

CATHERINE RYAN HYDE

What if the  
family you need  
isn't your own?

*Where We  
Belong*

## About the Book

Fourteen-year-old Angie and her mum are on the brink of homelessness . . . again. The problem is her little sister, Sophie. Sophie has a form of autism, and a tendency to shriek. Home never seems to last long.

Until they move in with Aunt Vi, across the fence from a huge Great Dane. Sophie falls in love, and begins to imitate the dog's calm nature. The shrieking stops. Everyone relaxes. And then Paul, the dog's grumpy, socially isolated owner, moves away.

Much to Angie's humiliation, her mum thinks they can follow Paul and his dog. Once reunited, despite a huge age gap, Angie and Paul form the closest friendship either has known. But Angie risks everything to help Paul's dream come true, even their friendship and her one chance at a real home - the only thing she's dreamed of since her father was killed. A place she won't be thrown out of. A place she can feel she belongs.

# Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Part One

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

Chapter Six

Part Two

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Part Three

Chapter One

Chapter Two

Chapter Three

Chapter Four

Chapter Five

About the Author

Also by Catherine Ryan Hyde

Copyright

# **WHERE WE BELONG**

*Catherine Ryan Hyde*

# PART ONE

# **The Part When I Was Only Fourteen**

## *Chapter One*



**Hem**

By the time I was seven, I had twenty-two packs of playing cards. Twenty-two. And I never played card games with them. Not once. Card games are boring.

They were for building, not playing.

It started with the card house my dad showed me how to build when I was six, right before he stuck his hand in his shirt pocket and figured out he was out of cigarettes, and then walked out of the house to get more at the corner store and got murdered. For his watch and his wallet and his wedding ring. The watch was just a cheap Timex and the ring was only silver and thin. And he never carried a lot of cash because he never had a lot to carry.

I graduated card houses and went on to card condos, card apartment complexes, card ranches, card palaces. It's a lot of work for something that's always going to fall down at the end. But then, all of life is like that. Right?

Take my dad. He was just showing me that perfect moment when the house is getting big, when you're on the third or so level, and every card drop makes you hold your breath. You have to wait to see. You think it falls right away if it's going to, but it doesn't. There's this weird little pause, like time skipping. That pause was everything that kept me dropping those damn cards. Everything.

'I'll be honest, Angie,' my dad said. 'It brings out the gambler in me.'

But nothing needed to bring out the gambler in him. He was a gambler. It was always out.

Right after he said that, he stuck his hand in his pocket.

Now I have no packs of cards. I got rid of them all after my sister Sophie came along. Not right after. Because . . . you know. She was in a crib and all. And even when she started crawling around, it seemed like everything was OK with her. And then it wasn't. And it was hard to put our fingers on when we knew it wasn't. Probably a lot sooner than we said so out loud.

After that I knew better than to keep anything delicate and easy to ruin around the house ever again.

Anyway, what difference does it make? Now that I'm fourteen our whole life is a house of cards. Drop. Wait. Breathe. Or don't.

I liked it better with real cards. I liked how you could just sweep them all up with your hand and start over again. Everything in the world is easier to clean up after than your own actual damn life.

It was our first full day at Aunt Violet's, and I woke up wondering if it would also be our last. It can happen on any day. You think you know which ones are the most dicey, but it turns out you never do.

Besides, this one wasn't looking good.

It was a Friday, and I should have been in school, except I had to go to a new school now, and my mom said signing me up on Monday would be good enough, which really meant she needed me to babysit Sophie while she went job hunting.

We were sitting at the breakfast table eating toaster waffles, Sophie and me and Aunt Vi. This old Formica table with these glittery spots on it, like man-made stars. Those spots were holding Sophie's attention. She was eating her



waffle with her left hand, and dropping the tip of her finger down on those little glittery spots over and over and over. With a little grunt on each drop.

Her hair needed brushing. Probably my job, but I was ducking it. Pretend reason, because my mom didn't really make that clear. Real reason, because it's kind of a rotten job.

Aunt Vi was watching her in a way that made it hard for me to breathe.

Aunt Violet wasn't really our aunt. First of all, she was our mom's aunt, which made her our great-aunt, and also only by marriage. Did that make her our mom's for-real aunt? I guess it did, since there's no such thing as an aunt-in-law. I didn't know, and it didn't matter. Here's what I knew, and here's what mattered: we weren't blood family. Which would make it a whole lot easier to throw us away.

'What kind of job is your mom looking for?' Aunt Vi asked. She never took her eyes off Sophie, which made it sound like she was asking Sophie. But of course that was impossible.

