

Unclaimed
Baggage

JEN DOLL

FARRAR STRAUS GIROUX
NEW YORK

Farrar Straus Giroux Books for Young Readers
An imprint of Macmillan Publishing Group, LLC
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010

Copyright © 2018 by Jen Doll
All rights reserved
Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Elizabeth H. Clark
First edition, 2018

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

fiereads.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN 978-0-374-30606-9 (hardcover) ISBN 978-0-374-30607-6 (ebook)
ISBN 978-0-374-31220-6 (international edition)

Our books may be purchased in bulk for promotional, educational, or business use. Please contact your local bookseller or the Macmillan Corporate and Premium Sales Department at (800) 221-7945 ext. 5442 or by email at MacmillanSpecialMarkets@macmillan.com.

PROLOGUE

Before

A clang rang out through baggage claim as the carousel groaned into action. Arriving passengers jockeyed for positions around the metal edges of the machine, craning their necks and tapping their feet, as desperate for a glimpse of their luggage as they would be to see friends or family members.

Some bags had been wrapped in plastic by nervous people; others had bright ribbons tied around the handles to distinguish them from one another. There was a bossy sign warning everyone to make sure the luggage was indeed their own before leaving the terminal, but hardly anybody took the time to do that. In haste, mistakes had occurred.

A little boy frolicked along the raised metal edge of the

carousel, shouting, “Look at me!” until his weary mother collected him. “*Excuse me*” was the law of the land, though it was generally uttered in a way that was less polite and more “Outta my way. Can’t you see I’m standing here!?” There were elbow nudges and rude remarks and “Hey, watch it, buddy!”s. Slowly but surely, the passengers filed out into the world, taking with them their precious belongings, compactly contained in suitcases that most of the rest of the time were confined to the undersides of beds or the backs of closets.

With a low squeal, the carousel halted. A new flight would be in soon, and the same thing would happen, and then again.

For now, no one paid any attention to the suitcase that remained. It was small and purple and leopard-printed. It was a bag intended for adventures, intended for life. But its owner had failed to retrieve it, so it sat alone in the middle of the quiet baggage carousel, in the very place it was not supposed to be.

PART I

June

1

Doris

HELLO. I speak to you from where I stand amid hundreds, maybe thousands, of boxes, bags, trunks, containers, and suitcases. I'm in the stockroom of the store where I work, Unclaimed Baggage, which is a place that, yes, sells baggage that was never claimed from airports and other transit hubs to lucky new owners. Think of us as an animal shelter for goods. Does anything here look like you could give it a forever home?

As usual, I'm alone in the back. I pick up the microphone I just found in the suitcase I've been unpacking. It doesn't have batteries, so humor me. *Is this thing on?*

Please allow me to share my Number One top talent, the thing that will make me famous if ever I go on a reality TV

show or participate in a Miss America pageant (two things I will surely never do). Are you ready?

Wait. I should probably manage expectations. If you're like most people, you're not going to be that impressed by what I'm about to reveal. You're going to say, *Anyone can do that. All you have to do is pay attention.* Or, maybe you'd be harsher: *That's a dumb talent. That's not even a talent! Ugh, show me your baton, girl—get out there and twirl!* To which I would say, stop being so sexist and give me a chance to speak, please. Even if I am just talking into a dead microphone in a stockroom full of used items.

My name is Doris. I am sixteen, and—along with slightly ragged fingernails (I've promised myself this will be the year I finally stop biting them); long, so-dark-everyone-says-it's-black-but-it's-really-dark-brown hair; and two chocolate-colored irises that give looks described as both “penetrating” and “pugnacious”—I come complete with a love of lists (especially those that include parentheticals!), a passion for drawing, and the “gift of gab,” which is how my aunt Stella used to tease me about how much I talk.

