

Praise for Honey Butter

“Honey Butter is a lovely story for the young and creative soul. Millie Florence paints a radiant picture of childhood friendship and adventure!”

- *Erin Forbes, author of the Fire & Ice book series*

“Millie Florence. Remember that name – she’s going places.”

- *Julie Bogart, host of the Brave Writer Podcast*

“Honey Butter is a colorful tale about friendship, art, and the importance of family. Each chapter holds a lesson behind its words. I recommend Honey Butter to anyone searching for a warm summer escape.”

- *Melissa Torre Franca, founder of Teen Authors Journal*

“...A lovely coming of age story.”

- *Readers Favorite Reviews*

Honey Butter

by Millie Florence



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This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locals, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Sprouting Pen Press

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I dedicate this book to Silas, Isaac, Naomi, and Evelyn.
To the whole wonderful, chaotic, adventure of a life that is
sibling-hood.

You guys mean the world to me and you always will.

P.S. Now that I've finished my first novel, will you stop
drawing silly faces in my notebooks?

...

I didn't think so.

Dear Reader,

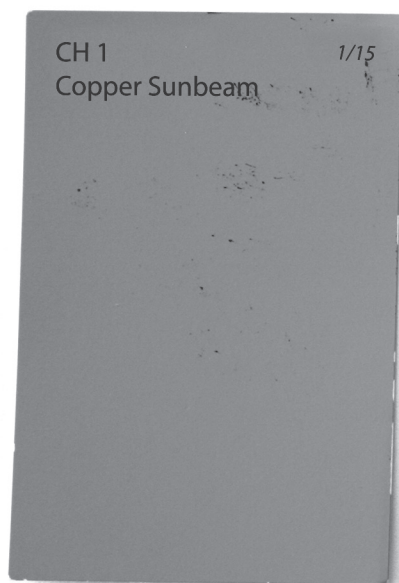
When it came to writing this author's note, I found that my head was full of ideas, and yet somehow also completely empty. I wanted to say something to you, something clever or dramatic. To encourage other kids like me, writers and readers. Maybe to make them feel as though the author of this story wasn't a far away person, but someone whom they could be friends with. Basically, I wanted everyone to know that I was there, and that I had something to say.

But after giving the idea some thought, I realized that everything I needed to say had already been said in the words of the story that follows. So when you think of this book, think of the story, not the author. Think of Laren and Jamie and Erica and Brian and Cara and Hazel and everyone else. Because once you read about them and their world, this story isn't mine anymore.

It's yours.

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The paint store was almost deserted.

It was standing alone in the bright sunlight, as the air shimmered with heat and the trees' leaves lay painfully still in the breezeless air. The store looked somehow faded under the sun's gaze, dull in comparison to the golden sands of the South Carolina beaches, which lay a short drive away. Except for the young man behind the counter, who was being paid to give up the summer evening, it seemed that almost no one in their right mind wanted to be inside a paint store on a glistening summer day.

Almost no one at least, for you couldn't quite dismiss the small, dark-skinned, curly-haired girl

with the battered blue shoebox under her arm.

Her name was Jamie Johnson, and at the moment, she felt that the world was boring, unfair, and totally in favor of undeserving older sisters and easily awoken baby brothers. After all, it wasn't her fault that the twins had woken up. Erica had taunted her. She had said Jamie was "too little to have a party," at which Jamie had screamed "I am *not* little!" causing Jack and William to cry and her mother to banish her to the outdoors.

The shoebox under her arm, which used to hold a pair of size three tennis shoes, now contained her collection. And it bumped about awkwardly as she pushed open the door to leave the paint store. An electric bell sang out a little ding as the door closed behind her, echoing clear in the silent air.

Jamie took a moment to re-adjust her shoebox before turning to plod down the sidewalk, her worn-out pink and orange flip-flops smacking her heels as she walked. It was late afternoon and the great red and gold ball of the sun dangled just above the edge of the horizon. Her dark, thick, tangled curls bounced behind her as she dodged the cracks in the sidewalk for something to amuse herself.

She walked one block and down a long stretch of sidewalk past a grassy area, then turned onto Winchester Court, to the first house on the corner, which was her own.

It had boring gray siding and brown roof shingles. Jamie would have preferred a yellow

house, but it was home. And she was about to walk up the pathway to the front door when she noticed something.

The house next to hers, a two-story mint green residence, was missing its sign. The sign was usually stuck in the front yard with big, red, capital letters spelling out the words, FOR RENT. Jamie had always vaguely wondered why for rent signs were always in capital letters. After all, everyone told her that she should write in lowercase because capitals were only for little kids.

But the sign was gone. And that was the first sign of everything that happened next.

The door of the mint house opened and two people came out. One was a grown-up man, the other a teenage-looking girl. From where she stood just inside her own front yard, Jamie stared at the girl apprehensively. She did not consider herself a shy person, quite the opposite in fact. But to her, the word ‘teenager’ was pretty much a synonym for ‘trouble maker’. More than once she had heard her parents talking about a story they heard on the news about some teenager who had either gotten into big trouble or had gotten badly hurt by their own doing. Or both. She heard them called ‘rebellious’ by nearly every grown up she knew, and the teenage boys who skateboarded around the block now and then generally acted as if they ruled the world.

But something about this teenage girl seemed different. She was skipping, her long brown hair

flying out behind. Her mouth had a laughing look about it, and a floor length floral patterned skirt swished around her ankles. Even from where Jamie stood, she could see the joyful shine in the girl's soft brown eyes. And because of these differences, Jamie, intrigued, stopped to watch.

The man (he must have been her father) opened the trunk of a small gray car parked in the driveway and started to heave out a suitcase.

"See if you can grab the other end, sweetheart," he said, addressing the girl, who reached out to heed his instruction. They both strained for a moment before the suitcase came out of the trunk and the father asked, "What on earth did you put in here?"

The girl laughed. "You ask that every time we unpack." Her voice was pleasant and full, like birdsong.

"That's because it's heavier every time we unpack," the father said, raising his eyebrows playfully at her as they made their way toward the front steps, carrying the suitcase between them.

"That," said the girl, also joking now, "is because we've passed more bookstores every time we unpack." Her eyes danced.

"Ha!" her father said, and the two of them disappeared inside the mint house.

Jamie stood for a moment, watching the door through which they had disappeared. Then turning back to her own house, she ran down the walk and inside, closing the door behind her.

The Johnson house was usually very noisy and today was no exception. William and Jack, the two-year-old twins, were yelling happily in the living room. From Jamie's bedroom came the sound of Erica chattering away on the phone. There was a dull thudding from the backyard patio where Brian was dribbling his basketball and Mr. and Mrs. Johnson were talking in the kitchen as Mrs. Johnson cooked. And from the cooking alone there was a whole manner of noises. The gurgling of the faucet, the hissing of steam, and the clunking of heavy pots and pans being picked up and set back down again. Jamie took a deep breath, smelling the overpowering spicy fragrances of dinner, and a hint of freshly mowed grass that was drifting in through an open window.

The whole house was very hot. Jamie kicked off her pink and orange flip-flops so they landed in the jumbled pile of shoes next to the door.

"Jamie?" Mrs. Johnson came out of the kitchen, still wearing a pair of oven mitts with blackened tips. They had been singed once when Mrs. Johnson ran into the living room to break up a fight and accidentally laid them on a lit burner on the stovetop.

"Yes?" asked Jamie.

"Just making sure it's you," said Mrs. Johnson, starting back into the kitchen. "We're having supper in a few minutes." Then she started talking again with Mr. Johnson.

She didn't even seem to remember that she sent me outside, thought Jamie, feeling slightly annoyed.

Jamie took her shoebox in both hands and walked through the living room and down the hall to her bedroom. For some reason, the door was closed. Jamie set down her shoebox and tried to turn the handle, but the door was locked.

From inside she could hear a bubbly and excited voice chattering.

“Really? No way! What did she say?”

“Erica!” Jamie yelled to be heard through the door. “Let me in!”

“Just a sec, Piper,” Erica said, and then yelled in quite a different voice. “Jamie! I’m on the phone! Go away!”

Jamie took hold of the door handle with both her hands and strained at it helplessly. “It’s my room, too!”

“Well, I’m on the phone!” Erica yelled back, as if this explained everything.

“But I need to get in!” Jamie moaned in frustration, giving the door a kick. Couldn’t a girl simply go into her own room without having to win a shouting contest? Must Erica always take advantage of her?

“Mom!” Erica yelled, “Jamie’s kicking the door!”

“Jamie, stop kicking the door! It’s time for supper!” Mrs. Johnson’s voice came from the kitchen.

The door reluctantly opened and Erica stepped

out. She had the same brown skin, dark eyes, and curly hair as Jamie, but she was much taller and several years older.

“Sorry Piper, gotta go. Suppertime. Okay, bye!” She said before hanging up, shooting Jamie a look, and marching toward the dining room. Jamie followed, setting her shoebox on the edge of the countertop in the kitchen before taking her seat at the table.

Mr. Johnson was putting Jack and William into their high chairs, and Mrs. Johnson was bringing the food in from the kitchen. Brian, who was nine, came in from the sliding back door holding a basketball under his arm.

“Please leave the ball outside, Brian,” Mrs. Johnson called over her shoulder as she walked into the dining room, carrying a pot of rice.

“Alright,” said Mr. Johnson as Mrs. Johnson set the last pot down and Brian was seated. “How was everyone’s day?”

“Boring,” said Jamie flatly.

“Great!” said Erica cheerfully.

Brian didn’t answer; his mouth was full of food.

“What happened that was so great?” asked Mr. Johnson with interest as he and Mrs. Johnson started getting food for the twins.

Jamie glared down at the plate her mother had given her. There were three foods on it, and only one was edible. There was no way she was going to eat green beans or red cabbage. If it had been up to

her, she would have only gotten the rice.

“My day was great,” said Erica importantly, “because I got to talk to Piper and make plans for the party.” She grinned. Jamie glared.

“Cool. And what about you, Brian?” asked Mr. Johnson, turning to his son.

“I played basketball with Jacob and Russell,” Brian said after swallowing his mouthful of green beans.

“Just like yesterday, huh?” said Mrs. Johnson with a knowing smile, retrieving Jack’s sippy cup from the floor where he had thrown it.

“Yeah,” said Brian, spearing more green beans on his fork.

“And the day before that,” added Mr. Johnson teasingly. “And the day before that.”

“Dad...” Brian hid his face in his hands in embarrassment, but he was smiling.

“Can I be done now?” asked Jamie, who had finished her rice and nothing else.

“At least three bites of green beans,” said Mrs. Johnson without looking up.

Jamie gingerly speared the smallest bean she could find on the tip of her fork, bit off a piece and swallowed it before she could taste anything.

“That doesn’t count as a bite,” Erica said accusingly.

“It does to me!” Jamie countered smartly.

“Girls,” Mr. Johnson said in a tired voice.

“Oh man!” Jack screeched and threw his bowl

on the floor. Rice spilled out everywhere.

Mrs. Johnson gave a small sigh and lifted each of the babies out of their high chairs in turn.

“You two,” she said, hoisting William into her arms, “are the most precious and most troublesome little things in my life. You know that?”

Mr. Johnson started to clean up the rice. Using this diversionary moment to her advantage, Jamie hopped off her seat, grabbed her shoebox from the countertop and rushed to the back door at the end of the kitchen.

“Hey!” Erica called after her, “You didn’t finish your two bites!”

“Bossy pants,” Jamie muttered under her breath as she slid shut the glass door behind her.

It was much quieter in the backyard, and Jamie stopped for a moment to feel her bare feet pressed against the sun-warmed patio before she crossed to the picnic table. The sun was setting, sending a great fiery array across the Carolina summer sky. The golden, late afternoon light streamed through the slats in the old gray fence, working its way through small knot holes and casting long thin shadows over the withering lawn and weather-worn picnic table where Jamie sat, quite unaware of the humble splendor around her. She had grown used to the brilliant summer sunsets that burnt the blue sky and her eyes were on the collection she kept in her shoebox. A collection of paint cards.

They were all spread out on the table before her,

lined up carefully side by side, all shapes, sizes, and colors. There was Country Earth, Paper Lantern, Moon Shade, and Crown of Laurel. Faded Denim, Rhapsody Lilac, Nettle Tea, and Black Currant. And that was just the beginning.

As usual, Jamie's favorite card, Honey Butter, was right in the middle of the table, its sweet buttery yellow shining out next to Dragon Fruit, a pinkish-red card which was her second favorite.

She had begun her collection what she felt was a long time ago. It had started out when she went to the paint store with her parents so they could pick out what color to use when they re-painted the kitchen. She had seen Honey Butter and liked it so much that she had taken it home, and it was from there that her collection had grown.

So whenever she had the chance, she added to it or laid it all out so she could look at it, which she was doing at that moment.

Sliding Ivory Soap in place next to Burnt Vanilla and Sweet Hope, Jamie happened to glance up long enough to see something through the slats of the fence.

It took her a moment to make out what it was since she could only see tiny slivers, but after looking a bit more, she realized it was the teenage girl she had seen next door.

The girl was perched on the edge of the porch step in her own yard, her hair hanging around her shoulders, her lips slightly parted. In one hand she

held a thick book, which her eyes were flickering over with apprehensive enjoyment. Sitting on the step next to her was a cup full of something, most likely tea, but the way the light fell over it, it looked more like a cup of liquid sunbeams. After a moment, the girl paused in her reading and lifted her head to gaze out over the fence at the sunset and slanting roofs before her in all their sun-drenched glory. Her eyes glowed in the reflection of it all, and then slowly drifted back to the book.

Jamie turned and stared at the sunset herself, as if its beauty had been suddenly made clear to her. She sat thinking for a moment, somehow wishing that she knew more about the girl on the other side of the fence. She turned again and looked back through the slats, but the girl had gone.

Jamie hesitated at the foot of the big, sun-warmed library steps, her shoebox under her arm. Steps that, a few minutes before, she had seen the odd teenage girl with the long brown hair ascend, book bag in hand.

And now Jamie was trying to think of a good reason to go inside the library. A reason other than that she wanted to become friends with this strangely wonderful girl who was a lot older than her. Because of course, she didn't want that. There was no way a teenager would want to be friends with a seven-year-old. And so there was no way she would be friends with that girl. And it wasn't at all that she was afraid the girl would reject her and

demolish any trace of hope that Jamie might have a friend. Of course not.

“Summer reading,” Jamie muttered to herself. “I’m just going inside to get some books to read so I can fill in the clocks on my summer reading program. That’s all.”

Mrs. Johnson told Jamie nearly every day that she should go to the library to get her summer reading done and she had obeyed only twice before in the past two months since the program had begun.

Which is all the more reason to get started now, thought Jamie defiantly as she walked boldly up the concrete front steps of the Eola Road Public Library.

Inside, Jamie breathed in relief as a tidal wave of cool air washed over her skin. She pushed some of her dark curls off her sweaty forehead and hurried through the open lobby. Two check-in desks were on either side of the room with a few librarians at each, and behind them were shelves of research books. Directly across from the front library doors was a wide staircase that Jamie quickly made her way up. She climbed past the second floor, which was for adults, and on up to the children’s section on the third floor.

Upon reaching it, she immediately saw the girl from the mint green house standing at the librarian’s desk talking to Mrs. Dayton, the children’s librarian.

“Did you enjoy it?” Mrs. Dayton was asking the girl.

“Definitely!” said the girl, her eyes sparkling. “It’s nice to meet someone else who’s read it. I was actually wondering if I could check out the next part of the series.”

Mrs. Dayton laughed, placing the checked-in books on a cart Jamie had seen her use to put them away.

“I’ll go get it for you,” she said kindly, standing up to retrieve the book.

Mrs. Dayton said everything kindly because she was not like the strict, easily-annoyed kinds of librarians you might read about in books. She always had an intently interested look in her eyes when she listened and her thick caramel-colored hair gave off a warm and motherly feeling. It was hard not to like her.

So as not to disturb them, Jamie sat down on a beanbag and opened her shoebox to line up the paint cards inside. Glacier Mist, Honey Dew Melon, Lemon Twist, and African Tulip.

“I like your calendar, by the way,” said the girl to Mrs. Dayton.

Jamie glanced up at the calendar that hung behind Mrs. Dayton’s desk. It was made from multiple pieces of pinkish red construction paper, showing all 31 days of August in big squares with hand-written numbers. And instead of the dates for summer reading programs and book showings, (what kid was interested in that?) each square had a funny holiday written on it, along with a little

picture to match. The square for that day, August 2nd, had National Ice Cream Sandwich Day written on it. Jamie's mouth watered at the thought.

"I like that each day is a holiday, because it's a wonderful thought that every day has something to celebrate. My family made raspberry pie yesterday, actually. You know, because it was National Raspberry Cream Pie Day. And I don't think I've ever had raspberry cream pie before, let alone heard of a day for it. But it was scrumptious," the girl said.

"Thank you," said Mrs. Dayton, coming back to her desk with a smile on her lips and a thick book in her hand. "I'm glad you like the calendar. Are there any other books you want?"

"Yes," the girl handed her an illustrated book of fairy tales and a poetry book that she had selected in the thirty seconds that the librarian had been gone.

"Alright then," Mrs. Dayton took the girl's library card, which Jamie noticed had the word GUEST written across it, and began scanning her books.

"Thank you, Mrs. Dayton," said the girl with a last smile, as she started towards the door.

"No problem," Mrs. Dayton said, looking after the girl with a fondly amused look in her dark blue eyes. Then she turned toward the small figure in the beanbag a few feet from her desk.

