

Chapter 1: I Win First Place

I'm going to throw up on the vice principal.

No, maybe I'm not. Okay yes I definitely am. No, wait, I think I can do this.

Sitting in a hard blue plastic chair on the cold auditorium stage, I wait for Mrs. Taylor to call my name so I can accept an award for my art project. I try to stay focused on the other winners, but keep getting distracted by a tattered banner gently swinging above our heads, left over from the first day of school. One more year until I get to see "Congratulations Class of 2004" hanging in cheap vinyl.

I don't think my art piece is that impressive, but my art teacher Ms. Orlopp asked me to submit something to the school-wide creative festival.

"These contests are judged by PTA moms who spend a lot of time watching *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, so anything that tugs at their heartstrings is going to have a better chance of winning!" Ms. Orlopp reminded the class last week. "Inspirational escapism is what they're looking for." I tried my best to deliver.

Though, to be honest, I didn't put as much work into the piece as I probably should have. My boyfriend, Michael, has been pretty distracting. Every evening I tried to work on my art (or any other homework) after school the past few weeks turned into a phone call that lasted well into the night.

Despite rushing to finish at the last minute, I won first place for my year in the "fine art" category. But I wish I hadn't. Now I have to accept the award, which involves sitting on a stage, in front of the other contestants and their parents. Well, some of our parents. Dad couldn't make it.

I start picking at the sleeve of my light blue zip-up hoodie, my heart racing as I hear the fine arts sophomore winners announced. Juniors are up next. I try to see my mom's face in the crowd, but only see shadowed heads through the glare of the stage lights. I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, rub sweaty palms against my jeans, and concentrate on my breathing.

"Sophie Wellington, first place, fine art, for a piece titled *Surviving Extinction*. Congratulations, Sophie!"

Okay, I can do this. I walk up to Mrs. Taylor, accept the piece of cardstock with "First Place" written across the top and a blue ribbon printed in the corner, and head back to my chair. Hurdle jumped, no vomit in sight. Success.

Thank goodness the painting and drawing category was the last one called. Now that second and third place juniors have received their certificates, I only have to wait for the senior winners to be announced before we can all go home.

I think back to my painting: a bird flying out of a cage that's engulfed in flames, towards a sunset. Kind of a "life is on fire but we're going to be okay" vibe. Not exactly heartfelt or realistic, but I'm glad the PTA moms seemed to get something out of it.

Jason Lee walks to receive his senior year third-place award from Mrs. Taylor.

I am so glad I didn't puke.

Mom drives the two of us home from school in her olive green minivan, ignoring the speed limit. I close my eyes and take deep breaths to fight the sour taste rising in my throat, but it only makes me gag.

"I'm just so proud! I had tears in my eyes the entire time. Linda Johnson *and* Mary Greenberg told me congratulations," Mom says, taking a turn far too fast. When I don't respond, she says something about Linda being the head of the PTA and Mary being the head of the HOA. All I can think about is the square pepperoni pizza I had for lunch making a reappearance on my lap.

"You're drawing the attention of some very important people," Mom says, more to herself than to me.

"Mhmm," is all I can manage in response. She doesn't hear me.

"I just kept thinking, 'That's my daughter. I did that!' Ah! I'm just so proud." Mom waves her right hand to emphasize each sentence, her acrylic manicure a blur above the steering wheel.

Afraid to close my eyes again, I stare at the horizon.

"Staring at the horizon helps settle your stomach when you're carsick," I remember Dad telling me when I was young. I used to battle carsickness a lot, but this nausea feels unfamiliar.

We fly past the red brick elementary school, our bumper narrowly missing a third-grader and his very angry mother.

"So, where was Michael tonight?" Mom asks after a brief moment of silence, glancing at me with her eyebrows raised.

"He had band practice." I say, examining the dead bugs on the windshield.

"How does band practice take precedence over his girlfriend earning first place for an art project? Out of the entire junior class?" She risks a full look in my direction. "Is there something going on between you two?"

My body is thrown forward into the seat belt as Mom slams the brakes at a light. "No," I say, grasping the plastic handle above the passenger-side window as if it could save me in a crash. "His band is important." Michael is the guitarist and lead singer of Drowning In A Puddle, the best high school punk rock band in North Texas.

"This award is important."

"Dad wasn't there either," I remind Mom.

"That's different. Your dad had to work."

"Dad had drinks with a client," I say, looking at the side of Mom's face.

“Which is work,” Mom replies quickly, stiffening at the words and pressing her lips into a straight line. She uses the back of her fingers to toss her highlighted blond bangs and says, “Dad is very proud of you. He would’ve been there if he could’ve been.” She never breaks eye contact with the road. “But work comes first.”