I also bear the distinction of being pretty much the Number One weirdo liberal agnostic in my minuscule Alabama town, which gives all kinds of grief to my parents. When I decided to petition against the school-sanctioned prayer at each football game, Mom and Dad retaliated by praying louder than anyone. You'd think adults would be over that kind of stuff, but nope: The desire to fit in appears to be a lifelong human condition. Unless you're like me, I guess.

But back to that talent.

Imagine me leaning in close to the mic, gesturing a little, dropping my voice to a sultry whisper: *I can find things*. Your lost keys. The neighbor's missing cat, awkwardly named Pussy. Maya Bloom's retainer, let us never speak of that dark day again—the smell of the dumpster in which it was located is lodged permanently in my left nostril. Billy Pickens's trombone, which didn't really go missing so much as it was purposely tossed into my backyard on the last day of school because, top secret intel: Billy Pickens *despises* trombone. Or my mom's sunglasses: Nine times out of ten, they're right on top of her head.

It's not a superpower—that would be fairly lame, as superpowers go. Who'd pick finding things over flying or shooting fire from their eyes or being able to turn water into Diet Coke? But it's been helpful, I have to say. Not just personally, but professionally: I find things for my job.

Or, more accurately, *things find me*.

Think about all the flights around the world happening at the same time, and how if even one percent of that luggage doesn't make it back to its owner, pretty soon you'll have a massive pile on your hands. What happens to all that stuff? Airlines try to reunite people with their belongings, but they don't always succeed. After a certain amount of time, those orphaned items are sold to stores like Unclaimed Baggage and auction houses where people show up to bid for suitcases they aren't even allowed to look inside. You might hit it big, or you might end up with a pile of soiled shirts. Game of chance, meet laundromat.

Most days I work in the stockroom, going through shipments. What I find ranges from the spectacular (a vintage Oscar de la Renta gown with only a tiny spot at the hem; I could have worn it to prom, if I had any interest in such things) to the abysmal (old boxer shorts that require me to disinfect myself with an entire bottle of hand sanitizer). Even better, I find those items—well, not the boxer shorts—homes. For example:

1. The doll that made my old piano teacher, Mrs. McClintock, cry because it was a replica of the one her grandpa had given her when she was a tiny girl.
2. The skateboard that class stoner Bruno Havens yanked out of my hands with the only scream of joy anyone's ever heard Bruno Havens emit because it was signed by some famous skater named Tony. Then Bruno actually hugged me, which is *unprecedented*.
3. The designer purse sold out everywhere that Ms. Lee, our extremely stylish vice principal, simply had to have. I kept it hidden in the back until she could pick it up, ensuring my path to a really good college rec letter, even if I am a godless heathen.

I've been working at Unclaimed for two summers now, so I've seen plenty of stuff come and go. It's a lot like life that way. Everyone's always looking for something. And we're all carrying around the memories of what we've lost. Which, by the way, is far more than just possessions.

For example, my closest friend, Maya Bloom, who's not only the one Jewish teenager in our town, but also the only lesbian who's actually out (a lot of people around here seem to think

that's worse than not being so sure about the existence of God), got a job as a camp counselor in Mentone this summer, so I'm here, left behind, my life the same but also different. I miss her, but at least I know she'll be back.

Then there are more permanent rifts: Friendships that go awry and can't ever be fixed. You can lose your mind, your heart, your dreams, your community, your job. You can lose someone you love. Or, to a less tragic extent, your virginity. (My parents would be relieved to know I still have my own.) Even age disappears, year after year. In two more years, high school will be gone. I'll head off to college, and all of this life I've had here will be, well, if not lost, closed. A chapter behind me.

Earlier today I was heading back to the stockroom after my lunch break when I found a kid. This kid was alone and loitering near the toy section, but he wasn't paying attention to any of the toys. That set off the alarm bells. He was five or six years old, a chubby boy with spiked-up hair and cargo shorts and a frown on his face. He looked at me, and I knew.

"You're lost," I said, and his big, round eyes, they got hopeful.

