

## Normal- (Ch.1)

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

"Just yesterday," Karla replied.

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

Sarah turned around. "What? What happened?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And then what?" Sarah asked.

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

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

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

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

"Hi!" He called to me.

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

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

“What?” He asked.

“Bryan asked her to be his girlfriend!”

“Really?” Jacob’s eyes widened as he used that voice he always used when he was surprised. I smiled.

“Ah huh.”

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

“I didn’t even know you liked him!” Jacob shouted.

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

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

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

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

“What? What are you talking about?” I asked innocently.

Karla laughed. “You said you didn’t like him!”

“Yeah, and I don’t.” I knew I couldn’t keep up the act much longer.

“Then why else would you want to know if I don’t like him, huh?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## The School Musical (Ch. 2)

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

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

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

"Hi. You nervous?" He asked.

"That's an understatement."

"Yeah, me too."

I smiled. "So, can I get a preview?"

He frowned. "I have a feeling I don't want to know what you're talking about."

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

His expression was firm and solemn. "No," Jacob replied, "You'll hear me sing at the audition."

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

"No."

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

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

"Then why won't you sing?"

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

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

"I know. Tricking people is my specialty," I replied, grinning.

"Ugh. Fine. But you owe me."

"Yeah, sure," I told him sarcastically.

Jacob ignored me and led me away to where no one else could hear. Again, I tested him. I asked how he would be able to sing the audition song in front of the whole cast and be Michael

and sing in front of an audience if he couldn't even sing in front of the few kids on the playground.

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

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

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

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

"Thanks," Jacob replied shyly.

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

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

"Great!" She seemed really enthusiastic.

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

"I hope," Sarah replied.

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

"I know. I hope it goes well."

"Thanks," Jacob replied for me.

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

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

"Good. I still have to learn it."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Jane Banks," she whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah! Oh, what about you?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, me too."

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

### Rumors (Ch. 3)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah, I know,” my mom replied.

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

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

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

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

“So, today at school-” I interrupted.

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

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

“Then this is really bad.”

#### On The News (Ch. 4)

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

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

“So, today, we’re going to...”

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

“The news said that the Coronavirus-”

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

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



“Stop. Just stop it. Stop.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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“Should I turn on the news?” My dad asked.

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

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

“Oh,” Allegra said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes. Hello. We are considering many options. We could...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### People (Ch.5)

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

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

“Whoa!” I heard a few of my classmates say.

“What happened here?” Jacob asked.

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

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

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

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

That afternoon, right before we went off to eat lunch, our principal Mrs. Kim walked in. "I just wanted to make sure that all your students know how to login to their Google account on a computer," she asked Mrs. Whaley.

"Yes," Mrs. Whaley answered.

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

"Yes."

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, that was weird," Karla agreed.

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

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

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

"Why?" Sarah asked.

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

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

"Oh." Jacob sighed.

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

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

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

Jacob sighed with happiness. "I love pickles."

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

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

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

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

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

“Mommy?” I asked.

“What?”

“Do you think school will close?”

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

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

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

### The Last Party (Ch.6)

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

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

Hi Heather. *It read.* I just found out from the Go Cart Racing club that the kids will be wearing publicly used helmets, and since they will be touching the handles of the Cart and many other things that other people have used, I just don't feel comfortable having the party there. Of course, Karla is upset, but it's for her own safety, and the safety of Stella and Karla's other friends. Would Stella like to join us at *Batch & Brine* for a late lunch? It would mean a lot to Karla. Thank you.

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

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

"Hi! Happy birthday!" I shouted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Karla and I ended up winning, five to one.

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

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

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

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

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

When my mom came to pick me up, I waved goodbye to my friends. Just a plain, "Bye, see you on Monday!" kind of goodbye. I didn't realize, though I should have, that that would be the last time I would see my best friends until fifth grade. None of us realized. If I had known that the only time I would see the beautiful faces of my friends would be on a screen, I would hold them in my arms and cling to them and not ever let them go.

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

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

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

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

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

"Oh," I whispered instead.

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

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

"Yeah," my dad confirmed.

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

~ ~ ~

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

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

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

While making the pie, he swore. A lot. My dad always swore often, but nothing like this. Then, I just thought he was swearing because the simple marmalade pie wasn't coming out the way he wanted it to. But, he was probably swearing, because of the quarantine. He was taking all his anger out on the poor little pie. I was sitting behind the desk in the kitchen, so I was right there. I was a witness to the pie's abuse.

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

## Zoom (Ch. 8)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's sprinkling," I noticed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“At least you have friends to call!” Allegra started. “You used to be the one with friend problems. But this year, you gained a ton and I lost a ton! The ones I have left are so stupid!”



They just talk and talk and talk at recess! They think we're too old, too mature, too this and too that to do anything! Online chats would be perfect for them. I wouldn't be bugging them to play tag or an imagination game. They could just recite monologues! But, they can't figure out Zoom! Yes, that's how stupid my friends and their parents and my teachers are. Okay? They can't figure out Zoom. Yeah, I have two or three friends! I'm not, 'friendless.' But it feels like I am! Because the friends I knew and loved are gone!"

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

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

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

"Okay? So, it's not just you. We all have it bad. All of us."

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

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

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

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

### That Call (Ch. 10)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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