it would just bounce off the wall and go back to Sarah and Clara.

Karla and I ended up winning, five to one.

"You guys had it easy though," Sarah informed us.

"We know," Karla and I smiled and high fived.

After we had all finished our meals, we headed over to the back of the restaurant. Clara stood against the wall, but in a position that made it look like she was sitting in a chair. So naturally, that gave us the idea to sit on each other's laps against the wall, which led to the idea of piggyback rides.

I was much smaller than Sarah and Karla, and a bit shorter than Clara, so I wasn't able to give anyone a piggyback ride, but I was often seen on someone else's back.

We gave each other rides for at least half an hour. We laughed, screamed, and fell to the ground. Nobody minded, because it was the sound of children having fun. The sound of children playing.

When my mom came to pick me up, I waved goodbye to my friends. Just a plain, "Bye, see you on Monday!" kind of goodbye. I didn't realize, though I should have, that that would be the last time I would see my best friends until fifth grade. None of us realized. If I had known that

the only time I would see the beautiful faces of my friends would be on a screen, I would hold them in my arms and cling to them and not ever let them go.

But I didn't know. I didn't know that pretty soon, my friends would break my heart without even knowing it. I didn't know that everyday I would wave goodbye to them while staring at my computer, smiling on the outside but sobbing on the inside. I didn't know everything that was going to happen. I should have. I should have been smarter than that. But I wasn't. And that stupidity caused me to face terrible consequences later on.

Three Weeks (Ch. 7)

My dad had just finished drying my hair. Besides braids, it was his job to take care of my hair because my mom would always pull too hard. My mom had extremely curly hair, and my dad had straight hair, so I ended up somewhere in between.

I was sitting on my parents' bed, which my dad always did my hair on. My dad was leaning over my mom's dresser, looking at his phone.

"Oh, Stella," my dad began. I looked up. "I just got an email. Your school is closed."

A million thoughts raced through my head. I had so many questions, so many worries. I wanted to scream, to cry, to shout, to even ask, *why?*

"Oh," I whispered instead.

"Yep, it's closed until April 6, just after spring break."

"Three weeks." I didn't feel capable of speaking in more than two syllables at a time.

"Yeah," my dad confirmed.

I felt like I was on auto-repeat. I kept thinking the same thing. *Three weeks. Only three weeks. Just three weeks. Three weeks and that's it.* I had to keep thinking that. I couldn't believe that it was as bad as it was.

~ ~ ~

On Monday morning, I checked my assignments on a platform we used called Google Classroom. In there, was a weekly plan. It gave all the assignments for the next two weeks and where to find them. I set to work. There was no point in waiting, I had nothing else to do.

Most of the assignments were review. There weren't many new concepts introduced. I understood why. *It's hard teaching online*, I thought.

My dad was a physical education teacher, so he had nothing to do so far. He spent his free time cooking, something he loved doing and hated doing at the same time.

While making the pie, he swore. A lot. My dad always swore often, but nothing like this. Then, I just thought he was swearing because the simple marmalade pie wasn't coming out the way he wanted it to. But, he was probably swearing, because of the quarantine. He was taking

all his anger out on the poor little pie. I was sitting behind the desk in the kitchen, so I was right there. I was a witness to the pie's abuse.

I didn't say anything. I wanted to scream at him. I wanted to shout, "Stop it! I'm trying to work!" Or, "It's not the pie's fault! Stop hitting the pie!" Or even, "I know this is hard! But it's just as hard for you as it is for me!" But I didn't. I just kept quiet and kept reducing fractions on a meaningless screen.

Zoom (Ch. 8)

Distance learning was quiet. Confusing. Scary. And most of all, distant. I felt so lonely, and I wasn't the only one.

A video platform, called Zoom, was being introduced. Apparently, it had existed even before the epidemic. It was like *FaceTime* except hundreds of people could be on a call at once, instead of just two or three. After four days of distance learning, my teacher sent out a message on Google Classroom. It gave the link to a zoom meeting for my class.

I expected to be thrilled. I wanted to jump up and down squealing at the thought of seeing my classmates again. I almost forced myself to. But I wasn't thrilled. I didn't know what to feel. I knew it wouldn't be the same to see my friends through Zoom, but it was more than that. I didn't know if I wanted to see them. I felt such a longing to be with them, to laugh, to scream, to squeal, to gossip: to do all those innocent, stupid things that ten year old little girls do. I was worried that if I saw them on a tiny screen, I would collapse. That the longing would be too much.

I clicked on the link. It brought me to the Zoom meeting. About ten little fourth grade faces popped up, and of course, Mrs. Whaley was there too. Everyone was smiling and laughing. But there was a tension in the air. Even if that air was in twelve different places, the tension was still there. We wore fake, stupid smiles and we said meaningless things, like, "I miss you guys!"

But that light, easy, comfortable atmosphere was gone. The joking, teasing personality of the kids I had spent six months with in a small classroom had vanished.

My classmates and I mainly tuned out what Mrs. Whaley had to say and we focused on messaging each other in the chatroom, which at the time Mrs. Whaley didn't know how to disable.

Looking back on the first Zoom session with my class now, I wish I had listened to what my teacher was saying. I could have missed something crucial, but instead of hearing Mrs. Whaley speak, I typed "hi," over and over again in the little white box called the ChatRoom.

"What's There To Be Happy About?" (Ch. 9)

My family and I were on a stroll on the Lafayette Trail. My sister and I were riding on our scooters, while our parents walked lightly behind us.

"It's sprinkling," I noticed.

The light rain drops turned to heavy balls of water. We reached a bench and decided to wait it out; we were too far from home to walk back.

"Oh, Stella," my mom looked over at me. "School's closed until May first."

Anger surged through my body. Anger at my parents. Anger at the wet markets in China. Anger at the world. And anger at the Coronavirus.

"You didn't think to tell me this?" I screamed. There were people around us. Everyone was taking walks, there was nothing better to do.

"I just found out right now." My mom defended herself.

"No you didn't! You don't even have your phone on you! How the heck would you have been able to find out right now? Did you see the message printed in the clouds?" I asked sarcastically.

I was screaming at my mom. I had gotten in fights with her in the past, of course, but I had never been this angry at her.

"Stella, I saw the message just before we left." My mom was getting impatient.

"Then you didn't find out right now!" A combination of rain and tears slid down my cheeks. "That's not right now! You should have told me the second you got the message!"

I grabbed my scooter from out of the mud where it was lying. I started off. The trail was slippery, but I tried to go as fast as I could. I must have looked ridiculous: a sobbing girl with puffy red eyes on a hot pink scooter, still screaming at her parents while hundreds of yards away from them.

All of that confusion, fear, sadness, and anger that had been bottled up inside of me for the last three weeks were finally let go. The cork was finally unscrewed and all the vile poison inside was released.

People were walking on the trail. They were spread out so that they wouldn't come in contact with each other. I saw a smiling couple walk by with their dalmatian on a leash.

"What's there to be happy about?" I yelled at them under the thundering rain. They were shocked. "Why are you smiling? The world is facing a pandemic! Why are you smiling?"

I had never used such a disrespectful tone in public before. And the few times that I had used that voice at home, I was severely punished. But I didn't care what the consequences would be for me screaming at two young strangers. My world had been turned upside down.

I kept scooting, past people who were looking at me; shocked. They couldn't believe what I had just done. And every time I saw smiling people, whether they were a blind old lady balancing on a cane or a little kid splashing in the puddles, I would scream the same thing. Over and over again. I wanted everyone to feel my pain. No, I *needed* everyone to feel my pain.

I heard the sound of a whizzing scooter behind me. I knew who it was. I didn't stop. I just kept going until Allegra jumped off her scooter and ran to grab mine.

"Stella!" She yelled at me. She pulled me off my scooter. I was about to fall into the mud, but she caught me. "Stop! Stella, stop!"

She brought me over to a nearby bench and tried to steady me. “Stella, it’s not that ba-”

“Yes it is!” I interrupted. I was sick of hearing that. “Hundreds of thousands of people have died! Thousands more are in the ICU or are on life support! They can’t breathe without a stupid ventilator! We won’t be able to see our family in Italy this summer! The school musical which I finally got a lead part in won’t happen! I can’t see my best friends in the whole world for another month and a half! And I probably won’t be able to finish fourth grade in a classroom!”

I started counting off all of the terrible things on my fingers. “That’s how bad it is Allegra! That’s how bad!”

Then, Allegra started crying. I was feeling a ton of emotions, and then a new one appeared: surprise. The last time I had seen my older sister cry must have been when she was six years old. She wasn’t sobbing, nothing like me, but tears did start running down her cheeks. Quiet, peaceful tears, not the hideous, loud ones that had been pouring out of my eyes for the last half hour.