'She's really wanting to find a job waitressing at a dinner restaurant,' I said. Sophie's grunts were turning to little squeals that hurt my ears. I could see Aunt Vi wince on each one. The sparkle-pointing was half morphing into arm flaps. I talked through it as best I could. 'Because the tips are really good. And then I can watch Sophie while she's—'

'Can she be gotten to stop that?' Aunt Vi squeaked. Suddenly, and with her voice too high-pitched. And kind of desperate. Like she'd been just about to break that whole time.

Which I'd known. Which I'd felt. But I'd been telling myself it wasn't as bad as I thought, half believing myself and half not. Uncle Charlie had just died a couple months before, and Aunt Violet was fragile.

A weird silence followed, which wasn't a silence at all, because Sophie didn't stop her noise. It was just Aunt Vi

and me holding still and saying nothing. Don't ask me how all that noise can feel like an awkward silence. But it can. And it did.

Drop.

'No, ma'am. I don't think it's possible for her to stop.'

Wait.

Aunt Vi sighed.

I breathed.

'It's just that I'm not myself since Charlie died. It's like being sick. You think you can get up and do things, but then you're still weaker than you thought. You know how when you're sick, you just can't abide anything? All you can do is be sick.'

I knew what she meant, even though I was either wrong about what the word abide meant, or she was using it wrong in the sentence.

'I'm really sorry about Uncle Charlie. He was a nice man. I liked him a lot.'

Aunt Vi's face held frozen for a split second or two. Then it twisted up into crying. And then I felt like eighteen different kinds of crap for saying exactly the wrong thing to her.

She levered up from the table. I had no idea that old woman could move so fast.

'I have to go lie down,' she said.

Of course, we'd all just gotten up for the day. I didn't say so.

'Want some earplugs?'

I dug two out of my shirt pocket and held them out in my hand. These bright, dark-blue bullets. Not foam. Foam earplugs don't do much. Well. They don't do enough. These were made out of beeswax and some kind of fiber. I held them out to her back as it hurried away.

She stopped at the kitchen doorway and turned around. She was wearing a housecoat covered with little pink flowers. It had seen better days. The pink flowers were

fading. Practically out of existence. She held on to the doorway like the house had just hit an iceberg.

She always wore make-up. Even with that horrible old housecoat. I wondered who she thought would notice or care. Well. I noticed. I mostly wondered who cared.

I just stood there with my hand out. Like an idiot. I made a gesture toward the earplugs. So comforting. So safe. Such a good solution. Couldn't she see that?

She shook her head hard. 'I'll just go lie down.'

'No, wait - don't go, Aunt Vi. We'll go outside.'

She only stood there, holding on for dear life. Probably waiting to see how I'd get Sophie to go anywhere.

I stuffed the last two bites of waffle into my mouth at the same time. Took my plate to the sink. Then I snuck up behind Sophie and grabbed the half-chewed dry waffle out of her left hand.

She shrieked.

I held it up like a carrot on a stick, just out of her reach. I knew she'd follow it right out the back door.

'I'll give it back to you when we get outside.'

I didn't know if Sophie even understood when I said stuff to her. I didn't even know if she listened. I said it mostly for Aunt Vi's sake. So she wouldn't think I was being mean to Sophie for no reason. Or maybe she wouldn't care. Maybe it was only me who cared.

I looked over at Aunt Vi as we hit the back door - almost literally. Locked eyes with her. Without really meaning to.

Wait.

'You don't know what it's like,' she said. 'How hard everything is when you've just lost someone.'

My face got hot, which it always does when I get mad. I always get mad really fast, but then I don't do anything with it. I don't let it loose. If I say I'm mad, I'll cry, which is just so incredibly unfair. It ruins everything. So I don't say.

Sophie was ramming into my side and bouncing off, over and over. Probably trying to get me to drop the waffle. It

hurt, but I was only giving it half my attention.

I just thought it was a mean thing to say to me.  
Thoughtless. You know?

I drew Sophie out the kitchen door and on to the back porch, and slammed the door hard behind us.

And gave her the waffle back.

And didn't breathe.

Much.

I was lying on this white plastic lounge chair, with the sun beating down on me, on grass that was all marked up with yellow spots from everywhere the dog had peed. The dog was gone, too. She'd died two weeks before Uncle Charlie, which was part of Aunt Violet's extra fragile state. I used to like that dog. Her name was Beulah, and she was a fat basset hound with arthritis. She was drooly but nice.