"Jamie, is there something I can help you with?"

Jamie was so immersed in her own intriguing thoughts about the girl that she was quite startled

and gave a little jump, nearly spilling her paint cards.

“No,” she said quickly, “I – I’m going.”

“Alright then,” said Mrs. Dayton understandingly.

“Bye,” Jamie half turned on her way to the door to wave at the librarian.

Then, for whatever reason, Jamie forgot where the stairs were. She took one step too far, then tripped, fell, and tumbled down the stairs and straight into the teenage girl who was also descending the steps, sending one shoebox, two girls, three heavy books, and about a million paint cards crashing down to the first landing of the staircase.

Jamie sat up painfully, feeling as if a ton of rocks had rolled over her back. The book of fairy tales had landed on her leg, the book of poems was bouncing down the next flight, and the fantasy novel had ended up in her shoebox, which was on its side with the lid a few feet away. Brightly colored cards littered the landing and surrounding steps.

“Oh my goodness...” Mrs. Dayton’s voice came from the top of the steps as she appeared in the entryway to the stairwell. “Are you two okay?” she asked, hurrying down the steps.

“Yeah,” Jamie muttered. Her cheeks were hot and she was biting back the urge to burst into tears.

The girl sat up and spit strands of her hair out of her mouth, staring in bewilderment at her surroundings as if unsure how she had gotten there. Then, overcome by the absurdity of the situation, she burst into laughter and fell back onto the rough

carpet of the landing.

“Yeesh,” she laughed, “I didn’t expect that! Are you okay?” she asked, turning to Jamie.

“Yes,” said Jamie, feeling confused and angry and embarrassed all at once. She reached over and started to gather up her paint cards. Mrs. Dayton walked down the next flight to get the runaway poetry book.

The girl pulled herself onto her knees and started to help Jamie gather the paint cards back into the battered blue shoebox. Jamie felt a bit annoyed about this - somehow she didn’t like other people touching her collection.

The girl looked down curiously at a paint card she had retrieved from a few steps below, mouthing the word, *Everlasting*. Her eyes darted curiously to Jamie, who looked away.

She never talked to teenagers except for those who were related to her. But that wasn’t the same, and she wasn’t sure she knew what to say to this odd girl.

Mrs. Dayton came back up the steps and handed the book to the girl.

“Are you both sure you’re okay?” she asked again, still concerned.

“Yes,” the girl said, smiling warmly. “We’re okay. Thank you for getting the book.”

“No problem,” said Mrs. Dayton, returning the girl’s smile. “Just don’t fall down any more stairs on your way out.”

“Yes, Ma’am!” the girl saluted, picked up her books and started down the stairs.

“Bye,” said Jamie, waving again at the librarian, and walking down the stairs much more carefully this time.

Down the stairs and past the front desk the two very different girls walked in silence, the older of them keeping step with her young acquaintance.

It was only once they passed through the double doors of the library and out into the hot, dry air that either of them spoke.

“I’m sorry I fell on you,” said Jamie at last, as they stepped onto the sidewalk.

“That’s alright,” said the girl kindly, looking curiously over at Jamie. “What’s your name?”

“Jamie,” she answered, feeling somehow encouraged that the girl had asked. “What’s yours?”

“Jamie... Hum,” the girl paused her walking and looked up at the sky with half-closed eyes.

“Your name is Jamie, too?” Jamie asked rather awkwardly when the moment began to lengthen.

“Oh! No,” the girl laughed and started walking again with Jamie following. “My name is Laren, Laren Grace Lark if you want to be specific. But, then again, I don’t suppose you do. I was just thinking about your name. It sounds like a cabinet full of jam and preserves, not the modern kind, you know, the old-fashioned kind, brightly colored and full of seeds with those little checkered cloths tied on top.”

Jamie wasn't quite sure what the girl meant by this, so all she said was, "Oh."

After they had walked in silence for a moment, Jamie asked, "Are you a teenager?"

"Kind of," said Laren, cocking her head to one side as if she had been wondering the same thing. "I'm only twelve, but I'm turning thirteen soon. In twelve days to be exact. My birthday is on the fourteenth."

"Oh," said Jamie again, then added, "I'm seven."

"Great!" said Laren, giving a little skip as if she was bursting with excitement. "I like the number seven. And people who are seven, of course."

"I live in the house next to yours," said Jamie. "I saw you moving in yesterday. Is your family going on vacation?"

They had come to a road and stopped to look both ways.

"Actually, I'm roadschooled," Laren answered. "Or at least I have been for the past year. We're not going to stay too long, though. My parents want to get home before my birthday."

"What's roadschooled?"

"It means we travel a lot and I learn things along the way."

"Why do you do that?"

Laren's face became impassive for a moment. "Well... we just thought we would try it for a year, I guess. I was homeschooled all my life before that."

"Is homeschooling fun?" asked Jamie. They

crossed the street and continued walking.

“I get that question a lot,” said Laren with a laugh. “Homeschooling is only as great as your parents are, but my parents are pretty great. So, yeah. And roadschooling is the same way.”

“I wish I could have fun like that,” said Jamie. She was feeling friendlier now that they had been talking a while. “My family doesn’t usually go places. My mommy says maybe we will when William and Jack get older. They’re my little brothers, and they’re only two. They’re also twins. My family has five kids.”

“I wish my parents had five kids,” said Laren. “It was fun to travel though, especially on the airplanes.”

“You’ve been on airplanes?” asked Jamie in amazement.

“Oh yes! Overnight ones when we went to Germany and France. It was definitely an adventure. At night you can look down and see all the lights of towns and cities beneath you, all spread out like a giant fiery web of tangled roads. And in the morning the clouds are so big and puffy they almost seem fake. And when the sun is rising the whole world is rosy pink and white, and the wonderful thing about it is that the sunrise lasted a lot longer for us because our plane was flying toward the sun. Then sometimes, when there’s a break in the clouds, you can see little houses down below – just waking up – and I was wondering if maybe some boy or girl

down below was looking up at our plane like I did sometimes at home.”

It struck Jamie that she especially liked the way Laren talked. It was like what a rollercoaster might sound like if it could speak. Because Laren’s voice seemed to change pitch every few seconds. It would be low and practical for a while, then gain momentum until it was bubbling with excitement, and warble around an idea for a moment, then take a sudden dramatic drop. It was as if she was telling a story to an entire audience of people, and her eyes lit up with an infectious enjoyment.

Jamie felt her eyes widening as well as they turned the corner onto their block, Winchester Court, and stopped in front of the houses. One gray, one green.

“What about you?” asked Laren. “What adventures do you go on?”

“I don’t,” said Jamie, feeling that nothing she said could hold a light to Laren’s dramatic account. “There aren’t adventures here, nothing ever happens.”

“Oh no,” Laren’s brow furrowed, and she shook her head from side to side, causing her hair to fall over her shoulders. “There are always adventures everywhere, it just takes an adventurer to see them.”

“I’m not an adventurer,” said Jamie.

“Time has a way of changing our minds,” said Laren poetically.

Jamie stared blankly at her.

“Well,” said Laren with a shrug. “I suppose I better go, it’s almost lunchtime.” She took a few steps toward her house.

“Wait!” said Jamie, barely knowing what she was going to say. “Could we – can we, I mean – be friends?” She would have never asked this of another girl Laren’s age, but after talking to her, Jamie knew that Laren would take it seriously.

“You know,” said Laren, her eyes brightening, “I think that’s a good idea. Nearly all the great friendships in books start with an unusual and unexpected catastrophe. And I think falling on someone down the library stairs should qualify. See you later then, friend!” And she waved and ran up the steps of the mint green house next to Jamie’s.

Jamie stared after her for a few seconds, unsure what to think. Then she laughed. She had met people who had tried to fit in. She had met people who tried to stand out. But until then she had never met anyone who simply tried to be themselves without expecting anything from those around them. It was a refreshing experience.

Laren was an odd girl, she thought, but in the best sort of way.

“Good morning,” Jamie announced sleepily as she stumbled into the kitchen the next morning.

Erica, Brian, and Mr. Johnson were sitting at the dining room table, which was adorned as always with its centerpiece of toy animal figures, a cookbook, and a few half-finished coloring pages, topped off with a tissue box. They were eating eggs and, in Mr. Johnson’s case, drinking coffee. Jamie squinted in the bright dining room light.

Mrs. Johnson came in from the kitchen, set down Brian’s fourth serving of eggs and paused to drop a kiss on Jamie’s head.

“Look at you, sleepy head,” she said, giving

Jamie's hand a quick squeeze before bending down to pick up William. "You're usually the first one up. Would you like any scrambled eggs or toast?"

"Both," Jamie yawned and sat down next to Erica so as to avoid Jack, who, as she knew from experience, was usually in the mood for a food fight during breakfast.

Outside the dining room window, a cool morning breeze was rustling the tree branches, and the blue sky was smeared with flighty bits of cloud.

Carolina Blue sky, thought Jamie, remembering one of her paint cards.

"Today a good day! Good day!" sang William, wiggling around as Mrs. Johnson buckled him into his highchair.

"You were the last one up today," said Erica, spearing an egg with her fork.

"No, I wasn't," said Jamie shooting Erica a look.

"Girls..." said Mrs. Johnson warningly, setting down Jamie's plate.

"Well she was!" contradicted Erica.

"Oh man!" Jack shrieked.

"No," Jamie glared hard at Erica through a mouthful of egg.

Erica looked absolutely exasperated. "Yes. You. Were."

"Both of you. Drop it," said Mrs. Johnson sternly. "If you are upset with each other, please express it in a way that does not disturb the rest of the family."

“I wasn’t,” Jamie muttered under her breath before returning to her breakfast. She prided herself on being the first one up. It was the only time, she felt, that she was first in anything. *And Erica didn’t need to be so mean. That was all she was, mean!* Continuing to glare, Jamie ate in stony silence.

“Come on guys,” said Mr. Johnson. “Let’s have a good day.”

“Good day!” William sang again.

Jamie felt, however, that the day was going to be just about anything but good.

“So, what are you guys planning to do?” asked Mr. Johnson cheerfully.

“Play basketball with Russell and Jacob at the park – can I have more eggs?” said Brian.

“There are no more eggs, Brian!” called Mrs. Johnson from the kitchen.

“Make sure you boys are careful crossing the streets,” said Mr. Johnson.

“Dad. The park is only two blocks away,” said Brian, standing up to take his plate to the sink.

“Well,” started Erica importantly, “I’m going to check with Claire and Maria to tell them about the party, and make a list of all the snacks I want to get for it.”

“It’s still two weeks away. You have plenty of time,” said Mrs. Johnson.

“Oh, I know,” said Erica. “But I just can’t wait!”

Feeling a sort of pointed annoyance, Jamie (rather kindly in her opinion) decided to stick out

her tongue rather than start another argument.

“Mom!” Erica yelled immediately. “Jamie stuck out her tongue at me!”

“Jamie,” said Mrs. Johnson wearily, “please don’t stick out your tongue at people.”

“She doesn’t deserve a ‘please’,” Erica muttered just loud enough that only Jamie could hear.

“Be quiet!” Jamie said, glaring at Erica.

Erica gave her a smug look and turned away. Jamie felt her cheeks heat up with frustration. It wasn’t fair! Erica got to go around bragging about her silly party and how much fun it would be, just to make Jamie feel bad. She was sure. No one understood...

“Well, I better get going,” said Mr. Johnson, standing up from the table. “See you guys tonight! Have fun Brian, Erica. And you two...” Mr. Johnson ruffled the twin’s wispy baby hair affectionately. “Don’t cause too much trouble for mommy. You too, Jamie,” Mr. Johnson gave Jamie a quick hug. “Try to find something to do. Okay?”

“Okay...” said Jamie with a sigh. *I am trying*, she thought privately.

Mr. Johnson gave Mrs. Johnson a quick kiss and then headed out the door. Then after a moment, Jamie heard the familiar rumbling that told her the car was pulling out of the driveway. She stuffed one last piece of toast into her mouth and brought her plate to the sink.

“Jamie?” called Mrs. Johnson from the dining

room. "Can you grab the milk out of the fridge for me?"

"Okay." Jamie pulled open the door to the fridge, which was packed with all the food needed to feed a family of seven.

"Where is it?"

"Middle shelf on the left," was Mrs. Johnson's answer.

"Which side is left?" asked Jamie.

"Whichever hand makes an L is your left hand, Jamie," said Mrs. Johnson, walking into the kitchen, holding a few more dishes.

This, of course, was useless information for Jamie. Because both hands made an L, even if one was backward. And how was she supposed to know which way an L faced any better than which way was left?

"You don't know your left from your right?" asked Erica, raising an eyebrow as she passed Jamie, also on her way to deliver her plate to the sink.

"I do!" said Jamie, which wasn't really true. She checked on both sides of the shelf and pulled out the milk.

"Wow, Jamie," said Erica, taking the milk from her hands. "Here, Mom."

This was just too much for Jamie.

With a growl of frustration, she kicked the cabinet next to the fridge.

"Jamie," she heard Mrs. Johnson's warning voice. "If you can't behave, you'll have to go outside."

Jamie stomped down the hall to the front door, sat down and furiously pulled on her worn-out pink and orange flip-flops so hard that the place where the plastic strap went between her toes stung. She grabbed her shoebox from the table in the living room and stomped out the door, slamming it behind her.

She was so angry that she almost didn't notice Laren sitting in the driveway of the mint green house next door with a bucket of sidewalk chalk.

"Hi," Laren said, looking up curiously. The look on her face clearly said that she had heard the door slam and possibly some of the shouting voices inside.

"Hi," said Jamie, still not quite over her anger. She couldn't think of anything to say.

There was a moment of silence during which Laren seemed to be waiting for Jamie to speak.

"Do you want to draw with me?" asked Laren finally.

"Sure." Jamie hitched her shoebox up under her arm and walked over.

"I'm drawing an enchanted garden," Laren explained. "It's going to take up the entire driveway, so draw small, okay? There's a lot we need to fit in."

Jamie looked at the top right corner of the driveway where Laren was sitting. It was a patchwork of bright colors. She knelt next to it and looked down at the patch. There was what looked like part of a rainbow, and lots of spirally vines with little

leaves.

“The rainbow is going to stretch all the way to the other corner,” Laren pointed. “I’ll draw the lines and you can color them in. Then we can draw some flowers on the vines.”

“Okay,” said Jamie.

Laren picked out two pieces of red chalk and handed one to Jamie. Then she started to draw two parallel curved lines to the bottom left-hand corner of the driveway, Jamie following behind on her hands and knees. Her anger towards Erica was ebbing away. After all, it’s difficult to stay angry when you are coloring with sidewalk chalk on a bright summer morning.

“This is a blue sky moment,” said Laren in a hushed but clear and rather dramatic voice. “I wrote a poem about blue sky moments a few days ago.”

Jamie paused her coloring and sat criss-cross for a moment to give her bare knees a break from the hard asphalt. Laren had stopped drawing and was resting on her stomach, chin in her hands, eyes turned upward at the cottony smears of cloud above them.

“The sky’s always blue,” said Jamie. “Well, except in winter. Then it’s gray.”

Laren laughed, “Actually, the sky doesn’t have to be blue for you to have a blue sky moment. Of course, it often is, but it doesn’t have to be. I just mean that this moment is absolutely perfect, and whatever comes next, no matter how imperfect, we

will always have this moment.”

There was a long wistful silence. Then Jamie started coloring again.

“*The sky is blue,*” Laren said slowly and thoughtfully,

the grass is green,

the water somewhere in between,

and it doesn’t matter where I’ve been

as long as I’m here now.”

Laren cocked her head thoughtfully to one side, “That was pretty good.”

“Did you make that up just now?” asked Jamie looking interested.

“Yep!” was Laren’s enthusiastic answer. “I’m a poet and I’ve always known it!” She laughed. “I write them down a lot too. I’ve always wanted to get a poem published - my parents say I should try – but I haven’t yet.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I’ve just always been content with reading them to my family, but maybe now I will. I am going to be thirteen soon. Maybe it’s time to take the next step!”

“You should,” said Jamie. “I think you’re good at it.”

“Thank you. Oh! I was going to ask you,” Laren finished her lines and sat up to face Jamie. “What is that, exactly?” She pointed to the shoebox that Jamie had left next to the chalk container.

Jamie hesitated, “It’s my paint card box. I...

collect paint cards.”

“Can I see?” asked Laren simply.

Jamie stood up, brushed bits of asphalt off her knees and walked over to the box. She opened the lid and pulled out some of the small cards, beginning to organize them on the driveway.

Desert Eggshell, Dusty Lemon, Raspberry Parfait, Lavender Steam, Peaceful Haze.

“How long have you been collecting?” asked Laren, staring in amazement at the contents of the shoebox.

“I dunno,” Jamie shrugged and pulled Honey Butter out. “This one is my favorite.”

“Cool,” said Laren. “You know, I’ve always liked paint cards too. The names give you a whole new way to think about things. Like this,” she pointed to Ribbon Dance. “You would never think of Ribbons Dancing otherwise.”

“Yeah.” Jamie had never thought of her paint cards like that, although she knew that certain ones gave her different feelings when she read the names.

“Words are powerful,” said Laren thoughtfully. “Even just a few words on a paint card. They’re magic.”

She picked up a long card that had several color samples on it and read aloud.

“Pale Orchid, Lavender Haze, Wild Lilac, French Violet, Purple Grapes.” Then she spread her hands dramatically apart. “Magic!”