“At least you have friends to call!” Allegra started. “You used to be the one with friend problems. But this year, you gained a ton and I lost a ton! The ones I have left are so stupid! They just talk and talk and talk at recess! They think we’re too old, too mature, too this and too that to do anything! Online chats would be perfect for them. I wouldn’t be bugging them to play tag or an imagination game. They could just recite monologues! But, they can’t figure out Zoom! Yes, that’s how stupid my friends and their parents and my teachers are. Okay? They can’t figure out Zoom. Yeah, I have two or three friends! I’m not, ‘friendless.’ But it feels like I am! Because the friends I knew and loved are gone!”

I was quiet now. I had never thought about Allegra. Honestly, I hadn’t thought about anyone. I had wanted everyone to feel my pain, but really, everyone was feeling their own type of pain.

“Oh.” I was shocked. After all that talking I had done, I had nothing left to say.

Allegra hugged me. She never hugged me. Unless she was being forced to on some special occasion, she hardly ever touched people. If you were to look up ‘germaphobic’ in the dictionary, you would see a picture of my sister’s face.

“Okay? So, it’s not just you. We all have it bad. All of us.”

I nodded in reply. I saw my parents in the distance. All four of us had a wet mess of hair. I looked down at my bare arms and I realized I had goosebumps from the cold. I started to shiver.

As my parents came closer, I walked up to them. My face was stained with tears, but I wasn’t crying right at that moment.

My dad hugged me. A big, warm hug, even though his shirt was soaking wet. My mom came over and kissed my head. I had forgotten all about my anger towards them for not telling me about the extended cancellation of school.

We walked the rest of the way home in silence. It was time to dive into part two of distant learning.

That Call (Ch. 10)

"What do you want for breakfast?" My mom asked.

I shrugged. I was sleepy. I had just woken up. I had gotten into the habit of sleeping in late. I figured that since I didn't have to be on a call with my teacher and classmates until 9:00 a.m., I might as well get some extra sleep and not wake up until 8:30.

I flipped open the family laptop, which was currently mine. Allegra was using her ChromeBook from school, and my mom was able to get two other laptops from her school for her and my dad to use.

I logged on to Google Classroom. I liked to be able to check my assignments before I started them, just so that I knew what to do.

"Oh good," I told no one in particular. "My assignments are not too heavy today."

My mom looked up from smearing peanut butter on a piece of Gluten Free bread. "Oh, okay," she started. "You should get dressed while your peanut butter toast is in the oven."

"What?" I was disappointed, though I knew I had no reason to be. "I don't want peanut butter toast!"

"Wha-uh," my mom made that sound. You know, the one that's half the word "what" and half the word "ugh." "I asked you what you wanted for breakfast and you didn't answer, so I started making this!"

"No, actually, I shrugged," I was being stubborn. "This happens every morning, and usually you give me a few options of things to eat. Why did you break the routine?"

"Will you really not eat this? You used to love it!"

I gave in. "No, I'll eat it," I said. "But, I just don't like change."

"I know," my mom slid my toast into the oven.

I got up and trudged into my room. I started to make my bed. Though I didn't like to admit it, I was a total neat freak and I never wanted anything out of place. Not my bed, not my breakfast, and certainly not my learning.

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My classmates' faces popped up. Mrs. Whaley had figured out how to block it so that we could only message her, but she said that if we got on the call early, she would open it up so that we could message each other. That made everyone get there early or right on time, so she didn't have to mark anyone as late in attendance.

After our computer clocks changed to reading 9:00 AM, Mrs. Whaley turned off our messaging privileges. I tried to chat a quick `bye!` but I wasn't fast enough, so I ended up sending "bye" to Mrs. Whaley instead.

As Mrs. Whaley read through the schedule, something she said made me confused. So, I quickly pressed the `UNMUTE` button, and it changed to say `MUTE`.

"Um, so are we supposed to-" I started.

"I asked you *not* to unmute yourself!"

A few weeks ago, during a virtual field trip, I had a question so I unmuted myself to ask it. Mrs. Whaley quickly muted me and then sent me a message through the chatroom telling me not to. I was a little upset, but I got over it pretty quickly.

But Mrs. Whaley's voice: she had never used that tone with me. It was so stern that I left the meeting. I slid out of my chair and ran into my bedroom. I was sobbing, but screaming too. It wasn't really in reaction to Mrs. Whaley, but mainly everything that had happened over the last month and a half.

"All I've done is love her!" I was hysterical. "Maybe I'm just a regular student to her! Maybe she doesn't love me! Maybe I'm not important! I thought that she thought I was something special!"

I knew I was overreacting. But I also thought that I had a right to be upset after all the things I had lost.

My mom and dad burst into my room.

"What happened?" My mom shouted over my cries.

I started telling them what had happened. But I didn't get the reaction I had expected.

"That's it? You can't be that sensitive," my dad told me.

"Teachers give students directions all the time. It's nothing personal," my mom agreed.

"But, but, but," I was still sobbing. "The voice! The voice she used!"

"Okay, so maybe she could have said it a little nicer," my mom said.

"But it's not that! She's never used that voice with me! I've always been special. She's never given me a direction!"

"Never?" My dad asked, surprised.

"She's given me a direction to do something, like to help another student. But she's never given me a direction not to do something," I explained.

"What's the difference?" My dad was still stumped.

"Ugh! Just go away if you can't be helpful!" I started crying again. My dad did what I told him to do and left the room.

"Stella, you should talk to Mrs. Whaley. I'm sure she didn't mean to hurt your feelings," my mom advised.

"No, but-" I immediately started to protest.

"Talk to her. It will help," my mom insisted.

I sent Mrs. Whaley a message through Google Classroom, and my mom messaged her too. Almost instantly, I heard back from her. She suggested to call right then, so I told my mom and she helped me log on.

Mrs. Whaley's face popped up on my screen. After we both said hello, Mrs. Whaley asked, "So what's going on?"

"Well, um, my mom said I should talk to you." I felt nervous. *What am I supposed to say?*

"Probably," Mrs. Whaley agreed.

"It's just, well, it's just been really hard. Staying at home," I continued.

I started telling her how much I was longing to see everyone. She told me that no matter how much she smiles and seems happy on the Zoom calls, that it's really hard for her too.

"You have no idea how much I miss you, like everyday," she told me.

"When I'm really upset, my mom and I have these meaningful conversations. She says things like, 'nobody can take those good memories away from you.' And so many times, I wish my life was a book. Because if it was, then that would be the end of the chapter, and the next chapter would take place a ton of months later when everything is back to normal again. But no, I have to live every single second. I don't get to fast-forward over anything."

Mrs. Whaley's face lit up. "Stella," she started. "You could write a book about this."

I laughed. "Yeah, I guess."

"No, I'm serious. You could write about your experience through this."

"Well, maybe." I started to realize that Mrs. Whaley wasn't joking.

"I mean, your grandchildren will be learning about the science of the virus. But how cool would it be for them to be sitting on granny's lap and hearing the story of a child's life in this?"

"Hmm," I pondered.

Mrs. Whaley's eyes widened so big that I was worried they were going to pop. "Stella, if you write a full book about this, we could share it with a larger audience."

"You mean, like..."

Mrs. Whaley finished my thought. "Yeah. I'll help you get in contact with publishing companies."

Ever since I could talk, I had been writing. I was always asking my mom how to spell something, and then I would write a story. And when I was six, I discovered the amazing internet, and I started writing stories on Google Docs. That was a life saver because I was always erasing what I had written and coming up with new ideas, and it was a pain to have to use a real, physical eraser. I was so happy to just be able to press the "delete" button, instead of having to use my scrawny six year old muscles (I didn't have any) to erase paragraphs of text. So to hear Mrs. Whaley voice those words, those precious, beautiful words: ".....publishing companies," well, that was something I never thought I would hear. At that moment, I made up my mind. I was going to write a book, a memoir, and I was going to publish it. For my teacher, Mrs. Whaley.

"Okay," I smiled. "I'll do it!"

Two Nights Later (Ch. 11)

I was lying in bed. It had been a half hour since I had crawled under my pile of blankets, and I was still awake. I was tired, exhausted, lethargic even, but I just couldn't fall asleep. I kept thinking, I couldn't get my mind to rest that night.

When I'm thinking hard, one thought leads to another, and before I know it, I'm thinking about a completely different topic than I was thirty seconds ago. So that warm, humid night, one

thought led to another, and before I knew it, my vision became blurred. My vision would always blur right before I was about to cry. And then, right on cue, tears started rolling down my cheeks and onto my silky purple blankets. I knew that although the tears were small and silent, they would soon be bursting from under my closed eyelids and would be heard throughout the whole neighborhood. So I threw off my covers and ran to the door of my room. As I pulled the small wooden door open, the sound of the TV became much more clear. But my mom, who was the only person I wanted to see at that moment, was in her and my dad's room, watching her own show on the computer.