"My mom is here somewhere," he said, and I said, "Of course she is." I took his hand, which was slightly sticky. He squeezed mine back in a way that felt like he was preparing to hold on for dear life.

"Don't worry; we'll find her," I told him, and walked him over to Customer Service, where my nemesis, Chassie Dunkirk, was waiting to return a pair of sparkly high-heeled shoes. Her boyfriend, Mr. Football Player Champion of the World (or at least Our Small Town), Grant Collins was holding her

name-brand purse. Chassie had her arm in a sling, the result of what even out-of-the-loop me knew was a cheer leading injury from earlier in the year. More worrisome than what I guessed was a cheerleading injury was the fact that their lips were pressed against each other's so hard I was afraid they might pass out on the floor in front of me.

"Ahem," I said, causing them to turn around. That's when I saw that Chassie wasn't with Grant Collins at all. She was making out with a senior who graduated in May, which is pretty shocking information, because in the history of our town, it's never not been Chassie and Grant.

"Oh. *Excuse us*," said Chassie.

The guy looked at me and then at the floor, and I remembered his name. Mac Ebling. He'd been on the football team with Grant.

Chassie noticed the kid clutching my fingers. "Blake Jarvis," she said, "you've got chocolate on your shirt." She rolled her eyes and turned back to Mac: "Let's get out of here. I'll just keep the shoes. My arm hurts, and this place smells like mothballs and death."

"I'm lost!" Blake Jarvis announced forlornly, but Chassie was already out the door, Mac Ebling's hand tucked snugly into the back pocket of her denim shorts. I gently tugged my charge toward my boss and the owner of Unclaimed Baggage, Red Finster.

"Found a new friend, Doris?" he asked. "Blake Jarvis, where's your momma? I really liked that duet you sang together at the church concert last week. That was real pretty."

Suddenly I understood why everyone seemed to know Blake

Jarvis except me—they all go to church together. Church is big in my town. Church and football, which I don't care much about, either. A bunch of jocks hurting one another and themselves as people stand around and cheer? No, thanks.

Blake Jarvis tried to smile, but his lip quivered. "I. Don't. Knowwwwww," he answered, his face crinkling into a pool of almost-cry.

"Wanna make an announcement for her?" offered Red, and Blake Jarvis shook his head up and down, a hard affirmative. I led him over to the little stairs that take you up to what Red calls the Customer Service throne, and Red held out the store's microphone for him.

"I've been found, Momma! Momma, where are you?" he said, and while everyone let out a collective "aw" at the tiny voice emanating from the sound system, Red stepped in. "Gail Osteen, Blake Jarvis is at Customer Service. Please pick him up at your leisure." Within minutes, there were the same hopeful eyes, with a neat bob rather than the spiked-up hair.

"Blake Jarvis Osteen, I told you to wait outside the dressing room like a good boy, and off you go running around—you nearly scared me to death!" said Mrs. Osteen, who smelled like vanilla and was holding several one-piece swimsuits with ruffled bottoms. She hugged her little boy, and he pointed to me.

"*She* found me!" he said, and though Mrs. Osteen looked at me kind of funny at first, she clutched me in a fragrant hug while Red smiled benevolently upon the scene. Blake Jarvis was promised a new toy for being so brave, and he and his mom went off together to pick it out, holding hands.

Red gave me a high five. “Stellar job, as always!”

You know who I thought of then? Aunt Stella. My badass, beautiful aunt, the adventurer of the family, the one who refused to be pinned down by the proprieties dictated by Southern society, much less our small town. The one who understood me completely, while my conservative parents wondered how I could have possibly resulted from their chromosomal merger. I wished desperately I could tell Stel about what had just happened with Blake Jarvis, because she would have looked at me delightedly across her Diet Coke (she drank them in extra-large mason jars, with plenty of ice, pretty much incessantly) as if I really did have a superpower, as if finding lost people was something remotely special, something only I could do. She would have told me that when I’m at college and surrounded by people who appreciate me, I will be way better off than Chassie is. *Never peak in high school*, she used to say. *You need somewhere else to go afterward*. That’s what she did after she graduated, but she didn’t just go somewhere else, she went everywhere: traveling the world, trying out different jobs, different apartments, different relationships.