Jamie giggled, then asked, “What’s your

favorite?”

“Hmmm...” Laren frowned. “I don’t know. Do you have any recommendations?”

“Well, what’s your favorite color?” asked Jamie.

“Blue.”

Shuffling carefully through the cards, Jamie took out all the blue ones and pushed them across the asphalt to Laren. Laren looked through them for a moment before pulling out a light blue card with just a hint of turquoise. The title was: Everlasting.

“I like this one,” said Laren brightly, handing the cards back to Jamie. “It reminds me of the color of my room at home.”

Jamie looked down at the card in her hand. Laren really is a nice girl, she thought. She considered for a moment, then, she held the card out to Laren.

“Here,” she said. “You can have it.”

“Oh, you can keep it!” said Laren with a laugh. “You’ve been collecting for a long time.”

“No.” Jamie shook her head and put the card into Laren’s hand. “I – I want you to have it.” She looked up at the older girl, trying somehow to make her understand the feeling that she could not quite put into words.

Laren looked at her for a second curiously, then a warm smile crossed her lips.

“Thank you,” she said.

The two girls sat quietly for a while after that, just thinking and listening. Listening to the hushed whisper of the trees in the morning breeze, a bird

chirping, and somewhere car tires rumbled along the road.

“Today’s a good day,” said Jamie confidently.

“A blue sky day,” said Laren poetically. “A magic moment in time. Everlasting...”

CH 4
Carolina Blue

4/15

“Oh, please come,” said Laren imploringly **the next** day. It was as hot and bright as ever, and Jamie was lagging dejectedly behind her new friend as they walked down the sidewalk. Laren was trying to walk backward so she could face Jamie and only halfway succeeding.

“But the library’s boring,” Jamie moaned, kicking a piece of gravel across the sidewalk and stubbing her toe because she was wearing flip-flops.

“You’re the one who said I should enter my poem in a competition,” Laren pointed out lightly. “You don’t have to come I guess, but I would appreciate your support.”

“Alright,” Jamie sighed, secretly pleased that

Laren wanted her support.

“Plus,” said Laren, spinning around to face forward again, “there’s not much else to do.”

They had reached the library’s front steps by now. The two girls hurried inside, sighing from the relief of cool air.

“Come on!” said Laren in an excited whisper, and the two of them dashed up the wide, carpeted steps.

Mrs. Dayton looked up from a pile of books she was sorting as they entered the children’s section.

“Happy National Chocolate Chip Cookie Day!” Laren announced after a glance up at the calendar.

Mrs. Dayton laughed, “You too.”

“Why are all the holidays about food?” asked Jamie.

“They’re not all about food,” said Laren. “Tomorrow is National Friendship Day, for instance. But a lot of them are about food. I guess people like food,” she said with a shrug. Jamie giggled.

“Is there anything I can help you with today?” asked Mrs. Dayton.

“Well, I need to return these books.” Laren pulled several books out of her blue and white bag and set them on the desk. “And, well, I was wondering if you had any magazines that publish children’s writing that I could look at.”

“Laren’s going to publish a poem!” Jamie piped up in a supportive sort of way.

“Really?” Mrs. Dayton looked curiously at Laren. Laren blushed.

“I’m going to try anyway,” she explained.

“That’s a wonderful idea!” Mrs. Dayton looked delighted. “I might actually be able to help you with that.” She stood up and walked behind the picture book shelves. Curiously, Jamie and Laren followed her. Mrs. Dayton shuffled through the magazine shelf and pulled out several thick folders before handing them to Laren.

“These magazines publish children’s writing. You can find some that will accept entries from your age range, then see what kind of writing they publish, and how you can contact them. There are a few more here, too.” She gestured to the shelves behind her.

“Oh, thank you,” said Laren gratefully. “Thank you so much. Can I check these out?”

“The older issues, yes,” said Mrs. Dayton. “The newest ones have to stay at the library though. And be careful, magazines tear easily.” Then she smiled again. “I’m sure you’ll have no trouble finding a publisher. A girl like you must write excellent poems.”

“Oh, thank you so much, Mrs. Dayton,” Laren blushed. “I can’t tell you how much this means to me.”

“No problem,” the librarian said. “And by the way, you can call me Cara.”

“Is that your first name?” asked Laren curiously.

“It’s very pretty. Makes me think of kindness and melting caramel.”

“My name is Carolina, like the state, but everyone just calls me Cara,” she explained, her eyes twinkling with amusement.

“Like, Carolina Blue...” said Jamie thoughtfully.

“What?” asked Cara, turning towards her.

“Oh. It’s the name of one of my paint cards,” Jamie said. She sat down on the floor cross-legged, pulled the card out of her box and held it up for her two older friends to see.

“Beautiful,” said Cara nodding. Jamie carefully replaced the card.

“Jamie collects paint cards,” said Laren as Jamie stood back up.

“Yes, I knew that,” said Cara. “I’ve seen her in here with them once or twice before,” she smiled. “Well, I better get back to work. Lots of things to do before the end of the summer reading program. It’s on Thursday,” she added, seeing the question on Laren’s lips. “Which is also National Book Lovers Day. You get a free book if you’ve read a certain amount of books according to your age group. And if you’ve filled in how much you read in the programs we gave out a while ago.”

“Oh,” said Laren, thinking. “I guess it wouldn’t do me much good to go then, since I don’t have a program to fill out. Do you have a program, Jamie?” Laren turned to look at her small friend.

“Yeah, but I won’t fill it out in time, though,”

Jamie admitted rather sheepishly. "I only have one clock colored."

"I'm always up for a challenge!" Laren proclaimed, proudly holding her head high. Cara smiled.

"Would it count if I read to her Mrs. Day – I mean, Cara?"

Cara chuckled, "Well, technically Jamie's age group in the program isn't for read-alouds. But I think I can accept it." Privately, Cara thought that to get Jamie interested in anything was worth an award.

"We don't have enough time," protested Jamie. "And anyway, books are boring."

Laren's eyes grew big. "Books aren't boring!" she said, rather aghast. "Books are portals to other worlds and windows into other people's thoughts! Please just give it a try." She bent down so as to be eye level with her friend and looked imploringly at her.

"Okay, okay!" said Jamie quickly. She found Laren's bouts of dramatic speech rather frightening sometimes. She thought for a moment. "What should we read?"

"Oh! That's a good question!" Laren stood up, looking rather lightheaded at the vast array of possibilities before her.

"How about *A Little Princess*," suggested Cara. "By Frances Hodgson Burnett."

"That's a great idea!" exclaimed Laren. "I love

that book! Well, I love nearly all books, but still. I'll go get it!" She quickly walked off to find the book.

Cara smiled and shook her head. "Well, I better get back to it." She walked back to her desk. Jamie sighed and followed Laren into the forest of bookshelves. Sometimes she felt that she would never understand Laren. Perhaps, however, that was what made her so interesting.

She walked around another shelf to find Laren on her knees, scanning the spines of the books in front of her for Burnett, Frances. Jamie had to step over quite a few thick books with glossy covers that were scattered over the floor.

"This is a mess," Jamie noted. It was nothing compared to how her room looked, but she was used to a very clean and organized library.

"I think someone was researching something," said Laren, pulling *A Little Princess* off the shelf. "And they didn't put the encyclopedias back."

"Encyclopedias?" Jamie sat down next to one of the books and opened it to a random page. There were lots of words and a few small pictures.

"You don't know what an encyclopedia is?" asked Laren.

"I do, but I forgot," said Jamie. "Don't they have stuff about everything in them?"

"Basically." Laren picked up another one of the big books and paged through it. "They don't have everything in them, just most things. Some encyclopedias have more than others."

“They have pictures on them.” Jamie pointed to the spine of the book she was holding. It had part of something yellow and furry on it.

“I think they all make up one big picture, actually.” Laren pulled a few more of the encyclopedias over to her and tried to line up their spines. “Like a puzzle. A puzzle of books. Now that’s my kind of puzzle!”

“We should solve it!” said Jamie.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea!” Laren started stacking the encyclopedias on top of each other. “It shouldn’t be too hard since they each have a letter on the side from A to Z. But it would be fun to see what the big picture is!”

“What do you think the picture is?” asked Jamie.

Laren set the Z book on one end of the shelf where the encyclopedias belonged.

“Well, it’s definitely something yellow and furry,” she said. “Maybe a griffin.”

“Or a lion,” said Jamie, picking up the X book.

“Or a cat,” said Laren. “Or a caterpillar. Or a giraffe. Or cheese.”

“Cheese?” Jamie giggled.

“Cheese can be furry if you leave it out a long time,” said Laren with a grin.

“Yuck!” Jamie said, still giggling.

As Laren had predicted, it didn’t take them long to solve the yellow fuzzy mystery. They finished the book puzzle in only a few minutes. But there was something satisfying about handling the big glossy

books. It made Jamie feel important.

“And... And... And...” Laren dramatically pushed the last book into place. “It’s a bumble bee!”

“Yay!” said Jamie.

“You cleaned up the encyclopedias for me.” The two girls turned to see Cara standing at the end of another bookshelf with her shelving cart.

“It was the funnest cleaning I’ve ever done!” said Laren.

“Then you should work at a library someday,” said Cara with a laugh.

“Wait.” Jamie grabbed her shoebox and quickly opened it to shuffle around inside before pulling out the Carolina Blue paint card. Then she stood up and walked over to the librarian.

“Cara,” she said, “could I give you this?” Jamie held out the card. Cara took it and looked at it quizzically.

“It has your name on it,” Jamie explained. “So I thought you would want it.”

“Well, thank you, Jamie,” Cara smiled warmly.

“You’re welcome,” Jamie smiled back. Her heart felt light, as if it would float away. She put the lid back on her shoebox and secured it under her arm.

“Alright,” said Laren, turning to Jamie. “Can we read *A Little Princess* now? I mean, if encyclopedias can be a puzzle, don’t you think it’s possible for a story book to be fun?”

“Okay,” Jamie tried to repress a smile and failed.

Laren found a cozy place in the corner of the

library, next to a sunlit window, and the two girls curled up in a big green armchair with Laren's arm around Jamie's shoulders.

"You know, there is a sweet sort of quiet that libraries often have," Laren commented thoughtfully. "And the smell of books. Books, I think, are what magic smells like." And in the enchanting peace, Laren flipped to the first page and began.

"Chapter one: Sara. Once on a dark winter's day..."

And the two were soon transported to a cold, mysterious and wonderful day, long, long, ago.

Jamie opened her eyes groggily, feeling too warm and sleepy to move. The curtains had been pulled back from her bedroom window and morning light spilled into her room. From the kitchen and living room, she could hear her parents' voices, one of the twins babbling on, and the clinking of dishes. She blinked and turned over, letting her senses wake up. Her mind began to whirl into action.

It was Sunday. Yes, her church dress was laid out on the dresser as always. That meant it was going to be a busy rush to get out the door on time.

With a yawn, Jamie kicked her feet to disentangle herself from the sheets and stretched her arms

above her head. Then she swung her legs over the side of her bed and stood up. Time to get moving.

Jamie quickly changed into her dress and left the bedroom.

In the living room, Mr. Johnson watched the twins while Mrs. Johnson rushed around the kitchen, fixing bowls of oatmeal.

Erica and Brian were already sitting at the table. Erica was dressed and ready, and Brian was the exact opposite.

"So," said Erica importantly, "I've told everyone except Hazel about the date for the party. I'll tell her at church today and then that will be everyone."

"That's good," Mrs. Johnson rushed to the table and set down three bowls. "Brian, do you have your shoes on?"

"No."

"Then please go put them on once you've finished eating. Jamie, be sure to brush your teeth before you get in the van."

And the frantic hustle continued. William didn't want to wake up. Brian couldn't find his church shoes. Jamie wandered around until she remembered that she had forgotten to brush her teeth. Erica moaned that they would be late and she wouldn't be able to tell Hazel about the party. And in the time that they were waiting for Brian to put his shirt on again, (he put it on backward the first time) Jack decided that he had a prejudice against his shoes and insisted on putting them in the trash can.

The entire time all this was happening, Mrs. Johnson was trying to do five things at once and snapping at everyone. Jamie would have felt sorry for her mother if not for the fact that this happened every single time they needed to get anywhere.

Thankfully, however, they were soon all in the car and driving to church.

"Are we late?" asked Erica nervously as the car pulled out of the driveway.

"By about five minutes," said Mrs. Johnson, shoving the clasp of her seatbelt into the buckle.

"We'll be alright," Mr. Johnson said reassuringly and kissed his wife.

After they had to wait at the train tracks for a seemingly endless train to pass, Jamie, Erica, and Brian walked into the kids' church in the middle of songs.

Erica took no time in finding her friend Hazel. Jamie soon located Emily, a girl about her age who she usually ended up sitting with. Emily was wearing her thin blond hair in two neat braids as usual, and her grayish-blue eyes held their matter-of-fact expression.

"Hi Jamie," she said as Jamie approached.

"Hi," Jamie returned, coming to stand next to her.

"I slammed my finger in the door yesterday," Emily said solemnly, holding up a bandaged finger.

"I made friends with a teenager," said Jamie.

"Oh," said Emily. Then, after a pause, "Why?"

“Because!” exclaimed Jamie. Although she was good friends with Emily, she often thought her a little exasperating. They stood together awhile longer, singing quietly, until the teacher called everyone together for the lesson. After the lesson, the kids around Jamie’s age did a craft project, while the older children studied with the teacher some more.

After church, everyone hung around talking while they waited for their parents to pick them up. Emily’s mother picked her up almost right away. Soon after, Mr. Johnson came for Brian, Jamie, and Erica. Erica seemed quite ecstatic.

“Look at this!” she trilled as they all walked across the parking lot to the van. She waved her arm in the air. On her wrist was a bracelet, the sun reflecting through the aqua and jade glass beads, casting colored shadows on the pavement. Rather against her will, Jamie felt interested.

“That’s pretty,” said Mrs. Johnson. She was holding each of the twins’ hands as they walked to the car, and had to stoop slightly because of this. “Where did you get it?”

“Hazel gave it to me,” said Erica. “You know how I told you she likes to make jewelry? Well, she said she made this one just for me!”

“That was nice of her,” said Mr. Johnson, unlocking the car.

“Yes,” said Erica, stepping back to let Brian in the car. “And she also said that she’d come to the

party!”

“Erica,” said Jamie, looking at the glittering string of color and wondering what the beads would feel like, “can I try it on?”

“No,” Erica said flatly as she climbed into the car.

“Please?” Jamie persisted, getting into the car, too.

“No.” Erica frowned and fingered the bracelet.

“Come on...” Jamie scuffed her sandals impatiently on the back of the seat in front of her where William was strapped in. “Please!”

“No!” Erica was firm this time. “Stop asking!”

Jamie bit her lip and glared defiantly out the window, trying to ignore the stifling heat of the car.

The sun was well overhead when the Johnson van pulled into the driveway at 3105 Winchester Court. The doors of the car opened and it was empty in seconds. Sitting still for several hours is tiring work, especially for a seven-year-old girl, and Jamie felt both hungry and very ready to wear some more comfortable clothes again. After changing into her play clothes and promising Mrs. Johnson she would be back for lunch, she skipped outside with her paint card collection under her arm, to find Laren drawing with sidewalk chalk again. The Enchanted Garden was really coming along.

Laren looked up as Jamie plopped down beside her on the asphalt, helping herself to a piece of green chalk and adding leaves to one of the vines.

“How was church?” Laren inquired. Jamie shrugged carelessly. Laren frowned but didn’t say anything.

“Did you go to church?” asked Jamie after a moment.

“We had church at the house,” Laren nodded to the mint house. “Me and my parents. We’ve been traveling so much all year it’s what we usually do.”

“Oh,” said Jamie, thinking for a moment. “What do you do?”

“Read parts of the Bible and discuss it together.”

“It must be nice,” said Jamie thoughtfully, “to be able to spend so much time with your mom and dad without them being busy with other brothers and sisters.”

“Oh. I guess.” Laren bent further over her drawing of a ruby-throated hummingbird. “By the way, I’ve been looking through some of the magazines at the library. You know, the ones that publish children’s writing that I wanted to submit to? I’ve narrowed it down considerably. Now all I have to do is write a poem.”

“Have you started it yet?” asked Jamie.

“Not on paper,” said Laren, “but in my head, I’m always working on a new poem. Everything I do each day helps me to write.”

There was a creaking sound as the screen door of Jamie’s house opened.

“Jamie!” Brian called, poking his head out. “Mom says you have to come in for lunch!” His

head disappeared and the door shut. Brian was probably in a hurry to eat.

“Coming!” Jamie yelled. She pulled herself to her feet and picked up her shoebox. “Sorry, gotta go.”

“Okay,” Laren nodded. “See you later.”

“Bye!” Jamie waved before turning to run down the sidewalk and into her house.

“Ready for lunch?” asked Mr. Johnson as Jamie closed the door behind her. There was the usual half-confused bustle going on and the loud clinking of silverware as family members carried their plates to the table.

“Yes. Just let me put my paint cards away.” Jamie kicked off her flip-flops and hurried into her bedroom.

It was slightly quieter there and bright with sun. Jamie crossed to the cluttered shelves next to the bunk beds. She shoved her shoebox into an almost clear space on one of the lower shelves and was about to walk away when a sparkling blue glint caught her eye.

Jamie looked and saw Erica’s new bracelet from church on one of the higher shelves. She frowned.