Sophie never liked Beulah. Sophie never liked any dogs. Or cats, either. In fact, you had to watch her every minute with them because she would try to kick or punch them, even if they hadn't done anything to her. One dog she saw outside a supermarket she tried to bite, and the dog was too nice to defend himself, and I had to step in and save the day, and then it was me who got bitten.

I looked up to see why Sophie was being so quiet. She was crouched on her belly up against the chain-link fence at one end of Aunt Violet's yard. She actually looked like a dog, the way she was lying in the grass. Like the way a dog will fold up in a sphinx position. She had her chin on the backs of her hands like they were her paws. Her nose was tucked right up to the chain-link fence. On the other side of the links was just about the biggest dog ever. This all-black Great Dane with cropped ears standing up, pointy. I think they shouldn't do that to dogs, but that's beside the point for this part of things. If I had to guess I'd say he was maybe close to two hundred pounds. He was lying in exactly the same position as Sophie. His nose was about

four inches from hers. It was the only part of him that wasn't black. His muzzle was gray.

I sat up. 'Hmm,' I said, out loud, even though there was nobody but me around to hear me. Then I called out, 'Sophie, you come away from him,' because I thought maybe she was lulling that poor dog into a false sense of security.

But . . . like I mentioned before, I don't even know if she heard or not. Or heard but plain didn't care. Or couldn't care, I guess I should say.

I ran things around in my head for a minute or two. She couldn't reach through the fence - anyway, not very far. That dog wasn't tied up or anything. Surely he knew how to duck? And he outweighed her three or four times over. Did I really want to take my life in my hands by going to get her? I could always have used the extreme emergency method, which was sneaking up behind and throwing a blanket over her like a net, but I tried to keep that plan in my back pocket as much as I could. Besides, I usually got kicked up just as bad.

I decided that big old dog could take care of himself. Only because of the fence, though. Without that fence I wouldn't have bet much on his chances.

Every now and then I looked up to see how it was going.

'Don't you dare hurt him,' I said. Maybe four times.

But nothing ever moved.

I thought again about brushing her hair, but I couldn't bring myself to mess up a good thing. It would've been easier if my mom had cut it short, like mine, but she loved Sophie's hair, and I didn't blame her. It was a color like mahogany, this rich brown with red highlights that came out in the sun. And in natural ringlet curls. She was a beautiful girl, more than I ever would be. My mom was always talking about her hair and those gorgeous green eyes like she didn't get it that I was here, too. She talked

about those green eyes less, though, now that Sophie hadn't made eye contact with us for years.

I sighed and tried to make all that go away.

After a while I heard Sophie shrieking that special horrible siren wail of hers. Our mom calls it keening, but I've heard other people keening, and I've got to tell you, this is worse. I sat up to see that the dog had wandered away from the fence to get a drink out of his water bowl. He raised his head and looked up at me, and I looked back. He had water streaming down from the corners of his mouth.

I reached to get my earplugs out of my pocket.

I don't want to sound cold, just putting in earplugs and then letting her wail. It sounds like I don't care that she's wailing. But it's not that. I care plenty. There's just nothing I can do. Nothing. Nothing anybody can do. Except preserve their own sanity by whatever means possible.

Aunt Violet burst out the back door.

'You have to make her stop,' she said. She sounded even more desperate, like she was on her last nerve. Like she could explode at any time, and flutter down to the spotty grass in a bunch of dry bits and pieces. 'I can't take it,' she said. 'I'm not strong. I told your mom I'm not strong. I'm not myself without Charlie. I don't have a lot of . . .'

While she searched for a word for what she didn't have a lot of, I looked at her eyebrows. I was always sneaking peeks at them when I thought I could get away with it. She didn't seem to have any eyebrow hairs of her own, so she drew them on in this weird color of light brown, and too high in the middle. It made her look like everything in the world was a shock to her system. Not that her eyebrows mattered at a time like that. Just that, when things get bad, my brain goes away. Sometimes.

Just as I opened my mouth to break the bad news . . . which she damn well should have known already . . . that I can't stop Sophie once she gets going . . . that nothing can

stop Sophie once she gets going . . . the dog came wandering back to the fence. I saw him out of the corner of my eye.

Sophie's cry wound down the way a siren does, getting lower and slower and then gone.

'Oh, thank goodness,' Aunt Violet said. 'Thank goodness she stopped.' Aunt Vi turned her eyes to me, her drawn-on eyebrows scrunched down as far as they could scrunch, but still looking a little too high. 'Did you take offense at something when we were talking before?'

She asked it like she'd had all this time to think and still couldn't imagine what it might have been.

My face got hot again.