Mom was always telling her little sister to grow up and settle down, but I thought Stel was perfect just the way she was. Calling her own shots, saying *the heck what other people think*. She’s the one who told me I didn’t have to do everything my parents did just because they decided it was right for them. *Find yourself*, she said. *That’s the only way*.

Last summer she was on a beach in the south of France when she noticed two little kids being swept out to sea. As a teenager,

she'd lifeguarded at our town water park, and she dove right in after them. She brought one back to safety before going in after the other. She got him close enough to shore that he could make it on his own, and that's when the riptide pulled her back again.

They never recovered her body.

That's the thing about lost. It doesn't always mean found. The worst losses are those things we never truly get over, no matter how good we are at locating misplaced car keys. Sometimes it feels like they take over completely, leaving a hole where your heart used to be.

The grief counselor told me to hold on to the memories, that's how I keep Stel alive forever. But there are some days I'd like to pack my memories up in a suitcase, put them on a plane, and let them fly around at thirty thousand feet until I'm ready to collect them again, which, to be honest, might be never.

My job helps, though, it really does. Last summer it was the one thing I kept doing, a place I could go when everything else seemed bleak and pointless. Red treats me like an adult, and he's never judged me for anything, unlike Mom and Dad. And if I cry when I'm back here, which I did pretty much every day after we got the call about Stel, there's no one around to see me. Along with getting regular paychecks, what more can you ask for in a job?

Well, there's another thing. At her memorial service, Aunt Stella's favorite yoga instructor called her a connector. That means someone who makes the world feel more welcoming and whole, who makes people feel better together in it. I keep

thinking that if I can be more like Stel, if I can bring people and things together, maybe I won't have lost her entirely after all.

I like to imagine that Stella survived and is living on an island somewhere, free and beautiful and drinking from her mason jar. Of course, that's highly unlikely, but who knows, maybe somewhere, someone is finding the things that are important to me. Being in the store makes me think about possibility, about how we only know our side of the story. Maybe there's another side to things you haven't even thought of yet.

I drop the mic. These suitcases aren't going to unpack themselves.

2

Nell

Ashton and I say good-bye in my driveway, in front of my parents, who are waiting in the car, all packed and ready to go and politely trying not to look. My little brother, Jack, has no such honor code; his face is pressed against the glass, eyes bulging and trained on us. Mom has given me ten—OK, fifteen!—minutes for this final-final-final farewell. The drive to Alabama from our town in the Chicago suburbs will take at least ten hours, and we need to get on the road. As it is, with eating and bathroom breaks and everything else, it's probably going to take two days.

But it isn't just about time. The truth is, my mom doesn't get it. *You and Ashton have been attached at the hip since school let*

out for the summer last week. What could you possibly still have to say to each other? she asked. She doesn't understand that love isn't a matter of having to *say things* to each other. We're past that, Ashton and me. When I tried to explain, she reminded me that we could email and text all the time, as if that's anywhere near the same. She's never liked him much, anyway: *Don't get too serious; first relationships are just for practice*, she told me when we started dating. *You'll see*. My mom is a scientist; everything has to be perfect. Me, I just want to be loved, and in love.

I grab Ashton's hand and pull him toward the corner of the yard, where there's a row of still spindly trees growing at different heights. I brought each of them home from school on Arbor Day—a tree for every year we lived here, fifth grade through sophomore year—and Dad helped me dig a hole and plant them, one after the other. The oldest are taller than I am now. I've heard the Arbor Day program is being discontinued. Just like my life as I know it.