Then, as carefully as she could, Jamie climbed up the bunk bed ladder until she was eye level with the shelf. She stretched out one arm and leaned out into open space, her hand groping for the slippery glass beads.

Jamie’s waving fingers nicked the edge of the

shelf, but just missed the bracelet. She leaned out further.

Outside the door, she thought she heard Erica's voice and froze. *Nothing. Just a false alarm.*

It's not as if I'm doing something bad, she thought. *But it would be best if Erica didn't know. It's like Mommy says: we should try to keep the peace.*

Peace-keeping Jamie slowly reached out again. Her fingernails tapped the beads, then her fingers closed around the bracelet.

Gently, Jamie eased herself onto the ladder, then climbed back to the ground, her bare feet grateful for the soft carpet after standing on the narrow rungs.

"I did it," Jamie said proudly to herself. She grinned and slowly opened her fist to look at the glittering string of sea-colored beads.

She slipped it over her wrist and held it up to the light from the window. The bracelet was a little too big for her and hung off her wrist, but it was still just as pretty.

Jamie let her hand drop to her side and swiveled her wrist back and forth to view the beads. It didn't seem fair that Erica should have such a pretty piece of jewelry yet would never share it with anyone.

Jamie curled the fingers of her other hand around the stretchy plastic string that held the bracelet together. She imagined pulling so hard that

the bracelet would snap right in half and shivered. It was a horrible thing to want to do, but still, a tiny part of her did want to.

Suddenly, a familiar voice, humming softly, was quite close. Erica was coming.

Panicked, Jamie tried to pull off the bracelet as quickly as she could. She did it rather carelessly, though and pulled a little too hard.

The string snapped. Blue and green beads went flying everywhere. Jamie's heart thumped loudly. Her breath caught in her chest. There was a squeak of Erica's hand on the handle.

In one fluid motion, she reached down and scooped up the most obvious beads from the carpet before stuffing them into the flimsy pocket of her shorts. Hopefully, among the rest of the mess on the floor, the other beads wouldn't be noticed.

The door opened and Erica barely had time to step out of the way as Jamie hurtled past her.

"Hey! Be careful!" she yelled.

Jamie didn't listen.

She raced into the kitchen, cold air from a vent brushing her bare feet. Quickly she emptied her pocket into the trash can. The beads clattered against the old milk containers and rolled off empty jars. Then, doing her best not to look guilty, she walked in for lunch.

The next day, Monday, turned out to be a **very hot** and humid day. About an hour after lunch, Jamie retreated to the front steps with a little electric fan and her paint cards. She was playing a game that she had invented, while also trying to think of a name for the game at the same time.

She took all the paint cards and found the right ones to describe the very moment and place she was in. So far, she had Amber Wave, Lemongrass, Robin's Egg Blue, Hushed Cranberry, Sea Sage, and Careless Whisper.

She chose Careless Whisper because that's what the wisp of the breeze seemed to be like. A Careless Whisper in the hot air.

“Jamie!”

Jamie looked up to see Laren on the sidewalk. She was wearing another one of her floral patterned skirts, her long brown hair loose about her face. In her hand was a bag. Not her blue swirly book bag, but a sturdier one that looked as if it was filled with all sorts of differently shaped things.

“Hi!” Jamie waved

“What are you doing?” Laren asked, walking over.

“I’ll show you!” Jamie beckoned and Laren sat down on the step next to Jamie as she explained her game.

“Oh, I like that idea,” said Laren as soon as Jamie had finished. “A breeze being a careless whisper... it sounds like something to put in a poem! You wouldn’t mind if I used it in a poem, would you?”

“Course not,” said Jamie, and then she glanced at Laren’s bag. “What’s that for?”

“I,” said Laren, sitting up straighter, “am going on a quest for inspiration! I read about it in a book about writing poetry that I got from the library. That reminds me! Happy National Wiggle Your Toes Day! Wiggle is a funny word, isn’t it?”

Jamie wiggled her toes in her flip-flops and thought about the sound of the word ‘wiggle’ for a moment before asking; “Where are you questing?”

“In the field behind our houses where the drain is,” Laren answered promptly.

“The green space?” There was a large grassy

area behind the houses on one side of Winchester Court. It was a few hundred feet wide with water from a drain in the middle, and houses from the next block on the other side.

“Yes, if that’s what you call it,” said Laren with a shrug.

“Can I come?” asked Jamie.

“Why do you think I just came over here?” exclaimed Laren. “I was going to ask you! Bring your paint cards and let’s go!”

“Okay,” Jamie smiled and together the two girls put all the cards back into the shoebox and started out onto the sidewalk.

“Let’s take the secret passageway,” said Jamie, turning to the right where the fences of two houses ran alongside each other a few feet apart. They hurried between them and onto the well-mowed grass. The green space wasn’t much to look at, just a steep dip in the ground that sloped down to a trickle of water coming from the drain under the road. The water ran in a small crooked line through the grass. Around it grew little clumps of weeds that had been overlooked by the mower. The houses on the other side faced away from the green space, as if they were treating it with disdain.

“Where should we go?” Jamie asked as they emerged.

Laren paused to think, then pointed over to the little trickle of water coming out of the drain that ran under the road, and then flowed along the

middle of the green space. "Let's walk along by the water down there and see where it goes."

"Okay!" Jamie agreed happily and adjusted her shoebox.

Suddenly something furry brushed up against their ankles and both of them jumped a little.

Jamie looked down. "Oh! Hi, Abby."

"Abby?" Laren looked at the little cat poised daintily in the grass beside them, her soft molasses-colored coat standing out against the grass.

"Yes. That's Abby. We call her Abby the Tabby because she's a dark tabby cat," Jamie explained.

"Is she yours?" asked Laren, bending down so as to be eye level with the petite cat. Abby blinked her bright eyes at her.

"No," said Jamie, "she just comes around sometimes."

"Hi Abby," said Laren, carefully holding out her fingertips. Abby gave her a disapproving glance and flicked her tail.

"My mommy says she acts like a little queen," said Jamie.

Queen certainly did seem to be the right word to describe the little, striped cat as she pranced down to the stream at the bottom of the slope and lapped daintily at the water.

"Well," said Laren standing back up to say seriously, "if she's a queen, we must be her royal subjects and follow her. Maybe she'll lead me to a good poem idea!" Jamie giggled.

The two girls followed the little cat down the slope and along the stream. There wasn't much to see, though, in Jamie's opinion.

"Let's not go too far," said Jamie after they walked a few more minutes, anxiously looking back at her house, which had shrunk a bit as they followed the cat.

"Alright," said Laren, then she pointed a few feet away. "Look! Red clover! Let's stop here."

The little purple-ish pink flowers were poking out of the bank near the edge of the water, looking bright and odd in a place of carefully mown grass and stiffly set sidewalks.

Abby stopped, sitting with her tail splayed out behind her, the tip twitching slightly, as she watched the two girls with her inquisitive green eyes. She cocked her head slightly to one side, as if considering the possibility that these girls might be worthy of her companionship.

Laren laughed brightly, "I think her royal majesty would like to stop too."

So having her royal majesty's permission, the two friends sat down a few feet away from the water - so as not to be on damp ground - and began their search for inspiration.

Jamie opened her shoebox. Laren pulled her notebook, pencil, *A Little Princess*, and two rosy-cheeked apples out of her bag. She held one of the apples out to Jamie, who took it happily. Then Laren got on her knees and stretched over to the

water, where she carefully picked two dainty stems of clover. The first she put behind her ear. Then she handed the second to Jamie, who giggling, did the same.

Jamie picked out Sweet Clover, Serene Stream, and Green Silk. Then she paused and looked over at Abby, watching her quietly when an idea sprang to mind.

“Here, kitty,” said Jamie softly, reaching out and unfurling her fingers to show the little cat the card that rested in her palm. It said: Catnip.

Jamie set it down in front of the little cat’s paws and Abby sniffed at it curiously.

“It’s for you,” Jamie whispered.

Laren glanced over and smiled. Abby sniffed the card again, all along the edge, and looked up at Jamie with a sort of friendly look in her eyes. Then she stepped carefully over the paint card to Jamie’s side and rubbed her small cheek against her finger in a way that seemed to say “thank you”.

“You’re welcome,” said Jamie quietly. Abby cocked her head to one side and then pranced away to lay down in a patch of sun.

Laren watched for a minute, then she suddenly gave a happy sigh and fell onto her back in the grass. Setting down her apple, she raised both hands up to the sky, made a square with her fingers, and closed one eye.

“What are you doing?” asked Jamie.

“Lay down and I’ll show you,” said Laren in a

dramatic whisper, patting the place beside her. “I think I’ve found some inspiration.” Jamie settled down in the grass beside her friend.

“Through this,” Laren explained, moving the square of her fingers to indicate it was what she was talking about, “you can only see the sky and the top of that tree in someone’s backyard.”

“So?” Jamie cocked her head to look at Laren’s face.

“So, we don’t have to be in a town at all. If I took a picture of what I saw through my fingers, nobody would know where we were. Think of all the places you could be! I’m imagining that I am in a clearing in a big forest, and I’m looking up at the sky, and just seeing the very tops of the trees. Do you see it?”

“Yeah...” said Jamie quietly, her voice only half sure.

The two lay staring up at it for a moment, then Laren reached for her notebook. And for a while there was no sound except for the butterfly of Laren’s pencil fluttering across the paper, pausing now and then while Laren thought.

“Do you think you could come over to my house tomorrow?” said Laren after a while, as if she had been struck with a good idea.

“I need to ask my mommy,” Jamie explained, excitement lighting inside her. Going to anyone’s house was fun and she had a suspicion that going to Laren’s would be extra fun.

“Okay,” said Laren, turning quickly back to her new poem.

For a while, there was only silence, but Jamie was thinking hard. Finally, she spoke up.

“Laren,” she said, “can I show you something?”

“Show me what?” asked Laren, looking up from her paper. Jamie was already standing up.

“A special place,” she said.

The paint store was very quiet except for the usual ‘bing’ of the electric bell above the door. The air conditioning was an immense relief from the sweltering sun. Jamie took a deep breath as the door thudded closed behind her. This, she felt, was where she belonged.

“Hi,” she said waving vaguely at the golden-haired young man behind the counter. With a smile, he waved back as he always did. Laren waved as well, looking interested at the exchange.

“This is your special place?” Laren asked curiously. Jamie nodded and walked toward the paint card wall that was situated next to the window, scanning the array of cards before her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Laren looking too.

Fireweed, Deep Maroon, Auburn, Electric Lime, Garden Pickles, Windswept Canyon, Storm Clouds, Fallen Leaves, and Strawberry Fizz.

“Do you know that man?” Laren whispered, cutting through Jamie’s train of thought.

“No,” said Jamie, shrugging. “We just wave

sometimes.”

“And he doesn’t mind you taking so many paint cards?”

“I don’t think so. And I only take a few at a time, anyway.”

“Why don’t you go talk to him?”

“I don’t know,” Jamie felt slightly ruffled. “Why don’t you?”

“I think I will,” said Laren thoughtfully. And with that, she walked away. Now, of course, Jamie had to go see what Laren would say.

Jamie slid around the paint card wall and toward the counter at the back of the small store.

“Hello,” said Laren politely to the man.

“Well, hello!” said the young man in a friendly sort of way. He smiled and looked over at Jamie, who had come up behind her friend.

“So you are the girl who collects the paint cards?” he asked.

“Yes,” said Jamie, feeling suddenly self-conscious of her shoebox.

“What’s your name?” asked Laren interestedly.

“Griffin,” replied the young man.

“Like the fantasy creature?”

“I suppose you could say that,” Griffin chuckled.

“I’m Laren,” Laren explained as she gestured to Jamie, “and this is my friend Jamie.”

“I see,” said Griffin. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” said Laren with a smile. “Thank you for letting us take some of the

paint cards.”

“Well, they are free after all,” said Griffin. “No one says you have to use them a certain way. I think it’s a very creative thing to do, collect them.”

But something about what Laren had said got caught in Jamie’s head like a bird that had flown into a net and was unable to free itself. Griffin had been watching her each time she went to collect paint cards. It was Griffin she should thank for her collection.

“Come on, Jamie,” Laren was moving towards the door, looking over her shoulder at her little friend.

“Hold on!” Jamie called to her. Then she turned quickly to Griffin.

“What’s your favorite color?”

“Purple,” Griffin looked slightly confused, but Jamie was already rummaging through her shoebox. Then, with a flick of her wrist, she disentangled one from the others and slid it carefully across the counter.

“What’s this?” asked Griffin, picking it up. Jamie knew he was asking it in the way grown-ups did when they didn’t want an answer, but she answered anyway.

“Purple Basil. It’s for you,” said Jamie.

“Well, thank you,” said Griffin, looking at her with a sort of puzzled amusement.

“Thank you,” said Jamie seriously. And in her big, soft brown eyes, you could see that she meant

it.

Jamie felt as happy as a bird as she skipped into the kitchen, kicked off her flip flops, and dove into a chair at the dining room table, dropping her shoebox on its surface.

“Hi, Mommy!” she said happily.

“Hello, sweetie,” said Mrs. Johnson distractedly. She was busy folding towels on the table and trying to keep Jack and William from unfolding them.

“Laren asked if I could come over to her house tomorrow... yesterday. And now it’s tomorrow... today!”

“Laren is the thirteen-year-old living next door you told me about?”

“Almost thirteen,” corrected Jamie.

“Oh, yes. Almost thirteen.” The corners of Mrs. Johnson’s lips turned up in amusement.

“Can I go then?” asked Jamie eagerly.

“Now?”

“Yes. Can I?”

“Hmm... You can,” Mrs. Johnson started. Jamie jumped up from her seat. “But I would like to come with you to meet Laren’s mom.”

“Alright,” said Jamie impatiently, “let’s go!”

“I’ll need Erica or Brian to watch the twins,” Mrs. Johnson reminded her.

Jamie turned, walked down the hall to her bedroom, and opened the door. Erica was sitting on the bunk bed.

“Mommy wants you to watch the twins while she takes me over to Laren’s house,” Jamie announced.

“Hey-“ Erica started, but Jamie had already walked away. Erica followed.

“Now we’re ready!” she said.

“Alright,” said Mrs. Johnson, standing up from the table. “Don’t worry Erica, we’ll only be a minute.”

“Fine,” said Erica reluctantly.

“Come on, mommy!” Jamie called as soon as the front door opened. She broke into a run, flip-flops slapping her heels and shoebox jogging under her arm. She hurried up the steps of the mint house next to her own, heedless of the hot, thick air.

Mrs. Johnson followed her, more slowly, and

pressed the doorbell once she reached the top of the steps.

It took only a second for the door to open and there stood Laren's mom with Laren just behind her. Jamie had never seen Mrs. Lark before. Her wavy brown hair was tumbling around her shoulders and she had a kind, plain face like Laren's.

The main difference that set her apart from Laren was a slender scar on her right cheek that ran from the edge of her jaw to behind her ear.

"Hello there," she said, opening the door so Jamie and Mrs. Johnson could step through. "I'm Ally."

"I'm Amora," said Mrs. Johnson, shaking Mrs. Lark's hand. "I've heard a lot about Laren from Jamie."

Laren tapped Jamie's arm and nodded toward the staircase next to the door.

"Can I go play now?" asked Jamie at once, who could tell that the moms were about to start talking. In her experience, when moms start talking, they didn't stop for quite a while. Although this could be useful when she wanted to stay at someone's house longer.

"Sure," said Mrs. Johnson, "I'll be down here for a few more minutes, okay?"

"Okay!" called Jamie over her shoulder as she and Laren headed for the staircase.

"Let's go to my room," Laren said happily as they reached the landing. Then she promptly marched

down the hallway and into a room at the end. Jamie followed inside more cautiously. On coming through the door, she paused in amazement.

The room was a square with gray-blue walls and a big window facing the backyard. The only furniture was a matching bed, chest of drawers, and bedside table that had probably been left for vacation renters. There was a poster made from four sheets of printer paper taped together and covered with blue and green ribbon-like shapes drawn with marker. A stack of books was on the floor and an open notebook was laying next to a pencil on Laren's bed. Besides all this, every surface was littered with little treasures. From shining pieces of sea glass to intricately carved wooden animals.

Jamie bent down to examine a tiny glass hummingbird. The little wings were half spread out in flight and the many colors in the glass waved and swirled like William and Jack's play silks. In the air there was a slight smell, like citrusy oranges and dark mellow licorice. The same smell that accompanied Laren like a fingerprint.

Jamie was reminded of a picture she had once seen in a book of fairytales of a mermaid's treasure trove under the sea, where jewels glittered in the blue-gray waters. Everything felt so peaceful here compared to back at home.

"Whoa," she breathed.

"I've picked up a few things here and there," Laren explained, jumping onto her bed, "while

we've been traveling."

"It's so cool," whispered Jamie, who had never in all her seven years seen so many different and beautiful things in one place. There was a moment of silence as Jamie surveyed the many objects in the room. Then Laren clapped her hands in a business-like manner.

"Well," she said, "there will never be another today, so let's make it extraordinary!"

"How?" asked Jamie.

"I," said Laren dramatically, "just entered the poem I wrote yesterday in a poetry competition I saw in a magazine!"

"Really?" squeaked Jamie, starting to get excited as well.

"Yes!" said Laren. Then she looked wistful. "Wouldn't it be wonderful," she said thoughtfully, "if I won and I found out on my birthday? That would be the best birthday present ever..."

"I bet you will win," said Jamie confidently. "I know you will."

"You haven't even heard the poem yet!" laughed Laren.