“Right.” I wish I could throw up on the dashboard to end this conversation.

“So,” Mom begins again, straightening her back in the gray fabric seat. “You and Michael are getting pretty serious?”

“I don’t know. I guess so,” I start picking at the lacey bottom of my top and slide my back down the chair. “He’s nice to me.”

“Nice isn’t everything, Sophie.”

“You can just say you don’t like him,” I snap, more quietly than I intended. Now I’m picking my too-short nails at the edge of my hoodie sleeve and examining the process.

My mom has only met Michael once, but they didn’t exactly hit it off. Michael made a stupid joke about smoking in the parking lot when Mom asked what church he attends. Two things you don’t joke about with Karen Wellington: smoking and Jesus.

“It’s not about liking him. It’s about what’s best for you. You’re very smart and talented. And tonight proves that! I just don’t want you to waste time on someone who doesn’t have the same potential.”

“Michael has a lot of potential. Just because he doesn’t play football doesn’t mean he has nothing going for him.”

Mom gives her typical sigh, which is less of a sigh and more of a combination between a gargle and a hiss. Like a bored French cat trying to blow smoke rings while coughing up a hairball. “*Aahhgh*.”

I roll my eyes and watch a McDonalds sail by, the golden arches a blur on the horizon.

“Whatever happened to Justin Larkin? Now *he* was a nice boy.”

I don’t reply. Mom wouldn’t think Justin was so nice if she knew he’d held me against the passenger side door of his blue F150, shoved his hand down my jeans, and threatened to break up with me if I kept pushing him away.

Mom risks another glance from the corner of her eye, crafting her next words. “I just want you to be happy,” she says, looking back towards the road. I stare at the short blond spikes in the back of her head.

“Michael makes me happy, Mom,” I say, now scratching my sleeve cuff. My nails might be a decent length if I could ever stop biting them. Or filing them against ribbed polyester.

“You don’t know what ‘happy’ is. You’re sixteen.”

“I’ll be seventeen in two months.”

Now it's Mom's turn to roll her eyes. "My point is, you're a child. A boy who wears skinny jeans, eyeliner, and dyes his hair black is not who I imagined for my little girl. People are starting to talk."

"What people?" I scoff. There were always "people" talking about our family: what we wear, the condition of our house, our grades in school. And who we date, apparently.

"People. People talk, Sophie. One day you'll learn appearances matter. Respect and reputation matter." Mom tosses her bangs.

"Or you could just not care what people think."

"Oh, don't be naive."

I lean back onto the headrest, closing my eyes against the bumps and swerves and wishing we lived closer to school.

After what feels like an eternity, we pull into the driveway. I see Justin's truck parked in the street next door and then realize he's helping his mom carry in groceries from the trunk of her car. My mom waves at Justin and my mouth floods with acid.

Chapter 2: I Take a Tough Test

Once the car is safely in park, I grab my backpack, slam the car door, and run upstairs to my bedroom. I'm not sure it's just Mom's horrible driving or criticism of my life choices that are making me feel sick. In fact, I've felt like I'm coming down with the flu or something for over a week now.

For the third night in a row, I go through my bedroom and into the Jack-and-Jill bathroom I share with my brother, lock the door to his side of the toilet, and try to throw up.

Sitting on the cold tile, trying to gag myself, I regret not taking up Jessica B.'s offer to teach me how to binge and purge that day in the girl's bathroom. How can I feel so sick and not be able to vomit?

My little brother starts banging on the door, asking, "What're you doing in there? Are you on your *peeeeeriod*?" with the annoying tone only 12-year-old boys are capable of.

"Shut up, Kyle!" I yell back before thinking about his question. Why aren't I on my period? I try to remember the last time I had to ask my mom to buy tampons. It was definitely more than a month ago. I remember because I meant to ask her the week before, but completely forgot and then started bleeding through my pants in theatre class.

Thank God my best friend Madison noticed. She slipped me a tampon, told me to tie my hoodie around my waist, and sent me to the bathroom to clean up.

So where is it? Annoyed, I unlock Kyle's side of the bathroom, open the door enough to flip him off, and go back to my bedroom. I find my school planner and double-check the dates to make sure. I count back to that day backstage. Seven weeks. That is so weird.

Suddenly, it clicks. And I think I might be able to hurl. I grab the paisley brown wristlet out of my backpack, run downstairs, and grab my mom's minivan keys from the hook. "I'm going to buy tampons!" I yell, running out the door.

"Bring back eggs!" she shouts as the door slams closed.

I make my way to the grocery store in a complete panic, doing a perfect imitation of my mom's driving.