'I just felt like it was a little bit thoughtless of you,' I said, and then my face burned like crazy, because it was a brave thing to say. I had to work hard not to cry.

Aunt Vi's head rocked back. 'Now what on earth did I say?' Like she already knew I was wrong and it couldn't have been anything, really.

'That I don't know how it feels when somebody dies.'

She just stared at me blank-faced for a minute. Not a real whole minute, but maybe for the count of three. Then her eyes went wide and her hand came up to her mouth. And she charged at me. It scared the crap out of me. I thought she was about to attack me, and I wanted to run, or yell. Or something. Or anything. But it all happened too fast.

Next thing I knew she was smothering me in this bear hug, and I was all pressed up to her big belly, which was softer than I thought a person should be. She actually had hold of the back of my head and was pulling it in close, against her big bosom, and I could hardly breathe.

'Oh, honey,' she said, bending over, close to my ear. 'I'm so sorry. I forgot. I forgot about . . .'

Don't say it, I thought.

' . . . your dad. Oh, and such an awful way to go, too. And so sudden. You're right, that was very thoughtless of me.'

See, I told you I'm not myself.'

She pulled my head back away from her soft self, holding me by both temples. I pulled in enough air for ten breaths.

'Do you forgive me?'

'Yes, ma'am,' I said. Just parroting the words. Not forgiving and not not forgiving. Not even really thinking what that would mean.

'Oh, dear,' she said, without really telling me 'Oh dear' about what.

She swooped back into the house, slamming the door behind her with a great bang. I looked back at Sophie. She and the dog had folded up into the mirror position again.

I breathed. Even though this wasn't going to buy us much time.

See, that's always the thing. While you're breathing, and being all happy that the whole house didn't come falling down, you know there's another card drop coming right up. It's not about gaining much. It's just about gaining. It's always about not losing everything in the exact moment you're in.

I got up and wandered over to the fence, the longish grass feeling funny and tickly between my toes. I was thinking maybe I should offer to cut the grass for Aunt Violet. Make myself as useful as possible.

I stood over Sophie.

'What's up with this, Sophie?' I asked her. 'You don't even like dogs.'

'Hem,' she said.

Which is really . . . I don't know how to say it. A word from Sophie is like . . . Mark this day on your calendar.

'I'll be damned.'

Then it hit me that this was the quietest, best day I'd had with Sophie in years. Why in God's name was I trying to talk her out of it?

Whatever 'it' was.



My best day lasted until twenty-five after five, and then I had to pay double for the peace and quiet. I happened to know the time because I went into the kitchen to check, because I was thinking it was about time for my mom to be home. I didn't know if it was the good news or the bad news, that it was taking her so long.

Just as I was coming back out, the dog suddenly stood up. He stayed close to the fence, but he was looking out toward the street. Sophie stood up, too.

I couldn't hear anything, but I could definitely sense that my vacation was about to be over. I'm not sure how much vacation I'd thought I could expect, or why.

Then I heard a car door slam. It sounded far away. But the dog started wagging that huge, strong tail. He was still right up by the fence, right near Sophie, so his tail slapped the chain-link hard on every wag, and the whole fence rang like an out-of-tune bell. Sophie started jumping up and down. Which I thought was interesting. I mean, clearly she was imitating the dog, so I half expected her to wag her butt around or something, but instead she jumped up and down like she was all excited, which made me think it was the inside of the dog she was imitating. Which seemed a little bit like knowing what somebody else was feeling, which I think is like what the doctors kept calling empathy. Which I think we all thought was something Sophie couldn't do.

A minute or so later the side door opened on the house next door, and a man stood in the open doorway. He seemed shocked to see me. Which was weird, in a way, because I was in Aunt Violet's yard, not his, and I couldn't figure out why he was looking at me like he'd suddenly found me in his living room. Our eyes locked for a minute, and then I looked away.

He was an old guy. Not old like bent-over old. He was tall and kind of reedy thin, and he looked like he was in good-enough shape and all. But his hair was mostly gray, and he

had just a hint of five o'clock shadow, just enough that I could see his beard would be white if he ever grew it in. He was wearing a nice gray suit, with a light-blue dress shirt and a striped dark-blue tie, but it was loosened. The top button of his shirt was undone and the tie was pulled out. To give him more room to breathe, I guess.

He stared at me for another minute, and then he looked at his dog. He got this puzzled look on his face, and I could tell, just from that look, that it was weird for his dog to still be over by the fence. The dog was slapping his tail against the fence like crazy now, but I could see that wasn't enough.

'Rigby,' the man said.