"I'm really going to miss you," Ashton says, looking into my eyes, and I once again try to memorize how his smile spreads across his entire face when something is funny; the flutter of his insanely long eyelashes; his hands, strong and calloused from sports, but soft, too.

"I'll miss you more," I say, and I know it's true. Ashton gets to stay right where I want to be, surrounded by all of our friends here at home, having the summer we'd been planning before my mom doled out her "exciting news" that was going to be "so good for us." Now, I'm en route to a place where the only people

I know are my immediate family members, and at the moment, I don't even like any of them very much.

I guess I buried the lede: We're moving to a small town in Alabama, because my mom, the rocket scientist, got a prestigious job at the Marshall Space Flight Center. And families stick together, whether they want to or not, I guess. Or at least mine does.

"You've got to come and visit me," I say.

"I'll do my best," he replies. He leans forward, and I lean forward, and we kiss just as my mom honks the horn.

I cry until we cross the Mason-Dixon Line. At that point, I think I'm out of tears.

3

Grant

When my alarm clock rings, I hit it as hard as I can, knocking it off my dresser. Something about that feels good for a second. Then I hear it, still beeping. I look at the side of my hand, which is bleeding—from the alarm clock, maybe, or maybe from something else. I turn over onto my stomach and bury my head in my pillow and drown out the noise and the tiny twinges of pain (I've felt worse), and I will myself to go back to sleep. It's summer, and there's nowhere I need to be. Setting my alarm at this point is just for appearances, even if appearances have ceased to matter.

Downstairs, I hear people moving around and breakfast sounds, like pouring cereal and the toaster dinging and the

chatter of my little brothers. Here in this room, my head is pounding, and the inside of my chest feels ragged. I shut my eyes. The only thing I can do is wait for the hangover to pass. The problem is, shutting my eyes doesn't necessarily bring rest. That's when my head feels like it might explode. That's when I get pretty near desperate for another something to soothe me. Most of the time, I give in. Nothing like popping the top of a cold one, as they say.

My name is Grant. I'm seventeen years old. I used to be the captain of the football team, the most promising young quarterback in the history of my school, maybe the entire state of Alabama. I used to date the hottest girl in town. Now I'm just a guy. Don't expect too much from me. If you do, I'll probably let you down.

Don't say I didn't warn you.

4

The purple leopard suitcase wasn't alone for very long.

Another flight came in shortly afterward, and all of the new suitcases it had held for its passengers were tossed onto the conveyor belt, tumbling around the left-behind bag, which was caught up in their swirl. Then everyone came and collected their belongings but one, and the purple suitcase had a friend, a neon green bag with a lemon appliqué. The purple suitcase would have breathed a sigh of relief, if suitcases could breathe, because it sucks to be left alone at baggage claim, and traveling together is almost always better than traveling alone.

At the last minute, though, a breathless, sweaty guy rushed into the terminal and grabbed the lemon-lime suitcase. “There you are!” he said. “Let’s go!” And then he, and it, were out the door, and the purple suitcase was all by itself once again.

5

Nell

To my surprise, our new house is not completely tragic. It's got a sloping roof that nearly touches the sprawling top branches of a big green willow tree growing right in the middle of the front yard. The back is full of what my mom says are magnolia trees. They're squat, with oily, oblong leaves, and they're supposed to be beautiful when they bloom in the spring. There's even a tiny trickling rock pond that the former owners built. It's twenty-years-ago high-tech; you hit a button, and water flows down the rocks. The other day I saw a little frog chilling in the pond, and I said, "Hey, frog," and it said nothing, and I said, "That's my line."

I apologize to the frog, and to you. This is what passes for a joke with me at the moment. I haven't been speaking to my

parents unless it's truly necessary. The only thing that's keeping me going is a constant stream of text messages from Ashton and my friends back home. (I check my phone. There's nothing new yet, but the ♡ ♡ ♡ **Miss u baby** ♡ ♡ ♡ **Sleep well zzzzz** from last night warms my heart.)