"Then tell me it!" said Jamie eagerly

"Alright," Laren patted the space next to her on the bed and Jamie took a seat on the cool blue cover, setting her paint card box next to her. Laren flipped through her notebook until she found the page, took a deep breath and sat up as tall as she could. Then she began in a dramatic voice:

*“A careless whisper of a breeze,
touches on my lips,
the whole wide world, seems to be,
at my finger tips.
The sky is blue,
the grass is green,
the water somewhere in between,
and it doesn’t matter where I’ve been as long as
I’m here now.*

*Freedom fills me through and through,
my heart a sparrow’s wing,
Watching, waiting, loving, hoping.
Life laid out for conquering.”*

Jamie applauded.

Laren tried to bow while sitting and fell off the bed in a flurry of laughter.

“And that’s that,” said Laren, climbing back onto her bed. “Now that I’ve entered it, all we can do is wait.”

They waited a few seconds. You could hear a pin drop.

“I can’t stand it anymore!” Laren exclaimed suddenly. She then threw herself dramatically back onto her bed, the back of her hand smacking her forehead. Jamie sat back on her knees and giggled.

“What should we do now?” she asked.

“Oh, I have a few ideas,” said Laren, springing to the floor. “Come on!”

Jamie and Laren spent the rest of the morning

happily. They read *A Little Princess*. They played with Abby in Laren's backyard, (although it often seemed more as if she was playing with them) and they drew more of their chalk garden masterpiece on the driveway. When Mrs. Johnson came to get Jamie for lunch, she smiled as the two girls raced down the stairs when Mrs. Lark called them.

"See you later!" Laren called.

"Bye!" Jamie waved vigorously as the door closed behind her. Her cheeks ached from laughing and smiling.

"I'm glad you have a good friend," said Mrs. Johnson as she and Jamie walked slowly next door to their own house. For once, Jamie was tired and hungry enough to walk as slowly as her mother, and her eyes were shining.

"Me too," Jamie sighed happily and looked around at the bright sunlit street, feeling almost perfectly content.

Unfortunately, her contentment didn't last long. No sooner had the screen door banged shut behind them than Erica came marching down the hall. Her hands were curled into fists and she was fairly radiating with fury.

"Erica," Mrs. Johnson started.

"Look!" Erica brandished her fist under Jamie's nose and opened it to reveal a pile of sparkling aqua and jade beads nestled in her palm. Jamie felt her breath stop short. She had been found out.

"It's broken!" Erica's eyes were flashing, her

chest heaved. "It's broken and most of the beads are gone! You did it, Jamie Amora Johnson. You broke it! I know it was you!" She was shouting now.

"Erica, what are you talking about?" said Mrs. Johnson in a voice much too calm for the situation.

"That bracelet!" Erica shouted, turning to her mother. "The bracelet Hazel gave me!"

"That shouldn't be such a big deal," said Mrs. Johnson slowly. "You have plenty of other bracelets."

"You don't get it!" Erica's voice had a crazed edge to it. "Hazel's the only one who's ever given me anything like that!" Erica spun on her heel and pointed at Jamie.

"And you're just going to let her get away with it! I bet she did it on purpose!"

"I did not!" Jamie yelled back. *Right?* She thought quietly to herself. "Anyway, you wouldn't let me hold it."

"That's no excuse to sneak into my room and break it!"

"It's my room too, and you would probably never let me hold it!"

"You don't know that!"

"Yes I do! You never share anything with me!"

"You don't deserve it the way you act!"

"Yes I do!"

"GIRLS!" Mrs. Johnson was forced to yell to be heard. "Both of you be quiet for goodness sakes!"

Erica shot one last glare at Jamie and turned

away.

“Jamie,” said Mrs. Johnson in the silence that followed, “you should not have taken Erica’s bracelet without asking. Go to your room.” Her voice was strained.

“But, mama-“ Jamie started.

“Go to your room. Now.”

Jamie ran to her room and slammed the door behind her. Erica was a problem, she felt, that would *never* be solved.

Jamie could not sleep that night. Thunder shook the house and lightning cut bright jagged lines through the sky. Rain pounded relentlessly on the roof and wind howled against the windows.

Under the covers, Jamie curled into a little ball and muttered to herself in annoyance. Why couldn't day hurry up and come already? Why couldn't she go to sleep already?

Jamie hated nights like this. She hated lying in bed for what seemed like forever. She was too hot and the minutes crawled. Above her, she could hear Erica's soft breathing. Thunder rumbled and growled like the stomach of a hungry animal;

Jamie's stomach growled back (she had been especially picky at supper that evening).

"Summer Storm, Rainy Clove," Jamie whispered, reciting the paint cards from memory in a voice stiff from the hours of sleep in which it had been unused.

"Lightning Flash, Gray Drizzle."

Jamie lifted her bare feet up and pressed them against the bottom of Erica's bunk. Being bored was one thing, but being bored and tired and hot in the dark was just plain miserable.

Giving a little unhappy sob, Jamie curled into a ball at the foot of her bed, which had grown warm all too quickly. Then she uncurled and rolled over.

I'll never get to sleep now, Jamie thought dejectedly. *Maybe some water will cool me down.*

In the kitchen, moonlight, fractured by the falling rain, was spilling through the window blinds that hung over the sliding door. Jamie fumbled in a cabinet for a cup and filled it with water from the sink.

Sipping her water, Jamie walked over and stood on the floor vent next to the back door. She wiggled her bare toes in the blast of cool air, her pajama legs billowing slightly.

She reached out a hand and pushed away the blinds to see into the backyard. It looked eerie at night, drenched by summer rain, shrouded in wet blue light.

A shape appeared at the top of the fence, and

two eyes, golden in the dark, looked out at Jamie.

“Hi, Abby,” Jamie whispered. Abby blinked and leaped down from her perch.

Glancing up, Jamie saw a square of gold against the starry sky. It was the top window of the mint house. Laren’s room. Jamie squinted at the square of light, but she couldn’t make out anything inside. She let the plastic blinds fall from her fingers, took a last sip of water, and walked quietly back down the hallway to bed.

Jamie lay her head down on the pillow and pulled the cooled sheets up over her. It felt sort of magically quiet in the dark now, with the soft patter of the rain and the lazy hum of the air conditioner weaving in and out of one another in a sort of lullaby. Jamie imagined a drop of water slowly sliding down her window pane. Twisting and turning its way around the other drops. Winding, winding, winding...

The bedroom door was open and bright light was streaming into her face. Pushing her tangled brown curls off her forehead, Jamie sat up and rubbed her eyes. She could still hear the rain on her window.

“You slept in again,” came Erica’s scornful voice from above her. And by the sound of the loud yawn that came next, Erica had only just woken up herself.

“Go away,” Jamie moaned, feeling annoyed at not

having been the first one awake twice in one week and wondering if Erica had started purposefully waking up early just to annoy her.

“This is my room, too,” Erica snapped, more awake this time. There was a thud as she hit the floor. Erica never used more than the first two top steps of the bunk bed ladder. She seemed to think it was beneath her.

Jamie stretched and rolled over in bed. She heard the closet door squeak open and Erica rifling through the clothes. Then there was the sound of something hollow hitting the floor. Jamie saw her shoebox come to a stop in front of her, paint cards scattered around it, the lid a few feet away.

“Hey!” Jamie shrieked, jumped up, and hit her head so hard on the bed frame that it brought tears to her eyes. She practically fell out of bed, and desperately started to shove her cards back into their box.

“Don’t do that!” Jamie yelled, turning over her shoulder to glare at Erica, who was pulling a shirt over her head.

“It was in my way,” Erica sniffed. “Keep your little box of junk somewhere else.”

“It’s not junk!” Jamie yelled back, her hands clenching into fists.

“Whatever,” said Erica carelessly, walking out the door. “It’s not like you’d *care* if someone broke *something* that was really *important* to you.”

Jamie glared at the half-open door for a

moment, breathing heavily and feeling a powerful urge to break something of Erica's. She glanced up and caught sight of a small pile of glass beads clustered carefully together on Erica's shelf. The feeling faded.

With a sigh, Jamie stood up and walked over to the window. The sky was a moody gray and although there was no more thunder or lightning, the rain was still coming down in sheets. She pressed her hands and face against the glass, her breath collecting there in a small fog. No playing outside today, but maybe she and Laren could read *A Little Princess* together at the library. This thought lightened her heart, and Jamie skipped into the kitchen.

It was early, but Jamie ate a breakfast of fruit and yogurt that she made for herself since she and Erica were the only ones up. Then she hurried through the quiet house to find an umbrella and raincoat. She found the large family umbrella, striped with rainbow colors, but not the raincoat. Oh well, it was warm outside anyway.

"Where are you going?" asked Erica. Accusingly, Jamie felt.

"To the library," said Jamie.

"It's almost eight o'clock. That's too early for you to go alone. And you didn't put away the yogurt."

"I'm not going alone." Jamie had caught sight of a familiar blue book bag out the window. "I'm going with my friend Laren." Then she ran out the door before Erica could object.

The rain was much warmer than Jamie expected. It pooled around her flip-flops in lukewarm puddles that she splashed through, soaking herself up to the knees. Gray clouds rumbled grumpily above her. Large drops of rain exploded around her like tiny water balloons. Holding her shoebox under her arm, Jamie ran, dodging the cracks in the sidewalk, while trying to stay under her umbrella.

"Hi, Jamie!" Laren called above the sound of the rain as the little girl reached her.

"Hi!" Jamie called, waving even though she was now right next to Laren, their umbrellas rubbing against each other.

"I'm going to the library," said Laren. "Want to come?"

"I'm going to the library, too!" Jamie giggled, jumping up and down and shaking raindrops everywhere.

"Race you?" Laren's eyes were alight with glee.

"Last one to the library is... leftover soup!" Jamie yelled, splashing off down the sidewalk.

"Hey!" Laren laughed, dashing after her. "I *like* leftover soup!"

From her dry spot under a nearby porch, Abby's bright eyes watched the two noisy girls disappear through the rain. Then she flicked her tail and settled down for a nap.

Soaked but happy, Laren and Jamie soon walked through the door to the children's section at the library. As usual, they were the only ones there

besides Cara.

“Hello, girls,” said Cara with her usual warm smile. “Have you seen the holiday for today?”

Laren turned around to look at the pinkish-red construction paper calendar, and read aloud. “National Sneak Some Zucchini onto Your Neighbor’s Porch Day.”

“What?” Jamie giggled.

“Well, it’s zucchini season,” Laren explained with a laugh. “And that means that you grow a lot of zucchini, usually more than your family can eat. And before long there’s all this zucchini that nobody wants because they have more than they can eat to begin with! That happens every summer where I live.” Laren grinned.

“And I guess someone thought the solution was to sneak some onto a neighbor’s porch,” chuckled Cara.

“I guess so,” said Laren.

“That’s silly,” said Jamie.

“Well, the library is the perfect place to be on a rainy morning,” announced Laren, “so let’s go find a cozy spot! Come on!”

Laren sat down in a beanbag by one of the windows and pulled a book out of her bag. Jamie sat down beside Laren and opened her shoebox, thinking. The calendar had reminded her of something.

“Laren,” she said, “how many more days until your birthday?”

“Six,” said Laren absentmindedly.

“Are you going to have a party?”

“If we stay here,” Laren explained. “My mom and dad want to get back home in time for my birthday, but we’ll have to go on an airplane if we wait much longer. So we’ll probably stay.”

“Okay,” Jamie said, starting to spread out her paint cards, but she was still thinking hard. Laren needed a birthday present. The question was what to get her...

Ashberry, Rich Raisin, Forest Falls, Frosted Kiwi, Sand Dance.

Laren liked books...

Sweetwood, Zaffre, Blonde Almond.

But where would she get a book?

Ebbtide, Spiced Cider, Saffron Thread.

“By the way,” said Laren suddenly, “did you color in all your clocks on your reading chart? The end of the summer reading program is tomorrow you know, when you can get a free book.”

“Yeah,” said Jamie softly, picturing her summer reading chart at home, only one clock was empty.

“Laren?”

“Hm?”

“Let’s read some more of *A Little Princess*.”



It was August 9th, National Book Lover's Day and the end of the summer reading program. Lunch was a hodgepodge of leftovers, none of which Jamie was interested in.

Instead, she was lying in the middle of the living room carpet on her stomach. She had just finished coloring in her last clock and was now making a line of all her paint cards, which, so far, had stretched to the other side of the room and back.

William was busily deconstructing his leftover muffin, and Jack, not wanting to be left out of the fun, threw his muffin on the floor.

"Oh man!" he yelled in delight. William was too

busy sprinkling muffin crumbs on his head to pay any attention to his brother.

Jamie was placing Forward Fuchsia next to Willow Rain, and Merlot next to that, when Erica walked in and kicked the line of paint cards.

“Hey!” Jamie yelled. “Mommy! Erica kicked my paint cards!”

“They’re on the floor,” said Erica irritably, as if this explained everything. “If you don’t want people to step on them then they shouldn’t be on the floor.”

“You did it on purpose!”

“Girls!” Mrs. Johnson called from the kitchen where she was working on plugging in the vacuum cleaner to clean up the muffin crumbs. “That’s enough! Jamie, please just put your paint cards somewhere else!”

This felt so unfair to Jamie that she threw her empty shoebox across the room in frustration. Didn’t anyone understand? The floor was the only place big enough for her to line up all her paint cards and look at them all at once.

“Jamie,” came Mrs. Johnson’s stern voice. “Did you throw that?”

Of course I did, Jamie thought, angrily stomping off to retrieve her box and toss all her cards into it. Then, still feeling mad, she stomped into the kitchen.

“Mommy!” she yelled above the noise of the vacuum cleaner.

Mrs. Johnson gave an exasperated sigh and turned the vacuum off. "What?"

"I finished my summer reading and I need to turn in my chart at the library."

"You did?" Mrs. Johnson looked impressed.

"Yes," said Jamie. "Laren and I read together."

"Really?" Mrs. Johnson smiled. "Well, Brian finished his too – I don't know when he found the time with all his basketball, but we can go to the library in an hour or so to get your prize. I have some books I need to return too."

"Did Erica finish?" asked Jamie quickly.

"No," said Mrs. Johnson with a frown.

Good, thought Jamie, feeling her spirits rise. She turned away to find her orange and pink flip-flops and then went outside, shoebox under her arm.

Upon closing the front door behind her, Jamie ran over to Laren's vacation rental house. Laren was not outside, so Jamie knocked on the front door. She waited. No one answered.

Frowning, Jamie walked over to one of the windows and hopped up and down to see inside. The blinds were drawn and it was dark inside.

Oh well. Jamie sighed, walked over to their enchanted chalk garden, and sat down on a large yellow sunflower. The flowers and vines were more than a bit smudged and rain had washed them nearly away by then. The garden looked like the shimmery colors you can see on a soap bubble, only slightly more flower-like. But Jamie was undaunted. She and

Laren could easily redraw everything when she got back. So instead, Jamie opened her shoebox. She only had time to pull out Dewberry and Dovetail, however, before a voice called her from her own house next door.

“Hey!” It was Brian. “Are you supposed to be over there?”

“I don’t know,” Jamie called back with some annoyance. “Are you supposed to be over there?”

Brian gave a sigh of exasperation.

“I’m coming back over anyway,” Jamie stood as she spoke and walked back over to her own front yard.

Brian had pulled the basketball out of the garage and was now dribbling it around the driveway. It made a little echoing smacking noise when it hit the ground, which was still slightly damp, and left a wet patch on the ball each time it bounced. Jamie started making an orange and purple checkerboard pattern with her paint cards on the asphalt and watching Brian to make sure he wouldn’t crash into her. After a while, however, her attention rested more on his dribbling than it did on her paint cards. Brian noticed this, at least his eyes flickered in her direction for a moment, and after that he started to do more impressive things such as passing the ball behind his back or dribbling it through his legs while he bit the tip of his tongue in concentration.

“You’re good,” said Jamie, after a while of this.

“Thanks,” said Brian shortly, his eyes still on the

ball.

Jamie had known, of course, that Brian really liked basketball and she had seen a few of his games. But he must have improved a lot since she had last seen him play, either that or he had just never had the chance to display his tricks in the games she'd seen. She didn't remember him being this good, and she felt a sort of pride in watching him handle the ball so easily. This gave her an idea.

Jamie looked about at her purple and orange checkerboard of paint cards. She had remembered one that she thought would be a good fit.

"Brian!" she called, picking up the card. "I want to show you something!"

Reluctantly, Brian caught the ball then walked over.

"I wanna give this to you," Jamie said, as she held out a slightly dull orange card that was titled Slam Dunk.

"It made me think of you," she explained.

"Thanks," Brian looked slightly confused, but shrugged and slipped it into his pocket.

"Mommy said that you finished your summer reading program," said Jamie.

"Yeah."

"What'd you read?"

"All sorts of stuff," Brian started dribbling again.

"I didn't know that you liked to read," said Jamie, brushing her hair away from her face.

"Well," Brian reflected, "it's not my most favorite

thing, or anything like that. But sometimes it's just nice to read a little, without anyone telling you what to read or anything."

"Oh," said Jamie, thinking. Brian went back to dribbling. After a moment, Jamie asked, "Do you think you could teach me to dribble?"

Brian's eyes lit up.

"Brian! Jamie!" Mrs. Johnson called, walking down the little strip of sidewalk that led up to their front door. "I'm ready to take you two to the library!"

"Okay!" Jamie said as her mother stepped onto the driveway, Jack and William toddling next to her.