He didn't yell it, or even call it out, really. He just said it, like you'd say any word in a sentence.

That broke the dog's spell, and he ran to the man and sat in front of him, tail swinging. And he raised his face up almost pretty close to the man's face, because he was honestly big enough to do that.

And, of course, by this time, Sophie's siren had gone off.

The guy looked around, but not really at us. I don't think he'd even noticed Sophie yet. If he had, he didn't let on. I don't think he imagined that a sound like that could come out of a small person. Most people don't. He looked around some more, like he was about to see an ambulance or a fire truck coming up the street. He even looked up, like it might be something overhead, but I have no idea what. Then he looked down, and his eyes locked on Sophie.

Wait.

I could see his face twist up a little. Like he could stand the noise better if it was coming from a what, not a who. People are like that. They figure a machine or a siren doesn't know any better, can't help the sound it makes. Once they know it's Sophie, they want it to stop.

The moment dragged out. Just long enough to make my face feel cold. Then he turned on his heel and went back

into the house, Rigby following with his tail still swinging. The door slammed shut.

I got up and went inside the house, leaving Sophie alone for just a minute, to get Aunt Vi ready for what we were all about to go through. It was actually pretty OK to leave Sophie, because she wasn't going to be doing anything except exactly what she was doing already. For just about . . . ever.

I found Aunt Vi in bed, a feather pillow over her ears.

I touched her shoulder and she jumped a mile. Then she sat up straight and looked at me with this look of utter misery on her face, and I felt bad for her. I did. I would have taken Sophie and gone away and left her alone if we'd had one other place in the world we could go.

I took two earplugs out of my shirt pocket and held them out to her.

'They work,' I said. 'Really. Not like there's no noise at all, but they make it sound so far away it hardly matters. You have to knead them around in your fingers till they're soft and then make them back into a bullet and press them in till it seals. You'll be surprised.'

She took them off my hand and smiled weakly.

'Thank you, darling,' she said.

Then I got up and left, because I pretty much knew she'd be happier alone with her misery. I was that same way, so I understood.

I went back outside and sat on the lounge chair near Sophie and softened up my own earplugs. I had one in place when the side door of the man's house opened again, and he looked out. Looked at me. Then at Sophie.

Just when I was wondering how long he could stand there and stare, he walked over to the fence, Rigby wagging at his heels. Sophie's siren wound down as they got closer to the fence.

He'd changed into a black sweater, but he still had his fancy suit pants on. And shiny black leather shoes.

He stood there looking down on Sophie, who was quiet now. Rigby had come right up to the fence and was sitting with his head stretched out, just inches on the other side of the fence, and Sophie had her hands wrapped in the chain-link, her face as close to the dog's as she could get it.

The man looked up at me again, and I looked away. Something about the way he stared. I didn't like it, and I couldn't hold it long. There was a harshness to it. Like he expected something and was trying to pull it right out of me.

'She stopped,' he said.

He had the voice I would have expected from him. Sharp-edged. A little hard. Almost critical.

'Yes, sir. She did.'

'Will she stay stopped?'

'Only till you go back in.'

I got up and walked over to the fence, even though I didn't really want to go closer to him. But I didn't want Aunt Vi to hear that we were having trouble with one of her neighbors. Already.

I took two more earplugs out of my pocket and held them out toward the fence. 'These help a lot,' I said.

He stared at them a long time. Like they were some kind of math equation. Maybe one that was just beyond his skills in math.

'They're earplugs,' I said, to try to break us through to a new moment.

'I know what they are.'

'You want to know why she's doing that.'

'You're getting warmer.'

'She likes your dog.' That just sat in the air for a moment, like nobody knew quite what to do with it. I guess if you didn't know Sophie, that didn't answer every question that was hanging around by then. 'She's been sitting with your dog all day, and she got upset because he went in.'

'She,' he said.

'Oh. It's a girl dog.'

'Yes. She's female.'

'My sister got upset because she - your dog - went back in the house with you.'

'And she makes that noise whenever she's upset?'

'Pretty much. Yeah.'

Then he got that look on his face that people always get. Like Sophie ought to know better. Like she ought to do better. And it makes me mad, because they don't know. They shouldn't be judging her if they don't know.

'I don't suppose your dog could stay out a while.'

He shot his gaze back up to me, and it burned. It was the same look, but this time for me. Like *I* should know better. Like *I* should do better.

'I work hard,' he said. 'Every day. And I hate every minute of it. All I want to do at the end of the day is come home and see my dog and watch the evening news in peace and quiet and have something to eat. Is that asking too much?'