There's this playhouse in the backyard. The former owners had two little girls, and little girls, according to the widely accepted gender rules of society, must love pink. I have long preferred blue, myself, and can go on about a certain shade of lush green for at least a minute, but I hope these little girls really did love pink, because they were the owners of a bright pink shack that's got enough room in it for all the pink things I can imagine them wanting: a pink Barbie Dreamhouse and a pink Easy-Bake Oven and a ton of pink stuffed animals, or whatever else little kids are playing with that comes in pink these days.

Pink notwithstanding, I would have killed for a playhouse when I was a kid. I made do with pillow forts. And now I sound like some ancient curmudgeon complaining about trudging in the snow for ten miles to get to school, hot potatoes in my pockets to keep my hands warm. I'm fun. I promise I'm fun. Just not right now.

On our second day in the new house, I took a bunch of blankets and a pile of books and carried them out to the empty playhouse, which is large enough that I can lie on the wood-planked floor and stretch my arms as far as they can go in front of me and my legs in the opposite direction, and there's still room on each side to grow. I decided then and there that this would be my safe space, where I can retreat and be alone and

think. Where I can figure out what I'm going to do with myself. I have to work on my plan, which is to get my parents to let Ashton come and visit, and to get Ashton's parents to do the same. (I'm less worried about that part. The difference between how adults treat teenage boys and girls is *real*.) In the meantime, I read books. I'm currently obsessed with noir. I've got a stack of novels with shadowy figures in trench coats trudging through the dark on their covers, which seems to fit my vibe right now.

In case you haven't heard, Alabama summers are no joke. Walking outside is like being hugged by a person who's just emerged from a pool of molasses. But under the roof of the playhouse, it's cool and quiet, and there's a woody-earthy smell emanating from below. It soothes me even more than the rock pond. So that's how I've decided I'll spend my days, book in one hand, phone in the other, keeping up with my friends and my boyfriend back home. In a week and a half of this schedule, I've plowed through seven novels. A girl cannot live on rereads alone, and it is, in fact, this lack of new material that forces me to finally have a conversation with my mom that goes beyond "Please pass the salt and pepper, and btw why did you have to ruin my life?"

It's Sunday, so Mom's in the kitchen, sitting at the table reading the newspaper and sipping coffee. I'm guessing Jack is playing video games in his room and my dad's probably in his office, working as usual, even though it's the weekend.

"Hi," I say.

"Nell!" she says. "Does this mean you're talking to me again?"

"I am right now," I tell her.

“Honey,” she begins. I can sense she’s about to try to give me a hug, possibly paired with the worst of the worst—*comforting words*—so I step back. I want her to hurt like I do for a minute. It’s the only power I have.

“You’ve always adjusted so well when we’ve moved before,” she says.

“I was in fifth grade, Mom.” That was when we went from Houston to the suburbs of Chicago. “And before that, kindergarten.” Those two moves had been for my dad’s job—he’s a consultant for a huge oil and gas company. He figured out a work-from-home arrangement after my mom was given this “once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.” The thing is, I barely remember the first time we moved. The second time, I hadn’t known how hard it would be. Now I do.

“I don’t see how you can’t understand the difference between then and now!” I say. “You ripped me away from my entire world, with barely any warning. Right in the middle of high school. When I finally had really good friends, a boyfriend, and everything! That’s brutal! It took me forever to feel good there, and I finally did, and now we’re here. . . .” I’m on the verge of crying.

“Shhhhh,” she says, and right on cue, Jack comes wandering into the room.

“What’s wrong?” he asks. We tell him nothing, even though something clearly is.

“I was just asking if Mom could take me to the library,” I say. Libraries are the same everywhere, I’m thinking. Maybe this one will feel a little bit like home, even if it’s in a new town.