There's no way. Seven weeks is nothing. Girls miss periods all the time at this age. Ashley L. didn't get her period for three months sophomore year because she was so stressed out studying for the practice SATs. Once it came back, she said it was like three months of bleeding happening all at once.

That's got to be it. We're doing *Grease* in theatre this year, and it's been very stressful. Tech week is coming up and now that I'm a junior, I get to start leading some of the Techies (theatre technicians) through their cues. It's a big responsibility. I have my eye on the Head Tech role for next year when we put on *Little Shop of Horrors*, and I have to be perfect in this year's production if I'm going to convince Mr. Williams to give me a chance. Lighting those music scenes would be a dream.

That's all this is. My nerves got the best of me, I've been too stressed out to take care of myself, and my body is rebelling. I haven't gotten my period and it's making me sick.

I fly into the Albertsons parking lot, narrowly avoiding Mrs. O'Reilly's gray sedan. Grabbing my purse and yanking the car keys out of the ignition, I run-walk into the store and search the pharmacy aisle.

Toothpaste and Toothbrushes - no.

Cold and Flu - no.

Feminine Hygiene - unfortunately, no.

I find the sign for "family planning," and - *shit!* There's a locked plexiglass door blocking what I need.

I search the next few aisles for any employee not working a cash register. I've broken out in a cold sweat, but I'm not sure whether it's the nausea or sheer panic.

Finally, I see someone wearing a blue vest and nametag stocking shelves. *Double shit.* It's Mark Holtz, a guy in my grade at school. Mark and I don't talk much, so I don't know whether he's a gossip or knows how to keep a secret. I seriously consider cutting my losses and hoping for the best, but instead decide to suck it up and ask for his help.

"Hey Mark."

"Oh hey Sophie!" Mark smiles. Poor guy has no idea what's coming.

"I need something from behind a glass door."

"Sure! Whatcha need?"

"I'll show you," I say, leading Mark back to the pharmacy aisle. I can hear his steps slowing down behind me as I reach the condoms and lubricant. I stop walking. Crossing my arms and staring at the floor, I stand still next to the plexiglass case of pregnancy tests. Sorry, Mark.

Mark unlocks the door, also staring at the floor. He asks, "Which one?" without looking up, and I point to the closest blue box. Three tests. Perfect.

"Um, please don't tell - "

"No, of course not. Good luck."

"Thanks, Mark."

I grab a carton of eggs from the Dairy section and head to check out, avoiding eye contact with the cashier.

Once I'm home, I toss the eggs into the fridge and grab a bottle of water off the top shelf.

"Careful with those!" I hear Mom yell from the kitchen as I run up the stairs and close my bedroom door.

Once inside, I lock Kyle's side of the bathroom, take a few chugs of water, and rip open the package. The box says "Clearblue" with a picture of a baby. Let's hope that's just optimistic marketing.

I pull out the first of three tests and the small instruction pamphlet, folded into quarters and then again in half. The test is wrapped in an individual foil package.

"God can they make this take any longer?" I ask myself while unfolding the instructions. I begin reading and following along.

Remove overcap. Hold stick by thumb grip, with the absorbent tip pointed down, and the result window facing away from body. I squat over the toilet, holding the test as instructed.

Place absorbent tip into your urine stream for 5 seconds only. I start thinking about all the ways this test could ruin my life, and decide to take a few more chugs of water before I begin. After draining the water bottle, I resume the squatting position and count to five. I lean over to continue reading the paper instructions laying on the floor at my feet.

While still holding the stick with the absorbent tip facing downward, replace the overcap and lay the stick on a flat non-absorbent surface with the result window facing up. I replace the cap and put it window-up on my bathroom counter.

You may soon see a pink color moving across the result window to indicate the test is working. Wait 3 minutes until reading result. Three minutes until I know whether my life is over. Great. The digital alarm clock on my nightstand reads 8:14 p.m.

I pace around my room until 8:17, then turn the test over with my fingertips, as if flipping over a dead rat. When I see the window, I wish a dead rat were my problem.

PREGNANT: Two pink lines in the result window.

"Triple shit."

I look at myself in the large frameless mirror installed above the white countertop. My dirty-blonde hair is up in a folded over ponytail, a pink baby tee that reads "Christian Girl" in small white letters under my hoodie, and American Eagle jeans. I don't look pregnant. I don't even look old enough to get pregnant.

I've spent the last several years pissed off that everyone thinks I want to hear how young I look for my age. Well, the doctors will be in for quite the surprise when this 12-year-old shows up to deliver a baby.

I take a deep breath, grab the second test, and unwrap it.