My mom looked up suddenly as I ran into her room. "What's the matter?" She asked frantically, as she could tell I had been crying.

I climbed into her bed and whispered, "I was just thinking about all the things I've lost." I'm surprised my mom could hear me, because my voice was so soft and my sobs were so loud.

My mom pushed the computer to the edge of the bed and scooted closer to me. She could tell I just needed to let everything pour out.

"I was Jane Banks!" I was hysterical again. I knew everyone was tired of hearing me cry, but I didn't care. I was grieving, and I needed a good cry every other day or so.

"I finally got that lead role! Finally, finally! I've been acting since I was four years old, and I work so hard, but the kids who sing happy birthday at the auditions always get the lead! But I finally had a smart director! I finally got cast as a lead! I was going to be so good, I was going to impress all those parents and teachers and little kids in the audience so much! But nope! Now it's cancelled! Because of the Coronavirus!"

I was screaming by that point.

"My friends! I had such good friends! I love my friends! We were such a perfect foursome of friends! Karla, Jacob, Sarah and me! All of us! And my teacher! She changed my life! She made me a different person! She turned a self-conscious, shy, and friendless nine year old into a free spirited, out-going, friend filled ten year old!"

"She made me, me!"

I collapsed onto my mom's bed. She was crying, softly, for me. I didn't want to cause her pain, but I didn't know how to deal with my grief without expressing it.

"But, Stella, none of those good memories are gone." My mom tried to comfort me.

"Yes, but, there was going to be so many more!"

The door opened, and my dad and sister, Allegra, were standing in the hallway.

"What's going on?" My dad asked, as if he hadn't heard the whole thing.

"She's upset because of Coronavirus," my mom explained simply.

I turned to face my dad. "It's all gone! All of it! It's all lost!"

My dad came over and sat on the edge of the bed. He hugged me, and I leaned into it. My dad's pajamas were soft and warm; he always wore pajama tops too, though most men didn't. I looked at his dark face and noticed for the first time how sad he seemed. And the more I thought about it, the more I realized his face had been like that for the whole quarantine.

I had been hyperventilating. My breath started to steady. My mom turned her solemn gaze over at me and asked, "Are you ready to go back to bed?"

That irritated me. *I mean, do I look ready?* “Why are you so eager to get rid of me?”

I started questioning my mom. I knew in the back of my mind how hard everything had been for her too, and how she had been so strong and supportive of me. But my conscious brain was sure that my sweet mom was annoyed with my depression and wanted to send me to bed so that she could watch *Working Moms* on Netflix.

“No, Stella, I’m not. You just seemed like you were calming down.” My mom looked so exhausted.

“I’ll just leave. I’ll just cry myself to sleep so that you can watch *Working Moms*,” I was being so mean.

“A stupid TV show is more important to you than me?” I continued.

“Stella, no, stop it,” my dad intervened.

I made my way past everyone and stomped into my bedroom. I slammed the door, which I knew my dad hated. Soon after, my mom and dad walked in.

“Stella, you just seemed like you were calming down,” my mom tried to explain. “You don’t have to go to bed. You can stay up and we can talk some more.”

I started to be a little nicer. “No, it’s okay,” I sighed. “I’m okay. I’ll just go to bed.”

My mom didn’t seem sure. “Okay, if you’re ready.”

She tucked me in and both her and my dad said goodnight. My face was still stained with tears, but it was 10:30 and I was so exhausted that I fell asleep right away.

The next few weeks, I kept breaking down. I would have a couple of good days, and then everything would come back and I would sob and sob. I would repeat the same problems over and over again and my parents would have to listen to me drone on forever. I didn’t realize how supportive they had been, how much they had done to make me feel better. I was only concerned with my problems.

Swimming (Ch. 12)

“Girls! You ready?” My mom called from across the house. It was a Saturday, and we were heading over to my aunt’s house to swim in her pool. It was a scorching day, so the circular pool would be refreshing.

“Yep! Coming!” I called back.

I was wearing a beach dress with a pretty, flowery design running down the middle of it. It was white and silky, and I had my two piece bathing suit on underneath.

My toes were curled around the edge of the pool. My goggles were on top of my head, so I brought them down so that they covered my eyes. I was going to just jump in, but then everyone noticed me standing there, and all eyes turned to me.

“Are you going to dive?” Auntie Jenny, my mom’s sister, asked, while bouncing my little cousin on her hip.

"I think she's just going to jump," my mom clarified.

"No, it's okay. We practiced dives during every training session when I was on swim team. I can dive." I always tried to sneak in the fact that I was on a "swim team."

"Are you sure?" My mom looked worried.

I turned to look at my aunt. "How deep is the pool?" I asked, referring to the deep end.

"Eight or nine feet," she replied.

"Eight or nine! That's plenty deep. Where I swim, it's only six and half feet deep. I'm going to dive," I told everyone.

I bent down on one knee. That was my favorite dive. I could do a standing dive, but I wasn't able to flip in a standing dive, and I wanted to impress my five and three year old cousins, so I chose to do a knee dive.

I lifted my bended knee slightly, and positioned my other leg so that it was bent in a lunge position. I brought my tan arms over my head and put my hands together.

"Come on! Whoooo! Go Stella!" My mom started cheering.

"Go Stellie!" My five year old cousin, Livia, called from my aunt's hip.

I laughed. "Three, two, one!" I shouted.

I plunged into the cool water. It tickled my skin.

"Refreshing!" I called out to everyone as I resurfaced.

My flip hadn't gone exactly as I had hoped, but I managed kind of a half circle in the air before splashing into the water.

At least I didn't belly-flop, I thought, and then laughed aloud.

Everyone cheered and laughed after I landed in the pool. I started swimming breaststroke slowly over to my family.

I gave Livia, and her three year old brother David (also my cousin) a hug. They were wearing cute little Disney floaties, a Rapunzel one for Livia and a Mickey Mouse one for David.

David doggy-paddled over to me. "Do you want a piggy-back ride?" I asked him.

He nodded. I brought him gently over to the steps in the shallow end of the pool, so that he could jump on my back from the step.

"Wheeee!" I squealed as I brought the little boy around the pool, him clinging to my back.

I started bouncing him a little, and he giggled and laughed.

"Me want piggy-back ride too!" Livia told me.

I leaned back so that David would gently fall in the water, and then I made my way over to Livia. I brushed her blonde curls out of her face and lifted her out of the water. I slung her on my back like she was a knapsack and started bouncing her around the pool just like I did to David.

After playing and wading in the pool with Allegra and my cousins. And doing some lap swimming as well as practicing dives, we all got out of the water. I started snacking on slices of watermelon on strawberries. *I mean, it's better than chomping down on chips, right?* I thought.

I dried off a little, and then went in the house to change back into my flowery beach dress. I tried to comb my hair a little in the bathroom, but I hadn't brought a comb, so I had to

use my hands. My hair stayed wet and messy, but I figured it would dry more after lying in the sun.

“Stellie!” Livia called in her baby voice after I skipped out of the bathroom and back outside.

“We got twawbewwies,” David told me, meaning *strawberries*.

“Yes, I know. I’ve already eaten a ton.” I giggled a little.

Allegra walked up to us. “Do you guys want to draw?” She held up a box of chalk.

We agreed to draw on the patio together, all four of us, working on the same art project.

Allegra started giving us jobs. She told us what to color, with which color, and where, but she didn’t go as far as to explain the why.

It seemed that based off of what Allegra was telling us to do, we would be drawing a flower. A huge, bulky, lumpy flower. But, we went along with it. I was given the official role of “Outliner.” I would outline whatever Livia and David were going to color in. That meant that Allegra would be drawing the entire flower. *Great. How is this going to turn out?*

Surprisingly, the flower turned out better than I had expected it to. It was huge, and bulky, and lumpy, but it had pretty colors and was a unique design. Everyone was either talking, laughing, snacking, or playing, including my aunt’s three dogs, all happy to be there. Except for me.

My dad was born and raised in Ravenna, Italy. His whole family had either grown up in Eastern or Southern Italy. After meeting my mom in college, in England, he moved to California, where my mom had grown up, to be with her. Of course, that meant sacrificing a life with his family involved: his parents, his brother and sister, and his nieces and nephews. So, ever since, even before Allegra and I were born, my mom and my dad would travel to Italy every summer to see my dad’s family. And since both of my parents were teachers, they had the entire summer off to enjoy being in Italy.