"Brian's been teaching me basketball," Jamie announced proudly as Mrs. Johnson pulled the twin stroller out of the garage.

"That's great." Mrs. Johnson began buckling Jack and William into their seats.

"Is Erica staying home alone?" asked Brian.

"She wants to," said Mrs. Johnson. "And since we're only going to be gone for a bit, I thought it would be okay. Jamie, do you have to bring your shoebox?"

"Mama," Jamie groaned.

"Alright, just asking. I know you wouldn't want to lose it. Let's go!" And with that, Mrs. Johnson pushed the stroller off the driveway and down the sidewalk.

"We a going to the library!" sang William happily.

Jamie skipped along behind the stroller, her worn-out pink and orange flip-flops smacking her heels as she went, past the still damp, but quickly drying world around her.

It didn't take long for the group to reach the library. On the front steps was a sign that read: END OF SUMMER READING PROGRAM. TURN IN YOUR FORM AND GET A FREE BOOK!

What is with all the capitals, thought Jamie as her mother steered the stroller toward the ramp that was next to the stairs.

Mrs. Johnson parked the stroller next to the big double doors that led inside and after getting Jack and William out of their seats, the group proceeded inside, and up the spiral staircase to the third floor children's section.

Several metal rolling book carts were set up behind the librarian's desk, and there was a poster hung on the wall above them announcing free books and the end of the summer reading program. There was a group of parents and kids already there.

Cara was behind her desk, and there was a line to get to it because, apparently, that was where you were supposed to turn in your reading program form.

Mrs. Johnson reached into her purse, pulled out Brian's and Jamie's filled-out reading forms, and handed them over. "You two turn in your forms and then pick out your book. I need to keep an eye

on the twins,” their mother said.

Then she quickly walked off to keep Jack from pulling down all the magazines.

“I wanna green book!” said William, following her. Jamie and Brian smiled at their little brothers’ antics.

The line was not very long and soon enough the two of them were at the front of it.

“Hello there!” said Cara in her friendly way.

“Happy National Book Lover’s Day!” said Jamie immediately. Then she handed her form to Cara.

“To you as well. I’m glad to see that you filled this out.” Cara reached under her desk and pulled out a bag made of thick plastic with some bookmarks and pieces of paper (that looked tantalizingly like ice cream coupons) inside.

“Now you can go up there and pick out your book.”

“Thank you!” said Jamie, waving as she stepped away.

“You’re very welcome,” said Cara as her dark blue eyes twinkled. Then she turned to help Brian as Jamie bounded over to the rolling metal book carts. She ignored the cart marked for her age and immediately went for the thick chapter books, wondering what Laren would like.

It’s hard to tell, she thought as she shuffled through the books. In the end, however, Jamie decided that if she picked a book that she liked, Laren would probably like it too. And just as she

was making this decision, a book with a bright and interesting cover caught her eye. The title was “*My Father’s Dragon*” and below these words, it said ‘By Ruth Stiles Gannett’.

This was the one.

“I’m done!” she said aloud and looked around to find her mother.

“You have a book?” Mrs. Johnson was sitting nearby reading a picture book to the twins. Jamie nodded.

“Okay then. Brian is ready too, so let’s get going.” Mrs. Johnson stood up and closed the book.

“No!” said William loudly.

“Don’t worry,” Mrs. Johnson reached down and ruffled his hair. “We can check it out and read it at home. Okay?”

“Okay,” William grudgingly agreed.

Jamie waved to Cara as they walked out the library door.

After the hot walk home with the sun directly overhead, everyone was glad for the air-conditioning at home. As soon as Mrs. Johnson put the stroller away and the front door closed behind them, Brian walked to his room with his new book. Jack and William insisted on Mrs. Johnson reading to them instead of starting supper.

The sun shone outside the windows, and the house, for once, was peacefully quiet.

Jamie felt warmed and comforted as she walked into her room to put *My Father’s Dragon* someplace

safe until Laren's birthday.

"Back already?" The warm, comforting feeling evaporated at Erica's smug tone.

Jamie glared and ducked to sit down on her bed.

"What's that?" asked Erica, spying the book in Jamie's hand.

"It's not for you," Jamie said stiffly and slid the book under her pillow.



Oceanside, Radiant Lilac, Obstinate Orange, Apricot Bronze, Dogwood Cottage, Weathered Canvas.

Jamie was lying on Laren's driveway. A line of paint cards was spread out in front of her and she was halfway through coloring in a purple tulip in the enchanted garden. Beside her, Laren was halfway through telling about her family's trip the day before, while Abby the Tabby was halfway through washing her molasses-colored paws in the strip of grass next to the driveway.

"After the beach," Laren continued, "we had supper at a place I've decided is my new favorite

restaurant. The handles on the front doors were shaped like giant spoons! And it was so big inside with so much good food. I felt like I was in a banquet hall! It was wonderful.” Laren sighed happily. “I got to spend a whole two hours in a bookstore that evening and I was filled with ebullience. That’s a new word I learned, it means ‘bubbling enthusiasm’. I think it would be nice to use it in a poem sometime.”

Abby blinked her green eyes in an interested sort of way.

Jamie smiled and the two were silent for a moment, in which the only sound was of an odd bird trilling in the trees and the usual hum of car tires a few streets away. It was hot and beautiful.

“So,” said Laren at last, using her hands to lay her long brown hair out behind as she half lay down. “How was your day yesterday?”

“Good,” Jamie said, carefully trying to conceal her sly smile. She was still thinking about the book she had gotten for Laren.

“Your birthday is soon, isn’t it?” asked Jamie.

“Only four days!” Laren laughed. “I’ve been thinking up plans for it. You know it’s on National Creamsicle Day, so I think I’ll have an ice cream cake.”

“Yum,” said Jamie, who had finished coloring her chalk tulip and had moved on to a rose.

“Jamie!” someone called.

Jamie felt like she had just been doused by a bucket of cold water.

“Erica,” she looked up and glared at Erica who was marching down the sidewalk toward her and Laren. “Why are you here?”

“The real question should be, ‘why are you here?’” Erica bossed.

Jamie glared and Laren sat up and looked mildly at the two girls.

“You need to help clean the house too, you know.”

“Well, it’s your party!” snapped Jamie. “I’m not cleaning up for *your* party!”

Erica looked as if she was about to snap back, but then changed her mind and turned to look at Laren, who had an expression of concern on her face.

“Your name is Laren, right?” she said in a much more respectful voice than she used with Jamie.

“Yes,” Laren smiled in her curious and friendly way. “Are you Jamie’s sister, Erica?”

“Yes,” replied Erica as if this was beside the point. “Laren, do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“I...” Laren blinked. “No. I don’t.” She shook her head slightly, her cheeks going red like that of someone who had said something terrible and was now thoroughly embarrassed.

“Lucky you,” replied Erica. She threw a significant look at Jamie, then turned on her heel and marched away.

Jamie felt her cheeks heat up and her hands clench into fists. Laren sighed as they watched Erica

disappear into the house.

"She's having all her friends over for a party tomorrow," said Jamie stiffly, still staring in the direction Erica had gone.

"Well, why is that so bad?"

"Because," Jamie clenched her fists even harder, "she'll have all sorts of fun and not let me have any. It's - " Jamie felt a catch in her voice "It's not fair."

Abby stepped over to Jamie and gently rubbed her soft cheek against the tips of her fingers.

"It can't be that bad," said Laren soothingly. "Surely you two can get along."

"It *can* be that bad!" moaned Jamie. "And we *can't* get along!"

As if on cue to fill in the silence that followed, a little breeze sprang up, dancing playfully among the two friends' strands of hair. Jamie bit her lip and stared down at her crisscrossed legs beneath her.

"What are some of your good paint cards?" said Laren suddenly.

Needing no further bidding, Jamie reached into her shoebox and pulled out a few.

"Twilight Purple," she said, speaking each card's name aloud as she set it down. "Moonlit Surf, Glassline, Arabella, Candlelight, Fiesta, and... Honeysuckle."

"Oh, I like those," said Laren, her eyes drifting off into the distance. "It makes me think of a fairy ball." Her voice slipped into its musical and poetic tone. "Where the fairies dance along the Moonlit

Surf in their Candlelight Fiesta, sipping nectar from Honeysuckle petals.”

“I like that,” said Jamie, imagining the scene in her head.

“I’m glad,” said Laren comfortingly. “And now, about the party. If all else fails, smile. A smile is a magic spell that turns the stars in your favor.”

Jamie giggled, “Really?”

“Attitude is contagious,” said Laren simply. Then she looked down at the intricate chalk garden beneath her and brushed her chalk dust covered hands on her denim skirt.

“And I think we’re about done here!” she said triumphantly.

“Laren?” Mrs. Lark poked her head out the screen door. “I hate to interrupt you two, but I thought you might want to know. You just got an email from the magazine you sent your poem to. Don’t worry, I haven’t looked at it yet.”

Laren’s eyes grew big. Jamie’s mind kicked into overdrive.

“Can— Can I see it?” asked Laren breathlessly.

“Just a minute.” Mrs. Lark walked back into the house, the screen door clanging shut behind her. Then she came back out, carrying her computer. She opened the email and handed it to her daughter.

Laren, her eyes flickering, read through it. Jamie sat next to her, but she could only read about half the words since they were unfamiliar. Laren’s expression was impassive, finally, she slumped back

and her eyes fell to the asphalt.

“Declined,” Laren said, still looking down, not bothering to brush away the hair that was slowly falling to cover her face.

Jamie recognized that word.

“So you didn’t win?”

Laren nodded slowly and Jamie felt like a bathtub with all its water going down the drain with that slurred whirring noise.

“But your poem was good,” said Jamie.

“I know. But it wasn’t good enough,” Laren admitted.

“Oh, Laren,” Mrs. Lark put a hand on her shoulder.

They sat in silence for a moment, then Laren drew in a deep breath and straightened up.

“It doesn’t matter.” Her eyes were determined. “I’m going to write some more, I’ll write a new poem, a better poem. And send it to some more magazines. And I will get better.”

“And then you’ll change the world!” Jamie said. Laren laughed and squeezed Jamie’s hand.

“You’re right, Jamie. I will.”

Mrs. Lark smiled and gave Laren a hug. “That’s my girl.”

“Thanks, Mama,” said Laren.

“Also,” said Mrs. Lark, “I was going to ask if you wanted to help me with the salad for dinner tonight.”

“Oh, yes!” said Laren, then she glanced at Jamie

as if asking her opinion.

"It's okay," Jamie shrugged and pulled herself to her feet. "I'll see you later. And besides, we finished the enchanted garden!" She grinned.

"Okay, see you later!" said Laren as she and her mother walked toward the front door.

"Bye, Mrs. Lark! Bye, Laren!" Jamie called, waving and starting to walk back toward her own house.

"Bye, Jamie," said Mrs. Lark.

"Just you wait!" said Laren as she walked up the steps. "My poetry will get into a magazine yet!"

"Yeah!" cheered Jamie.

Mrs. Lark and Laren disappeared inside the mint green house and Jamie adjusted her shoebox as she walked up towards her own front door.

The breeze was whispering softly to itself, birds were singing, and Jamie skipped along, holding her shoebox tightly so it wouldn't bounce around. She was confident that no matter how long it took, Laren would get one of her poems published. Jamie thought again of her birthday present to Laren and smiled to herself as she reached for the handle of her door. *And really, she thought, turning the handle, how bad could Erica's party be? Maybe if I smile, like Laren said, and try to have fun, I will!* There was only one way to find out.

The next day was Saturday, August 11th: National Son and Daughter Day, and most importantly, the day of Erica's party.

That evening supper had to be eaten quickly before Mr. Johnson took Brian out with him while he ran some errands. Jamie had wanted to go too, and was about to ask when Erica said, "Can Jamie go with you, too?"

Jamie was so mad about this, that she decided she would rather stay and endure Erica's party than let Erica get her way for the thousandth time. So she yelled, "No!" and Mrs. Johnson said please don't yell, and that Jamie was allowed to stay. So she did.

The guests were due to arrive any minute, and feeling rather apprehensive, Jamie had retreated outside. She was trying to skip on one of the less tangled jump ropes as she waited for the party guests to arrive.

The sun rested a little bit above the horizon as if getting one last look at this side of the world before beginning its slow descent to the other side. Clouds floated in the great blue expanse above, hardly moving, for the air that day was painfully still.

Jamie swung the rope up and over her head, skipping over it a few times before tripping and tangling herself up. Laren and her family were gone again, and she had spent most of her day either doing nothing or trying to avoid cleaning.

This was another reason to be outside. Mrs. Johnson, who had been ‘tidying up’ as she put it, did not seem to understand that Jamie would much rather be doing nothing than cleaning.

Jamie’s train of thought was broken as the whirring of car wheels came down the street. Jamie watched the car for a moment, then, when it turned toward her driveway, she stepped behind one of the bushes that grew under her parent’s bedroom window.

She wasn’t scared of Erica’s guests exactly, but she didn’t want to talk to them either as she suspected they would be Those Kind of Girls.

The girl who got out of the car, Jamie recognized immediately as Hazel, Erica’s friend from church.

She was a small, rather shy girl with thin hair and eyes the same color as her name suggested.

“Bye, mom.” Hazel shut the car door and walked along the path to the front of the house and rang the doorbell. She clasped both her hands together on her skirt and waited. She did not have to wait long.

From her vantage point, Jamie watched as the door flew open and heard Erica’s out of breath voice. (She must have run from the other side of the house when she heard the doorbell.) “Hazel! So glad you came!”

“Thanks. I’m glad to be here.” Hazel entered and the door slammed shut.

Jamie stared at the door for a moment, then disentangled herself from the bush, leaving the jump rope forgotten in the middle of the yard. She walked to the door and rang the doorbell herself for the fun of it. With a new person in the house, at least it wouldn’t be so boring anymore. And she knew Hazel wasn’t as bad as some of Erica’s friends could be.

Less than a second later, Erica was there. As soon as she saw Jamie she looked both disappointed and annoyed.

“Jamie, what are you doing?” she glared as if Jamie had personally offended her.

“I want to come in,” Jamie informed her flatly.

“Fine.” Erica threw her one last look and walked off.

Jamie walked into the kitchen where some snacks were laid out on the table. Mrs. Johnson had let Erica pick a few things for refreshments.

“Can I have a cookie?” Jamie asked her mother, who was holding Jack while she bustled around the kitchen cleaning up.

“Just one for now,” said Mrs. Johnson.

“Roar!” William roared at Jamie, narrowly missing her with the spoon he was holding. “I’m a dragon!”

Jamie grabbed one of the store-bought chocolate chip cookies and nibbled it as she walked back into the living room where she could hear Erica and Hazel talking.

“I wanna cookie too!” William shouted.

“Oh man!” shouted Jack, purely for the fun of it.

Ding! The doorbell sounded through the house again and Jamie had to dodge out of Erica’s way as she hurtled down the hall to open the door, Hazel following slowly behind.

The door opened.

“Hi, Erica!” two voices chorused in giggling, excited tones.

Filled with ebullience, Jamie thought, feeling a twinge of pride for remembering the word Laren had taught her.

“Are we the first ones here?” asked one of the voices, detaching itself from the other.

“Nope. Sorry, Hazel beat you to it,” replied

Erica. Her comment was followed by more laughter as the new guests, whom Jamie recognized as Claire and Maria, filed into the living room. They were cousins, but they lived so close to each other and looked so alike they might have been twin sisters; they certainly acted like it at any rate. They were each wearing a necklace shaped like half a heart. Claire's said "Cousins" and Maria's said "Forever". Their clothing was covered in so much glitter that it made Jamie's eyes hurt.

"I'm so excited you guys are all here!" Erica exclaimed happily, almost jumping up and down.

"We can tell," said Maria and all three burst into laughter yet again.

"Hello," said Hazel, walking toward the group.

"Dancing dominoes! I love your skirt, Hazel," said Claire.

"Thanks," said Hazel, blushing a rosy shade.

Jamie sat down on the couch, uninterested, as the girls chattered on. *I wish I were playing with Laren*, she thought. The date for Laren's birthday was drawing closer. *And then Erica won't be the only one who gets to have a party!* Jamie decided, comforted by this idea.

Ding!

The doorbell rang again, in a slightly more strained tone, as if its voice was tired from overuse.

"That must be Piper!" said Erica, looking as though she might burst with delight. She dashed to the door and this time all her party guests followed.

The entryway was soon extremely crowded with Claire and Maria pressing in to greet Piper as Erica tried to find the door handle between them. Hazel stepped back into the living room.

As soon as the door opened, there was a collective shriek of delight from those who could see out the door.

“No. Way.”

“Oh my goodness, Piper!”

“Did your mom really let you?!”

Hazel, who had stepped back into the living room, looked up, mildly interested. Claire broke away from the others and ran over to Hazel.

“Dancing dominoes, Hazel! You have got to see what Piper did to her hair!” Claire shrieked.

Jamie was unimpressed. Claire and Maria usually made a big deal out of the most insignificant things. She swallowed the last bite of her cookie and glanced over as the small crowd parted. Then Jamie’s eyes got big.

Erica had mentioned before (about six million times) that Piper was a whole year and a half older than her and the sort of girl that everyone wanted to be friends with. She had also mentioned that Piper was known for doing things very few girls were allowed to do, like have multiple piercings in her ears. But since Erica was often prone to exaggerate, Jamie hadn’t really expected much. She certainly hadn’t expected this.