'No, sir. I don't suppose it is.'

It was more than he was going to get, though. I didn't say so.

'But she'll start again the minute I do.'

'Yes, sir. I expect she will.'

'And you can't stop her.'

'No, sir. Nobody and nothing can stop her.'

'So when does she stop on her own?'

'She can generally go about two hours before she loses her voice. Then all she can do is whisper and squeak for a couple of days. That gives us all a break.'

He looked into my eyes for a minute. Like he was desperate to find the place where I was only joking. Then he looked down at Sophie with this look of total contempt. Like she was the lowest life form on earth. My face started to burn, and I knew this time I was going to say something. Whether I humiliated myself by crying or not.

Before I could open my mouth to do it, though, he turned to go back in. And Sophie started up shrieking again.

'She's not a brat,' I said. Nice and loud, so he could hear me over the noise.

But he didn't hear. He cupped one hand behind his ear to tell me he didn't. Then he came back to the fence, and Sophie wound down. I could feel it in my gut. Or the lack of it, I guess I should say. Like something nasty had been vibrating around in there, and it felt so good when it stopped.

'What did you say to me?' he asked, which made it much harder to speak my mind.

I did anyway.

'She's not a brat.'

'Funny, because she acts like one.'

A few tears leaked out, but I couldn't let myself care. Well. I couldn't not care. But I could not stop.

I looked right into his face, tears or no.

'I'm sick and tired of people treating her like we don't raise her right or something. My mom raised me and I turned out fine. Sophie's different. Her brain is different. It's like a kind of autism. I mean, it's like autism in most ways and not like it in other ways. It's what they call the autism spectrum. The doctors still don't really understand her, but she can't help it and we can't help it, and you don't know us, so you shouldn't judge what you don't know a damn thing about.'

By now the tears had broken free, and there was no hiding them. I actually felt one slide down my cheek. Which was total humiliation, but what was I supposed to do? I wiped it off hard and fast with the back of my hand.

He just looked at me for a long time. Well. A few seconds. It felt long.

'You're right,' he said. 'Please accept my apology.'

Then he turned to go back in the house. The dog stuck for just a second, close to the fence. Close to Sophie. But then

the man turned around and made eye contact with her, and then she picked him. Which I guess it was her job to do. I thought it was kind of remarkable that she hadn't all along.

The siren started up again.

The guy stopped on his front porch and gave me one long, unhappy look over his shoulder. I could see it all drain away - all his hopes for that quiet dinner in front of the news. I could just look at his eyes and see him get it. That it was never going to happen. That even that simple dream was gone.

I held the earplugs out again.

At first he just teetered there. Like the whole decision was just too pathetic. But after a time he came back to the fence to get them. And . . . this was weird, I thought . . . the dog just sat there on the steps by the door and waited. Like she was smart enough to know that going over there for just a few seconds might only make things worse.

I reached the two little dark-blue bullets through the fence on the tips of my fingers. Dropped them into his waiting hand. He had big hands, but smooth, like he'd never dug a hole or built a fence in his life. Probably he hadn't. Not in that nice suit.

'Thank you,' he said, kind of shouting to be heard over the siren.

Then he shook his head and walked back inside.

I wasn't wearing a watch, but I think it was about forty-five very screechy minutes later when the police showed up. I didn't hear them pull up and park, or knock on the door, or ring the bell, or whatever they did. Of course, I had my earplugs in, and I was still out back with Sophie, who was still keening, and if I was going to hear anything, it was only going to be that. I was daydreaming, and my head was a hundred miles away, but I don't remember where. Then I saw a movement at the corner of my eye, and it was Aunt Vi

coming out into the backyard with two policemen. Well, actually one policeman and one policewoman.

I sat up very straight, this cold feeling in my gut, and I pulled out the earplugs as fast as I could.

'They got a report about the noise,' Aunt Violet said, yelling to be heard over Sophie's wail. I'd never seen Aunt Vi - or anybody else for that matter - look so completely defeated and humiliated. And I'd seen some stuff.

'I'm sorry,' I shouted. Knowing it wasn't enough, but not having much else in the way of ammunition.

The two cops looked at Sophie and then at each other.

'The neighbor who called it in thought it was an animal in distress,' the man cop yelled out.

Then I got mad, because that damn guy next door knew damn well it wasn't an animal, and he knew damn well we weren't abusing her. That was a scummy thing for him to do, I thought.

'You can see we're not hurting her in any way,' Aunt Violet shouted.

The woman cop yelled, 'What did you say her diagnosis was again?'