For as long as I can remember, I’ve traveled to Italy every summer with my parents. We’ve never really felt like tourists there-especially my dad-and we’ve never really been sight-seeing, unless we were showing someone else around. We would spend most of our days *living* there. We would relax on the beach; playing in the warm water from the Mediterranean Sea, building sand castles, letting our skin turn bronze, and talking and laughing with Italian friends at the cafe. And of course, eating a ton of *gelato* and pizza. We would treat ourselves to a three course meal cooked by my Italian grandmother every night. We would visit my dad’s friend from college, who owned a six story castle that we loved to explore. We would spend days at *Mirabilandia*, Italy’s version of *Disneyland*, going on rides like *HighSpeed*, that went at over 90 miles per hour. Everything was perfect up there. I always missed my school friends, but I got to visit dozens of cousins and play with both old and new Italian friends on the beach, so I never missed my friends too much. I never felt that terrible ache, that terrible longing to see my friends, like I had during the quarantine.

So being at the pool, talking and laughing, shooing away mosquitoes, made the fact that we weren't going to be able to go to Italy that summer much more clear and vivid. That longing, that ache, it all came back. Almost like a cramp, except instead of on your side or hip, in your heart. I wouldn't get to see my sweet *Nonna* and *Nonno*. I wouldn't get to make up dances with my older cousins. I wouldn't get to wade around in the mellow water. I wouldn't get to scream "wahoo!" on a roller coaster. I wouldn't get to listen to ghost stories in Italian about the ancient princesses and princes that lived in my dad's friend's castle.

I felt tears starting to come through my eyes. I pushed them back. I was so determined not to cry in front of Livia and David.

"What wong?" David asked me, meaning to ask "what's wrong?" *Shoot. Too late.*

"What? Oh, nothing! You wanna know something funny? Whenever I sneeze, my eyes water! That's probably why it looked like I was crying." I put on a huge fake smile. *Well, that's true. My eyes do water when I sneeze.*

Livia came over. "But you didn't sneeze!" She exclaimed. *Ugh. Livia. Now what am I supposed to do?* I thought, irritated.

"What? You're so silly! Yes I did!" I started laughing playfully, hoping that they would too, and then they would forget about it.

Livia started giggling. *Good, I sighed. I'm on the right track.* "I'm not silly! You're silly!" She laughed.

I reached in and tickled her playfully. She squeezed her shoulders, hoping to get my hands out of her ticklish little armpits. We all giggled, and David did too.

Even though I was able to mask my depression in front of my cousins, it doesn't mean that it made the pain fade away. In fact, it even made me ache more. Because I had to suffer alone. I had to pretend I was fine when really I was sobbing and trembling and shivering on the inside. Sobbing, trembling, and shivering on the inside, while smiling, laughing, and giggling on the outside. The contrast of my external emotions from my internal emotions almost became too much to bare. I almost broke down, and cried and screamed in front of my aunt and her boyfriend and my little cousins and my sister and my parents. But I couldn't do that. Stella's Wild Emotion Ride is reserved strictly for when she and her immediate family are alone at home, not for public appearances. So I kept it all in. I just kept drawing on the cement and giggling and snacking on watermelons.

Too Good To Be True (Ch. 13)

I'm sitting on the ledge of a planter box. I turn my head and take in my surroundings. I see a blue playground, one exactly like the one at my school, Lafayette Elementary.

"Hey, Stella!" There stands Karla, Jacob, and Sarah on the edge of the playground.

"What? What are you all doing here?" I look stunned.

Sarah laughs. "It's school. Of course we're here."

"But-Coronavirus. We can't be here," I answer.

"Coronavirus? What's that?" Jacob asks.

"What? Coronavirus! You know, the pandemic." *Why don't they know what it is?*

Karla gets closer to me. "Did you have a bad dream?" She asks, cracking up.

"Karla, we can't be closer than six feet! Get back!"

"Oh my gosh, Stella. This must have been a nightmare!" Sarah concludes.

"What! No, it-"

"C'mon, Stell. Come play with us!" Jacob smiles his beautiful grin, and his adorable dimples show.

I laugh. "Well, maybe I just did have a bad dream! It was crazy. There was this thing-"

"Stella! Forget about it! Just come play," Karla tells me.

"Wait! Stop! What if *this* is a dream? It is! You're lying! Stop lying!" I shout.

Karla gets even closer. She pinches me. "Did that hurt?" She asks with sass.

"Yeah! What was that for?" I snap.

Sarah giggles. "If it hurt, then this can't be a dream, right? You really are here, Stella. Forget about that crazy dream. Let's go play an imagination game," she tells me.

"Okay. Alright," I agree.

"Let's race to the playground!" Jacob shouts.

"Last one there is a rotten egg!" I scream, feeling more like myself.

We sprint over to the tanbark. I'm first, because of my experience doing track.

"How do you run so fast? It's like you're flying!" Jacob asks.

I grin. "I have my ways."

We climb the steps of the tall playground. "How about Crime Scene Investigation?" Sarah suggests.

Crime Scene Investigation is our favorite imagination game. "Perfect!" I call.

"What's the crime?" Karla asks.

"Ooh, I know! Kidnapping in the Swiss Alps! There are a ton of avalanches there!" I tell them.

"And who's the victim?" Jacob asks.

"Seven year old, Jane Marlin. Thin, brunette. Last seen on March 7th, 2089," Karla comes up with that idea on the spot.

"Oh, good! A future one! Can there be magic elements?" Sarah asks.

"It's our game! Of course!" I answer.

We start to play. We pretend to speak into future walkie-talkies, ones that don't have any static, even in temperatures below zero.

"Look!" Jacob calls. "See that man! He must be the kidnapper! I mean, what else would he be doing in the Swiss Alps?"

"Keeping his milk cold?" Karla jokes.

"There's no time for kidding!" Sarah shouts seriously. "We have to go quietly, so we can catch him, interrogate him, arrest him, and find out where this Jane Marlin is and bring her back to her family."

"Well, probably to the Emergency Room first. She probably has frostbite and a million other things you get when you're so cold." Jacob clarifies.

"Oh my gosh!" Karla screams. "The ice is breaking! Quick, down on your stomachs! We have to move slowly, like snails."

"Too late!" Sarah screeches. She looks in the direction of the imaginary kidnapper. "He's seen us!"

"He's drawing out his gun!" Jacob looks terrified. *He's such a good actor.*

"Stella! Move out of the way!" Karla screams at me.

I take a few steps back. The wall behind me, the one that keeps kids from falling off the playground, dissolves. I take an extra step, and then I'm falling.

"Nooooo!" We all scream, in slow-motion.

I'm frantically trying to grab something, anything. The fall is so long, I feel like I'm falling off a cliff. I'm screaming, we all are. I look down, even though I know I shouldn't.

The tanbark turns into sharp, jagged rocks. I see my life flash before my eyes.

"Good-bye! I love you guys!" I cry out to my friends, but they can't hear me over the sound of the wind.

Then I hit the ground. I hit rock bottom. And everything turns black.

~ ~ ~

I sat up suddenly. I started to pant, to hyperventilate. Beneath me were my silky purple blankets, not black nothingness or the angels of heaven. Sweat was plastered to my forehead. When I realized what had happened, tears started rolling down my cheeks.

"Why couldn't that have been true?" I whispered. "Even the dying part! Even landing on huge, sharp boulders!"

The dream had been so real, so vivid, that I convinced myself it was true. Somewhere in my subconscious, I knew it wasn't. But I was so excited at the thought that maybe the whole pandemic had just been a bad dream, that I went along with playing with my friends, almost without doubting it at all.

"Why couldn't it have been real? Why? Why?" I cried softly.

I slid back down in my bed and covered myself with my blankets. Sweat and tears stained my face. The voices of my friends started to fade from my memory, and I slowly drifted off somewhere into dreamland...

No! (Ch. 14)

I flipped open the laptop. It's bright glare flashed in my face, and almost instantly gave me a headache.

"Oh, it's 8:57. I have to get on the Zoom," I told my mom, who was making breakfast for Allegra in the kitchen.

I clicked on the hyperlink and it brought me to the Zoom meeting. A few of my classmates were already on the call, but not most of them.

The attendance question was, “what are you most excited for next year?” After all twenty-eight students had answered the question, showing that they were on the call, Mrs. Whaley flashed a big, fake smile.

“What I’m most excited for, is that I’m going to be getting a new school next year!”

Almost every kid unmuted themselves to scream, “what? why?”

I didn’t ask her why, though. I cried instead. I just cried and sobbed and whimpered in front of my entire class.

“No!” I called.

“Okay! Goodbye everyone!” Mrs. Whaley kept smiling as she quickly ended the meeting. Having heard me sob, my parents and sister ran over to the kitchen desk where I did my school work.

“What happened?” My mom asked frantically.

“Mrs. Whaley won’t be at Lafayette Elementary next year!” I told them.