Piper’s entire head of hair was a bright, almost

neon, pink. She had it piled over her shoulder in a complicated sort of elegantly messy braid. Immediately, Jamie was reminded of the bright paint card in her collection, Disastrous Pink.

"I got it dyed last week," Piper said with a casual shrug. She looked rather amused at the other girls' excitement.

"That is so cool," said Maria in awe.

Erica was fingering her own dark, springy curls as if imagining that they were pink too. Jamie didn't know what to think.

"Why'd you dye it?" asked Jamie. The girls turned to look at her as if she were from another planet. Erica was staring daggers.

"Um. Because I wanted my hair to be pink?" said Piper, as if it was totally obvious.

"It looks like Disastrous Pink," said Jamie, thinking that maybe if she could turn the conversation to paint cards, tonight would actually be fun.

Everyone stopped. Erica winced visibly.

Then Piper burst into laughter.

Immediately, everyone else starting laughing as well. Erica's cheeks were very red as she laughed uncomfortably.

Jamie's cheeks matched Erica's and she bit her lip so hard it hurt. *Meanies!* she thought. Her face felt hot as she slouched down in her seat on the couch.

Mrs. Johnson came into the living room, Jack

and William trailing behind. The laughter subsided somewhat. Only Maria and Claire were still giggling.

“Hello, girls. Goodness Piper, that’s some very pink hair.”

“Yeah,” Piper smirked, fingering her braid “I dyed it last week.”

“That’s cool. Well, I just wanted to tell you girls that snacks are on the table in the dining room and I’ll be in the kitchen if you need me.” Mrs. Johnson smiled and walked back into the kitchen.

“Oh man, pink!” yelled Jack, hurrying after her, proud of himself for noticing what all the fuss was about.

“We’re fine, mom.” Jamie heard Erica mutter under her breath.

“Snacks!” Maria hissed excitedly, nudging Claire with her elbow in a would-be-discreet sort of way.

The girls moved to the dining room to get their snacks. Jamie followed because she wanted some too. Erica’s guests, however, were all crowded around the table, and she did not care to sit next to any of them. She did, though, spot an unopened bag of snack mix on the counter just inside the kitchen.

“Mama?” Jamie said, walking over to the sink where Mrs. Johnson was washing pots and pans. “Can I have some of the snack mix?”

“Yes,” said Mrs. Johnson, glancing over at the bag on the counter. “Just a minute, I’m almost done.”

Jamie leaned against the wall and watched her mother for a moment, then she picked up the bag of snack mix and looked at it. Surely her mother wouldn't mind if she opened it herself. Jamie grabbed either side of the bag and pulled as hard as she could.

Mrs. Johnson glanced up from the dishes just before it happened.

"Jamie-" she started.

The bag exploded - Jamie's hands flew wide apart, each holding a wad of metallic-looking plastic. Jack and William shrieked, "Oh man!" and little pieces of snack mix rained down around the kitchen. All chatter at the table was quieted for a moment as the party guests plus Erica turned to stare.

"Dancing dominoes," Claire whispered.

"Sorry," said Jamie in a small voice.

"Go get the broom, Jamie," Mrs. Johnson sighed.

Cheeks burning, Jamie crept through the dining room, feeling the girls' stares on her back.

"Um, why don't we go to my room?" she heard Erica say.

Returning from the hall closet with a broom, Jamie saw them walk past her, and into Erica's room.

The kitchen felt suddenly silent as they worked on cleaning up the mess; Jamie holding the dustpan, Mrs. Johnson sweeping, William and Jack eating the

little pieces when they thought no one was looking. And as Jamie emptied the last bit from the dustpan into the trashcan, she glanced out the window and gave a little sigh. The stars were starting to shine above, like bright little jewels in the dark velvet sky.

“Alright, that’s all of it.” Mrs. Johnson picked up William and checked to make sure he didn’t have anything else in his mouth. “Could you put the broom away, Jamie?”

Jamie returned the broom and dustpan to the hall closet, and was about to turn back and go into the kitchen when her sharp ears caught her name. Jamie froze, listened for a moment, and then realized that she had heard Erica’s friends talking from within her room. Had they been talking about her?

Curious, Jamie darted over to the door and leaned her ear against it.

“-doesn’t know when to quit,” said Erica’s voice.

“I know right? Little siblings are such a pain.”

“Yeah, no need to apologize.”

“Jamie isn’t so bad.” It was Hazel’s timid voice this time. “It’s not like she’s trying to be.”

“Oh, she tries,” Erica said, her voice bitter. “She just pretends not to when other people are around, but trust me, she does it all on purpose. Did I tell you about how she destroyed the bracelet Hazel gave me? Honestly, Piper, you don’t know how lucky you are to be an only child. I have trouble with all my siblings of course, but Jamie is the

worst. I absolutely hate her.” Erica heaved a sigh that seemed to express the most terrible woes of her soul.

The girls continued their chatter and Jamie thought she had heard Piper suggest a game of truth or dare. But somehow it all seemed far away now. Jamie felt as if all the breath had been knocked out of her. Erica’s words were echoing in her head. Her lips felt numb and her mind was fuzzy.

It took her a moment to realize that the door handle had started to turn and the girl’s voices were much nearer.

Jamie jumped away from the door into the living room as the girls filed out and toward the front door, talking and giggling. Erica’s face gave no hint that she had just said such terrible things about Jamie. She was actually laughing and smiling, and chatting away with her friends. Unaffected. She would probably forget everything she had said in less than two minutes, but Jamie wouldn’t.

Has she always felt that way? thought Jamie as she stumbled unnoticed back into their shared room. *She hates me?*

This was not the first time Jamie had wondered this, but it was the first time she realized it might be true. She felt trapped. Her chest felt heavy, like there was a stone lodged inside her.

Mostly out of habit, Jamie reached for the shelf where her paint cards were. Surely paint cards would make her feel better. Honey Butter, and her

second favorite, Dragon Fruit.

She put the box on her bed and climbed up next to it. For a moment she just looked at it, then something inside her came crashing down and she burst into tears. A shimmering rainbow of hot tears, burning into her cheeks and blurring her vision. *Erica hates me.* She felt her arms wrap around her shoebox, her shoulders shaking. She had known before that Erica got annoyed or angry with her, and that had hurt enough, but she had always managed to hide from Erica how much it hurt. She would hide this too. That she promised herself as the tears streamed down her cheeks, as her exhausted emotions caused her eyelids to fall closed. Her tear-stained cheek pressed against her damp pillow.

I don't care, she tried to think. She gritted her teeth and tried furiously to hold the oceans of tears behind her eyes. *I don't care what she thinks of me, I don't care.*

But she did care, and it hurt.

Jamie had forgotten about church the next day, being so caught up in her own troubles. But when she woke up the next morning, still face down in bed where she had fallen asleep, she remembered.

Her mother always set out a dress for her to wear to church on the chest of drawers and from where she lay in bed she could see it waiting for her as always. Jamie sat up and climbed out of bed. She stumbled sleepily over to the dresser and began to put her dress on. It occurred to her that she could probably see Laren after church.

The rest of the house was quiet. Morning sunbeams danced outside her window. Somehow, things didn't seem quite so hopeless as they had

the night before. Yes, things were all right and they would be better when she and Laren played together. Things were always better when she played with Laren.

“Why are you so sulky?” There was a thud as Erica dropped to the ground from the top step of her ladder. Excitement and delight from the night before still lingered in her eyes.

Jamie’s cheeks felt suddenly hot. She glared at Erica, all traces of hope replaced with fresh anger toward her. For her part, Erica gave a superior smile and skipped, humming, over to her closet.

Still filled with a mixture of hurt and fury, (overwhelming for a girl of seven) Jamie walked out of her room, hoping that maybe there would be something good for breakfast.

Church went by slowly, as usual, with Jamie staring at the window trying to sort out her feelings but getting nowhere.

After Sunday school, while they were waiting for their parents to pick them up, Emily was unusually talkative. Her parents were re-painting a room in their house and she was very excited about it. At least by Emily’s standards, she was excited. To most people she would only seem slightly interested.

“It’s gonna be light blue,” she informed Jamie. “I’m not allowed to paint, but daddy said I could watch.”

Jamie picked at her fingernail and glanced

around for her father. Suddenly, however, she noticed something peculiar.

In the corner of the room, Hazel and Erica were talking. Or rather, Hazel was talking, very quickly with nervous darting eyes and Erica was listening with a half horrified, half unbelieving look on her face.

Jamie frowned, curious.

“Jamie!” It was Brian.

“Oh. Gotta go, Emily! Bye!” Jamie ran toward her brother.

“Dad’s here, we’re ready to go. He said to get you and Erica.” Brian looked around “Where is Erica?”

“She’s talking to Hazel over there.” Jamie waved vaguely. “Probably about the party.”

“What would they still have to talk about?” asked Brian in a slightly annoyed tone. Jamie shrugged.

“Erica, we’re leaving!” Brian shouted to them. Erica’s eyes flickered with surprise over to Brian and Jamie. She said something to Hazel, who nodded and then walked over to them.

“Well, see you next week, I guess!” Hazel called as if she wasn’t quite sure.

For the rest of the day after church, Jamie lay in her front yard looking through her paint cards. Bubbling Fountain, Cinnamon Crumble, Cornsilk, Dark Chestnut, Goldenrod. She would have gone to play with Laren, but Laren hadn’t come out yet,

and before long, Jamie retreated back inside to do something else.

It was late afternoon when she saw Laren's family's car pull into the garage of the mint green house. They must have gone shopping or something after lunch.

Immediately forgetting her paint cards, Jamie rushed outside. Abby the Tabby looked up at her as she ran past. Sure enough, Laren was outside and she smiled as Jamie approached.

"How was the party?" Laren asked.

"Horrible," said Jamie flatly. Laren's smile dissolved into a look of concern.

"What happened? Wait, no, let's talk in the green space." In silence, the two girls walked through their secret passage to the grassy space beyond.

"Okay," said Laren once they had sat down together with Abby observing them a few feet away. "What happened?"

Jamie hadn't originally planned to tell Laren at all, but the heavy feeling in her chest was bursting and she felt that she had to tell somebody. Then, of course, it all came tumbling out and she told Laren about the entire evening, start to finish. The exploding snack mix, Piper's pink hair, and all the terrible things Erica had said.

"I mean," Jamie said once she had explained it all. "She's always been mean to me," Jamie glared. "But I don't care. And if she wants to hate me, then that's fine with me because – because I hate her

too!" She pushed away the prick of guilt at what she had just said and waited for Laren to say that she understood, that Erica was truly mean and horrible. But she didn't. And there was a long silence before either of them spoke.

"You don't mean that," Laren said finally. Her voice was quiet, barely above a whisper. Her eye rested on the grass next to her, some of her soft brown hair had shifted over her cheek, obscuring her face.

"I do too!" Jamie said forcefully. Why couldn't anyone understand?

"No, you don't. Even if you don't realize it." Laren turned to look at Jamie with her steady brown eyes. "And Erica didn't either. Siblings should never hate each other. They might say hurtful things in the moment, but they should never hate each other. Don't say things you don't mean, Jamie. Hate is a word that you don't understand. If your sister has already made that mistake don't make it worse, you'll regret it. Trust me."

Jamie stared at her friend, a tempest of emotions swirling inside. Didn't Laren get it? Erica had been horrible! She had said terrible things about Jamie! Why was Laren making excuses for her? She was the bad guy!

Somehow, Jamie couldn't keep it in.

"How should you know!" she yelled at Laren. "You don't even have siblings! You don't understand!"

Laren stared at her for a moment. Then her eyes drifted toward the trees on the other side of the green space.

"I did," she said, finally. Her voice calm, yet somehow far away.

"What?" Jamie stared at her.

"I had a brother." Laren turned back to look at Jamie. "His name was Daniel. He's six, well... He *was* six a year and a half ago. And he was the craziest, sweetest, most energetic six-year-old boy ever." A small wistful smile crept up the corners of Laren's mouth.

"And man did he ever annoy me. Of course, I liked poetry back then just as much as I do now and I had a notebook that I wrote all my poems in, and to me, it was one of the most important things in the world." Her smile faded. "He ripped it up one day and we had a big fight, I yelled at him that I hated him. A couple of hours later, Mama took him shopping with her. Daddy said she should take him because we were still mad and he said we needed some time apart. He got a call later... there was a car crash. Three cars were involved. One of them was ours. Mommy and Daniel had to be airlifted to the hospital... Mommy's okay now. She has a scar on her cheek, but she's okay. Daniel though...he... he's in heaven now." Laren's face was calm, but her eyes shone with memories. Flashing headlights, twisted metal, salty tears, shattered windows. "When I yelled I hated him, I didn't mean it. I wish

I had never said it. But I never had the chance to take it back.”

They sat in silence, Jamie feeling as if she had received an electric shock.

“I prayed a lot,” said Laren, “and I know I’ll get to see Daniel again... but it was hard, you know... back home after it happened. I think that was part of the reason my family went on a yearlong trip. I’m sorry I never told you.” Laren’s fingers played absentmindedly with the grass next to her. “I don’t mind talking about him with my parents and other family... but, well, it’s still kind of hard to explain to someone who doesn’t know.”

Suddenly, Laren stood up. She looked down at Jamie.

“I don’t think you realize how lucky you are Jamie, to have crazy, healthy, horrible siblings. God has really blessed you.” She turned slowly and started to walk away.

Jamie just looked after her speechlessly. Then she jumped up and hurried after Laren through the secret passage and onto the sidewalk. Laren was mounting the steps to the mint green house.

“Hey!” Jamie called.

Laren paused and looked over at her.

Jamie wanted to say something, something important maybe. That she understood what Laren felt. But the truth was that she didn’t understand and something inside Jamie told her that she couldn’t possibly understand, not in a million years. So all

she said was, "See you tomorrow?"

"Yeah." Laren gave a small smile. "See you tomorrow." Then she walked inside and closed the door behind her.

Twilight was falling as Jamie walked back to her own house next door, flip-flops smacking her heels as she walked down the sidewalk. Everything felt so confusing now, she wasn't quite sure what to do. Her feelings of anger and hurt toward Erica seemed like almost nothing compared to what Laren had gone through. And yet she felt as though she had to decide about Erica. Jamie shook her head to clear it and pulled open the door to her house.

Inside, Brian was playing with the twins and Mr. and Mrs. Johnson were talking in the dining room. The warm smell of home-cooked food wafted from the dishes that were laid out on the table.

"Here she is!" said Mr. Johnson heartily as Jamie closed the door behind her.

"Hi, Daddy," said Jamie as he swooped her up into a hug.

"I guess we can start supper now, then," said Mrs. Johnson.

"Not yet," said Brian, looking up. "Erica isn't here, I saw her go into the backyard."

"Jamie? Would you mind going to get Erica?" asked Mrs. Johnson.

"Okay," said Jamie, after a moment of hesitation. Then she turned toward the back door and slid it

open, feeling that the last thing she wanted was to talk to Erica.

The backyard, however, was empty.

Jamie looked around.

“Erica?”

No answer. Jamie started to walk the length of the fence, still looking around. Just then, she heard a small noise coming from behind the old crab apple tree in the corner of the yard.

Jamie approached cautiously. As she rounded the corner of the tree, she did not actually look up until the noise was very close. And when she did, it was not what she expected.

In the descending gloom of the evening, scrunched up between the fence and the crab apple tree, was Erica. Her knees were pulled against her chest, her head on her knees, and her arms over her head. Her shoulders shook as she sobbed.

“Erica!” said Jamie in disbelief, feeling rather frightened at the sight.

Erica lifted her head enough for Jamie to see her face. Her cheeks were damp, her eyes bloodshot.

“G-g-go away,” she managed to choke out. Jamie was frozen. Part of her wanted to go away, but another part of her wanted to find out what was going on. Still, she couldn’t find the willpower to do either, so she just stood there.

“Go away!” Eric repeated, louder this time. Jamie watched the fresh tears running slowly down her cheeks.

“What is it?” was all she could think to say, in a sort of hollow voice.

“I don’t have any friends anymore, that’s what it is!” Erica yelled, her voice was cracked. “It w-was Piper! I said some stuff at the party that annoyed her or something. And then she went and told everyone else that she hates me. Everyone listens to her! Her and her ridiculous pink hair! And now I don’t have a-a-any f-friends. H-h-Hazel told me at church.” Erica started to cry again, putting her hands over her face.

The sun sank lower, glowing along the distant horizon. The silhouettes of the trees stretched out in black strips, like rubber bands pulled almost to the breaking point, casting Erica’s hunched figure into shadow.

“Just go away,” her voice was small, almost pleading. “You don’t know what it feels like! For people to say terrible things about you behind your back.”

Erica sniffed again. Then, Jamie said quietly,

“I do know... I know exactly what it feels like.”

Not in a harsh voice. Not in a hurt voice. But in a truly understanding voice.

The sniffing stopped, and then everything was silent. An unsettling sort of silence. A silence so loud it rang in Jamie’s ears. The breeze started to blow, playing gently with the girls’ dark curls, telling them softly that the silence must be broken.

“Mommy says supper is ready,” said Jamie at

last.

“I’m coming.” Erica lifted her head from her knees, looking only at the ground. She would not meet Jamie’s eyes. She knew exactly what Jamie had meant.

“Okay,” Jamie turned away. She paused for a moment at the back door to glance back over her shoulder at Erica, still sitting hunched up as darkness stumbled on the edge of the horizon and fell gracefully over the houses and lawns and roads. A solitary firefly blinked in the growing darkness. Jamie stepped inside and shut the door behind her.