'ASD,' I said. And then had to repeat it, louder.

'Which is . . .?'

'Autism spectrum disorder.'

'So she's autistic?'

'Yes, ma'am. More or less. There are a lot of different ways that can go, and she's one of them. She's upset because she likes the neighbor's dog, and he took the dog inside. I was doing my best to keep her happy, I swear.'

The cops looked at each other again. Definitely having some kind of a conversation with their eyes. I was right there watching, but I couldn't quite read it. But I didn't like the feeling.

'There's nothing you can do to stop her?' the lady cop called.



‘No, ma’am. I swear I would if I could. I’m sorry. She just has to wear herself down.’

Another of those looks.

‘Can you at least get her in the house? Give the neighbors that much of a break?’

I cut my eyes over to Aunt Vi. I’d purposely been staying outside with Sophie to give *her* ears a break. But she flipped her head toward the house. And that was one silent conversation I understood. Get her *in*, for God’s sake, she was saying.

I stood up straight. Locked down the thoughts in my head. Braced myself.

‘Can you . . . help me? By holding her feet? Otherwise she’ll kick the – she’ll kick me really hard. She doesn’t mean to hurt me. It’s just the way she’s wired.’

The man cop opened his mouth to say no. He got partway through it. ‘We’re not supposed—’

‘I’ll help,’ the woman said.

We stood over Sophie, and I took a deep breath and then just grabbed her up in a bear hug, pinning her arms to her sides. I kept my hands pretty low, toward her waist, in case she tried to bite. The lady cop grabbed her bare ankles, but Sophie pulled them right away again, and got me a good shot in the right thigh, and then the lady grabbed on again and held tighter this time. Now that she knew what she was up against.

I made a rookie mistake, though. And I of all people should’ve known better. I was holding her up too high, so her head was almost as high as mine, so that if she threw her head back . . .

Just as I had the thought, she bucked hard, trying to straighten out, and her head came back and hit me, slamming my lower lip against my teeth. Enough to really stun me.

The lady cop’s head came up. ‘You OK?’

I just gave her this desperate point toward the house with my head, because all I wanted was to get in, so this could be over. We moved fast across the grass and up the three little concrete steps into the kitchen. Aunt Vi slammed the door behind all of us, and I set Sophie down on the linoleum as gently as I could.

One of the cops handed me a paper towel, but I couldn't even see which one was doing the handing. It just appeared in front of me on the end of a blue-sleeved arm. At first I didn't know why a paper towel. Then I got it that my lip was bleeding.

That was when Sophie started throwing herself against the door. Hard.

See, that was bad. That was self-injury behavior. Most of the time we didn't have to worry too much about self-injury with Sophie, but we always knew things could get very bad if she ever crossed that line. It was this thing that was always out there, maybe waiting for us. And I really didn't want that to be the moment it showed up.

I grabbed her and brought us both down to the floor and just sort of lay on her, wrapping up her arms and wrapping my legs over and around hers. My earplugs were still out, and she was shrieking right in my ear, but that seemed like the least of my worries.

Her voice was still pretty strong.

I don't know much of what went on behind me after that. I heard Aunt Vi talking to the cops by the front door, but not what they said. After I thought they were gone, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I thought it was Aunt Vi, but when I turned my head, it was the lady cop. She took my chin in her hand and wiped the blood off my lip and my neck and my shirt as best she could with some kind of damp cloth, and then she held the split together and put a little butterfly bandage on it.

She gave my shoulder a squeeze before she left. I could probably interpret it as either meaning I was doing a good

job, or wishing me luck, because I'd need it. Or maybe both.

Then I didn't hear any more talking and nobody seemed to be around.

I'm guessing it was about another thirty minutes before Sophie screamed herself to sleep.

After I put her to bed, I locked myself in the bathroom. I took a long, long shower, almost until the hot water was gone. Like everything that had just happened would wash off. It did make me feel better, though. Some better.

I got out and wrapped up in a towel and wiped steam off the mirror with my hand.

My lip was swollen under the butterfly bandage, and it still looked a little bloody. I wiggled the tooth right behind it with my tongue, and then with my finger, and it scared me how loose it was. I didn't know if it would tighten up again on its own, or if I'd lose it. That would be a major disaster. It's not like we could afford cosmetic dentist visits.

I heard a light knock on the bathroom door.

'I'll be right out, Aunt Vi.'

'It's me,' my mom said.

'Oh. Hi.'

'Did you have an OK day?'

'Pretty much like most of them,' I said.

We sort of had a deal that we each wouldn't tell the other any more than they needed to know about any bad days. We'd never said such a thing out loud, but it was a deal all the same.