My mom embraced me in a hug. “Oh, Stella.” She seemed almost as upset as I was.

“Why not? Why won’t she be at my school?” I asked no one.

“She didn’t say?” My dad asked as he came over and kissed me softly.

“No! She just said that she’s excited for a new school next year and then she ended the meeting!”

“Well, she wouldn’t be your teacher next year anyway,” Allegra tried to make me feel better.

“Yeah, but, at least I would still see her around the halls!” I cried.

My mom nodded.

“I need her! I need Mrs. Whaley!” Tears rolled down my cheeks.

My mom and I made our way over to the living room. I plopped down on the couch and buried my rosy cheeks in the pillows.

“Why?” I called. “Why is she leaving? Why?”

“Maybe she didn’t want to leave,” my mom suggested.

“You mean, she wasn’t asked back?” The thought of my teacher not being rehired made me sick to my stomach.

“I’m going to be so angry if she wasn’t,” my mom told me.

“Can you message her? To find out, I mean?” I asked my mom.

“Yeah, I will.”

Just a few minutes later, Mrs. Whaley messaged my mom back to tell her that it was her choice to resign.

“Why would she quit?” I cried, still in hysterics. “Was Lafayette Elementary really so bad? Why didn’t she like it?”

“Where is she going to be next year? What school?” I asked.

My mom quickly messaged Mrs. Whaley again, asking my question. Mrs. Whaley answered by saying that, I do not know where I will be next year. I will let you know as soon as I know.

“Oh my gosh! She hates L.E.S. so much that she didn’t even wait to be hired elsewhere, she just quit right away!”

Despite the news I had just received, I felt myself calming down. I curled up in the corner of the couch and rested my head on the edge of it.

“Do you want to talk to her?” My mom asked.

“Well, what am supposed to say? Like, ‘do you hate my school so much that you quit without finding another job first?’”

“No, not exactly in those words,” my mom said hesitantly. “But somewhere along those lines.”

“Okay, I guess.”

Mrs. Whaley stared into my eyes. “Um, so, I was, um-”

“Be honest,” Mrs. Whaley’s kind face was encouraging.

“So, why are you leaving Lafayette Elementary School?” I asked, nervous of what she would answer.

“Stella, believe me, I did not want to. I did quit, but I felt I had no other option,” Mrs. Whaley told me.

“Oh.”

“I know this is confusing, but I can’t tell you the details right now. If you want to know, feel free to send me an email in six months, and I can tell you the whole story,” Mrs. Whaley explained.

I felt my eyebrows crease in confusion. *What does six months have to do with anything?*

“And, if you don’t mind,” Mrs. Whaley continued. “I’d really rather kids not speculate the reasons why I quit. So when you’re talking to your friends, if the subject comes up, can you steer it in a different direction?”

“Yeah, of course.” I nodded.

“Okay, thanks. Please remember that I really do love Lafayette Elementary.”

Mrs. Whaley looked so sincere that my heart couldn’t help but melt.

“I will.”

Make A Wish (Ch. 15)

I jumped up the huge steps. My feet became sore. I hopped down, and continued walking.

My family and I were on an outing at the nearby Avery Middle School. The gorgeous building, huge classrooms, and full-sized tennis courts always made Allegra and me jealous that we wouldn’t be going there for middle school.

We were hoping to exercise a bit. We had brought our tennis rackets, water bottles, track gear, frisbees, and balls for our dog, Geri. I felt so lazy being at home all the time, so I was excited to move around.

I started on a run around the track. I sprinted, and I literally felt my muscles elongate. I sighed with happiness.

I completed a lap or two. I eyed the tall classrooms with awe. I stared at the windows, hoping to catch a glimpse inside. *No*, I thought. *If I were to see inside, I would have to go up close.* Still, I squinted my eyes, but I only saw the gray blinds.

"Stella!" I heard someone call in the distance.

I looked all around me, and I finally noticed Allegra standing in a lunge, ready to throw the dirty frisbee in my direction.

"Ready!" I shouted back.

She flung the ugly disc right at me, with perfect technique in the wrist. *Well, she is a tennis player, and that's all in the wrist.* I dove, ready to grab the frisbee. I caught it in mid-air, almost flying. Allegra and I cheered.

I threw it back to her. We continued the game for a little while longer, laughing and squealing. Suddenly, just as I was about to grab the disc, my vision blurred.

Life seemed to stop around me. I heard someone calling my name, but at the same time I didn't. Then, things appeared in the distance. A blue playground popped up, just off the edge of the grass. A swing set appeared, and two basketball courts did too. The yellow, tall buildings turned into short, stocky, brick ones. The short, mowed grass became long, and dozens of little kids seemed to spring out from underneath the lawn. They were running, laughing, and screaming, like elementary kids do.

I stumbled backwards. I looked all around me. Avery Middle School had the same shape it always did. The same gorgeous campus, the same huge fields, and the same tennis courts. The frisbee was on the ground, a few feet to my left. My mom was playing fetch with our dog. My dad was running laps. Allegra was standing only ten meters away from me, waiting for me to pick up the frisbee that I had dropped.

What had seemed like hours of viewing my precious elementary school had only been seconds. Seeing an innocent school like my own, had made me so desperately want to be at my own school. I didn't just envision being at Lafayette Elementary, or imagine it, I really felt like I was there. I felt it so vividly.

I slowly turned around. I didn't care about the frisbee game anymore. I wasn't sure if I cared about anything.

I glided over to the fence, at the edge of the field. I felt so weightless, like I was flying. My fingers interlaced with the metal fence. I rested my head on the cold, gray material.

Footsteps sounded behind me. My eyes were pointed at the ground, so whoever was walking up to me had a clearly visible shadow I noticed frizzy hair, swaying in the wind. *Great.* I thought sarcastically. *Mom.*

"Hey," she said gently as she walked up to me. I didn't respond.

"What's the matter?" She asked.

I looked up at her. I stared into my mom's warm eyes.

I explained what happened. I told her how being at Avery Middle School reminded me so much of Lafayette Elementary, my school.

I was sick of being depressed. I was sick of being sick. Sick to my stomach with loss.

I knelt down. The grass tickled my feet through my sandals. I picked at the grass. My hand brushed by a dandelion. I scooped it up.

My mom noticed. "Oh, a dandelion!" She smiled warmly. "I'll pick one too."

She knelt, just like I had and grabbed another one of those wispy flowers. As she came back up, I brushed my hand against the tiny, wispy petals of the dandelion.

I held the flower hard in my fist. All my muscles were tense, and I could tell that the dandelion was becoming wrinkled under the pressure. So I let go.

I started with my fingers. They became loose and wiggly. And then, I relaxed my wrists. I moved up to my shoulders, and rolled them back and forth in a circle. Finally, I came to my jaw. I realized that an utmost amount of pressure was being held in that underrated body-part. And last, I reached for my temples. I rubbed them hard, and I could feel all the pressure being released from within me.

Without even realizing it, I was then holding the dandelion lightly, as if I was writing an elegant piece of poetry with a feather, dipping it every now and then in the ink. I noticed my mom subconsciously following my example, holding the simple but beautiful flower gently.

"Make a wish," my mom suggested.

I held the dandelion up to my eye level. I smiled at its simplicity. *What if the world were that simple?* I contemplated. *What if everyone and everything and every decision ever to be made were that simple?*

I whispered my wish while staring up at the sky. "I wish...I wish for everything to be normal again." I nodded my head in satisfaction.

"No," I corrected my own dream. I didn't know if I was allowed to do that, but I figured the dandelions and the wind would understand. "I wish for everything to be better than normal. I wish for the world to come out of this a better place than it was before. Because we all have shared an experience. We have all lived through the Novel Coronavirus."

The Trip To School (Ch. 16)

Just a few days before the very end of school, all the kids were supposed to drive by the front of Lafayette Elementary to pick up essays and art projects, and drop off library books and musical instruments. The fourth grade's time slot was from 12:00 to 1:00, so we ate an early lunch and headed down to the garage.

"Are you coming too, Daddy?" I asked.

"Do you want me to?" My dad replied.

"Of course."

So with my textbooks under one arm, and my fictional stories under the other, I climbed into the car. Allegra went in after me, sitting in the seat next to mine, and my parents were already buckled in the front seats.

As we pulled into the round-a-bout parking lot, I noticed friendly volunteers standing at the curbside. Huge, thick masks covered their faces, despite the hot weather. One volunteer walked a bit away from the rest, took off her mask, gulped in a huge breath of air, and then went back to the rest of the volunteers. I laughed a little.

We had taped a sign to the car window saying my name, grade, and teacher, so that the volunteer moms could just stick my stuff in the trunk of the car.

"Name?" One familiar looking mother called out to us.