Acidic Violet, Shaded Moss, Shockwave, Old Jeans, Olive Horizon, Brown Sugar, Cranberry.

“Jamie?”

“What Mama?” Jamie asked looking up absentmindedly from her spot on the floor. The twins were asleep, which gave her the opportunity to spread all her paint cards out on the carpet in the living room, and Mr. Johnson was taking a day off work. Outside she could hear the basketball pounding the asphalt as he played with Brian. She had not seen Erica most of the morning.

Mrs. Johnson was dressed in the sort of clothes she wore when she went out places. Not dressed up exactly, but neater and tidier than when she was

cooking or taking care of Jack and William.

"I was wondering if you might like to come shopping with me," said Mrs. Johnson, who was looking for her shoes among the jumbled up pile next to the door.

Jamie considered for a moment.

"Who else is coming?" she asked suspiciously. Getting out of the house with a parent and no other siblings was a rarity in a family of seven.

"No one else," said Mrs. Johnson.

"What about Jack and William?"

"Nope. Just you and me."

"Okay!" said Jamie cheerfully, hopping up from her sun-warmed spot on the carpet and closing her paint card box. Then she hesitated. She probably wouldn't have time to look at any of the cards while they were out, so there wasn't much point in bringing it. Still... Jamie opened it again and grabbed a single card, shoving it into her shorts pocket. She had a feeling she would need it.

As the car was pulling out of the driveway, Mrs. Johnson shouted to her husband that William and Jack were asleep in their bedroom and that she would be back in about an hour.

Jamie leaned over and pressed her cheek against the warm glass of the car window as they drove down the block and onto the little streets that led to the main road. The bright green branches of trees were sweeping by. Her heart felt light and carefree.

She had nothing in particular to do, but it didn't feel boring. It felt full of possibility.

"So," said Mrs. Johnson "How have you been lately? Anything exciting going on?"

"No," Jamie started, then she thought of something, "Mommy, what's today?"

"Monday, August 13th," said Mrs. Johnson.

"Then something is happening!" said Jamie. "Laren's birthday is tomorrow!"

"That is exciting!" said Mrs. Johnson with a laugh. "Did you get her a birthday present?"

"Yes, I'm going to give her the free book I got at the library for my summer reading, because she helped me with it. My summer reading."

"That is very sweet of you," said Mrs. Johnson "I'm sure she'll appreciate it." There was a pause.

"You two are best friends, aren't you?" said Mrs. Johnson softly.

"I guess so," said Jamie with a shrug, "We have a lot of fun together, even if she is a lot older than me. I gave her one of my paint cards. It was Everlasting."

"Really?" Mrs. Johnson sounded thoughtful. "Brian said you gave one to him, too."

"Yes. It was Slam Dunk, I gave it to him because I know he likes basketball."

"That was nice of you." Mrs. Johnson pulled into the grocery store parking lot. "Come on."

Jamie hopped out of the car and followed her mother inside. They wound their way through the

store, picking up apples, green beans, a pineapple, a bag of flour, and a good many other things. Somehow, even though it was only shopping, Jamie enjoyed herself. There is something satisfying about walking down aisle after aisle of neatly stacked rows of food, not really thinking of anything. But by letting your mind be open in a place where so much is happening, you are sure to soon think of something interesting. Jamie might plan out what she would buy when she grew up, or just run her fingers along the edges of the shelves and pretend that her fingers were in an obstacle course and had to jump over the cans and boxes.

They were soon done, however, and Jamie helped her mother heave the heavy bags into the trunk of their van before they climbed back inside. The doors closed with a few dull thuds, and they drove off again.

Jamie stared out her window at the stores and other cars they drove past. And after a while, she realized that they were not on the road back to Winchester Court. She tried not to get her hopes up, it was always possible that Mrs. Johnson needed to go to another store. In a moment, however, the van stopped in front of a little bakery Jamie had seen a number of times, but had almost never been in. Her heart leaped.

“Are we going in the bakery?” she asked her mother, trying not to show too much of her excitement.

“Yes, we are,” said Mrs. Johnson with a sly smile, opening her door. “And you can pick out a treat if you want to.”

Jamie pulled off her seat belt and got out as quickly as she could. A treat! Her day had just gotten ten times better!

Before long, Jamie and her mother were seated at a table near the window in the corner. The smell of cinnamon sugar wafted around them and soft music was playing. Jamie was eating a monster cookie and her mom had gotten a lemon and orange scone. For a while there was silence between them as they ate, then Mrs. Johnson set down her half finished scone and looked over at her daughter.

“Jamie,” she said after a moment. “Can I ask you something?”

“I guess so,” said Jamie through a mouthful of cookie.

“Well, I was wondering what happened at Erica’s little get together the other night.”

“The party?”

“Yes. I don’t really know what happened, but I came looking for you after you put the broom away and I found you asleep in your bed. You looked like you’d been crying.” Mrs. Johnson looked worried. “Can you tell me what happened?”

Jamie swallowed her bite of cookie and looked down at the floor uncertainly. She shuffled her feet.

“You don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” said Mrs. Johnson, reaching across the table

and putting her hand on Jamie's. "But I would like to know."

"I'll tell you," said Jamie. Because she would. It was the sort of thing you had to tell your mother sooner or later, but she wasn't quite sure how to do it. Silence filled the air.

"Well?" said Mrs. Johnson concernedly.

"I— I heard Erica talking to her friends," said Jamie "And she, well," she was quiet for a moment. "She said she hated me..." Jamie's voice was barely more than a whisper. She stared at the floor of the bakery below her. "She said it to all the girls."

"And that made you really upset?" asked Mrs. Johnson gently.

Jamie nodded slowly, her lips felt as if they had been glued together. And she realized she had clenched her hand into a fist in her lap.

"Oh Jamie," Mrs. Johnson sighed, "I'm sorry."

Jamie just nodded.

"Do you need a hug?"

Again, Jamie nodded. She slid from her seat, took a few steps over to her mother and fell into her mother's warm embrace.

"Love you, Mama," Jamie muttered into her mother's shoulder.

"I love you too, sweet pea." Mrs. Johnson sighed. "That night has seemed to do more harm than good in the end. Something has been upsetting Erica too."

"How do you know?" Jamie pulled away a little

so she could be face to face with her mother again.

Mrs. Johnson smiled. "I know my girls well enough to tell when something's wrong. My boys too."

"I'm glad you do," said Jamie, looking thoughtful for a moment. Then she reached into her shorts pocket and pulled out the card she had brought. It was Heartfelt.

"Here." She handed it to her mother.

"Is this for me?" asked Mrs. Johnson. Jamie nodded.

"Thank you so much." Mrs. Johnson leaned over and kissed Jamie on the cheek.

"You're welcome." Jamie frowned, thinking seriously.

"Mama?"

"Yes, sweetie?"

"Can I finish my cookie now?"

The window was rolled down and Jamie stuck her head out. The warm breeze buffeted her dark curls and swept over her face. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, smelling the sharp tang of grass, the cars rushing by on the road, the warmth of the sun.

"Can you smell the sun?" Jamie mused aloud, although no one could hear her.

Reveling in the wonderful summer air, she felt like a bird soaring high in the blue sky. Free! Free as a bird with the world stretched out before her.

“We’re home!” Mrs. Johnson announced.

With a sigh, Jamie pulled her head back into the car as the window hummed shut and the car pulled into the driveway.

“Now don’t tell anyone I got you a treat,” Mrs. Johnson reminded her. “You know how that will go.”

Jamie nodded, and she felt a little leap of joy. She had a secret!

“Mommy I awake!” William came running up to the side of the car, Mr. Johnson behind him.

“Hello, William!” Mrs. Johnson opened the car door and picked him up.

Jamie unbuckled and hopped out. She would help her mother carry in the groceries and then she would go straight over to find Laren, she decided.

“Hi, Brian!” Jamie called to her brother, who had set down the basketball and was coming over to help unload.

“Hi, Jamie. What did you get, mom?” Without waiting for an answer, Brian started looking through the trunk.

“Brian, bring the bags in first,” said Mr. Johnson, setting down Jack, whom he had been carrying, to pick up a few bags.

The screen door to the house clanged.

“Mom?” Erica stood next to the door. She was holding an envelope and frowning at it.

“I’m coming, honey!” called Mrs. Johnson

“I’m coming honey too!” called William.

“Oh man!” called Jack for no particular reason.

Erica stepped out of the way so her father could enter the house with his load of bags and then she walked down the driveway to Jamie.

“This is for you,” she said blankly, handing the envelope to Jamie.

“For me?” asked Jamie, her eyes lighting up.

“I found it in the mail box. Someone must have put it there because we already had mail today.”

Hastily, Jamie flipped the envelope around to read the back. There was no address; instead, written across the middle in careful handwriting, it said;

From: Laren Grace Lark

To: Jamie Johnson

“It’s from Laren!” said Jamie excitedly. It must be an invitation to her birthday party!

She tore open the envelope eagerly, but immediately, she knew that it wasn’t a birthday invitation. The lines were too close together and the words were too small. There were no colorful titles or exclamation points. Slowly, Jamie began to read.

Dear Jamie,

I’m really sorry about this, but we left this morning. I told you that my mom and dad have been trying to figure out a way to get home before my birthday, and well, they did. I looked for you this morning to say goodbye, but I couldn’t find you. Brian told me you went shopping with your

mom.

I'm really sorry I won't get to say goodbye in person and that we won't be able to celebrate my birthday together. But it was amazing to spend a little bit of the summer with you. I'll never forget you and everything you taught me. You are a truly wonderful friend, and I know I'll never have another one quite like you.

I'm keeping your paint card Everlasting. It's the best souvenir from my entire trip, and my favorite bookmark.

Treasure those around you while you can. I think you know what I mean.

Your Best Friend Forever,

Laren

Jamie felt numb. Not the numb from when you spend too much time out in the cold, but a different kind. The 'what next?' kind. The purposeless kind. When you're not quite sure what to do.

Laren was gone. She would never get to give her the book she got for her birthday present. She would never even get to say goodbye.

Slowly, Jamie's eyes drifted from the letter in her hand to her feet in the grass. She felt a hot wetness behind her eyelids and blinked, staring hard at the ground, feeling as if she had been turned to stone. No more poetry, no more chalk gardens, no more musical rollercoaster voice to talk and laugh with. The windows of the mint house were dark and silent. Her best friend was gone.

“Laren’s gone,” Jamie said quietly, although no one had asked. She took a deep shuddering breath and felt a tear roll along the length of her nose, then over her lip. The letter wrinkled in the tight grip of her fingers.

“Hey, you’re okay,” a voice said softly. Two arms gently pulled her into a somewhat awkward hug, rusty from disuse.

Ignoring the awkwardness, Jamie let the letter drop from her grasp, clasped both arms tightly around Erica, and buried her face in her sister’s shoulder. It smelled like clover flowers and Mrs. Johnson’s vegetable soup. Like home.

“Thank you,” Jamie whispered, watching one of her tears leave a small, wet blot on her sister’s sleeve.

“Yeah?” The reply was unsure with a touch of hopefulness.

“Yeah.” Jamie closed her eyes and smiled.

"Erica?"

Jamie was standing in the doorway to the girls' bedroom; her shoebox was tucked under her arm. She was wearing her flip-flops even though she was inside. It was the late morning of August 14th. Erica was sitting on her top bunk, her back to the door. Jamie took a deep breath and tried again.

"Erica? I want - I need to go to the paint store." There was no answer. "Would you maybe come with me?"

Finally, Erica turned around. For once, she used the ladder to get to the bedroom floor instead of jumping.

"I'll come," she said quietly, and walked past

Jamie toward the front door. Jamie quickly turned and hurried after her, pausing only to adjust the shoebox under her arm.

The screen door clanged as it slammed behind the two girls and they fell in step walking down the damp sidewalk. It had rained the night before and there were still a few puddles on the road. The air smelled fresh and wet.

Glancing over to next door, Jamie noticed the enchanted chalk garden on the driveway of the mint green house was gone. Only a few blurred streaks of color remained. The windows of the house were dark, and the big red sign was in the yard again. FOR RENT.

Jamie looked down at the ground and sighed.

“What?” asked Erica, looking over.

“Nothing,” said Jamie. “It’s National Creamsicle Day.”

“Cool,” said Erica.

“It’s also Laren’s birthday.”

“Oh.”

They walked in silence for a while. The sun was hot and bright above them. Jamie’s flip-flops smacked the wet ground. Slowly, the two girls rounded the corner and crossed the street to the paint store.

“Well, here we are,” said Erica.

Jamie pushed the door open and it gave its usual little ding. The tang of fresh paint lingered in the atmosphere.

“Hello!” said Griffin from behind the counter.

“Hi,” said Jamie with a smile. Erica looked surprised but waved at him anyway.

“Go pick your paint cards, I guess,” she said.

Jamie looked over at the wall of cards. There were diamond shaped ones, and long strips with six colors, and small rectangles, and the big squares that had a little hole in the corner. Pale Nectarine, Spiced Cider, Falling Star, Harvest Sky, Coconut milk, Copper Leaf, Blackberry Fool. She looked down at her shoebox, then shook her head. She had made her decision already.

“Come here.” Jamie grabbed Erica’s hand and walked to the back of the store where Griffin’s desk was.

“Jamie? Right?” said Griffin.

“Yes,” said Jamie, and set her shoebox on his desk.

“Can I help you then?”

“Kind of,” said Jamie, then she took the lid off her shoebox, and pushed it across the desk towards him.

“I want to give these back,” she said.

“Your whole collection?” asked Erica, looking confused.

Jamie shrugged.

“I don’t need them anymore.”

“Well, thank you... I guess,” said Griffin, looking slightly puzzled.

“No problem.” Jamie paused, trying to think of

something else she could say, but there didn't seem to be anything left. She smiled and gave a little wave before turning away, and Jamie and Erica walked out the door. She saw him wave too, and the door closed behind them.

"I can't believe you gave away your whole paint card collection," said Erica with a frown.

"Almost all of it," said Jamie, reaching into her pocket and pulling out her two favorites: Honey Butter and Dragon Fruit. She hesitated and then held out Dragon Fruit to Erica.

"I want you to have this one."

Erica stared at it for a moment, then she smiled a small smile. The late morning sun shone softly over her features and Jamie realized for the first time just how much Erica looked like their mother. "Thanks, Jamie," she said quietly. She put the card in her own pocket, then she started walking down the sidewalk.

"Where are you going?" asked Jamie, hurrying after her.

"You said it was National Creamsicle day, right?" There was a new cheerful note in Erica's voice.

"Oh! Right! You mean? Hey! Erica! Wait up!"

Later that morning, two girls sat in the green space next to the secret passageway, each holding an almost finished ice cream pop. The grass was a little wet, but neither of them really minded.

Jamie sucked the last remnants of ice cream off

her stick and turned to Erica.

“Have you ever heard of a book called ‘My Father’s Dragon?’” she asked.

“No, why?”

“Well, I thought we could read it together,” Jamie explained.

“Sure,” said Erica. Then there was a long pause.

“Jamie?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m sorry, you know, about... what I said.”

“I know,” said Jamie. “And I’m sorry, too, about your bracelet.”

“I know,” said Erica. “It’s just a bracelet.”

Both of them smiled tentatively, and suddenly Jamie’s heart felt full. Full of shoeboxes filled with paint cards, and hot rainy nights. Chalk flower gardens, blue sky moments, and silly holidays for every day. Poetry, sunsets that burnt the sky in the evening, and her mother’s arms around her. Erica, Brian, the twins, and their parents. All crammed into one messy, crazy, wonderful place in her heart.

She pulled the popsicle stick out of her mouth and fell back onto the wet grass looking up at the sky. It was Everlasting Blue. She raised her hands up to make a square shape, and closed one eye.

“What are you doing?” asked Erica.

“Lay down,” said Jamie. “Because if you lay down and look up like this, all you can see is the top of that tree and the sky. And it could be the sky and branches of anywhere in the world.”

There was a soft shuffle in the grass and Erica lay down beside her.

“I see it,” she said quietly. “Where in the world is it?”

“Here,” said Jamie, simply.

And they were silent after that, just two sisters, side by side, as the world turned and the clouds floated by. Just thinking, because they each felt something that was almost impossible to put into words; almost, at least.

CH 15
Honey Butter

15/15

Gold Ink Magazine

September Poetry Competition

1st Place: Honey Butter, By Laren Lark

A summer world where skies were Carolina
blue,
And friendship was everlasting.
A place where courage finally came through,
And sorrow left our side.

It all started with a smile
That I tried to put on every day,
But when a true friend smiled back,
It never went away.

And as time goes on, something lingers,
A lesson learned by heart,
A memory that will always be near,
Even though we are apart.

Love is such a miraculous thing,
When two can help each other,
Bringing joy to both friendship, and family,
Until life's as sweet as
Honey Butter...

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Thank you for taking the time to pick through my story. Thank you for challenging and encouraging me with your comments, suggestions, and emojis. Without you this book would not be nearly as good. Seriously. Please don't tell anyone about my earlier drafts.

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Well. I guess that's the end of the end of this book. I better get to work on the next one... See you then!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Millie Florence is an adventurous homeschooler who published her first book, 'Honey Butter', at age 13. She loves sushi, zip lines, and just about all things yellow.

Millie lives in a picturesque blue house in the woods with her parents and her four siblings, plus a varying amount of cats and chickens.

Whenever you need a good excuse not to clean your room, you can visit her online at millieflorence.com

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