'I have some great news for you.'

'Good. I could use some.'

'I got hired on the spot. I'm going to be working dinners at that nice Italian restaurant on Sixth Street. It's kind of expensive. And you know what that means.'

Good tips. That's what it meant. The higher the bill, the bigger the tips.

‘That’s great,’ I said. ‘Maybe we can afford our own place.’

‘Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, hon. Anyway, I start next week.’

‘That’s good, Mom.’

‘You sound—’

‘I’m fine. I’ll be right out, OK?’

A pause. And then I guess she must have walked away. Because I never heard another sound after that.

After I got dressed again, and dried my hair with Aunt Vi’s blow-dryer, I wandered out into the kitchen to see where everybody was. I could hear Mom and Vi talking to each other in low voices.

When I stuck my head in the kitchen, they both stopped talking and looked up at me. Like I’d caught them doing something wrong.

‘Why didn’t you tell me the police came?’ my mom asked. Like it was my idea they should come by.

She didn’t say anything about my lip, but maybe it was just the light. The light from the living room was bright behind me, and probably she just didn’t see.

‘You didn’t ask,’ I said.

I guess that was a bad-attitude thing to say. I didn’t mean to have a bad attitude. I was just tired. I can live through everything or I can answer for everything, but sometimes both is just too much for one day.

Nobody said anything, and nothing happened, except it got real clear to me - real fast - that they weren’t going to finish their talk with me standing right there listening. I ducked out of the kitchen again, and through the living room toward the front door.

I heard Aunt Violet say, ‘I just don’t think—’

And my mom cut her off and said, ‘Please, Vi. Please, I’m begging you. We need a little more time. We’d literally be out on the street if—’

That was when I slammed the front door. With me on the other side. The outside. It was dusky and cool out, and I felt free somehow, being out in it. Or freer, anyway.

I looked at the house next door, pulled in a long, deep breath, drew my shoulders back, and marched over there. And knocked.

I heard big, impossibly deep woofs from Rigby. Just three. The door opened.

The man was wearing pajamas and a nice burgundy-colored shiny bathrobe, even though it wasn't too late. Rigby was swinging her tail back and forth like she'd known me all her life. Her tail kept hitting the back of the guy's thighs, but he didn't act like he noticed.

His eyes narrowed when he looked at me. Just a little, but still . . .

'Yes?'

I almost lost my nerve.

I had to fill up with breath again. I had to re-straighten my shoulders.

Before I could speak, he asked, 'What happened to your —'

I didn't let him finish.

'That was a mean, horrible thing to do.'

He chewed on his lower lip for a moment. Just studying my face. Then he said, 'I apologized, so I thought we'd be through that.'

'That's not what I mean and you know it.'

'I don't know as much as you seem to think.'

'You know what you did.'

'I honestly don't.'

'Calling the police on us like that. When you knew I was doing my best with her. It was mean and awful.'

'I didn't call the police.'

That fell to the stoop and just lay there a minute. I wasn't sure what to do with it. I didn't really believe him. But it's

pretty strong stuff to call a grown-up a liar. That's a pretty radical thing to take on.

'Well, who did, then?'

He stepped out on to the stoop, and Rigby came out with him. She sat down near my left side, and I put my hand on her back, and it made me feel better.

'Look around,' he said, pointing up and down the street. 'What do you see? The surface of the moon with just these two houses on it? Or neighbors as far as the eye can see?'

Then I felt incredibly stupid. Because it should have occurred to me that anybody could have called the cops. Just because I hadn't met any of the other neighbors didn't mean they couldn't hear the ruckus.

'You really didn't do it?'

'Let me tell you something about me. When I think something is the right thing to do, I do it. And if you ask me if I did it, I'll tell you the truth, because I thought it was the right thing. I'll tell you I did it and I'll tell you why I did it. I won't do something and then lie about it. I did not call the police. I put in your earplugs, and read the news online instead of watching the TV news, and had a roast beef frozen dinner with mashed potatoes. And that's all.'

'Oh,' I said. And, when I said it, all my tiredness caught up with me, all at once. I almost could have melted into a little puddle on his stoop. 'I'm sorry. Seriously. Very, very sorry.'

'Apology accepted.'

'This is a really nice dog,' I said, rubbing her enormous shoulder blades.

'Thank you. Now if you'll excuse me—'

'Did you name her after the song?'

'What song?'

'Everybody knows that song. About the people. Who are lonely.'

'I just like the name Rigby. Now if there's nothing else . . .'  
,