My mom rolled down the window. "All the information's on the sign. We thought it would be helpful."

The volunteer looked in the direction of where my mom was pointing, and she noticed the little piece of paper taped to the front window with scotch. She nodded, and took a few steps forward to read what it said.

The mom headed over to the brick wall-my school was over ninety years old, and except for the new section, all the buildings were brick-and found a pile of folders that read "Whaley." She dug through them, until she found the one that had my name on it.

"Hi Stella!" I turned my head.

In the distance, I saw the school's sweet librarian, Mrs. Commins, wave in my direction.

"Hi Mrs. Commins!" I called back. I couldn't see her mouth and nose through her mask, but I could tell she was smiling just because of the way her eyes sparkled.

She came a little closer. Allegra waved too. After all, Mrs. Commins had been my sister's school librarian first.

"Have you been reading any good books lately?"

I dove into a deep conversation with her about the gorgeously written book I had just finished, truly a stunning piece of literature. It was called *Ghost Boys* and was about a fictional African American boy named Jerome who was shot because of his skin color. He was playing on the street with a plastic, orange, toy gun, which the police officer who shot him claimed to see as threatening. The remarkable part was that it was in the perspective of the dead twelve year old, and how he changed the world without even being able to communicate with any of the living. I had had so many in depth conversations with Mrs. Commins about racial injustice and prejudice. There had been so many long lunchtime talks about World War II, concentration camps, slavery, segregation, immigration, and so on. Around Mrs. Commins, articulating my thoughts and feelings was always so much easier. I really felt like we understood one another.

While talking with Mrs. Commins, the volunteer mom had made her way over to our red Subaru, holding my huge folder under her arm. My dad unlocked the car so that she could open the trunk.

The volunteer stuck the folder in the trunk and reached her arms out for the materials I was bringing back to school. I handed her my Learning California History For Fourth Graders! textbook, my Area and Perimeter, Angles, and Practically Anything About Geometry math book, and my couple of fictional books I had checked out from the library before the shelter-in-place.

“Thanks.” She grabbed the books, leaned back so she wasn’t in our car anymore, and shut the trunk door.

We waved one last time at the volunteer moms and Mrs. Commins. My dad started the engine and we drove through the round-a-bout, past downtown Lafayette, and into our neighborhood.

My parents helped me unload the car. We brought the folder up the stairs, and set it down on the counter. It was time to visit all my fourth grade memories, in paper form.

The Grieving...The Remembering Wall (Ch. 17)

I pulled out paintings, essays, projects, and all sorts of different fourth grade assignments from the big, tan colored folder. Talking, laughing, shouting, and even crying filled my head as I stared at each “masterpiece.” *The Northern Lights, A Painting By, Stella Ciarlantini* made the sound of squealing enter my mind as I thought of how Sarah and I sat at the same desk while we made that, and how excited we were and we found out we were going to be sitting together. I heard myself contradict the tour guide smartly on the class field trip when I stared at *The Quantabella Mission*; how angry I was at the mission system and how the indigenous people of California were kept captive there, forced to be converted to Catholicism and work long hours in the fields. Even just looking at the project made me want to march back to that big, old building and speak out loud my opinion narrative in defense of The Native Americans again. And then my *Where The Red Fern Grows* book cover came out of the folder. I remembered how the whole class, including Mrs. Whaley, was in tears at the end when Little Ann and Old Dan, the faithful hounds, passed away. So many memories were engraved in just some worthless sheets of paper.

The folder was almost empty when I noticed something peeking out of the corner of the folder. A string of some sort. I grabbed it, pulled it out, and tears filled my eyes. It was my Brag Tag.

Mrs. Whaley would give out rewards daily, called Brag Tags, that specified something good and honorable that the receiver of the award did. There were so many different types, all starting with the hashtag symbol. There was the *#Teamwork Makes The Dream Work* Brag Tag. I smiled as I noticed that I had received four of those. And then the *#Magical Thinking* Brag Tag, which I had received twice, once for raising my hand constantly in class, and once after our field trip to the Mission Building. I noticed my *#The Comeback Kid*: I got that after being sick with the flu for a week and a half. *#Gold Star Collector*, *#Quiet Competitor*, and *#Human Dictionary* were all examples of other brag tags I had gotten throughout the year. They all hung from a chain that I would wear around my neck, with a design in the front that had my name on it.

When Mrs. Whaley would announce that she was giving out Brag Tags, everyone would turn dead silent. We would be excited and wiggling in our seats, but sure that if we were quiet there was more of a chance that we would get one. Everyone was always envious when

someone else got one, but happy for them at the same time as it was so rare to get one of those special tickets.

"Stella?" My mom drifted over to where I was standing, tears in my eyes and my Brag Tag in my hand.

She interrupted my depressing train of thought, but I was glad for a distraction from the nostalgia. I turned my head.

"I have an idea. Come with me." She ignored my small tears and turned towards the office, where Allegra and I had done our distance schooling.

I followed her curiously. "Bring the folder," she added. So I turned back around, grabbed the folder stuffed with my artwork, and made my way into the office.

My mom's hands were on the frame of the bulletin board. She stepped back as she heard my footsteps in the room.

"What if we hung all your fourth grade work up on the bulletin board, and the easel?"

My lips curled into a smile. My mom knew my answer without me even uttering a word. That's how well she knew me.

As we started pinning my work onto the bulletin board, and clipping it with magnets onto the easel, a thought popped into my head. "Is this like...a grieving wall?"

My mom smiled as she paused to think.

"No, it's not," she decided. "It's a remembering wall."

"I Can't Sleep" (Ch. 18)

I lay in bed, facing another sleepless night. I stared up at the ceiling, just thinking. I tried to count sheep, but I didn't know what to count. *There aren't any sheep in front of me*, I thought. *Am I supposed to visualize sheep? And then count them? That seems like a lot of work if you're trying to get sleepy.*

I finally decided to get out of bed. The door of my room still creaked as I tiptoed down the hall. I silently moved past the living room, not wanting to be noticed by my dad who was watching TV, and made my way into the office. There, at the desk, sat my mom, scrolling down on the computer screen. I could tell she was entering grades into the online gradebook. *Always a teacher.*

I opened the door as I whispered, "I can't sleep."

My mom turned around suddenly, noticing me standing in the doorway.

"Oh. How come?" She sighed.

I shrugged as I slid my way over to the two-seater couch. I plopped down and leaned back. I noticed how nice my remembering wall looked.

"You know..." I started.

"Yeah?" My mom replied as she turned to face me completely.

“My school year, it seems so simple when it takes up only a quarter of a wall. And yet, so complex at the same time. Because every painting, every sketch, every essay, every single piece of paper brings up at least a dozen memories, which each bring up a dozen more.

“To the world, it just looks like a bulletin board and an easel with some dumb drawings and stories that a little kid made. But it’s so much more than that. It’s laughter, and it’s friendship. It’s awkward silences, and it’s winking across the room. It’s tears, and it’s despair. But most of all, it’s happiness on that wall. Pure, and utter happiness.”

I took in a breath. I felt like I was Abe Lincoln after the Gettysburg Address, or Martin Luther King Jr. after his “I Have A Dream Speech.” I waited patiently for a response, but I got a smile instead.

“Stella,” my mom’s eyes twinkled, “This is just the beginning. All those memories, they don’t conclude an era. They start a new one. You are going to have so many more adventures, so many more experiences, with the friends you have now and new ones. This is *not* the end. This is the beginning.”

“You’re right.”

I took one last look at my remembering wall. And then I got up, turned around, and walked out.

A Car Parade (Ch. 19)

I was running. Sprinting. Racing. Down familiar streets, and down roads I had never seen before. I turned corners. I ran up and down hills. I ran through fields and tanbark and sand and grass. A smile was plastered to my face the whole time. I had almost made it, I had almost gotten to the finish line, when I had to grind my feet into the ground to stop in time. Separating me and the blue ribbon was a huge, empty pit, that reeked with all sorts of different smells.

That’s what my fourth grade year was like.

I felt like I was on a race against time all throughout the school year. It was perfect, so incredibly perfect, but just as I was about to finish, I became stuck; standing helplessly when a huge empty space taunts you in your nightmares. Throughout the year, I faced obstacles, but I was so happy anyway. Because I had a teacher that cared for her students in a way that is unimaginable and three friends that I felt more like myself with than anyone else in the world.

That day was the day before The Last Day of School. I always pictured it like that, with caps at the beginning of each word, like the title of a book. I would have never thought that The Last Day of School would have happened online, but then again, nobody ever thought that a 6.9 earthquake would strike San Francisco in 1989.

In the streets of Downtown Lafayette, the teachers of my school were going to drive around in their cars, waving goodbye to all their students. The nearest street that the teachers were going to drive on was about a block away from our house. So we headed down there a bit past noon.