She glances at her watch. “Those nightstands we ordered are

supposed to be delivered this afternoon, and Dad's got an important work all scheduled. What if I loan you the car and you go yourself? It's not far." Back in Illinois, I would have jumped at the chance to get behind the wheel of her Mercedes on my own. But now taking her car seems like accepting that I'm stuck in Alabama and might as well embrace it. I'm not ready to do that yet.

"I'll go by myself next time?" I wheedle. "Pretty please?" She folds after I promise to make it fast, which isn't difficult. The town's so small! To get to the library, we drive by a big church, a scattered array of small stores, and the high school. (It nearly sends me into a panic to think about *that*.) Jack and I both pick out a stack of books, and we're home again before the nightstands have arrived.

Back at the kitchen table, Mom passes me a section of the newspaper. Circled in black ink are a bunch of want ads.

"These seem like they might be good for you," she says. "And a job will help you meet some other kids!"

"Oh," I say. "I'm not really into a job right now, to be totally honest. I'm still . . . adjusting."

She smiles with her mouth, but her eyes stay serious. I know that look. "Nell, I'm not making a suggestion."

"Mom, *come on*," I protest. "You really expect me to work at a Waffle House? No way. That's my nightmare."

"You don't have to work at a Waffle House, honey," she says calmly. "Though I think they're pretty hip nowadays! I hear they have a hilarious Twitter account."

I groan.

“The point is, you have to work somewhere. You told me you didn’t want me to help you get a job at the Marshall Space Flight Center, and I respect that. But you’re going to have to find something to do with your time that doesn’t involve moping around reading romance novels.”

“Mom.”

“You may not feel like talking to me for the rest of the summer,” she says. “But you are going to talk to *someone*. You’re going to get a job, and that is not up for debate.”

“I’m not reading romance novels! I’m reading *detective fiction!*” I yell. I toss my current book, which is, for the record, Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*, on the counter and stomp out to the pink playhouse, where I lie on the floor for a while feeling sorry for myself and angry that I sacrificed my book when I could now be finishing it. I skim through one of Jack’s dumb kid magazines—he’s always trying to hang out in the playhouse and read with me—and cry. *How many tears am I going to shed in this place?* I wonder.

I reach for my phone and call Ashton, but he doesn’t answer, so I leave him a quick voice mail. “Everything’s terrible, I miss you, call me back!” I say. Next I try my friend Morgan, who picks up. “Nell!” she shrieks so loudly I have to move the phone away from my ear. “I’m with Nisha and we’re giving each other pedicures and we wish you were here!”

Nisha grabs the phone. “Come back!” she says, and I feel even worse. “You should see this color Crankensence and Myrrh;

it's this vile green that looks totally rad. Oh, dammit, Morgan, you just spilled polish on my white shorts! Ugh, Nell, we gotta go. Love you!"

I'm holding the phone to my ear like it's a shell, listening to the echoes of my friends carrying on with their lives without me. Something in me shifts, ever so slightly. I stand up, shaking myself off like I've been in a fight but I haven't given up yet, and head into the kitchen. My mom is sitting there drinking a glass of wine and talking to my dad as he makes dinner. They both turn to me.

"OK," I say. "I guess I'll need the car tomorrow. To look for, you know, jobs."

"Fabulous!" she answers, breezy as can be. Jack is helping shuck corn my dad brought home from a nearby farm. He asks, "Can I come?" and my mom interrupts, "Oh, Jack, honey, Nell's got to do this on her own. But I bet Dad will take you to check out that toy store at the mall."

She winks at Dad, but he gives her this look. "Just because I'm working remotely doesn't mean I'm not working," he says. "You know I can't just be gone for half the morning."

"I thought you were going to take things a little easier for a while," she reminds him.

"Fine," he says, but he seems about as psyched as I've been since the move, and I wonder if my dad isn't so thrilled about this upheaval, either. But then he smiles and looks at my little brother. "Jack, wanna check out the toy store at the mall tomorrow?"

Jack nods eagerly, and I manage a smile, too, and I guess that's how it all begins.