I had completely forgotten that my best friend and crush lived on Brook St., one of the streets the teachers were going to drive on. So when I was standing in the scorching sun on one side of the street, lifting my WE LOVE L.E.S. TEACHERS! sign high, Jacob sat on a lawn chair in the shade on the other side of the street, right in front of his apartment building.

My heart skipped a beat when I saw him standing there. Time seemed to freeze all around me, so that it looked like we were having internet problems while on Zoom. Jacob's arm was in the sky, waving at me with a huge cheesy grin stuck to his face.

As everything returned to focus, I smiled shyly and waved in return.

"Come on over!" Jacob's mom called out from across the street.

So we hesitantly crossed the neighborhood road and made it over to the grassy area in front of the Brook Garden Apartments.

Jacob held up a sign too. We talked shortly and awkwardly for a bit, before we heard honking in the distance.

"Oh!" My mom squealed as if she was a fourth grader, and *her* teachers were coming.

Before we knew it, cars were rolling down the street. First the elective teachers and the office staff, like Mrs. Kelley, the school secretary and Mr. Spears, the music teacher. Most of them had sunroofs that they peeked out of to cheer and holler while their spouses or family members drove the car.

Next, the grade school teachers. First the Kindergarten teachers, the ones with the Disney princess voices. First grade cars drove by, and then second.

Third grade teachers didn't come until a minute after the second grade teachers. I waved to the teacher I had had the year before.

And then, there came fourth grade.

First, Dr. Cholis. The older teacher with the stern smile.

And then there was Ms. Bahr, the new teacher that was infamously known for her *long* lectures.

And last, Mrs. Whaley. *Well, you save the best for last I guess*, I thought to myself with a smile.

Her car was small but long. Both windows were open as she was driving the car. Her long golden hair fell much past her shoulders, and she brushed it aside as she smiled hugely.

Jacob and I waved and cheered and hollered. We held our signs above our heads.

And just as Mrs. Whaley had almost turned the corner to the next street, we noticed the back window of her car.

Owen, Henry, Bryan, Jacob, Sarah, Karla, Stella, and so many other names were written in pen on the back window of the car. They shined brightly, glistening in the sun.

A tear rolled down my cheek as I observed my surroundings. Even Jacob had to stand six feet away from me. People had been gathering, but all apart from each other. Nobody could get close.

By the time I came back to reality, the fifth grade teachers had already driven by and it was time to go home.

An Awards Ceremony (Ch. 20)

My mother had been a theater teacher at a high school near our home for over twenty years. Towards the end of the school year, my mom would always do an awards ceremony with awards like, Best Actress, Best Actor, Best Technician, Most Outstanding Contribution, and so on. My elementary school gave out awards for the third through fifth graders too.

That day I was doing a virtual dance class. The Zoom link had been sent to my mom's email account. Therefore, in order to get into class I would need to log onto my mom's email account.

So I was scrolling through emails to find the one with the subject of *Virtual Contemporary*. When I found it, I clicked on the link and it brought me to the Zoom Waiting Room.

But what caught my eye wasn't the dance themed email, but the email below that. The subject read, *Writing Award For Stella*.

I shut the computer with such force that the sound echoed throughout the house.

Oh my gosh, I thought, I won the writing award! I won the writing award!

My first reaction was to be thrilled. I started jumping up and down in the privacy of my room.

But then I realized that I had ruined the surprise. I had won the writing award, but I ruined the surprise of getting it.

After coming to this realization, I started to cry. I was so mad at myself. *How could I have ruined such a great surprise?*

Hearing my tears, my dad burst into the room. "What's the matter?" He shouted, his voice filled with concern.

"Nothing, nothing. Everything's fine." I didn't feel like explaining the whole situation.

"Are you sure?" He didn't sound convinced.

"Yeah, yeah."

"Come out. What are you doing in here?"

"I have contemporary," I responded, tears bubbling in my eyes.

"Oh, okay."

My dad left hesitantly. I tried to convince myself that this was a good thing, that I should be happy, not upset. But no matter what I told myself, I still couldn't shake that terrible feeling that I had ruined something incredible.

~ ~ ~

My mom was doing her virtual awards ceremony that night with her students. She must have heard my crying, because as soon as she was done, she ran over to me.

"What happened? I heard crying!"

I told her everything. She listened so intently, and then took my hand.

"Stella, that award goes to a fifth grader. I reached out to the principal to see if they were giving it out this year, because I just felt like you deserved something."

"So I didn't win?"

My mom shook her head slowly. I invited a gentle smile to my lips.

"Oh, that's fine! I was just upset because I thought I had ruined the surprise!"

My mom laughed along with me.

"Well, at least I can still win the class citizenship award, right?"

My mom's face sunk. She swallowed, bit her lip and looked at me.

I allowed her a chance to say something, but after a while I was getting tired of looking at her sad face.

"No? I can't? What do you know? Tell me!" I insisted.

My mom sniffed a little. "When I asked about the award, I asked in general. I wanted to know if there was a reason to watch the Awards Ceremony tomorrow."

"And there isn't?" I asked quietly.

My mom shook her head as she whispered, "no."

I didn't feel like crying. I had cried too much over the past three months.

"You're taking this well," my mom concluded.

"I just...I feel like enough tears have been shed, you know?"

"I know." My mom nodded smally.

I knew who had won. I knew even before my mom had told me that I hadn't won. *Sarah*, I thought quietly, like the thought was in the back of my mind. *Sarah won the Class Citizenship award.*

"I know who won Mommy," I declared.

"You do?"

"Sarah. If she doesn't win, then I really will be upset. She deserves it."

"Well, that's mature of you," my mom realized.

"No, but she does! She represents the pillars of kindness the most."

It was true. Sarah deserved that award. She was the most bubbly person to live on planet Earth. I had so many memories of her just coming up to me and hugging me, for no reason in particular. Sarah was always so happy, always ready for anything.

But then I started to cry a little. Not as much as other days, but still, tears are tears. They rolled down my cheeks, dropped onto my chest, cascaded down my stomach, and landed with a final “*splash*” on my thighs.

“I just feel like that after everything Mrs. Whaley and I have been through...that she could have given it to me. It just would have made things just a little bit better. Just a little bit.”

“I know, Stella,” my mom started. “But teachers have to be very literal when they give awards. I know I have to. I have to stick to the award’s exact definition, otherwise...well, otherwise it just doesn’t work.”

“I know, I know! It just would have made things a little better.”

On the roller coaster of emotions I had been through over the past months, I was almost always going down hill. It was hard to find joy and hope during a pandemic. But I was sure that if I had gotten that award, the Cart could have gone up a little. A new track could have been built, and the passengers would get to see the sky, instead of having to continuously descend into a dark cave.

We hugged. *Hugging is important. Everyone should give hugs*, I thought, but then I contradicted myself: *Well, except for during this. You can’t hug outside of your immediate family during this, it spreads too many germs*, I rationalized.

“Stella,” my mom whispered, “Maybe it’s time to go to bed.”

“Yeah, I want to sleep. I want an escape from the world, even if it’s just for nine hours.”

So I slid my feet towards my bedroom. I changed into soft pajamas, and I lazily brushed my teeth. I collapsed onto my bed, and it took me a while to readjust my position so that I was underneath the covers with my head on the pillow.

Finally in bed, my mom lay down with me. I grabbed her, squeezing her tight, and she gave my hand a squeeze in return.

“Goodnight Stellie,” my mom sniffed.

“Goodnight Mommy,” I responded.

She got out of my bed, and headed towards the door. Just as she opened it, and was about to step into the hallway, I whispered one last thing.

“If I could be like anyone in the world, I would want to be like you.”

The Last Day of Fourth Grade (Ch. 21)

Sometimes I get this feeling, a sensation almost, that I’m not allowed to enjoy something. Because eventually, it will end. And then I’ve become attached to something that doesn’t exist anymore.

Well, that’s what I started feeling in November of fourth grade, three months into the school year. I spent so much time worrying about the perfect nine months ending, that I missed out on a lot of enjoyment.

So when I woke up on May 31st, a lump had been formed in my throat. I could barely swallow. The year had ended. Pure perfection had ended.

I didn't want to get out of bed. I wanted to stay in there and let the day drift by, in the comfort of my dark little cave.

I finally came to the conclusion that even if I stayed in bed all day, I would have to get out tomorrow, and school would still be over. It would just be one day later, the first day of summer. So with that knowledge, I pulled myself out from under the covers and headed into the kitchen.

The whole household knew how upset I would be. My sister, Allegra, wasn't upset, as she had had some terrible teachers that year, especially during distance learning. So everybody tried to comfort me but keep their distance at the same time.

When I logged onto the class Zoom, it was different. Nobody chatted in the ChatRoom. Nobody talked. Nobody even looked at one another. We all just sat there, silently, until Mrs. Whaley started a conversation.

"So, guys, you're almost fifth graders!" She exclaimed.

We nodded dryly.

"I can't believe the year has gone by so fast!" Mrs. Whaley continued her effort.

But when she realized we just weren't going to budge, she pursed her lips and stopped talking.

Once attendance was over, nobody knew what to do. We pleaded through our eyes, telling Mrs. Whaley not to leave. *She just can't leave! I need her. I need her!*

"Um, well, I guess you guys should start working on your assignments for the day," our teacher suggested.

"No, no, no!" Jacob insisted.

"Nobody leave!" One kid shouted, as if it were a crime scene.

"Stay!" Multiple students cried.

"It can't be over yet!" Sarah exclaimed.

I sobbed. Into my hands. Onto the desk. Even on the keyboard. It seemed like everything had just been a dream, a bad nightmare. If I only were to wake up, I would realize it was still early February, and everything and everyone was normal.

But, no. *This is the normal.* "Don't leave us Mrs. Whaley! Please!" I screeched.

Somehow, we all left. One person after another. Each square slowly vanished, a crying kid behind it.

I ended up the last one on the Zoom call, besides Mrs. Whaley. I looked at her, and she looked at me, and then I left. Without one more word spoken.

A Man Named George Floyd (Ch. 22)

The Novel Coronavirus is obviously something that will be spoken about and taught in schools centuries after it happened. "A very historical time period," some might call it. But at the same time, another life changing event occurred.

An African American man named George Floyd was suffocated to death by a white police officer, unfortunately just like countless others. He was a suspect of writing a false check, a check of twenty dollars. *Twenty* dollars.

The racist officer stuck his knee against George's neck, making it impossible for George to breathe. His very last words were, "I can't breathe."

"I can't breathe." No human being's last words should have to be "I can't breathe." We should die peacefully, old people, warm in our beds.

Huge riots happened all over the world. *Enough is Enough!* the signs read. *Black Lives Matter!* signs were in front of houses everywhere. But there were plenty of people that weren't doing anything.

And some people even used the riots to their advantage. To break into shops, stores, and so forth. That way they would blend into the crowds.

We had some family friends come over for dinner, from a distance. The family had two boys, three or four years older than Allegra and me.

While our parents discussed politics, the four of us pretended not to listen, when really we spent the evening eavesdropping.

"I'm scared of the riots," the boys' mom declared.

You're scared of the riots? I thought, disgusted. *No, be scared for the reason that there's riots!*

My mom must have been thinking what I was thinking because she responded with: "Well, I'm scared that African American people keep getting killed by white police officers."

The injustice in the world made me feel so angered. *Two* historical moments in history were happening: people were walking around with masks that read *Black Lives Matter!* or *I Can't Breathe!*, symbolizing George Floyd's last words.

"I'm not black. So I can't fully understand racism. But I can do everything in my power to end it," I told my mom one day while we were cooking dinner together, side-by-side.

I had always wanted to go to law school and become a lawyer. And then I wanted to become a judge. And eventually, if I worked my way high enough, a Supreme Court judge. I wanted to make change so badly, and the Black Lives Matter Civil Rights Movement just made my desire to help even stronger.

"We all breathe the same air, live on the same planet, and we're all the same species. We're all human! We share a planet! Shouldn't we treat everyone equally?" I spoke aloud one night at dinner, talking to no one in particular.

And one night, I was sitting in bed, about to retreat under the covers, when I felt a pang of guilt. Guilt for not being able to do more. "Mom? What can I do? I mean, I'm not even eleven years old. How much change can a tween even make?"

My mom was Jewish, which made me part Jewish. Her grandfather escaped Nazi Poland with my mom's grandmother. They had barely made it to Russia when *my* grandmother

was born. And soon after that, they had to flee again. They eventually made it to America, when my grandmother was thirteen and her brother was eleven.

So my family knew injustice. We knew what it was like to be discriminated against, just for being different.

I had made up my mind. I was going to fight for justice. I was going to speak out anytime I saw an *injustice*, and I was *never* going to let anyone hurt my community; hurt the people I love.

I was going to make a change.

Summertime (Ch. 23)

Summer is a time to be outdoors. To play in the pool. To laugh in the sun. To be with family. Everyone always associates summer with those things, that it's hard to picture summer without them.

But a summer during a worldwide epidemic looks a bit different.

That summer, I was doing a six-week-long intensive acting program. Online.

My mom did the same summer camp when she was a teen, she did it for six years. She was the youngest person to ever be accepted, as it was audition only. Until I came along. I beat her by two years. I felt the need to gloat about breaking her record.

I was doing four classes: Voice & Dialects, Audition Technique, Acting, and Writing. I knew I was going to learn so much.

In the afternoons, I tried to spend as much time outdoors as possible. I spent my whole mornings in the program, looking at the screen, so I wanted to be able to enjoy the sun in my free time.

We wouldn't be able to go to Italy that summer. We wouldn't be able to relax on the beach, and eat three course meals, and see family. But, we got to go over to Livia and David's house much more often, and their pool was much cleaner than the Mediterranean Sea.

We also wouldn't be able to see school friends. But, we wouldn't be able to anyway if we were in Italy.

I tried hard to beat every negative with a positive. I wanted things to start looking up for me, and everyone else.

One day, we were driving to Livia and David's house, when I noticed something. The Lafayette Plaza, the one with the overgrown grass, didn't look so empty anymore. People were gathering. Talking people. Laughing people. People that were singing and dancing. People that were eating. People that were running back and forth on the grass, racing their dogs. They were all there. It wasn't a hallucination that time. They were together, but apart. *Together, but apart at the same time*, I thought. *Huh! I didn't know that was possible.*

They were on lawn chairs and under umbrellas. Enjoying themselves. Almost as if the worldwide problem we were all facing didn't exist.

Time stopped all around me. I couldn't believe my eyes. The Lafayette Plaza had it's spark back. It was happy, and joyful, and lively.

And the people were happy, and joyful, and lively.

So if all those people could find happiness during COVID-19, couldn't I?

If we had gone to Italy, I wouldn't be doing my theater program, Young REP. I wouldn't have one of the same teachers my mom had when she was just a little bit older than me.

And though I would be with people I love, I wouldn't be doing *what* I love.

And that summer, I was doing what I love. Theater.

A Final Message of Grief (Ch. 24)

I lost four months of school. I lost a play. I lost a family trip to Italy. I lost laughter, and joy. I lost so many things due to the Novel Coronavirus.

But I didn't just experience loss.

I experienced growth.

I would not be who I am today if it weren't for the quarantine. I grew so much as a person. I felt grief, and pain, but also hope.

Before the shelter-in-place, I didn't know what it was like to actually miss someone. To actually miss something.

To feel a burning ache in your heart. A longing to see them, to be with them.

Happiness was so hard to find while we were inside. I had to seek it. I had to reach out to it. But I realize now, that you don't choose happiness. Happiness just happens. All on its own. When you least expect it, happiness springs up on you.

People need people. And I needed my family more than anything when I was stuck inside. I needed their comfort, and warmth, and support. I needed to hear their voices, and their laughter, and even their pain.

We were in isolation. But that didn't mean we had to become truly isolated. We couldn't block ourselves off from each other.

Even just one look, one glance, one smile, can show someone how much they mean to you. And you never know how badly that person might need that. How much *you* might need that.

Fourth grade is going to stay with me forever. Even if the disease that changed our lives hadn't sprung up all in a sudden, I would have remembered my classroom. And my classmates.

You don't forget family. No matter how far apart you are, or how long you haven't seen each other for.

To this very day, the Coronavirus is still going on. We're still inside, hundreds of people are still dying everyday, and fifth grade will start with distance learning.

But fifth grade *will* happen. And then sixth, and seventh, and eighth. And high school after that. I'll go to college, and I'll get a job, and I'll fall in love, and have a family. But it'll all be a little different. It'll happen a little differently, just because of this experience.

The Coronavirus didn't ruin my life. It changed my life, for the better. I definitely went through a lot. But so has every single child living through this time. And we have that in common. We have our pain, and our heartache, and our loss, all bubbling at the surface, ready to tell the next generation all about.

I will always grieve my losses. I will always think of what could have been. But I'm ready to move on now. I'm ready to live the rest of my life.

I'm ready for joy. And I'm ready for laughter. But I'm also ready for more pain, more loss, and more tears. Because if those things weren't a part of our life, we wouldn't actually be living. And we wouldn't be able to see the beauty, in healing.

My name is Stella Ciarlantini.

And this, is my story.